INSTRUCTOR’S MANUAL
TO ACCOMPANY

LITERATURE

An Introduction to Fiction,
Poetry, Drama, and Writing

TWELFTH EDITION

X. J. Kennedy
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University of Southern California

with Michael Palma

PEARSON

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We've always found, before teaching a knotty piece of literature, that no preparation is more helpful than to sit down and discuss it with a colleague or two. If this manual supplies you with such a colleague at inconvenient hours, such as 2:00 A.M., when there's no one in the faculty coffee room, it will be doing its job.

This manual tries to provide exactly that sort of collegial conversation—spirited but specific, informal but informed. We offer you a sheaf of diverse notes to supply—if you want them—classroom strategies, critical comments, biographical information, historical context, and a few homemade opinions. These last may be wrong, but we set them down to give you something clear-cut with which to agree or disagree. Candor, we think, helps to enliven any conversation.

The manual includes:

- Commentary on every story, poem, and play presented in the text, except for a few brief poems quoted in the text as illustrations;
- Additional classroom questions and discussion strategies;
- Thematic Indices at the beginning of the “Fiction” and “Poetry” sections.

**PLAN OF THE BOOK**

There is a plan to Literature, but the book does not oblige you to follow it. Chapters may be taken up in any sequence; some instructors like to intersperse poetry and plays with stories. Some may wish to teach Chapter 25 on “Myth and Narrative” immediately before teaching Oedipus the King. Many find that “Imagery” is a useful chapter with which to begin teaching poetry. Instructors who prefer to organize the course by theme will want to consult the detailed thematic indices.

If, because you skip around in the book, students encounter a term unknown to them, let them look it up in the Index of Terms. They will be directed to the page where it first occurs and where it will be defined and illustrated. Or have them look it up in the Glossary of Literary Terms at the back of the book.

In the poetry chapters, the sections titled “For Review and Further Study” do not review the whole book up to that moment; they review only the main points of the chapter. Most of these sections contain some poems that are a little more difficult than those in the body of that chapter.
FEATURES OF THIS EDITION

- Wide variety of popular and provocative stories, poems, plays, and critical prose—Offers traditional favorites with exciting and sometimes surprising contemporary selections.
  - 67 stories, 11 new selections—Diverse and exciting stories from authors new and old from around the globe.
  - 452 poems, 65 new selections—Great poems, familiar and less well known, mixing classic favorites with engaging contemporary work from a wonderful range of poets.
  - 17 plays, 4 new selections—A rich array of drama from classical Greek tragedy to Shakespeare to contemporary work by August Wilson and Anna Deavere Smith.
  - 149 critical prose pieces, 19 new selections—Extensive selections help students think about different approaches to reading, interpreting, and writing about literature.

- “Talking with Writers”—Exclusive conversations between Dana Gioia and celebrated fiction writer Amy Tan, former U.S. Poet Laureate Kay Ryan, and contemporary playwright David Ives offer students an insider’s look into the importance of literature and reading in the lives of three modern masters.

- 9 casebooks on major authors and literary masterpieces—Provide students a variety of material, including biographies, photographs, critical commentaries, and author statements, to begin an in-depth study of writers and works frequently used for critical analyses or research papers.
  - Edgar Allan Poe
  - Flannery O’Connor
  - Emily Dickinson
  - Langston Hughes
  - Sophocles
  - William Shakespeare
  - Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”
  - Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use”
  - T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

- “Latin American Fiction” and “Poetry in Spanish” chapters—Present some of the finest authors of the region, including Sor Juana, Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende. These important and unique chapters will not only broaden most students’ knowledge of world literature but will also recognize the richness of Spanish language fiction and poetry in the literature of the Americas—a very relevant subject in today’s multicultural classrooms. The bilingual selections in Poetry will also allow your Spanish-speaking students a chance to bring their native language into their coursework.

- Shakespeare, richly illustrated—Production photos of every major scene and character make Shakespeare more accessible to students who have never seen a live production, helping them to visualize the play’s action (as well as break up the long blocks of print to make the play’s text less intimidating).
  - 3 plays by Shakespeare: Othello, Hamlet, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream—In an illustrated format featuring dozens of production photos.
• “Picturing Shakespeare” photo montages—Offer students a pictorial introduction to each Shakespeare play with a visual preview of the key scenes and characters.

■ Audio version of Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*—Specially created for this book.

■ “Terms for Review” feature at the end of every major chapter—Provides students a simple study guide to go over key concepts and terms in each chapter.

■ “Writing Effectively”—feature in every major chapter has four elements designed to make the writing process easier, clearer, and less intimidating:
  • Writers on Writing personalizes the composition process
  • Thinking About ________ discusses the specific topic of the chapter
  • Checklist provides a step-by-step approach to composition and critical thinking
  • Writing Assignment plus More Topics for Writing provide a rich source of ideas for writing a paper.

■ “Writing About Literature”—8 full writing chapters provide comprehensive coverage of the composition and research process, in general and by genre. All chapters have been edited for increased clarity and accessibility. Our chief aim has been to make the information and structure of the writing chapters more visual for today's Internet-oriented students. (We strive to simplify the text but not to dumb it down. Clarity and concision are never out of place in a textbook, but condescension is fatal.)

■ Student writing—16 sample papers by students with annotations, prewriting exercises and rough drafts, plus a journal entry, provide credible examples of how to write about literature. Includes many samples of student work-in-progress that illustrate the writing process, including a step-by-step presentation of the development of a topic, idea generation, and the formulation of a strong thesis and argument. Samples include:
  • Argument Papers
  • Explication Papers
  • Analysis Papers
  • Comparison and Contrast Papers
  • Response Paper
  • Research Paper

■ Updated MLA guidelines—Provide students source citation requirements from the 7th edition of the *MLA Handbook* and incorporate them in all sample student papers.

■ Accessible, easy-to-use format—Section titles and subtitles help web-oriented students navigate easily from topic to topic in every chapter. Additionally, all chapters have been reviewed and updated to include relevant cultural references.

■ “Critical Approaches to Literature” with 30 prose selections—Provides depth and flexibility for instructors who prefer to incorporate literary theory and criticism into their introductory courses. Includes 3 pieces for every major critical school, carefully chosen both to illustrate the major theoretical approaches and to be accessible to beginning students, focusing on literary works found in the present edition (including examinations of work by Zora Neale Hurston and Franz Kafka, a piece by Camille Paglia on William Blake as well as a piece in gender theory by Richard Bozorth that provides a gay reading of Auden’s “Funeral Blues”).

■ Glossary of Literary Terms—More than 350 terms defined, including those highlighted in boldface throughout the text as well as other important terms. Provides clear and accurate definitions, usually with cross references to related terms.
STATISTICS ON POETRY

The twelfth edition of Literature includes 455 whole poems. In case you wish to teach a poet's work in greater depth than a single poem affords, these poets are the most heavily represented (listed by number of poems):

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<td>Langston Hughes</td>
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<td>E. E. Cummings</td>
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<td>Thomas Hardy</td>
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<td>Alfred, Lord Tennyson</td>
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<td>Gwendolyn Brooks</td>
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<td>John Donne</td>
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<td>T. S. Eliot</td>
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<td>Wallace Stevens</td>
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<td>Gerard Manley Hopkins</td>
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<td>A. E. Housman</td>
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<td>Charles Simic</td>
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<td>William Wordsworth</td>
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<td>Buson</td>
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<td>Billy Collins</td>
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<td>H. D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ben Jonson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philip Larkin</td>
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<td>Sylvia Plath</td>
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<td>Alexander Pope</td>
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<td>Ezra Pound</td>
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<td>Adrienne Rich</td>
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<td>Theodore Roethke</td>
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<td>Kay Ryan</td>
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<td>A. E. Stallings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dylan Thomas</td>
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There are three poems each by Buson, Billy Collins, H. D., Ben Jonson, Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, Alexander Pope, Ezra Pound, Adrienne Rich, Theodore Roethke, Kay Ryan, A. E. Stallings, and Dylan Thomas. Many other poets are represented doubly.

TEXTS AND EDITORIAL POLICY

Spelling has been modernized and rendered American, unless to do so would change the sound of a word. Untitled poems are identified by their first lines, except for those that have titles assigned by custom. The poems of Emily Dickinson are presented as edited by Thomas H. Johnson.
It would have been simpler to gloss no word a student could find in a desk dictionary, on the grounds that rummaging through dictionaries is good moral discipline; but it seemed best not to require the student to exchange text for dictionary as many as thirty times in reading a story, poem, or play. Glosses have been provided, therefore, for whatever seemed likely to get in the way of pleasure and understanding.

The spelling *rime* is used instead of *rhyme* on the theory that *rime* is easier to tell apart from *rhythm*.

**A NOTE ON LIVE READINGS**

Many find that, for drumming up zeal for poetry, there is no substitute for a good live poetry reading by a poet whose work students have read before. Anyone who wants to order a live poet is advised to visit the website of Poets and Writers <www.pw.org> and use their online directory of writers to get information about inviting a poet to visit your college or university. Not all poets give stirring performances, of course, so ask your colleagues on other campuses for suggestions, lest you get stuck with some mumbling prima donna.

If you want the poet to visit classes or confer with student writers, be sure to specify your expectations ahead of time. Some poets, especially media figures whose affairs are managed by agents, will charge for extra services; less-known visitors grateful for a reading are often pathetically happy to oblige (they may even walk your dog). All poets, if they are to do their best for you, need an occasional hour of solitude to recharge their batteries.

**WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS**

If we have described this manual as a 24-hour teacher’s lounge, we are pleased to report how many interesting colleagues have stopped in to chat. We receive a steady stream of letters on *Literature* from instructors throughout North America and abroad. Sometimes they disagree with our comments; more often they add new information or perspective. Frequently they pass on stories about what works or does not work in their classrooms. Much of this information is simply too good not to share. We have, therefore, supplemented our own comments with hundreds of comments from instructors (always properly credited to their authors).

**THANKS**

Heartfelt thanks to Michael Palma, who contributed many excellent entries on the new selections added to this edition. His deep knowledge of literature and crisp sense of style keeps the manual fresh, informed, and accessible. We also thank Erika Koss of Northeastern University, who updated, edited, and reformatted many of our fiction entries and also contributed entries on some of our new selections. Ongoing thanks go to Diane Thiel of the University of New Mexico, who originally helped develop the Latin American poetry chapter in a previous edition, to Susan Balée, who contributed to the chapter on writing a research paper, and to April Lindner, who served as associate editor for the writing section revisions of the previous edition.
Ellen Mease, a professor of drama at Grinnell College, not only provided good counsel on the Drama section but also wrote the extensive entry on Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Ongoing thanks to Daniel Stone, Robert McPhillips, Cheryl Clements, Lee Gurga, Nan LaBoe, Richard Mezo, Jeff Newberry, Beverly Schneller, Janet Schwarzkopf, Theresa Welford, and William Zander for help with this book.

Many instructors, most of whose names appear in this manual, generously wrote us with their suggestions and teaching experiences. Other instructors are noted in the introductory remarks to the textbook itself. We thank them all for their pragmatic and informed help. We are grateful to Donna Campion at Pearson and to Dianne Hall for their formidable effort and good will in managing the design and production of the manual and to Chris Heath for carefully proofreading the book. Finally, we would like to thank Mary Gioia, whose remarkable planning and editorial skills kept this manual in running order despite its erratic drivers.

ON TEACHING LITERATURE

We’ll close with a poem. It is by Billy Collins, from his collection *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (University of Arkansas Press, 1988), and it sets forth an experience that may be familiar to you.

INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

I ask them to take a poem and hold it up to the light like a color slide or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem and watch him probe his way out, or walk inside the poem’s room and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski across the surface of a poem waving at the author’s name on the shore. But all they want to do is tie the poem to a chair with rope and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose to find out what it really means.

As you might expect, Billy Collins, a past U.S. Poet Laureate, is himself a professor of English—at Lehman College of the City University of New York. May this manual help you find ways to persuade your students to set aside rope and hose and instead turn on a few lights.

XJK, DMK, and DG
Introduction

Welcome, instructors, to MyLiteratureLab, a specially configured, interactive website for users of Kennedy/Gioia’s Literature series. If you and your students are using the Interactive Edition of Literature, your book includes an access code that lets you use the website at no additional charge. In the front of the book you and your students will find a chart with all the media resources on the site, listed by author, which correspond to specific selections in the book. Additionally, throughout the text there are marginal icons designating which authors and selections have corresponding materials on the site.

For help in using MyLiteratureLab in your course, this Instructor’s Manual includes listings of available resources by author, on a chapter-by-chapter basis, and in the relevant entries on each selection.

If you have used The Craft of Literature CD-ROM that accompanied previous editions, please note that all the resources on the CD (and more) are now available at MyLiteratureLab.

If you are not using the Interactive Edition of Kennedy/Gioia Literature and are interested in using MyLiteratureLab, visit www.myliteraturelab.com to find out how you and your students can access the site.

Resources Section

Resources. The Resources area contains instruction, multimedia tutorials, and exercises for a wide array of literature, writing, grammar, and research topics. Students can use this area on their own for self-study or instructors can point students to specific tools.

A new design makes it easier to view all instruction, multimedia, and exercise content within each Resources topic. As part of the new Resources design, instruc-
tors can require students to complete individual assignments or view entire topics under the Resources tab. Instructors can add Resources assets to students’ To Do lists and Study Plans.

Resources content includes:

- **Introduction to Literature**: Longman Lectures; Interactive Readings; timelines; full-length films; “Writers on Writing” videos; glossaries of literary terms; instruction on literary theory, elements of literature, and specific authors and selections; and robust assignments and exercises.
- **Writing**: Instruction in the writing process, writing about literature, and the effective use of sources, as well as a library of sample papers.
- **Grammar**: Diagnostics, video tutorials, and thousands of exercise sets.
- **Research**: Avoiding plagiarism and evaluating sources tutorials, citation diagnostics and exercise sets, step-by-step instruction in writing a literary research paper, samples, and much more.

**Literature Resources**

**eAnthology.** Two hundred additional selections are available with this interactive eAnthology, which is organized by genre and alphabetized within each genre. In addition to providing more selections, the eAnthology is an excellent study aid: Students can search, highlight, and take notes.

**Four feature-length films.** These films help students engage with their course material. From Films for the Humanities and Sciences, MyLiteratureLab™ offers *Hamlet* with Laurence Olivier, *Othello* with John Kani, *Antigone* with John Gielgud, and *Oedipus the King* with John Gielgud. Each film also has closed captions.
Longman Lectures. Narrated by our textbook authors and other experts on the selected works, these compelling “lectures” include background information about the author and work, as well as analysis and writing suggestions.

Interactive Readings. For a variety of key works, students can click on highlighted sections of text to read helpful explanations and see critical thinking questions. These aids guide their reading and increase their understanding of the work.

Writers on Writing. Students will gain inspiration for their own writing from exclusive interviews with noted contemporary authors, including Rita Dove and Kim Addonizio, as each discusses practicing the craft of writing. Each interview has closed captions and runs in a new player.

Writing, Editing, and Research Resources

Writing in Action videos. Updated Writing in Action videos with a new look and feel, closed-captioning, and references to updated versions of Word and other word-processing programs.

Common Grammar Error videos. Added to cover more common errors!
Grammar Podcasts. The Grammar Podcasts have now been added to the multimedia resources section in addition to being offered in the Writer’s Toolkit.

Assessment Resources

Diagnostics and Study Plan. Students can improve their grammar skills outside of classroom time through the MyLiteratureLab™ grammar diagnostics, which produce personalized study plans. The study plan links students to multimedia instruction in a given topic and practice opportunities. Instructors and students can track progress via the Gradebook. Students’ Study Plans will adapt based on their diagnostic results, assets required by the instructor, or comments made by the instructor on their writing submissions. Students can track the status of all assignments and required activities on their To Do list.

Exercises and Assignments. For students: Multiple choice, short answer, and essay assignments to help students practice and demonstrate knowledge of literary selections and grammar, writing, and research. For instructors: The Assignment Builder includes literature essay prompts as well as interactive Grammar Apply sets that encourage students to practice editing and grammar within the context of full paragraphs.
Writing and Grading Tools

Composing Space. This dynamic space for drafting and revising has been updated to provide consistent formatting, prominently displayed word count, and more. It includes a “Writer's Toolkit” that provides students with writing, grammar, research, and online tutoring help in one convenient place. With all of this online help, students are likely to turn in better papers. They will also be saving paper!

Pearson’s SourceCheck is now integrated into the Composing Space. SourceCheck helps instructors monitor originality and encourages students to accurately document and cite their sources. SourceCheck instantly spots similarities and reports matches. Documents can be submitted by the instructor or the instructor can permit students to submit their work.

Students can now create multi-modal compositions by attaching different types of files to their compositions (audio, video, PowerPoint, etc.). Students may also use this feature to submit fully formatted documents illustrating documentation for research papers.

WriteClick. The most versatile and powerful program of its kind, WriteClick assesses writing in any platform (word processors, online, email, etc.), calls out potential errors for consideration, and offers suggestions for improvement to encourage writers to think critically about their writing and revising. The application instantly analyzes writing for grammar and spelling errors, provides suggestions on writing skills, and puts useful tools at the writers’ fingertips to help improve their writing. WriteClick is a catalyst for learning, helping its users become critical thinkers and thoughtful writers in their academic writing and beyond.
Commenting. MyLiteratureLab™ offers two flexible commenting tools that will reduce the amount of time spent grading papers: pre-loaded “Common Error” comments on key grammar topics and “My Comments,” which enables instructors to save the comments they make over and over. Instructors now have the option to record and attach an audio comment when responding to student documents.

Peer Review. Students can also comment on each other’s papers within MyLiteratureLab™ making peer review projects easier to execute—and paperless.

Gradebook. Built specifically for courses with a heavy writing component, the MyLiteratureLab™ Gradebook makes it easy to capture, assess, and manage student submissions and practice results.

Instructors can now grade on any point scale between 0.01 and 1000. The instructor can also customize grades in the Gradebook to display as points, percentages, or letter grades.

A new column on the Student Results page has been added to display scores for required resources. A corresponding page provides specific details for each student’s performance on the required resources. This new page also indicates which topics are on each student’s Study Plan.

The calendar and Gradebook will display student submission dates based on time zone choices.

Instructor Resources. A new Instructor Resources page linked from the homepage provides instructors with teaching tips, ways to solve course challenges, grading strategies, a link to MyClassPrep (a database of downloadable instructor resources), and more! Instructors can now add course announcements that will appear for students on their homepage. Instructors can now manage and post their syllabi from their homepage. Instructors can use this tool to create and post podcasts and author a blog for each of their courses.
Using MyLiteratureLab™ in Your Course

You can use MyLiteratureLab™ to help build student interest.

- MyLiteratureLab™ engages students in the study of literature. Audio and video clips and Longman Lectures encourage student interest—not only from hearing a poem read expertly or seeing a professional production of a story or play, but also by opening the door to the ways literature can be interpreted.

- MyLiteratureLab™ helps create a theatrical experience. Approximately half of today’s college freshmen have never seen a live professional play, and the full-length films and clips shown here give them the flavor of live performance.

- MyLiteratureLab™ gives background material and critical essays that allow students an opportunity to study an author, selection, or critical theory in depth.

MyLiteratureLab™ helps students read and interpret.

- **Interactive Readings.** For a variety of key works, students can click on highlighted sections of text to read helpful explanations and see critical-thinking questions. These aids guide their reading and increase their understanding of the work.

- **Longman Lectures.** Narrated by our textbook authors and other experts on the selected works, these compelling “lectures” include background information about the author and work, as well as analysis and writing suggestions.

You can use MyLiteratureLab™ to supplement and enrich your assignments.

- Every major section of MyLiteratureLab™ is supported with pedagogy. Students don’t just watch a video clip and then turn to something else. Critical-thinking questions accompany every element.

You can incorporate MyLiteratureLab™ into your course in a number of ways.

- **As homework**—to reinforce the content covered in class and in the anthology.

- **In class**—to promote discussion and provide alternative ways of covering the syllabus.

- **For research assignments**—to get students started on researching an author or a work via the Research and Writing sections.

- **For independent study.**
Author Index

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources

The many assets supporting authors and selections include: biographies, critical overviews, bibliographies, links, lectures, practice questions, and assignments. The selections marked with an asterisk can be found in Literature.

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<td><strong>ROBERT BROWNING’S “MY LAST DUCHESS”</strong></td>
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<td>Structure and Meaning in Browning’s “My Last Duchess” by Joshua Adler</td>
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<td>A Feminist Reading of Browning’s “My Last Duchess” by Artavia Lineszy-Overton</td>
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**Listening to a Voice**

Chapter Introduction to Listening to a Voice
Video Introduction to Listening to a Voice
Dana Gioia

Background
William Blake
Anne Bradstreet
Gwendolyn Brooks
Emily Dickinson
Thomas Hardy
Edna St. Vincent Millay
Wilfred Owen
Edwin Arlington Robinson
Theodore Roethke
Anne Sexton
Walt Whitman
William Carlos Williams
William Wordsworth

**THEODORE ROETHKE’S “MY PAPA’S WALTZ”**

Background on Roethke
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz
Essay Questions

**EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON’S “LUKE HAVERGAL”**

Background on Robinson
Critical Essay
Robinson’s “Luke Havergall” by Ronald E. McFarland

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WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS’S “THE RED WHEELBARROW”  
  Background on Williams  
  Comprehension Quiz  
  Essay Questions

WILLIAM BLAKE’S “THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER”  
  Background on Blake  
  eAnthology of Blake work  
  Audio Essay and Questions

WILFRED OWEN’S “DULCE ET DECORUM EST”  
  Background on Owen  
  Longman Lecture  
  Interactive Reading  
  Comprehension Quiz  
  Essay Questions  
  Critical Essay  
  “Dulce et Decorum Est”—A Dramatist’s Point of View  
  by Troy M. Hughes

Words  
Chapter Introduction to Words  
Video Introduction to Words  
  X. J. Kennedy  
Background  
  Billy Collins  
  Lewis Carroll  
  E. E. Cummings  
  John Donne  
  Thomas Hardy  
  William Carlos Williams

JOHN DONNE’S “BATTER MY HEART . . . ”  
  Background on Donne  
  Longman Lecture

THOMAS HARDY’S “THE RUINED MAID”  
  Background on Hardy  
  Comprehension and Essay questions  
  Critical Essay  
  Thomas Hardy’s “The Ruined Maid,” Elsa Lanchester’s “Music-Hall,”  
  and the “Fall into Fashion” by Keith Wilson

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E. E. CUMMINGS’S "ANYONE LIVED IN A PRETTY HOW TOWN"
  Background on Cummings
  Audio Essay
  Comprehension Quiz
  Essay Questions
  Critical Essay
  Anyone's Any: A View of Language and Poetry Through an Analysis of
  "anyone lived in a pretty how town" by James Paul Gee

BILLY COLLINS’S "THE NAMES"
  Background on Collins
  Longman Lecture
  Questions and Writing Prompts

LEWIS CARROLL’S "JABBERWOCKY"
  Background on Carroll
  Longman Lecture
  Interactive Reading
  Comprehension Quiz
  Essay Questions
  Critical Essay
  Carroll’s "Jabberwocky" by Karen Alkalay-Gut

Saying and Suggesting
  Chapter Introduction to Saying and Suggesting
  Video Introduction to Saying and Suggesting
  Dana Gioia
  Background
    William Blake
    Gwendolyn Brooks
    E. E. Cummings
    Robert Frost
    Wallace Stevens
    Alfred, Lord Tennyson
    Richard Wilbur
  Writers on Writing Video Interview of Diane Thiel

RICHARD WILBUR’S "LOVE CALLS US TO THE THINGS OF THIS WORLD"
  Background on Wilbur
  Critical Essay
  From Cold War Poetry by Edward Brunner

Imagery
  Chapter Introduction to Imagery
  Video Introduction to Imagery
  X. J. Kennedy
Background
  Elizabeth Bishop
  Billy Collins
  Emily Dickinson
  T. S. Eliot
  Gerard Manley Hopkins
  Theodore Roethke
  Jean Toomer
  William Carlos Williams

THEODORE ROETHKE’S “ROOT CELLAR”
  Background on Roethke
  Interactive Reading
  Critical Essay
    “Root Cellar” by George Wolff

ELIZABETH BISHOP’S “THE FISH”
  Background on Bishop
  Critical Essay
    Some Observations on Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Fish” by Ronald E. McFarland

JEAN TOOMER’S “REAPERS”
  Background on Toomer
  Comprehension Quiz
  Essay Questions

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS’S “PIED BEAUTY”
  Background on Hopkins
  Video Essay
  Critical Essay
    Seeing “Pied Beauty”: A Key to Theme and Structure by Amy Lowenstein

JOHN KEATS’S “BRIGHT STAR! . . .”
  Background on Keats
  Longman Lecture

Figures of Speech
  Chapter Introduction to Figures of Speech
  Video Introduction to Figures of Speech
    Dana Gioia
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    Margaret Atwood
    William Blake
    Emily Dickinson
Robert Frost
John Keats
Sylvia Plath
William Shakespeare
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S SONNET 18 “SHALL I COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER’S DAY?”**
Background on Shakespeare
Longman Lecture on the Theme of Love in Shakespeare’s Sonnets
Audio Essay
Critical Essays
  - *Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 18”* by Robert H. Ray
  - *Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 18”* by Mark Howell
Student Paper
  - *Shakespeare’s Eternal Summer* by Laura Todd

**SYLVIA PLATH’S “METAPHORS”**
Background on Plath
Interactive Reading
Critical Essay
  - “Metaphors” by Karen Alkalay-Gut

**MARGARET ATWOOD’S “YOU FIT INTO ME”**
Background on Atwood
Critical Essay
  - Atwood’s “You fit into me” by Jes Simmons

**DANA GIOIA’S “MONEY”**
Video Clip of Gioia Reciting

**Song**
Background
  - William Shakespeare
  - Edwin Arlington Robinson

**EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON’S “RICHARD CORY”**
Background on Robinson
eAnthology of Robinson work
Longman Lecture
Reading Questions
Comprehension Quiz
Writing Prompts
Sound

Chapter Introduction to Sound
Video Introduction to Sound
X. J. Kennedy

Background
T. S. Eliot
Robert Frost
Gerard Manley Hopkins
A. E. Housman
William Shakespeare
Alfred, Lord Tennyson
John Updike
William Wordsworth
William Butler Yeats

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS’S “WHO GOES WITH FERGUS?”
Background on Yeats
Interactive Reading

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH’S “A SLUMBER DID MY SPIRIT SEAL”
Background on Wordsworth
Critical Essay
Cosmic Irony in Wordsworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal”
by Warren Stevenson

JOHN UPDIKE’S “RECITAL”
Background on Updike
Student Paper

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON’S “THE SPLENDOR FALLS ON CASTLE WALLS”
Background on Tennyson
Audio Essay

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS’S “LEDA AND THE SWAN”
Background on Yeats
Comprehension Quiz
Essay Questions
Critical Essay
Rhetorical Figures in Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan”
by Barbara Edwards-Aldrich

Rhythm

Chapter Introduction to Rhythm
Video Introduction to Rhythm
Dana Gioia
GWENDOLYN BROOKS’S “WE REAL COOL”
  Background on Brooks
  Interactive Reading
  Comprehension Quiz
  Essay Questions
  Critical Essay
    On “We Real Cool” by James D. Sullivan
  Student Paper
    The Tides of “We Real Cool” by Juli Grace

DOROTHY PARKER’S “RÉSUMÉ”
  Background on Parker
  Video Clip: Jack Lemmon reads Résumé

LANGSTON HUGHES’S “DREAM BOOGIE”
  Background on Hughes
  Critical Essay
    Creating the Blues (“Dream Boogie”) by Steven C. Tracy

Closed Form

Chapter Introduction to Closed Form
  Video Introduction to Closed Form
    X. J. Kennedy

Background
  Elizabeth Bishop
  John Donne
  Robert Frost
  John Keats
  Edna St. Vincent Millay
  William Shakespeare
  Dylan Thomas

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S SONNET 116 “LET ME NOT TO THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS”
  Background on Shakespeare
  Longman Lecture on the Theme of Love in Shakespeare’s Sonnets
Critical Essay
William Shakespeare: Sonnet 116 by Linda Gregerson

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY’S “WHAT LIPS MY LIPS HAVE KISSED . . .”
Background on Millay
Video Essay
Comprehension Quiz
Essay Questions
Student Paper
Analysis of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why” by Stephanie Willson

KIM ADDONIZIO’S “FIRST POEM FOR YOU”
Writers on Writing Interview of Addonizio

ROBERT FROST’S “ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT”
Background on Frost
Longman Lecture

DYLAN THOMAS’S “DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT”
Background on Thomas
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz
Essay Questions
Critical Essay
Making of a Poem: Dylan Thomas’s “Do not go gentle into that good night” by Oliver Evans

Open Form
Chapter Introduction to Open Form
Video Introduction to Open Form
Dana Gioia
Background
E. E. Cummings
George Herbert
Langston Hughes
Wallace Stevens
Walt Whitman
William Carlos Williams

E. E. CUMMINGS’S “BUFFALO BILL ’s”
Background on Cummings
Audio Essay
Questions, Writing Prompts
Critical Essay
Cummings’s “Buffalo Bill ’s” by Thomas Dilworth

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E. E. CUMMINGS'S “IN JUST-”
   Background on Cummings
   Interpretations
   Questions, Writing Prompts

WALT WHITMAN'S “CAVALRY CROSSING A FORD”
   Background on Whitman
   Interactive Reading
   Critical Essay
   Whitman's Theme in “Cavalry Crossing a Ford” by Dale Doepke

GEORGE HERBERT'S “EASTER WINGS”
   eAnthology
   Critical Essay
   “Easter Wings” by Joan Klingel Ray

Symbol
   Chapter Introduction to Symbol
   Video Introduction to Symbol
   X. J. Kennedy
   Background
   T. S. Eliot
   Emily Dickinson
   Thomas Hardy
   Robert Frost
   Wallace Stevens

THOMAS HARDY’S “NEUTRAL TONES”
   Background on Hardy
   Critical Essay
   The God-Curst Sun: Love in “Neutral Tones” by James Hazen

ROBERT FROST’S “THE ROAD NOT TAKEN”
   Background on Frost
   Interpretation
   Video Clip
   Questions and Writing Prompts
   Critical Essay
   Frost's “The Road Not Taken”: A 1925 Letter Comes to Light
   by Larry Finger

WALLACE STEVENS’S “ANECDOTE OF THE JAR”
   Background on Stevens
   Interactive Reading
   Critical Essays
   Stevens's “Anecdote of the Jar”: Art as Entrapment by A. R. Coulthard

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### Myth and Narrative

**Background**
- Robert Frost
- John Keats
- Edgar Allan Poe
- Sylvia Plath
- Anne Sexton
- William Wordsworth
- W. B. Yeats

**Anne Sexton’s “Cinderella”**
- Background on Sexton
- Comprehension Quiz
- Essay Questions

### Poetry and Personal Identity

**Background**
- Sylvia Plath

**Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”**
- Background on Plath
- Longman Lecture

**Judith Ortiz Cofer’s “Quinceañera”**
- Writers on Writing Video of Cofer

### Recognizing Excellence

**Background**
- Elizabeth Bishop
- Emily Dickinson
- John Keats
- Edgar Allan Poe
- Percy Bysshe Shelley
- Dylan Thomas
- Walt Whitman
- W. B. Yeats

**William Butler Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium”**
- Background on Yeats
- Critical Excerpts

**Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias”**
- Background on Shelley
- Audio Essay
- Comprehension Quiz and Essay Questions
ELIZABETH BISHOP’S “ONE ART”
Background on Bishop
Longman Lecture
Critical Essay

Casebook: Emily Dickinson
Background on Dickinson
“I HEARD A FLY BUZZ – WHEN I DIED”
Audio Essays and Clips
“WILD NIGHTS – WILD NIGHTS!”
Audio Essay and Clip
“BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH”
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz and Essay Questions

Casebook: Langston Hughes
Background on Hughes
“HARLEM” [“DREAM DEFERRED”]
Audio Clip
Comprehension Quiz
“The WEARY BLUES”
Longman Lecture
Questions and Writing Prompts
“THEME FOR ENGLISH B”
Comprehension Quiz

Casebook: Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”
Background on Eliot
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz and Essay Questions
Student Paper
The Existential Anguish of J. Alfred Prufrock by Patrick Mooney

Poems for Further Reading
MATTHEW ARNOLD’S “DOVER BEACH”
Audio Clip

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William Blake’s “The Tyger”
   Background on Blake
   Video and Audio Clips
   Comprehension Quiz
   Essay Questions

Gwendolyn Brooks’s “The Mother”
   Background on Brooks
   Longman Lecture
   Comprehension Quiz and Essay Questions

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”
   Background on Coleridge
   Comprehension Quiz and Essay Questions
   Audio Essay
   Critical Essay
   “Kubla Khan”: The Poet in the Poem by Geoffrey Little
   Student Paper
   Symbolic Language in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”
   by Patrick Mooney

John Donne’s “Death Be Not Proud”
   Background on Donne
   Audio Clip

Rita Dove’s “Daystar”
   Background on Dove
   “Writers on Writing” Video Interview of Dove

Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” and “Birches”
   Background on Frost
   Longman Lecture: Mending Wall
   Video Clip
   Mending Wall
   Birches
   Comprehension Quiz and Essay Questions: Mending Wall

Allen Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California”
   Background on Ginsberg
   Comprehension Quiz and Essay Questions

Seamus Heaney’s “Digging”
   Background on Heaney
   Longman Lecture
   Comprehension Quiz and Essay Questions

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Chapter Guide: MyLiteratureLab® Resources

A. E. Housman’s “To an Athlete Dying Young”
   Background on Housman
   Longman Lecture
   Evaluation Questions
   Writing Prompts

Randall Jarrell’s “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”
   Background on Jarrell
   Comprehension Quiz and Essay Questions

John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”
   Background on Keats
   Audio Clips
   Comprehension Quiz
   Essay Questions
   Student Paper
      John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: Dissolving into the Moment
         by Michelle Brown

William Shakespeare’s Sonnets
   Background on Shakespeare
   Longman Lecture: The Theme of Love in Shakespeare’s Sonnets
   Interactive Reading of Sonnet 73: “That time of year thou mayst in me behold”

William Wordsworth’s “Composed upon Westminster Bridge”
   Background on Wordsworth
   Audio Clip

X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia Read Their Poems

X. J. Kennedy
   For Allen Ginsberg
   Snowflake Soufflé
   Nude Descending a Staircase
   In a Prominent Bar in Secaucus One Day

Dana Gioia
   California Hills in August
   Summer Storm
   Unsaid
   Money
Drama

Reading a Play
Chapter Introduction to Reading or Watching a Play
Video Introduction to Reading or Watching a Play
Michael Palma

Introductions to the Elements of Drama: Exposition, Dialogue, Conflict, Plot, Character, Theme, Symbol
Video Introductions to the Elements of Drama: Exposition, Dialogue, Conflict, Plot, Character, Theme, Symbol
Michael Palma

SUSAN GLASPELL’S TRIFLES
Background on Glaspell
E-file, Glaspell’s A Jury of Her Peers
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz and Essay Questions

The Theater of Sophocles
Chapter Introductions: Modes of Drama, Verse Drama, the Unities
Video Introductions: Modes of Drama; Verse Drama, the Unities
Michael Palma

SOPHOCLES’S OEDIPUS THE KING
Background on Sophocles
Longman Lecture
Evaluation Questions
Comprehension Quiz
Writing Prompts / Essay Questions
Video
Full-length 1984 TV production of Oedipus, starring John Gielgud and Claire Bloom

SOPHOCLES’S ANTIGONÉ
Background on Sophocles
Longman Lecture
Evaluation Questions
Chapter Guide: MyLiteratureLab™ Resources

Comprehension Quiz
Writing Prompts / Essay Questions
Video

Full-length 1984 TV production of Antigonë, starring John Gielgud and Juliet Stevenson.

The Theater of Shakespeare
Chapter Introductions: Modes of Drama, Verse Drama
Video Introductions: Modes of Drama, Verse Drama
Michael Palma

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S OTHELLO
Video Introduction to Othello
X. J. Kennedy
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz
Audio Essay

Excerpt from a 1944 recording of Paul Robeson’s Othello
Video

Video clip of Othello starring William Marshall, Ron Moody
Full-length 1989 TV production of Othello, starring John Kani and Richard Haddon Haines

Interactive Reading
Critical Essay

Impertinent Trifling: Desdemona’s Handkerchief
by Harry Berger, Jr.

Student Paper
A Guiltless Death: The Unconsummated Marriage in Othello,
by K. A. Goodfellow

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S HAMLET
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz
Reading Questions
Writing Prompts
Video

Full-length film of Hamlet starring Laurence Olivier

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz
Reading Questions
Writing Prompts
The Modern Theater

HENRIK IBSEN’S A DOLL’S HOUSE
Background on Ibsen
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz
Essay Questions

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS’S A GLASS MENAGERIE
Background on Williams
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz
Essay Questions

Plays for Further Reading

DAVID HENRY HWANG’S THE SOUND OF A VOICE
Background on Hwang

ARTHUR MILLER’S THE DEATH OF A SALESMAN
Background on Miller
Longman Lecture
Comprehension Quiz
Reading and Evaluation Questions
Writing Prompts

AUGUST WILSON’S FENCES
Background on Wilson
Longman Lecture
Evaluation Questions
Writing Prompts
FICTION
If you prefer to teach a different story to illustrate an element of fiction—to discuss style, say, with the aid of “Cathedral” or “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” instead of the examples in the chapter on style—you will find the substitution easy to make. Many choices are at your disposal in Chapter 12, “Stories for Further Reading,” and other stories in the book lend themselves to varied purposes. The following list has a few likely substitutions. If you teach other elements of fiction (e.g., humor, fantasy) or specific genres, you will find some nominations here.

**FABLE, PARABLE, AND TALE**

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<td>The Camel and His Friends</td>
<td>The Tell-Tale Heart</td>
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<td>The Fox and the Grapes</td>
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<td>Godfather Death</td>
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**PLOT**

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<td>How I Met My Husband</td>
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<td>The Judge’s Wife</td>
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<td>An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge</td>
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<td>A Rose for Emily</td>
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<td>The Shunammite</td>
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<td>The Story of an Hour</td>
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**POINT OF VIEW**

**First Person Narrator as Central Character**

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<td>Araby (mature narrator recalling boyhood view)</td>
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POINT OF VIEW (Cont.)

The Cask of Amontillado (unreliable narrator)
The House on Mango Street
How I Met My Husband
The Lesson
A Pair of Tickets
The Shunammite
The Tell-Tale Heart (unreliable narrator)
The Yellow Wallpaper

First Person Narrator Not the Protagonist

STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER
A Rose for Emily
Sonny’s Blues

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
The Fall of the House of Usher
The Lawsuit
The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

Third Person, All-knowing Narrator

SUGGESTED STORIES
The Gift of the Magi
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The Judge’s Wife
The Rocking-Horse Winner
The Storm
The Swimmer
The Things They Carried
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? (par. 1–13)

Third Person, Limited Omniscience
(Narrator Seeing into One Major Character)

STORY INCLUDED IN CHAPTER
A Worn Path

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
Barn Burning
The Gospel According to Mark
Interpreter of Maladies
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
Miss Brill
An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge
The Open Boat
Parker’s Back
Revelation
Shiloh
The Story of an Hour

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Objective or “Fly-on-the-Wall” Point of View
SUGGESTED STORIES
The Chrysanthemums
A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

Multiple Points of View
SUGGESTED STORY
A Haunted House

CHARACTER
STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER
Cathedral
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
Miss Brill
Young Goodman Brown

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
Barn Burning (Sarty Snopes: dynamic character, one who develops within the story)
The Chrysanthemums
The Death of Ivan Ilych
Everyday Use
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
How I Met My Husband
Interpreter of Maladies
The Lesson
The Metamorphosis
Parker’s Back
Paul’s Case
Revelation
Sonny’s Blues
The Swimmer
The Things They Carried
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?
A Worn Path

SETTING
STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER
A Pair of Tickets
A Sound of Thunder
The Storm
To Build a Fire

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
A & P
Araby
Brownies
The Cask of Amontillado
The Chrysanthemums
A Clean, Well-Lighted Place
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The Fall of the House of Usher
The Gospel According to Mark
Greasy Lake
A Haunted House
The House on Mango Street
Interpreter of Maladies

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SETTING (Cont.)
The Lawsuit
The Open Boat
Orientation
Paul’s Case
A Rose for Emily
Sweat
The Swimmer
The Things They Carried
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings
A Worn Path
The Yellow Wallpaper
Young Goodman Brown

TONE AND STYLE
STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER
Barn Burning
A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
The Cask of Amontillado
Cathedral
The Fall of the House of Usher
Girl
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
Greasy Lake
A Haunted House
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
The Open Boat
A Rose for Emily
The Swimmer
The Tell-Tale Heart
The Things They Carried
A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been!
Young Goodman Brown

IRONY
STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER
The Gift of the Magi
Teenage Wasteland

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
The Appointment in Samarra
Dead Men’s Path
The Gospel According to Mark
Happy Endings
How I Met My Husband
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
The Judge’s Wife
The Lottery
An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge
The Open Boat (irony of fate)

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Stories Arranged by Type and Element

Orientation
The Rocking-Horse Winner
A Rose for Emily
The Storm
The Story of an Hour
The Swimmer
To Build a Fire

SYMBOL

STORIES INCLUDED IN CHAPTER
The Chrysanthemums
The Lottery
The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas
The Swimmer

OTHER SUGGESTED STORIES
Araby
Cathedral
A Clean, Well-Lighted Place
The Gospel According to Mark
Greasy Lake (the lake itself)
A Haunted House
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
The Open Boat
Parker’s Back
A Rose for Emily
Sweat
The Tell-Tale Heart
A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings
The Yellow Wallpaper
Young Goodman Brown

OTHER ELEMENTS AND GENRES

FANTASY AND THE SUPERNATURAL
The Appointment in Samarra
Godfather Death
The Gospel According to Mark
A Haunted House
The Lottery
The Metamorphosis
The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas
The Rocking-Horse Winner
A Sound of Thunder
The Swimmer
A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings
Young Goodman Brown

HUMOR
A & P
Greasy Lake
Harrison Bergeron
How I Met My Husband

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8  FICTION

HUMOR (Cont.)
  Independence
  Orientation
  Teenage Wasteland

MYTH, FOLKLORE, AND ARCHETYPE
  The Appointment in Samarra
  Godfather Death
  The Lottery
  This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
  A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings
  Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?
  Young Goodman Brown

SCIENCE FICTION
  Harrison Bergeron
  The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas
  A Sound of Thunder
STORIES ARRANGED BY SUBJECT AND THEME

In case you prefer to teach fiction according to its subjects and general themes, we have provided a list of stories that may be taken up together. Some instructors who arrange a course thematically like to begin with Chapter 6, Theme, and its four stories.

ART, LANGUAGE, AND IMAGINATION
- Cathedral
- Everyday Use
- The Gospel According to Mark
- The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
- The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas
- Parker's Back
- Sonny's Blues
- A Sound of Thunder
- The Yellow Wallpaper

CHILDHOOD
- Araby
- Brownies
- Girl
- The House on Mango Street
- The Lesson
- The Rocking-Horse Winner

COMEDY AND SATIRE
- Brownies
- How I Met My Husband
- Orientation
- This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona

COMING OF AGE, INITIATION STORIES
- Araby
- Barn Burning
- Battle Royal
- Brownies
- Greasy Lake
- How I Met My Husband
A Place I've Never Been
Paul’s Case
The Shunammite
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

DEATH
The Appointment in Samarra
Dead Men’s Path
The Death of Ivan Ilyich
The Fall of the House of Usher
Godfather Death
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The Gospel According to Mark
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
The Judge’s Wife
The Open Boat
A Rose for Emily
Sweat
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
To Build a Fire

DEFIANCE OF FATE
The Appointment in Samarra
Godfather Death
The Open Boat
The Swimmer

DISABILITIES
Cathedral
Shiloh

DIVINE REVELATION
The Gospel According to Mark
Parker’s Back
Revelation

EPIPHANIES AND ILLUMINATIONS
Araby
Greasy Lake
A Haunted House
Interpreter of Maladies
Miss Brill
A Pair of Tickets
The Parable of the Prodigal Son
Revelation
The Story of an Hour

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FACING ONE’S OWN DEATH
The Cask of Amontillado
The Death of Ivan Ilych
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The Gospel According to Mark
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge
The Open Boat
To Build a Fire

FAMILIES
Barn Burning
Everyday Use
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The House on Mango Street
Interpreter of Maladies
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
The Lawsuit
The Metamorphosis
A Pair of Tickets
The Parable of the Prodigal Son
The Rich Brother
The Rocking-Horse Winner
The Storm
Teenage Wasteland
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona

FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS
Barn Burning
The Lawsuit
The Metamorphosis
A Pair of Tickets
The Parable of the Prodigal Son
The Storm
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona

FRIENDSHIP AND CAMARADERIE
A & P
Araby
Brownies
Cathedral
Greasy Lake
The Camel and His Friends
The Open Boat
The Things They Carried
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona

GENERATION GAPS
A & P

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Araby
Brownies
Girl
Greasy Lake
Teenage Wasteland
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

HOLDING A JOB, WORK
A & P
A Clean, Well-Lighted Place
Interpreter of Maladies
The Metamorphosis
Orientation
The Rich Brother
Sweat

HUMANITY AGAINST THE ELEMENTS
The Open Boat
To Build a Fire

ILLUSION AND REALITY
Araby
The Cask of Amontillado
The Chrysanthemums
Dead Men’s Path
The Fall of the House of Usher
The Gospel According to Mark
Greasy Lake
An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge
Paul’s Case
The Swimmer
The Tell-Tale Heart
The Yellow Wallpaper
Young Goodman Brown

IMMIGRANTS AND EXILES
The House on Mango Street
Interpreter of Maladies
A Pair of Tickets

INDIVIDUAL VERSUS SOCIETY
A & P
Barn Burning
Battle Royal
Dead Men’s Path
Harrison Bergeron
Independence

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The Lottery
The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas
Paul’s Case
The Rich Brother
A Rose for Emily
Young Goodman Brown

INGENIOUS DECEPTIONS
The Tell-Tale Heart
Young Goodman Brown

LONELINESS
The Chrysanthemums
A Clean, Well-Lighted Place
How I Met My Husband
Miss Brill
Paul’s Case

LOVE AND DESIRE
A & P
Araby
The Chrysanthemums
Happy Endings
A Haunted House
How I Met My Husband
Interpreter of Maladies
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
The Lawsuit
Parker’s Back
A Place I’ve Never Been
Shiloh
The Shunammite
The Storm
The Story of an Hour

MACHISMO AND SEXISM
A & P
Greasy Lake
The Shunammite
Sweat

MAGIC AND THE OCCULT
The Appointment in Samarra
Godfather Death
A Haunted House
The Rocking-Horse Winner
A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings
Young Goodman Brown

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MARRIAGES (THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY)

Cathedral
The Gift of the Magi
Happy Endings
A Haunted House
Interpreter of Maladies
The Lawsuit
Shiloh
The Shunammite
The Storm
The Story of an Hour
Sweat
The Yellow Wallpaper

MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Everyday Use
Girl
Interpreter of Maladies
The Jilting of Granny Weatherall
A Pair of Tickets
Revelation (the “ugly girl” and her mother)
The Rocking-Horse Winner
Teenage Wasteland

MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Battle Royal
Brownies
Dead Men’s Path
Everyday Use
The House on Mango Street
Independence
Interpreter of Maladies
The Judge’s Wife
The Lawsuit
The Lesson
A Pair of Tickets
The Shunammite
Sonny’s Blues
Sweat
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
A Worn Path

MURDER

The Cask of Amontillado
The Fall of the House of Usher
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The Gospel According to Mark
The Judge’s Wife
A Rose for Emily
The Tell-Tale Heart
Sweat

NATURE
The Open Boat
The Storm
A Sound of Thunder
To Build a Fire

PRIDE BEFORE A FALL
Barn Burning
Dead Men's Path
The Fox and the Grapes
Revelation
The Swimmer

RACE, CLASS, AND CULTURE
Barn Burning
Battle Royal
Brownies
Dead Men's Path
Everyday Use
The Gift of the Magi
The House on Mango Street
How I Met My Husband
Independence
The Lawsuit
The Lesson
A Pair of Tickets
Revelation
The Rich Brother
The Shunammite
Sonny's Blues
Sweat
This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona
A Worn Path

SIBLINGS
Everyday Use
The Metamorphosis
A Pair of Tickets
The Parable of the Prodigal Son
The Rich Brother
Sonny's Blues

VICTIMS AND VICTIMIZERS
Battle Royal
The Cask of Amontillado
A Good Man Is Hard to Find
The Judge's Wife
The Lawsuit
The Shunammite
Sweat
The Tell-Tale Heart
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?
The Yellow Wallpaper

WAR
An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge
The Things They Carried

THE WISH TO LEAVE EVERYTHING AND RUN AWAY
The Chrysanthemums
The Parable of the Prodigal Son
Paul's Case
The Swimmer

WOMEN'S ASPIRATIONS
The Chrysanthemums
Shiloh
The Yellow Wallpaper
At the end of earlier editions of Literature, we included a short student questionnaire. This form solicited each student’s opinion about his or her reactions to the book. The editors read and saved each completed questionnaire they received. These candid student responses often help improve the anthology from edition to edition.

These student responses are interesting in their own right, but they also add perspective on what really happens in the classroom. The stories students prefer often differ sharply from those that instructors rate most highly. Instructors can learn a great deal by remembering how younger readers find certain selections both exciting and illuminating that may seem overly familiar to seasoned teachers.

Here are the top stories from previous editions chosen by a large sample of students over the years.

**FAVORITE STORIES (Student Choices in Rank Order)**

1. William Faulkner, “A Rose for Emily”
2. Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*
3. Shirley Jackson, “The Lottery”
4. Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”
5. T. Coraghessan Boyle, “Greasy Lake”

Let us add one cautionary footnote: Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* polarizes students (not necessarily a bad thing). It not only ranks second among student favorites, it is the overwhelming first choice among stories students dislike.
A story even shorter than the one about the last person in the world and her doorbell appeared in a letter to the editor of the Times Literary Supplement for January 16, 1981. “Unluckily,” writes Hugh R. Williams, “I cannot remember the source.” He offers it as the briefest ghost tale ever discovered:

Before going to bed one night, a man put his wig on the bedpost. In the morning it had turned white.

Suggestion for an assignment in writing a story: Write another supernatural tale that ends with the revelation of something inexplicable. It need not be so brief, but keep it within two paragraphs.
1

READING A STORY

For a second illustration of a great detail in a story, a detail that sounds observed instead of invented (besides Defoe’s “two shoes, not mates”), you might cite a classic hunk of hokum: H. Rider Haggard’s novel of farfetched adventure, She (1887). Describing how the Amahagger tribesmen dance wildly by the light of unusual torches—embalmed corpses of the citizens of ancient Kor, left over in quantity—the narrator, Holly, remarks, “So soon as a mummy was consumed to the ankles, which happened in about twenty minutes, the feet were kicked away, and another put in its place.” (Pass down another mummy, this one is guttering!) Notice the exact specification “in about twenty minutes” and the unforgettable discarding of the unburned feet, like a candle stub. Such detail, we think, bespeaks a tall-tale-teller of genius. (For this citation, we thank T. J. Binyon’s review of The Private Diaries of Sir Henry Rider Haggard in the Times Literary Supplement, 8 Aug. 1980.)

When you introduce students to the tale as a literary form, you might point out that even in this age of electronic entertainment, a few tales still circulate from mouth to ear. Ask them whether they have heard any good tales lately (other than dirty jokes).

TYPES OF SHORT FICTION

W. Somerset Maugham, The Appointment in Samarra, page 6

Maugham’s retelling of this fable has in common with the Grimm tale “Godfather Death” not only the appearance of Death as a character, but also the moral or lesson that Death cannot be defied. Maugham includes this fable in his play Sheppey (1933), but it is probably best known as the epigraph to John O’Hara’s novel Appointment in Samarra (New York: Random, 1934).

Students may be asked to recall other fables they know. To jog their memories, famous expressions we owe to Aesop (“sour grapes,” “the lion’s share,” “dog in the manger,” and others) may suggest the fables that gave them rise. At least, the fable of the hare and the tortoise should be familiar to any watcher of old Bugs Bunny cartoons.
Aesop, The Fox and the Grapes, page 7

Aesop’s fables—many of which, like “The Fox and the Grapes,” involve animals endowed with human traits of character and consciousness—are still so familiar to many students that they may be tempted to treat them condescendingly as “kids’ stuff.” His fables are also so compact that they seem very slight. It may help students initially to point out that in classical times the notion of a special literature for children as opposed to other groups did not exist. Aesop told his stories to a mixed audience probably consisting mostly of adults. It might even be interesting to ask a fundamental question such as whether a story is necessarily different if it is directed toward adults or children.

Questions

1. In fables, the fox is usually clever and frequently successful. Is that the case here? The sly fox, who uses guile and cunning to trick others into giving him what he wants, is a stock character of the fable tradition. In this fable, of course, the fox fails to achieve what he wants to, perhaps because the skills required are physical, not mental. On the other hand, it could be argued that he displays some (no doubt unconscious) cleverness in coming up with an explanation that soothes his vanity and blunts his desire.

2. The original Greek word for the fox’s description of the grapes is omphakes, which more precisely means “unripe.” Does the translator’s use of the word “sour” add any further level of meaning to the fable? While “unripe” merely suggests “not yet ready,” “sour grapes” sound bitter and permanently, if not inherently, undesirable (and may even, on one level, be suggestive of the mood in which the phrase is most likely uttered).

3. How well does the closing moral fit the fable? A number of Aesop’s fables carry morals that do not seem directly expressive of what is happening in the text, but the moral of this fable fits quite well indeed, so much so that “sour grapes” has become a stock phrase in English to refer to the disparagement of something that is desirable but unattainable.

Bidpai, The Camel and His Friends, page 8

Bidpai’s Sanskrit fables remain little known in English, but they occupy an important place in Asian literature—from Turkey and Iran to Indonesia and India. Translations and adaptations abound in the East as extensively as Aesop’s fables do in the West.

The Panchatantra, or Five Chapters, was intended as a sort of moral textbook. The frame-tale presents a learned Brahmin teacher who used animal tales to instruct his students, the three amazingly dimwitted sons of a king. (Remedial education, it appears, is nothing new.) The moral code espoused by the fables is consistently practical rather than idealistic. Shrewdness and skepticism, they suggest, are necessary traits for survival in a world full of subtle dangers. The foolishly trusting camel in the fable reprinted here finds out too late that his “friends” have fatal designs—not bad advice for members of a royal family or anyone else to learn.
Chuang Tzu, INDEPENDENCE, page 11

Chuang Tzu’s parables are famous in Chinese culture, both as works of intrinsic literary merit and as pithy expressions of Taoist philosophy. Parables are important literary genres in traditional societies. They reflect a cultural aesthetic that appreciates the power of literary artistry while putting it to the use of illustrating moral and religious ideas. Clarity is a key virtue in a parable or moral fable. Its purpose is not merely to entertain but also to instruct.

Chuang Tzu’s celebrated parable suggests the uneasy relationship between philosophy and power in ancient China. It was not necessarily a safe gesture to decline the public invitation of a king, and the refusal of employment could be construed as an insult or censure. Chuang understands that the only safe way to turn down a monarch is with wit and charm. He makes his moral point, but with self-deprecating humor.

In his indispensable book Essentials of Chinese Literary Art (Belmont: Duxbury, 1979, p. 46), James J. Y. Liu of Stanford University comments on the sly rhetoric of this parable:

Instead of solemnly declaring that worldly power and glory are all in vain, Chuang Tzu makes us see their absurdity by comparing them to a dead tortoise. At the same time, life unburdened with official duties is not idealized, but compared to the tortoise dragging its tail in the mud.

The Tzu following Chuang’s name is an honorific meaning master. The philosopher’s historical name was Chuang Chou. The Chinese surname is conventionally put first, so Chuang is the proper term to use for the author.

This parable was a favorite of the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, who was fascinated by the Chinese fabular tradition.

Jesus’s “Parable of the Prodigal Son” (Luke 15: 11–32) is found in the chapter on “Theme.” It may be interesting for students to compare the differing techniques of these two classic parables from different traditions.

Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, GODFATHER DEATH, page 12

For all its brevity, “Godfather Death” illustrates typical elements of plot. That is the main reason for including it in this chapter (not to mention its intrinsic merits!). It differs from Updike’s contemporary “A & P” in its starker characterizations, its summary method of telling, its terser descriptions of setting, and its element of magic and the supernatural. In its world, God, the Devil, and Death walk the highway. If students can be shown these differences, then probably they will be able to distinguish most tales from most short stories.

“Godfather Death” may be useful, too, in a class discussion of point of view. In the opening pages of Chapter 2, we discuss the ways in which this tale is stronger for having an omniscient narrator. If you go on to deal with symbolism, you may wish to come back to this tale for a few illustrations of wonderful, suggestive properties: the magical herb, Death’s underground cave, and its “thousands and thousands” of flickering candles.
This is a grim tale even for Grimm: a young man’s attentions to a beautiful princess bring about his own destruction. In a fairy tale it is usually dangerous to defy some arbitrary law; and in doing so here the doctor breaks a binding contract. From the opening, we know the contract will be an evil one—by the father’s initial foolishness in spurning God. Besides, the doctor is a thirteenth child—an unlucky one.

Possible visual aids are reproductions of the “Dance of Death” woodcuts by Hans Holbein the younger. Have any students seen Ingmar Bergman’s film The Seventh Seal, and can they recall how Death was personified?

Anne Sexton has a sophisticated retelling of “Godfather Death,” in which the doctor’s guttering candle is “no bigger than an eyelash,” in her Transformations (Boston: Houghton, 1971), a collection of poems based on Grimm. “Godfather Death” is seldom included in modern selections of fairy tales for children. Bruno Bettelheim has nothing specific to say about “Godfather Death” but has much of interest to say about fairy tales in his The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Knopf, 1976). Though Bettelheim’s study is addressed primarily to adults “with children in their care,” any college student fascinated by fairy tales would find it stimulating.

**Plot**

**The Short Story**

*John Updike, A & P, page 17*

Many popular novels and short stories feature a protagonist’s defiance of his or her society, often prompted by an epiphany. In J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye and James Joyce’s “Araby”—as well as John Updike’s “A & P”—this character is a teenager in quest of adulthood.

John Updike was hired by the New Yorker as a staff writer in the mid-1950s. First published in the 22 July 1961 issue of the New Yorker, “A & P” appeared the next year in Updike’s short story collection Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories. A prominent literary critic at the time, Arthur Mizener, reviewed the collection for the New York Times Book Review, praising Updike for “his natural talent [that] is so great that for some time it has been a positive handicap to him.” More than fifty years later, “A & P” continues its claim as one of the most popular stories of the twentieth century, and Updike’s most anthologized.

“A & P” is a good story to use in the classroom to discuss the typical elements of plot. The setting is clear from Updike’s opening paragraph (“I’m in the third checkout slot . . . with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers”). Relatively long for so brief a story, the exposition takes up most of the story’s first half. Portraying Queenie and the other girls in loving detail, this exposition helps make Sammy’s later gesture of heroism understandable. It establishes, also, that Sammy feels at odds with his job, and so foreshadows his heroism. Dramatic conflict arrives with the appearance of Lengel, the manager, and his confrontation with the girls. When Lengel catches Sammy smiling, we can guess the clerk is in for trouble. Crisis and climax are practically one, but if you care to distinguish them, the crisis may be found in the paragraph 20: “I thought and said ‘No’ but it wasn’t about that I was thinking,” in which Sammy hovers on the brink of his decision. The climax is his announcement “I quit”; the conclusion is his
facing a bleaker future. The last sentence implies not only that Sammy will have trouble getting another job, but that if he continues to go through life as an uncompromising man of principle, then life from now on is going to be rough.

In “A & P” and the fairy tale “Godfather Death,” the plots are oddly similar. In both, a young man smitten with a young woman’s beauty makes a sacrifice in order to defend her from his grim overlord. (It is far worse, of course, to have Death for an overlord than Lengel.) If this resemblance doesn’t seem too abstract, it may be worth pursuing briefly. The stories, to be sure, are more different than similar, but one can show how Updike is relatively abundant in his descriptions of characters and setting and goes more deeply into the central character’s motivation—as short-story authors usually do, unlike most writers of tales.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “A & P.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Notice how artfully Updike arranges details to set the story in a perfectly ordinary supermarket. What details stand out for you as particularly true to life? What does this close attention to detail contribute to the story? The details of this perfectly ordinary supermarket are clear from the beginning, and there are several humorous descriptions, such as when the three girls walk “up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-spreads-spaghetti-soft-drinks-crackers-and-cookies aisle” (par. 5). As with most grocery stores, the placement of certain items on a particular aisle seems misplaced or illogical. Later in that same paragraph, Sammy aptly describes the way people mutter in a grocery store, completely engrossed with their lists, when he speculates, “I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering ‘Let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah, yes, applesauce’” (par. 5).

The store is far away from any beach or swimming pool (five miles away according to paragraph 10), so the girls’ bathing suits draw a great deal of notice from Sammy and the other customers. His detailed analysis of what they’re wearing and their body size, as well as his lustful comparisons as he tries to decide which of the three is the prettiest, is certainly true to real life. All these vivid descriptions help the reader not only picture the grocery store, but also demonstrate Sammy’s personality and worldview.

2. How fully does Updike draw the character of Sammy? What traits (admirable or otherwise) does Sammy show? Is he any less a hero for wanting the girls to notice his heroism? To what extent is he more thoroughly and fully portrayed than the doctor in “Godfather Death”? Sammy isn’t sophisticated, but he is sometimes witty and always observant. He comes from a family of proletarian beer drinkers and thinks martinis are garnished with mint. His feelings for the girls begin with lustful admiration for their beauty and unconventional behavior, but this soon turns to pity, since he believes the girls did not intend to foster such a judgmental response from strangers. Then he feels elated when they decide to check out at his register, which turns to anger at his manager for the unjust humiliation they undergo. That he wants to be admired for his heroism only makes his character more realistic.
and human. His motives for doing so are deeper than just wanting the girls' attention. Sammy considers that his boss knows his parents, and realizes his act may warrant their disapproval.

Unlike the doctor in "Godfather Death," the reader experiences the pleasure of hearing Sammy's own thoughts consistently throughout “A & P.” We sympathize with Sammy, in part, because we are offered so many insights into his personality and humanity. We experience his passage from boyhood to manhood, and we share his painful realization in the final paragraph. In “Godfather Death,” we are only given two moments of insight into the Doctor's thoughts: once when he defies Death to save the King, and again when he rebels to save the King's daughter. Although we sympathize when he “fell into the hands of Death,” it is so predictable that we wonder why he didn’t see it coming. Sammy's final realization is raw and surprising. We see Sammy's strengths and weaknesses from a psychological perspective that is completely absent from “Godfather Death,” as it is from most fairy tales, fables, and legends.

3. What part of the story seems to be the exposition? Of what value to the story is the carefully detailed portrait of Queenie, the leader of the three girls?
The exposition takes up most of the story's first half, through paragraph 10. The exposition's carefully detailed portrait of Queenie is essential to the story and to Sammy's final decision to defy his boss. She moves gracefully with a commanding presence. Sammy notices every part of her body and praises it with great detail. Sammy is perhaps most intrigued by the fact that she isn't wearing her bathing suit's shoulder straps. Stokesie, Sammy's married co-worker, almost faints. If she were not such an enthralling Queen, how would she effect such a response in a stranger with whom she barely speaks? While Sammy's language is sometimes pedestrian—"Really, I thought that was so cute" (par. 11)—he is capable of fresh and accurate insights, as when he describes the way Queenie walks on her bare feet, his comparison of the "clean bare plane" of her upper chest to "a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light" (par. 3).

4. As the story develops, do you detect any change in Sammy's feelings toward the girls? This is a crucial aspect of the story that you may need to point out to your students. During the first half of the story, Sammy displays conventional male reactions to girls in two-piece bathing suits, and he comments that he can “never know for sure how girls' minds work” and even wonders if they have a mind or if there's just “a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar” (par. 2). He acts as a 19-year-old awestruck boy. He only notices their tan lines, bathing suits, and body parts. He gives them nicknames based on their body shapes without any thought to what their real names might be.

However, toward the end of the story, Sammy moves from sexual attraction to human sympathy for the girls. For example, he changes from focusing on Queenie's "good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can" to noticing when Lengel makes her blush from embarrassment in his check-out line. When Sammy first hears Queenie speak, “all of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living room” and he imagines her family and his enjoying the herring snacks that she was at his store to purchase (par. 13). No doubt his hormones are raging, especially when Queenie “lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her nubbled pink top” and hands it to him (par. 11). However, after the girls exit the store, Sammy thinks about Lengel's confrontation and considers his own options: “remembering how he made
that pretty girl blush makes me so scrunchy inside I punch the No Sale tab” (par. 30); and he walks out of the store in defiance.

5. Where in “A & P” does the dramatic conflict become apparent? What moment in the story brings the crisis? What is the climax of the story? The dramatic conflict arrives with the appearance of Lengel, the manager, and his confrontation with the girls. The crisis and climax are practically one—but to be more exact, one might say the crisis is found in the paragraph 20: “I thought and said ‘No’ but it wasn’t about that I was thinking,” in which Sammy is considering his decision, and the climax follows in paragraph 21 when he announces “I quit.”

6. Why, exactly, does Sammy quit his job? When Lengel confronts the girls about their appearance and embarrasses them in front of the other customers, Sammy feels empowered to make a heroic gesture. Within this story, Sammy rises to a kind of heroism. He throws over his job to protest their needless humiliation. Their display of nonconformity prompts his. Unfortunately for Sammy, the girls leave the store without even noticing what he did for them. He continues through with the action, however, because it becomes a matter of pride for himself and a rebellion against his boss: “It seems to me that once you begin a gesture it’s fatal not to go through with it” (par. 30). While the girls are certainly the impetus for him to quit, ultimately it could be argued that he quits for himself, asserting both his frustration with the A & P as well as his evolving manhood.

7. Does anything lead you to expect Sammy to make some gesture of sympathy for the three girls? What incident earlier in the story (before Sammy quits) seems a foreshadowing? Sammy’s descriptions of Queenie and the other girls in the opening paragraphs helps make his later gesture of heroism understandable. It establishes, also, that Sammy feels at odds with his job and the mindset of his male coworkers. The clearest foreshadow of Sammy’s heroism takes place as Sammy watches the girls ask McMahon, the butcher, a question. Sammy observes that “they shuffled out of sight behind a pyramid of Diet Delight peaches. All that was left for us to see was old McMahon patting his mouth and looking after them sizing up their joints” (par. 10). Although Sammy has been doing the same thing since the girls walked into the store, he comments—in clear contrast to McMahon’s piggishness—“Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them, they couldn’t help it.”

8. What do you understand from the conclusion of the story? What does Sammy mean when he acknowledges “how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter”? Through the afternoon’s events at the A & P, Sammy loses his innocence as he learns about the way the world really works. This may be partially what Lengel means when he warns Sammy, “You’ll feel this for the rest of your life” (par. 31). In this sense, Sammy moves from boyhood to manhood, where he accepts that his choices will sometimes lead to uncomfortable or serious consequences. He wants to find his place in the world where he can make his own decisions and not simply follow the expectations and rules of others blindly. The harsh realization that Sammy now sees is that acts of heroism often go unnoticed and unacknowledged.

After Sammy quits his job and leaves the A & P, he looks back into the store while standing in the parking lot and considers his bleak future. No one is there to praise his heroism. He notices Lengel’s “dark gray” face and stiff back, “as if he’d just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter” (par. 31). This final sentence might refer to his imme-


diate difficulties finding another job and possibly at home with his parents’ reaction to the events, but more likely implies the difficulties ahead in leading an adult life as a man of conscience. Still, he displays courage—not the absence of fear but the willingness to face it—by accepting the world as it is, not merely as he wishes it would be.

9. What comment does Updike—through Sammy—make on supermarket society? Through the story, Updike criticizes supermarket society, a deadly world of “sheep” and “houseslaves” whom dynamite couldn’t budge from their dull routines and praises Sammy’s courage and desire to be different. Supermarket society—perhaps as a microcosm for the rest of American society in the 1960s—is narrow-minded, traditional, and reserved. People are like sheep that follow their leaders without thinking for themselves. When Sammy defies his manager, he indirectly renounces his co-workers as well (all who have worked there for a long time). He wants more for his future than working at a grocery store, and he does not want to blindly follow the leaders in his life, including his own father.

Updike himself reads this story and five others on Selected Stories. This is a crisp, dry reading that brings out the humor of “A & P.” It is available on CD from Caedmon and also for download at audible.com or Amazon.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Updike. Interpreting “A & P.” Interactive reading, student essay, critical essay, evaluation questions, comprehension quiz, writing prompts, and essay question for “A & P.”

WRITERS ON WRITING

John Updike, Why Write?, page 22

Although John Updike was one of the most prolific contemporary novelist-critics active in American letters, he wrote surprisingly little about his own creative process. Perhaps he was so busy examining the work of other writers that his critical attention was mostly focused outward. A certain native reticence, however, must also surely be at play. His 1975 essay “Why Write?” is therefore a key document in understanding his artistic perspective.

The passage excerpted is an elegant defense of imaginative writing as a special means of human communication not reducible to an abstract message. Art’s indirection, silences, and complexity are essential to its essence. “Reticence is as important a tool for the writer as expression,” Updike asserts. Genuine writing is “ideally as ambiguous and opaque as life itself.”

William Faulkner, A ROSE FOR EMILY, page 31

Over the past years whenever we have polled college students about their favorite short stories, Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” has usually ranked first. The story has immense appeal to students for its memorable title character, brooding atmosphere, and eerie surprise ending. It is also a story that immediately rewards rereading and study, especially since it is rife with foreshadows.

The style of “A Rose for Emily” is unusually conventional for Faulkner. There are no elaborate periodic sentences or stream-of-consciousness narration. The simple and direct style reflects the particular speaker Faulkner chose to tell the story.

The genre of the story is Gothic—more precisely, Southern Gothic—which may be another factor in its popularity. It includes typical Gothic devices such as a locked room, ancient servants, dusty chambers, and the decayed mansion as well as an oppressively claustrophobic atmosphere of disturbing mystery and implicit evil. This story provides a good introduction to the genre for students.

Studying “A Rose for Emily” may also help prepare students for Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” (Chapter 5), whose central character, the son of a sharecropper, is Colonel Sartoris Snopes. Both stories demonstrate the powerful effect of genre in shaping an author’s work.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “A Rose for Emily.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What is meaningful in the final detail that the strand of hair on the second pillow is “iron-gray”? After Homer Barron’s mysterious disappearance, Miss Emily is not seen on the streets of Jefferson for almost six months, although her Negro servant continues to come and go from the house with his market basket. When they next see Emily, “she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron gray”—the color her hair stays until her death at age seventy-four (par. 48). The narrator sets
up this detail early enough so the reader knows, and will not have forgotten, that this
long “vigorous” iron-gray hair belongs to no one other than Emily Grierson. From
the detail that the strand of hair is iron-gray, it appears that Emily lay beside Homer’s
body recently, many years after it was already rotten. In fact, she had probably lain
beside it many times, for the pillow next to the body is clearly indented with a head.

2. Who is the unnamed narrator? For whom does he profess to be speaking?
The unnamed narrator is a townsman of Jefferson, Mississippi, who has for some
years watched Emily Grierson with considerable interest but also respectful distance.
He openly describes his perspective as average; he often uses “we” in the story, never
“I.” Sometimes he uses “they” to distance himself from certain perceptions that the
townspeople have of Emily, her behavior, or her house. His tone and manner are
informed but detached, and surprisingly cool given the horrific conclusion. He mixes
his own observations with town gossip to provide a seemingly reliable view of Jeffer-
sion’s opinion of Miss Emily.

We must also note that while traditionally the narrator has been assumed to be
a man (perhaps a stand-in for Faulkner?), the text never clarifies this. It is possible
that the narrator is a fellow townsman, or even a distant female relation. How
might this change your students’ reading of the story?

3. Why does “A Rose for Emily” seem better told from his point of view than
if it were told from the point of view of the main character? The story would be
radically different if it were told from Emily Grierson’s point of view. Miss Emily
would hardly be able to tell her own story with any kind of detachment. While the
narrator notes and reports many things about Miss Emily’s history and personality, he
is not the man to analyze or ponder their significance.

The careful reader, however, soon understands several important factors affect-
ing her. Miss Emily’s father has somehow kept her down—dominating her life and
driving away suitors. She also has difficulty accepting loss or change. She will not, for
example, initially admit that her father has died or let the doctors or the minister dis-
pose of the body. Miss Emily seems starved for affection and emotionally desperate
enough to risk censure from the town when she takes Homer Barron as her lover.

At the end the reader also sees her determination in killing Barron, though her
motives are open to question. Such ambiguity would have been lost without a third-
person, omniscient narrator. When the story ends, readers still wonder if Emily wanted
to exact revenge for Homer’s apparent refusal to marry her, or was she trying to keep
him with her “forever”?

4. What foreshadowings of the discovery of the body of Homer Barron are
we given earlier in the story? Share your experience in reading “A Rose for
Emily”; did the foreshadowings give away the ending for you? Did they heighten
your interest? Students will want to make sure of exactly what happens in the story.
Just as Emily Grierson had clung to her conviction that her father and Colonel Sar-
toris were still alive, she had come to believe that Homer Barron had faithfully mar-
ried her, and she successfully ignored for forty years all the testimony of her senses.
The conclusion of the story is foreshadowed by Emily’s refusal to allow her father to
be buried, by her purchase of rat poison, by the disappearance of Homer Barron, and
by the pervasive smell of decay.

In fact, these foreshadowings are so evident it is a wonder that, for those reading
the story for the first time, the ending is so surprising. Much of the surprise seems
due to the narrator's back-and-forth, non-chronological method of telling the events of the story. We aren't told in proper sequence that (1) Emily buys poison, (2) Homer disappears, and (3) there is a mysterious odor—a chain of events that might immediately rouse our suspicions. Instead, we hear about odor, poison, and disappearance, in that order. By this arrangement, any connection between these events is made to seem a little less obvious, adding to the story's Gothic tone.

Faulkner's mysterious story also resembles a riddle, argues Charles Clay Doyle of the University of Georgia. The resemblance exists not so much in the story's structure or rhetoric, as in the tricky way it presents clues, clues that tell the truth but at the same time mislead or fail to enlighten. The pleasure of discovery experienced by readers of the story resembles the pleasure we take in learning the answer to a riddle: we are astonished that the solution, which now seems so obvious, so inevitable, could have eluded us. (“Mute Witnesses: Faulkner's Use of a Popular Riddle,” Mississippi Folklore Register 24 [1990]: 53–55)

Furthermore, Doyle identifies an allusion to a well-known riddle in Faulkner's final description of Emily's chamber: Homer's "two mute shoes and the discarded socks." The riddle is, “What has a tongue but can't speak?” (Answer: a shoe.) Taking the phrase “mute shoes” to echo the riddle, Doyle thinks the shoes are a pair of silent witnesses who, in their way, resemble the narrator himself, who shows us the truth but does not state it outright.

5. What contrasts does the narrator draw between changing reality and Emily's refusal or inability to recognize change? “A Rose for Emily” contains many contrasts that demonstrate Emily's refusal to recognize change. For example, this refusal is suggested in the symbol of her invisible watch (par. 7), with its hint that she lives according to a private, secret time of her own. Her once-beautifully decorated house seems an extension of her person in “its stubborn and coquettish decay” (par. 2). Years later the house becomes “an eyesore among eyesores” amid gasoline pumps, garages, and cotton gins; it refuses, like its owner, to be part of a new era. The story contains many such images of stasis: when Emily confronts the aldermen, she looks “bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water” (par. 6)—a foreshadowing, perhaps, of the discovery of Homer's long-guarded dust.

6. How do the character and background of Emily Grierson differ from those of Homer Barron? What general observations about the society that Faulkner depicts can be made from his portraits of these two characters and from his account of life in this one Mississippi town? Both the character and background of Emily Grierson from Homer Barron could not be more different. She is an “old maid” at age thirty, Southern, aristocratic, never having worked a day in her life. He is a Northern day-laborer, crass, crude, and experienced—a man not interested in marriage or settling down. Grieving after her father's death, Emily has isolated herself from the town, seeing no one except her Negro servant. She is thin and pale white, with a face “tragic and serene” (par. 29). When the townspeople decide to pave their sidewalks, Homer Barron comes to town as the foreman with the construction crew. The narrator describes him as a “big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face” (par. 30). Laughter follows him wherever he goes, and he soon knows everyone in town and carouses with younger men at the Elks Club.
That the Grierson house was “set on what had once been our most select street” (par. 2) and that “people in our town [. . .] believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were” (par. 25) only heightens Emily’s transformation after taking Homer as her lover. Emily’s scandalous behavior surprises the townspeople as they witness a rare occurrence: Emily laughing with a man whom she clearly likes. She rides with Homer on Sunday afternoons “in the glittering buggy, Miss Emily with her head high and Homer Barron with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth”—images that all suggest her “fallen” state (par. 33).

Some have read the story as an allegory: Homer Barron is the crude, commercial North who invades, like a carpetbagger. Emily, with her faithful ex-slave, is the Old South, willing to be violated. In an interview with students at the University of Virginia, Faulkner played down such North-South symbolism. “I don’t say that’s not valid and not there,” he said, “but . . . [I was] simply writing about people.” (The whole interview in which Faulkner discusses this story, not very helpfully, can be found in Faulkner in the University, Frederick Gwynn and Joseph Blotner, eds., UP of Virginia, 1959.)

Still, it is clear that Emily, representing an antebellum first family, receives both Faulkner’s admiration and his criticism for resisting change. “The theme of the story,” according to C. W. M. Johnson, “can be stated: ‘If one resists change, he must love and live with death,’ and in this theme it is difficult not to see an implied criticism of the South” (Explicator VI [No. 7] May 1948: item 45). But Faulkner’s criticism, Ray B. West, Jr., feels, is leveled at the North as well. West makes much of the passage in which Faulkner discerns two possible views of Time (55). If, for the South, Time is “a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches,” then for the North it is a mere “mathematical progression” and “a diminishing road.” West would propose, for a statement of the story’s theme: “One must neither resist nor wholly accept change, for to do either is to live as though one were never to die; that is, to live with Death without knowing it” (Explicator VII [No. 1] Oct. 1948: item 8).

7. Does the story seem to you totally grim, or do you find any humor in it? Although “A Rose for Emily” is both Gothic and grim, it also contains several moments of humor, a feature that is particularly Southern. (Teachers may wish to compare Faulkner’s humor with Flannery O’Connor’s, for while both are Southern writers, they each have their own flavor.) For example, from a certain point of view, Emily’s refusal to change, and the way in which she never has to pay taxes, is funny. When the deputation comes to visit her, they rise when she enters the room, and she does not ask them to sit down. She simply repeats “I have no taxes in Jefferson.” When she tells them to see Colonel Sartoris and to look at the city records, some readers may laugh, for the Colonel has been dead for ten years! By the story’s end, we learn again that she has never had to pay taxes, and the reader realizes that for all of her Southern “innocence,” she is a strong-willed woman who knows how to get her way. In addition, the description of the four men who cross Miss Emily’s lawn like burglars, not to steal from her but to deal with the rotten stench, may cause some readers to laugh.

8. What do you infer to be the author’s attitude toward Emily Grierson? Is she simply a murderous madwoman? Why do you suppose Faulkner calls his story “A Rose . . .”? However fascinating or well-written this story may be, some readers may object: how can anyone wish to pay tribute to a decayed old poisoner who sleeps with a corpse? The narrator patiently gives us reasons for his sympathy.
As a girl, Emily was beautiful, a “slender figure in white,” fond of society. But her hopes were thwarted by her domineering father, whose horsewhip discouraged suitors from her door. The narrator notes that after her father’s death, the townspeople begin to pity her: “being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized” (par. 26) and “we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will” (par. 28). Her strength and pride vanquished all who would invade her house: the new Board of Aldermen who tried to collect her taxes, the Baptist minister sent to lecture her on her morals, the relatives from Atlanta who eventually departed. “It is important,” Ray B. West Jr. writes, “to realize that during the period of Emily’s courtship the town became Emily’s allies in a contest between Emily and her Grierson cousins, ‘because the two female cousins were even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been’” (“Atmosphere and Theme in Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily,’” Perspective [Summer 1949]: 239–45).

Having satisfied their natural interest in the final horror of the story, students can be led to discuss why “A Rose for Emily” isn’t a mere thriller. Discuss the story’s title with your students: after all, no actual rose ever appears in it. Perhaps Emily herself is the white rose of Jefferson (like the heroine of The White Rose of Memphis, a novel by Faulkner’s grandfather). The usual connotations of roses will apply. A rose is a gift to a loved one, and the whole story is the narrator’s tribute to Emily.

Years ago, Joanna Stephens Mink of Illinois State University, Normal, divided her class into several groups and conducted a mock murder trial of Emily Grierson, which ended, after spirited debate, with an acquittal of Miss Emily by reason of insanity. For Professor Mink’s full account, see “We Brought Emily Grierson to Trial” in Exercise Exchange, Spring 1984: 17–19. Inspired by her example, Saul Cohen of County College of Morris in New Jersey later tried a similar experiment. In this instance, enough suspicion was raised about the actions of Miss Emily’s servant to create reasonable doubt, leading to a straight acquittal. Professor Cohen’s account appears in Exercise Exchange for October 1990.

Your students might enjoy another view of the story expressed in this limerick by a celebrated bard, Anonymous:

Miss Emily, snobbish and cranky,
Used to horse around town with a Yankee.
When she’d wake up in bed,
With the dust of the dead,
She would sneeze in her delicate hanky.

ZZ Packer, BROWNIES, page 38

in this debut collection present the often-neglected point of view of African American teenage girls. The Publisher’s Weekly review praised Packer for keeping “the tone provocative and tense at the close of each tale, doing justice to the complexity and dignity of the characters and their difficult choices.” That her protagonists sometimes lack self-knowledge is part of the point. Her girls are growing up in an America filled with racism and struggle; they fight against poverty, they long for education, and they desire to be heard. Packer’s particular insight in “Brownies” is that, raised in a racist society, these young black girls have also developed their own racist stereotyping of white girls. Their stereotypes are so strong, in fact, they fail to recognize the other Brownie troop as developmentally disabled. The deep-seated nature of racism highlighted in Packer’s story may lead readers to question if it is possible for true equality to be realized for all Americans, especially when prejudice comes from both sides. To “suddenly [know] there was something mean in the world that I could not stop” is a harsh epiphany for any character, especially one as young as Laurel in “Brownies.”

Packer’s story is rife with figurative language. Ask your students to spend a few minutes in class re-reading the story, looking for specific examples of metaphor or simile. You might want to discuss the pattern of white images throughout the story (e.g., white towels, white pigeons, a white tooth).

Although the story lacks any direct reference to the decade or year in which it takes place, ask your students if they can find any clues. For example, the references to Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson suggest that the story is set in the mid-1980s, when these two singer/songwriters were at the height of their popularity. One definitive date can be determined when Laurel mentions that Janice hums Jackson’s smash hit song, “Beat It.” Originally released on his multi-platinum record Thriller in 1982, “Beat It” was released as a single in February 1983, won two Grammys, and remained at the top of the charts for most of the year. “Karma Chameleon,” another song the girls hum, is a Boy George song that hit number one on the U.S. charts in 1984.

Teachers may also want to look at the Girl Scout website (www.girlscouts.org) to discuss the irony of the Girl Scout mission compared to the behavior of the story’s Brownie troop:

In Girl Scouts, girls discover the fun, friendship, and power of girls together. Through a myriad of enriching experiences, such as extraordinary field trips, sports skill-building clinics, community service projects, cultural exchanges, and environmental stewardships, girls grow courageous and strong. Girl Scouting helps girls develop their full individual potential; relate to others with increasing understanding, skill, and respect; develop values to guide their actions and provide the foundation for sound decision-making; and contribute to the improvement of society through their abilities, leadership skills, and cooperation with others.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Brownies.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the effect of having Laurel (nicknamed “Snot”) narrate the story? “Brownies” could not be effectively narrated by any character other than Laurel. She listens, she observes, and she critiques the behavior of her own Brownie troop.
Although she is not courageous enough to refuse to participate in her group’s victimization of Troop 909, she is critical of Arnetta’s choices.

However quietly she does so at first, Laurel is the only girl who verbally challenges Arnetta’s assertion that Troop 909 called “Daphne a nigger” by saying, “Maybe you didn’t hear them right” (par. 36). Later, during Arnetta’s secret meeting, Laurel says even more boldly, “but what if they say, ‘We didn’t say that? We didn’t call anyone an N-I-G-G-E-R’” (par. 62). Arnetta’s reply to Laurel’s reasonable objection is, “Snot, don’t think. Just fight. If you even know how” (par. 63). That brusque dismissal demonstrates Laurel’s outsider status even though she is also a part of this group. This perspective gives her some objectivity as she looks at the camping experience with a critical and observant eye. However, Laurel is not strong enough to fight against Arnetta and the group mentality that wants revenge. As the girls travel through the woods to find Troop 909, the narrator confesses, “I felt I was part of the rest of the troop; like I was defending something” (par. 62). Even though she has no idea what they are defending, she gives into a group mentality echoed in Shirley Jackson’s story “The Lottery.” Similarly, “Brownies” shows that people sometimes follow a vicious leader because of tradition, fear, and self-preservation.

2. How does the setting of the story affect the action? How is the Brownie camp different from the girls’ everyday world?

All the young girls have traveled by bus to a summer camp in Georgia, a setting that proves particularly important in its themes of group dynamics and racism. They are removed from their usual environment, the south suburbs of Atlanta, where whites and blacks rarely interact. At their almost all-black elementary school, the narrator’s Brownie troop is a dominant group led by Arnetta, who especially enjoys ridiculing and persecuting other kids in school. The camp brings together an all-black Brownie troop and an all-white Brownie troop—a new experience for the girls.

That these girls are at a camp as a Brownie group brings a particular irony to the story’s action. As the premier leadership development organization for girls in the United States, Girl Scouts exists to help “young women discover their potential, connect with others and take action in their communities and the world” (www.girlscouts.org). The girls in this story are out of their comfort zones. Away from their homes and school, we see that their attitudes, revealed through actions, are inconsistent with the Girl Scout motto of “Courage, Confidence, Character.”

3. What is Laurel’s opinion of Arnetta? Does it change in the course of the story?

Although Laurel never directly states her view of Arnetta, she clearly views this group leader with a mixture of fear and suspicion. There is significant tension, and perhaps dislike, between these two young girls. Arnetta controls her Brownie troop by saying vulgar words and intimidating everyone around her; she is a bully who wants to fight. She decides to teach Troop 909 a lesson and runs the “secret meeting.” It is Arnetta who “said she’d heard one of the Troop 909 girls call Daphne a nigger” (par. 15), and it is Arnetta who says they smell like “wet Chihuahuas” (par. 3). Ironically, only the consummately hypocritical Arnetta has memorized Mrs. Margolin’s religious aphorisms (par. 6). Laurel notices that “Arnetta always [gave Mrs. Margolin] what she wanted to hear” (par. 7), a method she uses to deflect attention from her decidedly un-Christian attitude, which is full of revenge, envy, and prejudice.

Early in the story, Laurel highlights a seemingly insignificant moment from a past Brownie meeting that reveals a few characteristics of Arnetta. Laurel says that “once, Arnetta killed the troop goldfish by feeding it a French fry covered in ketchup” and
justified this action to Mrs. Margolin by claiming that “the goldfish had been eyeing her meal for hours, [so] then the fish—giving in to temptation—had leapt up and snatched a whole golden fry from her fingertips” (par. 7). Arnetta easily creates a ridiculous story—that the gullible Mrs. Margolin believes—to shift the blame away from herself. This foreshadows Arnetta’s actions with Troop 909 at camp.

It is clear that Laurel struggles with Arnetta because during the “secret meeting,” Arnetta turns to Laurel and asks, “Snot, you’re not going to be a bitch and tell Mrs. Margolin, are you?” (par. 34). For Arnetta to ask such a question, there must have been a time in the past when Laurel did tell on Arnetta, and the grudge remains. But Laurel is right to question Arnetta as the entire fight was based on a false accusation. When Arnetta twice accuses two innocent girls (one of whom does not even speak), she tries to do what she did before with the goldfish: put the blame elsewhere to get herself out of trouble.

4. How does the narrator initially view the white Brownie troop? Does her background influence her initial perspective? Consult the text for examples. As they get off the bus at camp, the white Brownie troop is immediately branded by the black girls for no reason other than their skin color. Their experiences at their school—located in the suburbs of Atlanta—reinforce such stereotyping, especially since there is only one white student at Woodrow Wilson Elementary (par. 13).

For example, when the black girls joke around in school with the idea of what behaviors are, or are not, particularly associated with “Caucasians,” their own prejudices are highlighted. They tease a boy for his unstylish jeans; they belittle anyone different from them. They use the word “Caucasian” so often that it loses its meaning altogether: “if you ate too fast you ate like a Caucasian, if you ate too slow you ate like a Caucasian” (par. 12). These earlier prejudices carry over into their view of the white Brownies.

Their assumptions about white girls come from TV commercials and from impersonal encounters with white people; none of them have any authentic relationships with any white girls or boys. Because whites are the minority group in the south suburbs of Atlanta, the girls confess that “it was easy to forget about whites. Whites were like those baby pigeons: real and existing, but rarely seen or thought about” (par. 14). But at camp, the black girls are forced to deal with a group of ten girls who look different than they do. Their “envy and hatred” is based on jealousy and longstanding resentment, because they are forced to look at the white girls’ “long, shampoo-commercial hair, straight as spaghetti from a box” (par. 14). A war theme is set up early when the black girls declare the white girls to be “invaders” (par. 12) who were “doomed from the first day of camp” (par. 1).

The reader’s (and the narrator’s) sense of the situation is initially clouded by Arnetta’s dubious accusation that the white girls called Daphne a “nigger,” a word that triggers in the troop (and the reader) hurtful racist associations. Packer is such a good storyteller that by the time we get to the restroom scene, we, like the black girls, focus only on the offensive nature of the word “nigger,” which arguably none of the white Brownies ever said. That word has become a convenient reason for the fight that was planned before any girl in Troop 909 ever opened her mouth. Ask your students to re-read the opening paragraph to see that the true motive for the fight has little to do with words, and everything to do with the skin color of the “doomed” Troop 909.

5. Much of “Brownies” is very funny. What role does humor have in the story? It is often said that humor helps us listen to difficult subjects or be open to
things that we’d rather not hear. The humor in “Brownies” feels particularly Southern, as if we are reading a story by Flannery O’Connor (which makes sense as the story is set in Georgia). The humor offsets this dark and disturbing story by providing some lighthearted moments.

ZZ Packer’s dialogue is often droll. For example, Octavia says, “I mean, I really don’t know why it’s even called camping—all we ever do with Nature is find some twigs and say something like, ‘Wow, this fell from a tree’” (par. 44). The story also brims with religious humor. In paragraph 6, it is particularly funny when Laurel describes that “Mrs. Margolin was especially fond of imparting religious aphorisms by means of acrostics—‘Satan’ was the ‘Serpent Always Tempting and Noisome’; she’d refer to the ‘Bible’ as ‘Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth’ (par. 6). Lastly, Packer’s descriptions of the adult women is especially funny and shows Laurel’s erudition and wit. For example, the leader of Troop 909 has a “severe pageboy hairdo of an ancient Egyptian” who lays “on a picnic blanket, sphinx-like, while eating a banana” (par. 40). Later, when the tearful white girls all crowd around her, “it reminded [Laurel] of a hog I’d seen on a field trip, where all the little hogs gathered about the mother at feeding time” (par. 148).

6. What realization does the narrator have at the end of the story? How does this change her understanding of her father and of racial dynamics more generally? In the end, the story is really about Laurel (”Snot”)—her growing sense of morality and what it means to grow up as a black girl in America.

As the girls leave camp, Laurel remembers an unusual moment from her past when her father asked a Mennonite man to paint his porch. She shares this memory with the girls on the bus, who—except for Daphne—have little appreciation for her revelation. Having lived through the futile racist drama at camp, Laurel finally begins to understand what her father meant when he said: “it was the only time he’d have a white man on his knees doing something for a black man for free” (par. 193).

This seemingly incongruous moment from Laurel’s past proves essential to a full understanding of “Brownies.” When Daphne silently chooses to bend over and clean the restroom without any thought of receiving a Brownie patch as a reward, she speaks louder than Arnetta to Laurel and to the reader. The incident with Troop 909 mysteriously leads Laurel to understand her own past and what her father meant, “though I didn’t like it” (par. 194).

The realization that “when you’ve been made to feel bad for so long, you jump at the chance to do it to others” offers neither hope nor promise that these Brownies will be leaders with “courage, confidence, or character” who will break a cycle of racial stereotyping. Of all the girls, Daphne alone asks Laurel if her father thanked them, and when Laurel replies, “No,” the full epiphany comes to her as she “suddenly knew there was something mean in the world that I could not stop” (par. 195). This, coupled with Laurel’s earlier statement that “we had all been taught that adulthood was full of sorrow and pain, taxes and bills, dreaded work and dealing with whites, sickness and death” (par. 96), leaves the reader to question whether or not Laurel will even try to stop the meanness.

7. What does the story suggest about racial stereotyping? Many literary works reveal the pernicious effects of racism from whites to blacks, but in this story, the racism is reversed. Here the retarded white girls are innocent “victims” to prejudice and misunderstanding. This fact suggests the story’s theme: that it is easy for all people to misjudge one another, especially when assumptions are made solely on the
basis of skin color or race. Ultimately, the story reveals that there is more to any human being than the color of one's skin. After all, Troop 909 is more defined by their gender and disabilities, rather than race or ethnicity.

“Brownies” also demonstrates that all forms of prejudice are learned from a very early age. The narrator's hatred strikes the reader from the story's opening sentence: “By our second day at Camp Crescendo, the girls in my Brownie troop had decided to kick the asses of each and every girl in Brownie Troop 909.” That this desire is based only on racial stereotyping is clear from the second sentence: “Troop 909 was doomed from the first day of camp; they were white girls, their complexions a blend of ice cream; strawberry, vanilla.” It shocks the reader to learn later that all the girls in “Brownies” are only in the fourth grade, and therefore between eight and ten years old.

Laurel's epiphany suggests the obvious: since her racism is, in part, learned from her father, it will take strength and willpower for her to break this cycle of prejudice and “something mean in the world” (par. 195). Not only will she have to transcend both her own family's racism and the larger racism of society, she will need courage to stand up to the Arnettas of the world, who unjustly accuse others. Perhaps one of the most disturbing aspects of this story is that girls ages eight to ten paradoxically have a view of race that is both innocent and sophisticated—and often ignorant—both of their own and of others.

Two relevant online interviews with Packer may also interest teachers or students. At the current time of writing, we found:

In Nidus (No. 9, Summer 2005), Packer talks with Jeff Janssens and S. Zoe Wexler about her writing and revision process, her experience at Iowa Writers' Workshop, and her perspective on writing about race: <www.pitt.edu/~nidus/current/packer.html>.

In an interview on WordSmitten.com, Packer talks about researching her new novel about the Buffalo Soldiers (the black cavalry troops who fought in the Indian Wars). She makes some interesting comments about the way in which victims become victimizers, which are very relevant to an understanding of “Brownies”: <www.wordsitten.com/author_zzpacker_parttwo.htm>.

—Erika Koss

Eudora Welty, A WORN PATH, page 52

Eudora Welty’s name would be sure to appear on any list of the greatest American short story writers of the twentieth century. “A Worn Path,” one of her most celebrated stories, shows her artistry at its height. While constantly advancing the plot and creating a unique and memorable central character, she achieves the vividness, the precision, and at times even the rhythms of poetry at its best. Death is everywhere in the story's landscape—dead trees, dead weeds, dead cornstalks, the dead birds in the hunter's game sack—and the threat of death hangs constantly over Phoenix Jackson and her quest. The title itself evokes both of the tale’s principal emphases, the frequency with which she undertakes this journey, and the exhaustion (“worn” as in “worn out”) that she meets and conquers with her steadfastness of spirit.

Here are some possible questions and answers for “A Worn Path.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.
QUESTIONS

1. What point of view is used in this story? Explain your answer.

   The point of view is that of limited omniscience. Everything is seen from the perspective of the central character, Phoenix Jackson. Welty does not, of course, confine herself to the vocabulary of her point-of-view character, who has, after all, no formal education, but she does render all of the events and the sense impressions of the story essentially as they present themselves to that character. For example, she refers only to “the big building” (par. 69) and “the document that had been stamped with the gold seal and framed in the gold frame” (par. 70); this is the extent of Phoenix Jackson’s awareness of these things, and this therefore is the extent to which they are described to us.

2. What is the significance of the old woman’s being named Phoenix?

   Mythologically, the phoenix is a beautiful, lone bird that lives in the Arabian desert; it spontaneously combusts every five hundred years or so and is then regenerated out of its own ashes, thus functioning as a symbol of long life and even immortality. Phoenix Jackson, whose dignity and perseverance confer a great beauty upon her, is basically a lone figure as she moves among the other characters in the story. The wintry landscape through which she moves is a desert of sorts. She achieves a kind of regeneration of will and purpose each time she must go to the city for her grandson’s medicine, and she allows no obstacle to defeat or even deflect her in the fulfillment of that purpose.

3. Welty presents Phoenix’s dreams and hallucinations as if they were as real as everything else she encounters. What does this technique contribute to the story’s effect?

   We are told that “a bush caught her dress” (par. 7), not that her dress got caught on the bush’s thorns; we are told that “a little boy brought her a plate with a slice of marble cake on it” (par. 15) as if it were really happening; when she thinks she sees a ghost (par. 22–24), we don’t learn what it really is until she does. Welty has locked us into Phoenix’s point of view and we see everything from her perspective, just as she sees it. Through this technique, her sense of her reality is made extraordinarily real and immediate to us.

4. How would you characterize the way Phoenix is viewed and treated by the white people she meets? Does their behavior toward her give you any indication of where the story is set and when it takes place?

   No one is hostile or abusive to her, and she is even helped by the people she encounters—the hunter helps her up, the lady on the street ties her shoes when asked to, and the nurse at the doctor’s office gives her a nickel. At the same time their treatment of her is more condescending than respectful: everyone calls her “Granny,” not “Ma’am” or, in the nurse’s case, “Mrs. Jackson.” The hunter finds her quite amusing, makes complacently demeaning assumptions about her intentions (par. 48), and repeatedly tells her what to do as if he were speaking to a child. Even without corroboration, all of this would suggest that the story is set in the pre-1960s South, as is corroborated by details within the text: the city is identified as Natchez (par. 61) and Phoenix was already too old for schooling at the time of “the Surrender” (par. 90) of the Confederacy in April 1865.

5. In paragraph 52, Phoenix laughs at the black dog “as if in admiration.” What does she admire about him, and what does this attitude tell us about her? As she herself says, what she admires about the dog is that “He ain’t scared of nobody.
He a big black dog.” Phoenix may not be very big, but she displays similar characteristics, as shown by her response when the hunter insultingly points his gun at her and asks, “Doesn’t the gun scare you?”

6. “With her hands on her knees, the old woman waited, silent, erect and motionless, just as if she were in armor” (paragraph 85). Is the comparison at the end of this sentence just a striking visual image, or does it have a larger relevance? Surrounded on all sides by obstacles—poverty, racism, forgetfulness, age and physical decline, the winter landscape with its dangers both real and hallucinatory—Phoenix Jackson is in armor, an armor compounded of her tenacity, determination, and love for her grandson.

James Baldwin, SONNY’S BLUES, page 58

“Sonny’s Blues” may be James Baldwin’s most frequently anthologized short story. It was first published in 1957 and later appeared in his story collection Going to Meet the Man in 1965.

The narrative structure of “Sonny’s Blues” is more complex and interesting than it may seem at first glance. The story reads so smoothly that it is easy to overlook the fact that it begins in medias res. “Sonny’s Blues” opens with the title character’s arrest for the sale and possession of heroin; it ends in a jazz club with the older brother’s ultimate understanding and acceptance of Sonny. This linear narrative is interrupted, however, by a long flashback that describes the uneasy earlier relation between the brothers. Since their parents are dead when the story opens, we meet the father and mother only in the flashback.

The inner story is the narrator’s spiritual and emotional growth into a person who can understand his younger brother’s artistic life and who will help him fight to conquer his drug addiction. There should be no doubt that Baldwin, the former boy street preacher, saw the narrator’s inner growth as in some sense religious. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the story’s final sentence, when the Scotch and milk becomes “the cup of trembling” as it “glowed and shook above [his] brother’s head” (par. 237). This biblical reference, from the Old Testament book of Isaiah 51:17-22, is a complex image for Baldwin to have chosen. UC Davis lecturers Dr. Anne Fleischmann and Dr. Andrew Jones interpret this symbol as follows:

In these passages, God tells the Israelites that He knows they have suffered His fury, that they have been afraid of His wrath and of their enemies (“drunken the dregs of the cup of trembling”). God promises here that they will no longer drink from the cup of trembling or feel His wrath and that the cup of trembling will instead be put into the hands of their enemies. As an allusion at the end of the story, this passage implies hope that those, like Sonny and his brother, who have been afflicted with fear and suffering, will no longer be tormented. (“Class Lecture on ‘Sonny’s Blues.'” <cai.ucdavis.edu/uccp/sblecture.html>)

Keith Byerman, in his article “Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity in ‘Sonny’s Blues,’” argues that the Scotch and milk drink is “an emblem of simultaneous destruc-
tion and nurture to the system; it cannot be reduced to one or the other. Sonny’s accept-
tance of it indicates that he will continue on the edge between the poison of his addiction
and the nourishment of his music” (Studies in Short Fiction 19 [1982], 371).

In fact, music is such an important part of this story that you may consider
devoting some time in class to playing some blues and jazz songs for your students.
The references to Louis Armstrong and Charlie “Bird” Parker suggest parallels with
the narrator and Sonny. Even as many African Americans saw Armstrong as some-
one who sold out to white culture, so does Sonny see his elder brother as someone
who has forgotten his heritage in his attempt to rise to a middle class lifestyle. The
narrator does not lack an appreciation for music, however, as references to sound,
music, and songs abound in the story.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Sonny’s
Blues.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. From whose point of view is “Sonny’s Blues” told? How do the narrator’s
values and experiences affect his view of the story? Although the story’s title
implies that it is about Sonny, this is actually a story narrated by the unnamed older
brother about his own transformation. The basic conflict of the story is the narrator’s
inability to understand and respect the life of the younger brother he so clearly loves.
Baldwin carefully establishes the brothers as opposites. The narrator is a cau-
tious, respectable family man. He teaches math and is proud of his professional stand-
ing. Living in a Harlem housing project, he consciously protects himself and his fam-
ily from the dangers that surround him. He wants to avoid the illegal, dishonest
activities of those around him, and he chooses to work hard rather than obtaining
money the “easy” way through drug dealing. His identification with Louis Armstrong
rather than Charlie Parker reveals much about his view of race and culture. Notice
how intensely he appears to dislike Sonny’s friend, the drug addict, when he encoun-
ters him in the school courtyard at the beginning of the story. However, the narrator
is also compassionate, and it is important to see, in the same episode, how quickly he
recognizes and responds to the addict’s battered humanity. That gesture prefigures his
reconciliation with his brother by the end of the story.

2. What is the older brother’s profession? Does it suggest anything about his
personality? The older brother is an algebra teacher, which seems to be an appropri-
ate profession for him. He is a methodical, analytical thinker, who doesn’t want to
get his hands dirty in helping Sonny. Although he deals with equations, factors,
problems, and solutions in his job, he doesn’t seem able to translate this capability
very well into his life. He isn’t truly close to anyone, even his wife. He is blinded to
his own role in Sonny’s troubles, erroneously believing that the answer for Sonny is
for him to make the same choices in life: find a decent job, move to the projects, get
married, start a family. The older brother has forgotten his promise to their mother
to take care of Sonny, and has, in one sense, given up on his younger brother. The
narrator doesn’t realize until the end that there isn’t just one solution for Sonny’s
blues, or his own.

3. How would this story change if it were told by Sonny? The story, of
course, would be entirely different. We only see Sonny through the lens of his
older brother; if Sonny were the narrator, we would see everything from a different setting and point of view. Sonny, in contrast to his older brother, is a romantic artist who is not afraid of taking risks to pursue the things he desires. His passion for music makes him impatient with everything else. He drops out of school and ends up selling and doing drugs. In the end, it seems that music is the only thing that saves him, especially since the older brother failed to keep his promise to take care of him.

4. What event prompts the narrator to write his brother? The first sentence of “Sonny’s Blues” tells the whole story: “I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work.” The “it” referred to here is soon revealed when the narrator explains, “He had been picked up, the evening before, in a raid on an apartment downtown, for peddling and using heroin” (par. 3), and the “he” is Sonny. That the older brother learns about this in the newspaper demonstrates that he has been out of touch with his brother for many years. That the older brother is using public transportation to go to his job shows that he has taken an opposite path than his drug-using brother.

The other compelling motivation that spurred the narrator to actually write to his prodigal brother is the death of the narrator’s small daughter from polio: “My trouble,” the narrator confesses, “made his real” (par. 176).

5. What does the narrator’s mother ask him to do for Sonny? Does the older brother keep his promise? The mother is the central moral figure of the story, but we never meet her in “real time” since she is dead. We do, however, hear her voice several times as a flashback. Her last conversation with the narrator ultimately becomes a crucial part of his impetus to reconcile with Sonny. When the narrator promises to take care of his kid brother, his mother warns him it will be hard, but it is clear the narrator doesn’t fully understand what she is asking him to do. She has seen enough of the world’s trouble to be fatalistic: “You may not be able to stop nothing from happening,” she tells him, before adding, “But you got to let him know you’s there” (par. 164). Baldwin’s story tells the story of what happened to Sonny because his brother failed him. Unlike Sonny’s drug addict friend at the beginning, the narrator doesn’t see that he is, in part, responsible for Sonny’s demise. In one sense, “Sonny’s Blues” is the story of the narrator’s slow, difficult process of living up to the promise he gave his mother.

6. The major characters in this story are called Mama, Daddy, and Sonny (the older brother is never named or even nicknamed). How do these names affect our sense of the story? The names are generic, which allows the reader to place his or her family in the story. Generic names allow us to focus on the characters as family members, tied to each other irrevocably. In this sense, the story can represent any family that suffers a particularly tragic event and its universal truths resonante.

7. Reread the last four paragraphs and explain the significance of the statement “Now these are Sonny’s blues.” How has Sonny made this music his own? The outer story of “Sonny’s Blues” is the title character’s rehabilitation from drug addiction, reconciliation with his estranged brother, and recognition as a jazz pianist. The final scene in the nightclub ends with a religious vision of the blues. Listening to the group leader, Creole, play, the narrator says:
He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, and it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness (par. 234).

That passage not only offers as good an explanation of the blues and jazz as one is likely to find anywhere; it speaks cogently on the purpose of all art. It is worth reading out loud in class and having students pause over it.

The final scene of “Sonny’s Blues” is set in a dark, smoky nightclub, and its lyric quality marks a noticeable shift in tone from the realistic narrative style that preceded it. As the closing episode gains force along with the music it describes, it becomes a kind of vision for the narrator. In intellectual terms (for, after all, the narrator is a reflective math teacher), the vision brings him to a deep understanding of the human importance of art and the terrible cost of its creation. In emotional terms, his comprehension of jazz is inseparable from his sudden and profound understanding of Sonny’s identity and motivations as an artist.

The blues have indeed become Sonny’s as he is finally able to use his artistic talent to give voice to his pain, thereby reaching out to his elder brother, who is grieving the death of his young daughter. This moment of connection is profoundly important to the character development for both brothers. In one sense, the whole story is a kind of blues composition, as both Sonny and his brother have “the blues.” They both have it and live it. The final image of the Scotch and milk suggest that, for the first time, the brothers will finally play the blues—in different ways—for the first time.

Unless the reader can accept the narrator’s capacity for this transforming insight, the story is flawed by the sudden change of tone at the end. Several critics have expressed their problem with the conclusion. They feel that Baldwin’s authorial voice has replaced the narrator’s. As Joseph Featherstone said in an initial review of Going to Meet the Man:

The terms seem wrong; clearly this is not the voice of Sonny or his brother, it is the intrusive voice of Baldwin the boy preacher who has turned his back on the store front tabernacles but cannot forget the sound of angels’ wings beating around his head. (New Republic, 27 Nov. 1965, reprinted in Kenneth Kinna-mon’s “Twentieth Century Views” collection, cited in “Resources” below.)

On one level, Featherstone’s criticism makes sense. The tone of the final scene is elevated and religious. It is quite unlike the narrator’s opening voice. However, a reader wrapped up in the power of the final scene is entitled to respond that the entire story up until then exists to justify this passage. “Sonny’s Blues” is not merely the story of the narrator’s experiences; it is the tale of his inner transformation. The final scene is the demonstration of the older brother’s spiritual growth, which his earlier experiences of death and loss have motivated. In understanding and accepting Sonny, he has enlarged his soul enough to understand Sonny’s life and music, too.
RESOURCES

Before students plunge into the secondary material on Baldwin, they should be encouraged to read the author’s own essays. Baldwin was one of the finest essayists of his time, and there is no better introduction to his work than the title piece in *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin’s passionate memoir of his Harlem youth. If your students want to read more stories by James Baldwin, direct them to “Going to Meet the Man” or “Come Out the Wilderness,” both published in *Going to Meet the Man*.


A UC Davis course, “Literature and Social History,” taught by Dr. Anne Fleischmann and Dr. Andrew Jones, has a particularly helpful online portal on “Sonny’s Blues” with pictures, links, and music, available at: <cai.ucdavis.edu/uccp/uccpdefault.html>.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Baldwin. Longman Lecture, reading and interpretation questions, writing questions, evaluation questions, and comprehension quiz on “Sonny’s Blues.”

WRITERS ON WRITING

*James Baldwin, Race and the African American Writer*, page 79

Baldwin was an essayist of genius—forcefully intelligent, penetratingly insightful, and passionately consumed with pursuing his ideas to their inevitable conclusions. He wrote extremely well on most topics he addressed, but none so completely engaged his creative powers as himself. “One writes out of one thing only,” he remarked, “one’s own experience.” Baldwin’s talent for seeing both sides of an issue is never so apparent than in his autobiographical writing since he alternately views his own life as both representative and singular. One sees this open-minded ability—indeed what John Keats called “negative capability”—to embrace opposites in this excerpt from Baldwin’s “Autobiographical Notes,” in which the author examines the many imaginative sources of a writer.
“I spend my life thinking about technique, method, style,” Katherine Anne Porter told her friend and fellow novelist Glenway Wescott. “The only time I do not think about them at all is when I am writing.” Marked by scrupulous and fastidious craft, by adherence to the highest standards of achievement, her fiction, including the novel Ship of Fools, fills less than a thousand pages. In her autobiographical statement for Twentieth-Century Authors (1942), Porter said, “As for aesthetic bias, my one aim is to tell a straight story and to give true testimony.”

With its frequent excursions into the rambling consciousness of its dying protagonist, “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” may not always be “a straight story” in terms of undemanding linear narrative, but it is certainly “straight” in the larger sense of fidelity to the realities of human nature and experience, the “true testimony” that the rest of her comment refers to. Its emotional power lies largely in its presentation of the complexities of emotion, in our understanding that no matter how much Granny Weatherall feels that her life has turned out better than it would have with George, and no matter how much the details of the story support her judgment, her jilting remains a raw, painful, irreducible fact that has, in its way, shaped the rest of her life. In paragraph 28, Granny thinks: “Don’t let things get lost. It’s bitter to lose things.” Her own awareness of, and refusal to confront, the larger application of this insight is shown in her very next thought: “Now don’t let me get to thinking, not when I am tired and taking a little nap before supper.”

Here are some possible answers to the questions at the end of “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students. Other questions may occur as well.

QUESTIONS

1. In the very first paragraph, what does the writer tell us about Ellen (Granny Weatherall)? That Ellen Weatherall is feisty, accustomed to having her way, and unwilling to be treated like the sick old woman she is, all comes through the story from the start.

2. What does the name of Weatherall have to do with Granny’s nature (or her life story)? What other traits or qualities do you find in her? Granny has “weathered all”—unrequited love, marriage, the birth of five children, early widowhood, backbreaking labor, “milk-leg and double pneumonia,” the loss of her favorite daughter, and the frustrations of old age. Her victories over adversity have made her
scornful of her daughter Cornelia, who seems to her weak and inadequate. Granny is tough and inclined to hold a grudge. She has never forgiven the man who jilted her. So overweening is her pride, in fact, that at the moment of her death, when she wants a sign and fails to perceive one, she decides she will “never forgive.”

3. “Her bones felt loose, and floated around in her skin, and Doctor Harry floated like a balloon” (paragraph 6). What do you understand from this statement? By what other remarks does the writer indicate Granny’s condition? In paragraph 56, why does Father Connolly tickle Granny’s feet? At what other moments in the story does she fail to understand what is happening, or confuse the present with the past? Granny is very ill, her sense of reality distorted by lengthening periods of confusion. The story quite convincingly ushers Granny Weatherall by fits and starts into an altered state of consciousness preceding death. Granny’s weakened grasp on reality is again apparent: when the doctor “appeared to float up to the ceiling and out” (par. 7); when “the pillow rose and floated under her” and she thought she heard leaves, or newspapers, rustling (par. 8); when she pondered her impossible plans for “tomorrow” (par. 17 and 26) in her belief that she could, if she wanted to, “pack up and move back to her own house” (par. 24); in the distortions that creep into Granny’s sense of the passage of time (par. 28, 29, 36, 37, 42, 43, 50, 56, and 57); when she feels the pillow rising again (par. 29); in Granny’s sporadic inability to hear (par. 31 and 32); in her belief that there are ants in the bed (par. 40); in Granny’s occasional inability to speak clearly enough to be understood (par. 40 and 53); when Granny has hallucinations in which she confronts her daughter Hapsy (par. 41, 50, and 60); in the doctor’s “rosy nimbus” (par. 51); in Granny’s failure to comprehend that Father Connolly is not tickling her feet but administering the last rites of the Catholic Church (par. 56). (In the anointing of the sick, formerly known as Extreme Unction, the priest makes a sign of the cross with oil upon the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands, and feet of the person in danger of death, while praying for his or her soul.)

4. Exactly what happened to Ellen Weatherall sixty years earlier? What effects did this event have on her? George, the man she was to marry, had failed to show up for the wedding. This blow to Ellen’s pride had left permanent scars even though Ellen had subsequently lived a full and useful life. It is hard to say whether her exacting, imperious, unforgiving ways resulted from the jilting—or caused it!

5. In paragraph 49, who do you guess to be the man who “cursed like a sailor’s parrot”? In paragraph 56, who do you assume is the man driving the cart? Is the fact that these persons are not clearly labeled and identified a failure on the author’s part? The most likely guess about the man who “cursed like a sailor’s parrot” is that he was John, the man Ellen eventually married. Presumably John had always loved her and was angry because she had been so deeply hurt. The identity of the man driving the cart is more nebulous. Was he George? John? A confused amalgam of the two? That the reader remains unsure is not a fault in the story. The dream-like haze surrounding the man’s identity beautifully reflects Granny’s loosening hold on reality.

6. What is “stream of consciousness”? Would you call “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” a stream-of-consciousness story? Refer to the story in your reply. The story’s point of view is one of selective omniscience. The events are reported in
the third person by a narrator who can see into Granny Weatherall's mind. When Granny is lucid, the story proceeds in tidy chronological order. In the story's most interesting passages—especially in paragraphs 17–18 and 24–31—Porter uses stream of consciousness with great skill to present the randomly mingled thoughts and impressions that move through Granny's dying mind. By fragmenting Granny's thoughts, by having her shuttle back and forth between reality and fantasy, by distorting her sense of the passage of time, the author manages to persuade us that the way Granny experiences dying must be nearly universal.

7. Sum up the character of the daughter Cornelia. Cornelia, evidently the oldest of Granny's children, is a dutiful daughter—a fact resented by her cantankerous mother (par. 10). Granny feels demeaned by her knowledge that Cornelia often humors her to keep peace. And, like mothers everywhere, Granny regards her daughter as far less competent than herself. Cornelia is tenderer, less tough than Granny. She weeps beside the deathbed. The old woman fails to appreciate her daughter's care and compassion because she scorns her own need of them.

8. Why doesn't Granny's last child, Hapsy, come to her mother's deathbed? Hapsy, the youngest child and her mother's favorite, died young. Paragraph 41 suggests that she may have died giving birth to a son.

9. Would you call the character of Doctor Harry “flat” or “round”? Why is his flatness or roundness appropriate to the story? A “flat” character, the doctor is little more than a prop in this account of Granny's dying. There is no reason for him to be more than that, for it is Granny's life and death that we are meant to focus on.

10. How is this the story of another “jilting”? What is similar between that fateful day of sixty years ago (described in paragraphs 29, 49, and 61) and the time when Granny is dying? This time, who is the “bridegroom” who is not in the house? Before talking about the final paragraph, why not read aloud to your students the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1–13)?

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

2 And five of them were wise, and five were foolish.
3 They that were wise took their lamps, and took no oil with them:
4 But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.
5 While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.
6 And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.
7 Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.
8 And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil, for our lamps are gone out.
9 But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.
10 And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.
11 Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.
12 But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.

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13 Watch therefore; for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh.

Evidently, the bridegroom whom Granny awaits at the end of the story is Christ. When he does not appear, she feels jilted for a second time. Why doesn’t he come? Why does Granny not receive the sign she asks for? Is it because her pride is so overweening (“I’ll never forgive it”) as to keep her from salvation? Is it because of her refusal to stay prepared for death (par. 18)? Or did she receive her sign (the last rites of the Church) and merely fail to perceive it? Students may object to the apparent grimness of the ending. Some of them are likely to insist that Granny gets worse than she deserves, that Porter has allowed her symbolism to run roughshod over her humanity. Divergent opinions may spark a lively discussion.

11. “This is the story of an eighty-year-old woman lying in bed, getting groggy, and dying; I can’t see why it should interest anybody.” How would you answer this critic? Such a critic will be hard to convince. But perhaps discussion can show that the story is remarkable for its condensation of a long life into a few pages. How does it feel to die? All of us find the question interesting, and Porter answers it. Although Edith Wharton has argued in The Writing of Fiction (New York: Scribner, 1925) that it is not the nature of a short story to develop a character, “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” certainly makes character its central concern. We finish the story persuaded that we know Ellen Weatherall very well indeed—better than she knows herself.

Here is a bleak reading of the story for possible discussion: For sixty years Ellen Weatherall has suppressed the memory of George, the man she loved, who jilted her. She prays not to remember him, lest she follow him down into the pit of Hell (par. 29). If she remembers him, she herself will be damned—yet she remembers him. She longs to see him again (par. 42), imagines him standing by her deathbed (par. 30). In the end she beholds the pit: a darkness that will swallow up light. For the sake of a man, she has lost her soul.

But is the story so grim an account of one woman’s damnation? It seems hardly a mortal sin to remember a person and an event so crucial in one’s life; damnation seems undeserved. We sense that the author actually admires Granny’s defiance in blowing out the light at the end. To say the least, the story is splendidly ambiguous.

“The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” lent itself effectively to the PBS television film series The American Short Story, starring Geraldine Fitzgerald and Henry Fonda, and obtainable on DVD. Anyone interested in writing for television might care to see Corinne Jacker’s excellent script, reprinted in The American Short Story, Volume 2 (New York: Dell, 1980), together with a revealing interview with the scriptwriter on the problems of adapting “Granny”—such as a dearth of physical action in the present—and Carolyn G. Heilbrun’s short critical essay on the Porter story.

Porter’s familiarity with illness and the threat of death may have been drawn from memory. As Joan Givner recounts in her biography, Katherine Anne Porter (New York: Simon, 1982), Porter had to struggle for years against bronchial troubles and tuberculosis. Defiantly, she endured to age ninety.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN, page 92

“Young Goodman Brown” is Hawthorne’s most frequently reprinted story and probably the most often misunderstood. Some initial discussion of the story’s debt to American history may be helpful—most students can use a brief refresher on the Salem witchcraft trials, in which neighbor suspected neighbor and children recklessly accused innocent old women. The hand of the devil was always nearby, and it was the duty of all to watch for it. From Cotton Mather’s Wonders of the Invisible World (1693), Hawthorne drew details of his imagined midnight Sabbath. In revealing to Brown the secret wickedness of all the people he knew and trusted, the story seems to illustrate the Puritan doctrine of innate depravity. Humankind was born tarred with the brush of original sin and could not lose the smudge by any simple ritual of baptism. Only the elect—the communicants, those who had experienced some spiritual illumination that they had declared in public—could be assured of salvation. Brown’s unhappy death at the end of the story seems conventional: Puritans held that how one died indicated his chances in the hereafter. A radiantly serene and happy death was an omen that the victim was Heaven-bound, while a dour death boded ill.

The devil’s looking like a blood relative may reflect another Puritan assumption. Taken literally, perhaps the resemblance between the devil and Brown’s grandfather suggests that evil runs in Brown’s family, or in the Puritan line as the devil asserts (par. 18–19). Or that wickedness lurks within each human heart (as well as good) and that each can recognize it in himself, as if he had looked into a mirror. Of course, donning the family face may be one more trick of the devil: an attempt to ingratiate himself with Brown by appearing as a close relative. Hawthorne’s great-grandfather, the witch trial judge, would have agreed that the devil often appears in disguise. The Salem trials admitted “spectral evidence”—testimony that the devil had been seen in the form of some innocent person. Spectral evidence was part of the case against Goody Cloyse, Goody Cory, and Martha Carrier—all named in Hawthorne’s story, all of whom Judge John Hathorne condemned to death. For more on Puritan doctrines (and how they eroded with time), see Herbert W. Schneider’s classic study The Puritan Mind (U of Michigan P, 1958). Of Hawthorne’s tales and The Scarlet Letter, Schneider observes:

[Hawthorne] did not need to believe in Puritanism, for he understood it. . . . He recovered what the Puritans professed but seldom practiced—the spirit of piety, humility, and tragedy in the face of the inscrutable ways of God. (262–63)

We realize that this story is often interpreted as highly ambiguous, highly ambivalent in its attitude toward Puritanism and the notion of innate depravity. But we read it as another of those stories in which the Romantic Hawthorne sets out to criticize extreme Puritanism and to chide the folly of looking for evil where there isn’t any. In this regard, the story seems much like “Ethan Brand,” in which the protagonist sets out to find the unpardonable sin, only to receive God’s pardon anyway; and like “The Minister’s Black Veil,” in which Mr. Hooper makes himself miserable by seeing the world through a dark screen. (The latter is, admittedly, a more ambivalent tale: Hawthorne also finds something to be said in favor of that black veil and its wearer’s gloomy view.) Brown’s outlook has been tainted by dark illusion, conjured up, it would seem, by the devil’s wiles.

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Some students will take the devil’s words for gospel, agree that “Evil is the nature of mankind,” and assume that Brown learns the truth about all those hypocritical sinners in the village, including that two-faced Faith. One likely point of departure is the puns on Faith in Brown’s speeches:

“I’ll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven” (par. 5).

“Faith kept me back awhile” (par. 12).

“Is there any reason why I should quit my dear Faith . . . ?” (par. 39)

“With Heaven above, and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil” (par. 46).

“My Faith is gone!” (par. 50)

What Faith does Hawthorne mean? Surely not Puritanism—in this story, hardly a desirable bedfellow. More likely Brown’s Faith is simple faith in the benevolence of God and the essential goodness of humankind. Brown’s loss of this natural faith leads him into the principal error of the Salem witch-hangers: suspecting the innocent of being in league with the devil. At first, Brown assumes that his Faith is a pretty little pink-ribboned thing he can depart from and return to whenever he feels like it. Brown believes he is strong enough to pass a night in the evil woods and then return to the bosom of his faithful spouse unchanged. Of course this conviction is blind pride, and it works Brown’s ruin.

Why does Brown go out to the woods? Apparently he has promised the devil he will go meet him, but go no farther. By meeting the devil he has “kept covenant” (par. 15). The initial situation—that Brown has a promise to keep out in the woods—is vague, perhaps deliberately like the beginning of a dream.

And was it all a dream? Hawthorne hints that the devil’s revelations to Brown and the midnight Sabbath are all one grand illusion. When Brown staggers against the supposedly flaming rock, it proves cold and damp, and a twig that had been on fire suddenly drips cold dew. (We are indebted here to F. O. Matthiessen’s discussion in American Renaissance [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1941] 284.) If we read him right, Hawthorne favors the interpretation that Brown dreamed everything (“Be that as it may . . .”). Leave it to the devil to concoct a truly immense deception.

Still, some ambiguity remains. As Hawthorne declared in a letter to a friend in 1854, “I am not quite sure that I entirely comprehend my own meaning in some of these blasted allegories.” If what Brown saw at the witches’ Sabbath really did take place, then his gloom and misery at the end of the story seem understandable. Some have read the story to mean that Brown has grown up to have a true sense of sin and therefore ends a good Puritan; he has purged himself of his boyish good cheer. But we find the morose Brown deluded, not admirable, and suspect that Hawthorne does too.

Students may not have met the term allegory in this book unless you have assigned the chapter “Symbolism,” but some will know it already. Not only Faith can be seen as a figure of allegory, but Young Goodman Brown himself—the Puritan Everyman, subject to the temptation to find evil everywhere. For a class that has already begun symbol-hunting, “Young Goodman Brown” is a fair field. Among the more richly suggestive items are the devil’s snaky staff or walking-stick (par. 13), with its suggestions of the Eden snake and the serpentine rods of the Egyptian magicians.
(Exodus 7:8–12). When the devil laughs, it squirms happily (par. 22). It works like seven-league boots, and its holder enjoys rapid transportation. The devil gives it to Goody Cloyse and then plucks Brown a fresh stick from a maple (par. 38–41); when Brown grasps it in despair (par. 51), it speeds him on to the unholy communion. Other symbolic items (and actions) include the forest—to enter it is to be led into temptation, and Brown keeps going deeper and deeper, the withering of the maple branch at the devil’s touch (par. 38), and the proffered baptism in blood or fire at the evil meeting (par. 67).

But the richest symbol of all is Faith’s lost pink ribbon that flutters to the ground, prompting Brown to conclude that Faith, too, is a witch who let fall her ribbon while riding on a broomstick to the midnight Sabbath. (Many students, unless you help them, will miss this suggestion.) Sure enough, when Brown arrives, Faith is there too. The ribbon, earlier suggesting youthful beauty and innocence, becomes an ironic sign of monstrous evil and duplicity. This terrible realization causes Brown to decide to follow the devil after all—even though, presumably, the fluttering ribbon was another diabolical trick. When Brown meets the real Faith once more, she is still all beribboned, as if she hasn’t lost anything.

How to state the theme? Surely not “Evil is the nature of mankind” or “Even the most respected citizens are secretly guilty.” That is what the devil would have us believe. A more defensible summing-up might be “Keep your faith in God and humankind” or “He who finds evil where no evil exists makes himself an outcast from humanity.”

Compare this story with Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery.” There, too, a whole town takes part in a blood-curdling rite—but in public, not clandestinely.

Katherine Mansfield, **MISS BRILL**, page 102

Like many practitioners of the modern short story, Katherine Mansfield frequently uses small details and seemingly trivial incidents to suggest a sense of a character’s entire life. We might borrow James Joyce’s term “epiphany,” applied to the way in which a small gesture may lead to a revelation of or insight into character, in discussing Mansfield’s “little sketch.” (In fact, in the situation of its protagonist and her sense of herself, “Miss Brill” calls to mind “Clay” and “A Painful Case,” two of the stories in Joyce’s masterful collection, *Dubliners*.) In the second half of the story, Miss Brill herself undergoes two such revelations, with far different reactions and consequences. Her own sense of oneness with her fellow concert-goers, in which her assumptions about their pettiness and absurdity is replaced by a larger human sympathy, is quickly undercut by her awareness of her own pettiness and absurdity in the eyes of others.

The narrative point of view in “Miss Brill” is interesting: third-person, selective omniscience. The narrator is detached from the characters but can also see events through the eyes of the protagonist. This narrative strategy allows the reader to experience the action inwardly with the emotional intensity of Miss Brill, but it does not
limit itself to only the exact words and ideas that the protagonist would use (as a first-
person narrative would). At times Mansfield's narrative style could be called stream
of consciousness since it often portrays the title character's interior monologue and
the momentary play of thoughts and images on her mind. But the author alternates
these stream-of-consciousness techniques with a more Flaubertian selective omni-
sience. A close examination of Mansfield's opening paragraph will reveal how both
methods co-exist in the story. In classroom discussion you might explore whether stu-
dents identify more strongly with “the hero and heroine,” whose cruel comments
Miss Brill overhears, or with the title character. This line of questioning could be
used to explore how the reader's sense of identification colors his or her sense of a fic-
tion work.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Miss Brill.”
Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What details provide insight into Miss Brill's character and lifestyle? Miss
Brill lives frugally, alone in a small room, eking out a meager living by teaching Eng-
lish and reading the newspaper aloud to an invalid gentleman four afternoons a
week. She seems happy with her lot even though her daily activities are drab by most
standards and her pleasures are small ones. Her well-worn fur delights her, and an
almond in the Sunday honey-cake is cause for rejoicing.

2. What is the point of view in “Miss Brill”? How does this method improve
the story? “Miss Brill” is written with selective omniscience: from the third-person
viewpoint of a nonparticipant, but one who sees events through the eyes of the
story's protagonist. In paragraph 5, Miss Brill notices that there is “something funny”
about her fellow park sitters: “They were odd, silent, nearly all old, and from the way
they stared they looked as though they'd just come from dark little rooms or even—
even cupboards!” (That she might look the same to them never enters her head—
until she is forced to see herself as others see her.) Because we as readers experience
the day's happenings from the perspective of Miss Brill, we come to understand and
to sympathize with the sweet old dear, even going along with her sudden view of her-
self as an actress in a play performed every Sunday. To an intense degree we share her
dismay and hurt when she overhears herself called a “stupid old thing” and her
furpiece ridiculed as “exactly like a fried whiting.”

3. Where and in what season does Mansfield's story take place? Would the
effect be the same if the story were set, say, in a remote Alaskan village in the
winter? In the opening paragraph Mansfield makes clear that Miss Brill is in the
Jardins Publics and, therefore, somewhere in France: in a small town, it seems, since
the Sunday band concert is a big feature of local life. In paragraph 6 we learn that
the sea is visible from the park. We also know that the season is autumn. Miss Brill
has taken her fur out of its box for the first time in a long while. The trees are cov-
ered with "yellow leaves down drooping" (par. 6). A chill in the air foreshadows the
chill of Miss Brill's dashed spirits at the end of the story.

4. What draws Miss Brill to the park every Sunday? What is the nature of
the startling revelation that delights her on the day this story takes place? Because
she lives on the fringes of life in her small French town, Miss Brill regards her soli-
tary Sundays in the park as the highlight of her week. Here, watching the people who come and go and eavesdropping on their conversations, she feels a connection with her fellow human beings. The smallest details about them excite her interest. She comes to feel herself one of them, an actor in life’s drama. So caught up does she become in the sudden revelation that all the world’s a stage and that she, like everyone else, has a part to play, that she has a mystical experience. In her mind, she merges with the other players, and “it seemed to Miss Brill that in another moment all of them, all the whole company, would begin singing” (par. 10).

5. Miss Brill’s sense of herself is at least partly based on her attitudes toward others. Give instances of this tendency, showing also how it is connected with her drastic change of mood. Early in the story (par. 5), her reaction to some of her fellow concert-goers is a bit condescending, which enables her to feel somewhat superior—which is highly ironic in light of subsequent developments. At paragraphs 9 and 10, just before her disillusionment, she feels herself to be at one with the rest of the audience, an equal participant in what she thinks of as the significance and beauty of the event. Then, when she discovers how she really appears to at least some of the others present, it is this cruel epiphany that shatters her happiness and even her sense of herself.

6. What explanations might there be for Miss Brill’s thinking, in the last line of the story, that she “heard something crying”? Miss Brill, who loves her fur as if it were a living pet or companion, is probably capable of thinking it was that “little rogue” she heard crying over the cruelty of the young couple in the park. It’s possible, too, for the reader to believe that Miss Brill actually does hear a sound and that the “something crying” is herself. Perhaps she has, as Eudora Welty surmises in “The Reading and Writing of Short Stories,” suffered a defeat that “one feels sure . . . is forever” (Atlantic Monthly, Feb.–Mar. 1949).

Raymond Carver, CATHEDRAL, page 105

In a relatively brief time after its first appearance in the Atlantic Monthly in 1981, Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral” became an acknowledged classic of American fiction. Widely anthologized, frequently analyzed, and almost universally admired, the short story perfectly blends the compressed and understated qualities of Minimalism with the lyrical emotionalism of realists like Sherwood Anderson. It also portrays in a credible way a positive transformation of character. Initially a man of petty prejudice and small worldview, the narrator grows in humanity and understanding as the story develops. Few contemporary stories have such a cogently uplifting effect.

According to Raymond Carver, “None of my stories really happened, of course. But there’s always something, some element, something someone said to me or that I witnessed, that may be the starting place.” In her introduction to Carver Country, Carver’s widow, the poet Tess Gallagher, makes clear that a great many of the details of “Cathedral” were rooted in an actual experience. Carver was uneasy when a blind man Gallagher knew came for a visit, and Carver became jeal-

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ous of the man’s relationship with her. As interesting as these facts may be, in the end, of course, they matter less than their reworking into an independent artistic pattern, an entertaining narrative that communicates movingly about attitudes and relationships.

On the surface, “Cathedral” is a simple story told flatly by a narrator of limited awareness, both of himself and of others. His misgivings about the visit, rooted in his lack of experience with the blind, are clearly spelled out in paragraphs 1, 5, 9, and 17; the fact that his perceptions are veiled by unexamined assumptions is shown further in paragraphs 31 and 44. His blundering attempts at small talk lead to increased discomfort (par. 25), and it seems to be a combination of thoughtlessness and the wish to cover over the awkward situation that impels him finally to turn on the television set.

Throughout, his wife demonstrates a much more relaxed attitude, seeing Robert not as an abstraction or the representative of an alien group, but as an individual, a valued friend and former colleague—so much so, in fact, that in some ways she seems to have an easier and more intimate rapport with him than she does with her own husband. The narrator initially reacts with jealousy and resentment at his seeming exclusion from this closeness; but as the story proceeds, he slowly achieves an emotional breakthrough.

Students have phrased the story’s theme in different ways: “Barriers tend to break down when people try to communicate with one another,” and “Even those not physically blind sometimes need to be taught to see,” and “Stereotypes render sighted people blind to the common humanity we all share.” Obviously, the story itself is much more effective and affecting than any possible statement of its theme.

For a writing topic, a student might be asked to read D. H. Lawrence’s “The Blind Man” (in Complete Short Stories, Volume 2 [Penguin Books]) and compare the characters of the blind man and the sighted man with the similar pair in “Cathedral.”

Tami Haaland of Montana State University has provided a critical analysis of “Cathedral” for inclusion in this manual:

The unnamed narrator of “Cathedral” is a man confined—intellectually and emotionally. He thinks he knows things, but he is intentionally labeling and limiting. His first words, “the blind man,” show this tendency, and his subsequent comments indicate his desire not to move beyond his most superficial impressions or his tendency to stereotype (“I wasn’t enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me.”)

“Cathedral” presents a succession of psychological and spiritual openings brought about because the narrator is repeatedly thrown out of his comfort zone. He can either accept new information (understanding that blind men have beards, for instance) or find a way to block the information. The culmination comes in the final scene, where he “didn’t feel like [he] was inside anything.” Perhaps Carver recalled the story of Tiresias and Oedipus: the blind man observes more than the seeing man, and when the seeing man becomes symbolically blind at the end of the story, his world opens up.

The narrator in “Cathedral” is intent on stopping up his senses. He doesn’t want to know any more than he has to, so it seems appropriate that he watches television, drinks, eats, and smokes pot through much of the story. The blind
man, Robert, joins him, but for the narrator this binge seems to be a daily pattern. The emphasis on drinking, eating, and smoking early in the story (drinking is one of their “pastimes”) alleviates some of the tension between husband and wife as well as the narrator’s discomfort in having “the blind man” in his home. During the meal, the narrator begins to refer to Robert by his name instead of “the blind man.” This marks the beginning of a change in the narrator.

Initially, the narrator seems surprised that other people have experiences and perceptions that are different from his. He even remarks on word choice that he finds unusual: “my wife’s word, inseparable.” It is also “beyond [his] understanding” that Robert was never able to see his wife and that the wife could never be seen by her husband. This remark implicitly invites comparison to the narrator and his wife. How much does he really see of her? Does he understand her at all? Does he try? Only a few lines later he sees her pull into the driveway with Robert: “She was still wearing a smile. Just amazing.” Apparently he sees something in her that he didn’t expect. When she looks at him a moment later, he says, “I had the feeling she didn’t like what she saw.”

It would be interesting to trace imagery and language associated with sight through this story. The wife is uptight too, like her husband, but her primary concern is that her husband will misbehave. This fear becomes evident very early after the three of them are together in the living room. The narrator asks which side of the train Robert sat on, and she reacts by saying, “What a question.” Robert shows himself to be more open than either husband or wife.

In the last scene, Robert takes on a kind of fatherly role, encouraging the narrator to explain and eventually draw the cathedral. A key statement here comes after the narrator attempts to describe and explain: “I guess I don’t believe in it. In anything. Sometimes it’s hard.” This admission seems to be the psychological or spiritual reason for the narrator’s limitations. He has no faith, not even in himself. A few lines later he says, “But I can’t tell you what a cathedral looks like. It just isn’t in me to do it. I can’t do anymore than I’ve done.” He then confesses that, “My legs felt like they didn’t have any strength in them.” He is exhausted, empty, and his preconceptions no longer seem to be in the way. He also believes that he is incapable of continuing the conversation on cathedrals.

Apparently Robert sees his potential and encourages the narrator to start drawing. It’s as if he is coaxing a child through a difficult project. The cathedral could be seen as a symbol of faith both in its function as a place of worship and also in the way that it was built by successive generations, many of whom would never see the finished structure. The narrator doesn’t see his finished structure either, though he knows that it as well as his sense of not being contained was “really something.” It is as if the narrator has developed a new sensibility, an emotional and intellectual openness that he didn’t have before.

In my experience, students often don’t get the ending. They react much like the wife who steps into the scene and finds it bizarre that these two men sit side by side, their hands linked, drawing a cathedral on a paper bag.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Carver. Longman Lecture, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “Cathedral.”
This excerpt from Carver's "On Writing" is both an explicit announcement of his literary aims and an implicit defense of his minimalist aesthetic, which at the time of writing was being hotly debated by critics. Carver insists that the imaginative endeavor “to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language” is not a retreat from fiction's greater ambitions since the author still tries to evoke “immense, even startling power.” Notice the names that Carver invokes—Vladimir Nabokov, Isaac Babel, Guy de Maupassant, Henry James, and Evan Connell (the last is the author of two classic contemporary American novels, Mrs. Bridge and Mr. Bridge). Carver places his own imaginative enterprise in the great tradition of Realist fiction (all his names but Nabokov are major Realists). Finally, Carver asserts that the sort of writing he practices is hard to do well—a statement subsequently proved by his many less talented and less scrupulous imitators.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does Raymond Carver's statement tell us about the qualities he prizes in literature? About his personal writing habits?

2. Consider “Cathedral.” How does it show that this writer practices what he advocates?
Kate Chopin, The Storm, page 123

Kate Chopin wrote “The Storm” at a single sitting in July 1898. Its four adult characters had previously appeared in “At the 'Cadian Ball,” written in 1892 and published in Bayou Folk (1894), Chopin’s first collection of short fiction. The earlier story recounts the relationship of Calixta and Alcée and the circumstances that led to their marriages.

Chopin never published “The Storm” in her lifetime. The frank depiction of sexual passion (especially in terms of the woman’s desire and enjoyment), the complete lack of remorse or guilt on the part of the adulterous lovers, and Chopin’s apparent acceptance of the situation put it well beyond the limits of what was acceptable more than a century ago.

Present-day students will not be shocked or outraged by the story in the way that Chopin’s contemporaries would have been, but they may still vigorously debate both the behavior of the lovers and Chopin’s own intentions, particularly in terms of the story’s very last sentence. Is that last sentence ironic? If so, at whose or what expense—the lovers themselves, the betrayed spouses, the institution of marriage?

The cultural milieu of “The Storm”—the French Catholic bayou country of Louisiana—was not Chopin’s native territory. She was born an Irish American in St. Louis and went to New Orleans at nineteen. She sees this milieu, therefore, with the relative objectivity of an outsider who is nonetheless rooted by family and children. Part of the special charm of her fiction is its careful depiction of this exotic local culture so different from the rest of the South.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Storm.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Exactly where does Chopin’s story take place? How can you tell? The story’s cultural milieu is the French Catholic bayou country of Louisiana. The fierce storm, the can of shrimp, and the characters’ French names signify that this story takes place in Louisiana. Calixta’s concern that the levees may not withstand this fierce storm, as well as the French expressions (“Dieu sait” or “Bonte!”), set the story near New Orleans. Alcée’s wife, Clarisse, is visiting her family in Biloxi, Mississippi, and the storm is so powerful that she may have felt its effects even from that distance.
2. What circumstances introduced in Part I turn out to have a profound effect on events in the story? This severe storm was unexpected; otherwise, Bobinôt would not have gone on this errand to Friedheimer's store with his son in the first place. Because its strength is so clear (both in sight and sound)—"somber clouds that were rolling with sinister intention from the west, accompanied by a sullen, threatening roar"—Bobinôt decides to stay at the store in safety, until the storm passes. That Sylvie, a house servant, helped Calixta the day before becomes an important detail, because her absence means Calixta is home alone. When Alcée happens to be walking by her house, he asks for her help and she willingly invites him inside.

3. What details in "The Storm" emphasize the fact that Bobinôt loves his wife? What details reveal how imperfectly he comprehends her nature? Before the storm hits, Bobinôt buys his wife a can of shrimps. However fond she may be of shrimp, this simple gesture suggests that he sees Calixta as a wife, housekeeper, cook, and mother—not as a sexual, passionate woman. Clearly he loves her, but the love feels rooted in familiarity rather than eroticism. That he sits on the keg "stolidly holding the can of shrimps while the storm burst" suggests he is trying to hold onto his wife, however imperfectly his attempt may be. It is this stolidness, perhaps, that has prevented him from ever exploring his wife's passionate nature.

4. What general attitudes toward sex, love, and marriage does Chopin imply? Calixta is queen of the domestic sphere: she is so preoccupied with her sewing that she barely notices the impending storm, and then she hurries to gather Bobinôt's Sunday clothes before the rain falls. Calixta worries about her husband's safety—and especially her son's—after she sees a lightning bolt strike a chinaberry tree. Even after her encounter with Alcée, Calixta seems genuinely glad to be reunited with her husband and son when they return home. But passions, Chopin seems to say, cannot be denied. Their force is equal to that of a storm, and the marriage bed is not the likeliest place for the release of that force. Indeed, the author hints that marriage and sexual pleasure are incompatible in Parts IV and V of the story, where Alcée urges his absent wife to stay away another month and where we learn that for Clarisse, "their intimate conjugal life was something which she was more than willing to forgo for a while."

5. What meanings do you find in the title "The Storm"? The storm is unexpected and, like one's passions, they come and go with a powerful force. The force of the rain begins to flood Calixta's house after Alcée walks onto her porch. The storm raging within Calixta needs release in her former lover who understands this aspect of her nature.

Chopin describes the literal storm with language that can also be used to describe Calixta's affair. In Part I, the storm "seemed to be ripping great furrows in the distant field." After Alcée enters Calixta's home, "the rain beat upon the low, shingled roof with a force and clatter that threatened to break an entrance and deluge them there." As they consummate their passion, "they did not heed the crashing torrents, and the roar of the elements made her laugh." And after "he possessed her," the storm ends: "the growl of the thunder was distant and passing away."

6. In the story as a whole, how do setting and plot reinforce each other? The setting of "The Storm" provides its most powerful unifying element. "The Storm," of course, features a literal storm that is so severe that it isn't safe for Bobinôt and Bibi to travel home. The powerful wind shakes both Friedheimer's store and Calixta's
house, and the strong rains make the roads so muddy that Bobinôt uses a stick to get the dried mud off his four-year-old son.

The raging storm provides Alcée with a legitimate excuse to seek shelter at the home of his former love, Calixta. The storm not only affects the situation of each character, it also reflects the tempestuous inner states of Alcée and Calixta, who find themselves unexpectedly alone. Their passionate adultery is supremely satisfying—the classic Chopin touch that outraged her contemporaries.

Jack London, *To Build a Fire*, page 127

Like other American fiction writers at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth—among them Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser—Jack London expressed a Naturalistic viewpoint in his presentation of man as a creature pitted against and often dwarfed by the forces of nature. Like Ernest Hemingway for a later generation, London gave his work what many considered an extra dimension by living the adventurous life that he sometimes described in his fiction. Having endured the winter of 1897–1898 in a cabin in the Klondike, he felt that the individual battling against nature was capable of a nobility that was denied to the anonymous masses toiling in the great cities.

In “To Build a Fire,” London builds up almost unendurable suspense, and our hopes, like those of the protagonist, are kept alive almost until the end. The early reference to the man’s limited perceptions and imagination creates a sense of foreboding that only grows stronger as the story proceeds. We are forced to come to terms with his fatally foolhardy assumptions, especially about his own power. By the story’s end, it is too late for the man to rectify what has gone wrong. The dog, protected by his instincts, survives.

The theme of the story, that our struggle against nature is a vastly unequal one that leaves little or no margin for error, is clearly dramatized. But the descriptive power of the text, in its almost overwhelming vividness, provides an excellent opportunity to remind students that, aside from all questions of larger thematic significance, one of the primary functions of literature has always been to re-create and record the textures of life and to convey the feeling of an experience to those who have not had it for themselves. The brilliance of London’s achievement at this level is undeniable.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “To Build a Fire.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Roughly how much of London’s story is devoted to describing the setting? What particular details make it memorable? Most of the story describes the setting in some way, but the opening paragraphs especially contain descriptive, vivid prose, as the author knew that most of his readers would not have experienced the climate, place, or experience he re-creates here. The absence of sun, the subtle gloom, and
the cloudless sky are particularly memorable, as is London’s description of the trail that goes 500 miles to the Chilcot Pass and then more than a thousand miles longer to the Bering Sea.

We hear Jack London at his best in passages such as this: “On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as the eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hairline that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island” (par. 2).

2. To what extent does setting determine what happens in this story? In “To Build a Fire” what happens—the plot—is almost completely determined by the setting. It is seventy-five degrees below zero, a degree of cold that the man failed to anticipate. Because of the ice, snow, and traps, the man is unable to build a fire and save himself. London lavishes upon the setting the amount of detail usually reserved for a story’s characters. The arctic weather functions as if it were a character, a malign adversary doing battle with the man. Detail is piled upon detail as the struggle is gradually lost.

But what happens is also determined by character, as this man’s biggest trouble is “that he was without imagination” (par. 2).

3. From what point of view is London’s story told? “To Build a Fire” is told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator who describes the landscape objectively, and who can see into both the man’s mind and the dog’s. This seamless ability of the narrator to flip back and forth is exemplified in a passage like this: “Working carefully from a small beginning, [the man] soon had a roaring fire, over which he thawed the ice from his face [. . .] The dog took satisfaction in the fire, stretching out close enough for warmth and far enough away to escape being singed” (par. 15).

4. In “To Build a Fire” the man is never given a name. What is the effect of his simply being called “the man” throughout the story? The man’s namelessness seems simultaneously to make him a representative of all humanity in his fight against nature’s relentless assault and to emphasize his—and consequently our—insignificance in the face of such overwhelming odds.

5. From the evidence London gives us, what stages are involved in the process of freezing to death? What does the story gain from London’s detailed account of the man’s experience with each successive stage? The man’s death begins with the frost on his face. After he opens his coat in order to get his lunch, he exposes his extremities and skin so that both become numb. Then a stinging ache comes, followed by shivering—especially after his feet get wet. Over time, the shivering ceases, especially after he deliriously runs around. Unexpectedly, he then feels so warm and comfortable that he even considers “freezing was not so bad as people thought” (par. 38). After he staggers and falls, his mental confusion becomes so great that he feels “out of himself” (par. 41). He then surrenders to the drowsiness that signals his end. London’s vivid description of this process of freezing to death is an essential part of the story.

By describing this process in stages, the reader imaginatively experiences the freezing along with the man. As we take the time to read this process, the reader is mindful of the length of time that the man’s body has been exposed to such a perilous setting. London’s detailed account builds the readers’ sympathy for a man,
whose pride and inexperience—not the treacherous weather—are the real cause for his painful, unnecessary, and solitary death.

6. What are the most serious mistakes the man makes? To what factors do you attribute these errors? Along the way the man unknowingly makes several fatal mistakes, but perhaps his most serious flaw is to ignore an old-timer's advice. This man on Sulphur Creek had told our protagonist not to travel alone. Underestimating his adversary, the man fails to ascertain the temperature and to cover his face. He knows about the danger of the springs (snow that appears solid on the surface but hides pools of water underneath that can be as deep as three feet). As he and the dog walk over the creek and encounter many traps, the dog doesn't want to go. Instead of listening to the dog's instinct, the man forces him forward, and, eventually, the man does fall into a spring. After he is wet to the knees, he builds a fire in the wrong place—under a tree. The snowfall from the tree branches extinguishes his fire, and he tries unsuccessfully to build another fire. Since his hands have begun to freeze, his fingers cannot hold a match, and by that time it is too late to rectify all that has gone wrong. Once his fingers freeze, he drops all his matches in the snow, and he cannot build a second fire.

Ultimately, the man dies because of his pride (which led him to reject the warnings of others with more experience—including his dog) and because of his failure of imagination.

Canadian Broadcasting made a film of “To Build a Fire,” with Orson Welles reading the entire text of the story over dramatic footage. It is available on DVD.

As a class writing assignment, ask students to retell this story in 500 words from the dog’s point of view.

Ray Bradbury, A SOUND OF THUNDER, page 137

As one of the most influential science fiction writers in history, Ray Bradbury’s work, more than 500 short stories and eleven novels to date, has helped shape the last half century of American literature and popular culture. Bradbury has achieved a rare distinction of writing books that are both literary classics and perennial bestsellers, especially the groundbreaking novel Fahrenheit 451 (1953), which presents Bradbury’s terrifying vision of a future without books. In fact, Bradbury may be single-handedly responsible for the crossover of science fiction into mainstream American literature with works such as The Martian Chronicles in 1950 and Dandelion Wine in 1957 (the Apollo 15 crew named the Dandelion Crater after this novel).

This is also true for his short story, “A Sound of Thunder,” one of the most reprinted science fiction stories ever. It was first published in 1952 in Collier’s Magazine, and collected in Bradbury’s book of twenty-two short stories titled The Golden Apples of the Sun in 1953.

Bradbury’s literary thrill ride started when he was a young boy in Waukegan, Illinois. He pulled books off his aunt’s and uncle’s shelves and read them all—The Fairytales of the Brothers Grimm, The Stories of Edgar Allan Poe, Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan novels and John Carter of Mars series. After Bradbury had exhausted his relatives’ collections, he fortunately discovered the library, which he considers “the most exciting place in the world.” Beginning at age seven, he and his brother Skip would explore the library every Monday night, checking out books on everything from
pirates to Egyptian mummies. He also discovered the science fiction of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells (author of The Time Machine). Many of his stories find their beginnings from his childhood passions; a story like “A Sound of Thunder” is clearly rooted in Bradbury’s love for dinosaurs and time travel.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “A Sound of Thunder.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the two main settings of Bradbury’s story? What is unusual about both settings? In the story, 2055 is the “present.” In the Time Machine, the characters go back to “the jungle of sixty million two thousand and fifty-five years before President Keith” (par. 27). Although both settings have certain realistic qualities, “A Sound of Thunder” is a story told in the genre of science fiction.

2. How does the plot of the story depend on the setting? Would it be possible to tell this story in different settings? The story’s plot absolutely depends on two settings—past and future. The story would be impossible without these two temporal settings and the time machine connecting them.

3. Why does the government not approve of time travel? How does Time Safari, Inc., deal with government obstacles? Travis explains to Eckels that Time Safari, Inc., has to pay thousands of dollars to the government because “a Time Machine is finicky business. Not knowing it, we might kill an important animal, a small bird, a roach, a flower even, thus destroying an important link in a growing species” (par. 32). However, the truth that Travis confesses to Eckels is they don’t definitely know what the effect is of their time travel. He even admits that their theory may be wrong: “Who can really say he knows? We don’t know. We’re guessing. But until we do know for certain whether our messing around in Time can make a big roar or a little rustle in history, we’re being careful” (par. 40). As a safety precaution, the company always leaves the body of the animal “where it would have died originally, so the insects, birds, and bacteria can get at it, as they were intended to” (par. 102). Time Safari, Inc., also deals with government obstacles by penalizing a customer ten thousand additional dollars if he disobeys orders, either by stepping off the prescribed path or by shooting an unauthorized animal. They are so careful that they send Lesperance back to the past prior to a safari to research the life and death patterns of the animals. He then marks dead animals with red paint, so that the Time Machine arrives two minutes before the animal’s natural death so that the customer shoots animals who would never mate again. Before the journey, the company sterilizes its customers’ clothing and bodies and provides “oxygen helmets so [they] can’t introduce [their] bacteria into an ancient atmosphere” (par. 40). Their goal is to leave everything in balance, but they fail to realize it is impossible to control the behavior of their customers.

4. When Eckels returns to the altered present, when does he first sense that something has changed? Both Eckels and Travis realize immediately that the present is altered by Eckels’s momentary step off the path. The first clue comes from the man behind the desk, who is, paradoxically, the same man as when they left and yet not the same man (par. 131). After the group returns to the present, Eckels smells a subtle chemical taint that he did not recognize before his trip. He notices colors on the
furniture and walls of the room that were not previously there. “And there was a feel. His flesh twitched. His hands twitched. He stood drinking the oddness with the pores of his body. Somewhere, someone must have been screaming one of those whistles that only a dog can hear. His body screamed silence in return” (par. 136).

5. In what specific ways has the present been changed by the trip? There are many changes, both slight and significant. Aside from the sensory changes felt by Eckels, there are two surprising external changes. First, the office sign painted on the wall has changed. The English language, especially the vowels, is different from when Eckels first read the sign. Second, and perhaps even more astonishing, the death of the butterfly has altered the presidential elections. Instead of President Keith, the terrible “iron man” dictator Deutscher has won, a man whose “anti-militarist, anti-Christ, anti-human, anti-intellectual” beliefs led people to call Time Safari, Inc., to ask if they could escape back to 1492 (par. 8). Eckels is shocked by the realization that a beautiful butterfly’s death “could upset balances and knock down a line of small dominoes and then big dominoes and then gigantic dominoes, all down the years across Time” (par. 141).

6. What happens in the last three paragraphs of the story? Eckels’s fate parallels the murdered butterfly, as revealed in the story’s final paragraphs. When Eckels picks up the butterfly “with shaking fingers,” he pleads: “Can’t we take it back, can’t we make it alive again? Can’t we start over?” The answer is, tragically, “of course not.” Although the Machine has taken the four men back in time, its power is limited: it cannot resurrect the life of a human, animal, or insect. Travis had warned Eckels of the seriousness of one misplaced step: “A dead mouse here makes an insect imbalance there, a population disproportion later, a bad harvest further on, a depression, mass starvation, and finally, a change in social temperament in far-flung countries” (par. 40). The story ends as Travis shoots Eckels with his rifle, resulting in the final paragraph’s “there was a sound of thunder.”

7. “A Sound of Thunder” is not a realistic story, but it seems to convey a pertinent message about humanity’s relation to the natural world. How would you summarize that message? Probably Bradbury’s single most influential story, “A Sound of Thunder” can be read as a parable where a carelessly squashed prehistoric butterfly has unimaginable, history-altering consequences. If this story has a message, it is perhaps best stated by Eckels, when he wonders, “Killing one butterfly couldn’t be that important! Could it?” (par. 141). He is repeatedly warned by Travis and the other Time Safari employees to never step off the path into the jungle. However, after he is terrified by the Tyrannosaurus Rex, he walks blindly back to the Time Machine, partly due to the mist and partly due to his own shameful fear. He doesn’t even realize that he stepped off the path until it happened.

“A Sound of Thunder” is a good example of the way literature sometimes precedes scientific research. The now-popular term “the butterfly effect” was first developed as an idea in the 1960s by meteorologist Edward Lorenz, who was a professor at MIT and is often regarded as the first proponent of Chaos Theory. He realized that minute variations could trigger unpredictable effects of weather with unanticipated results. He almost certainly borrowed the image of the butterfly from Bradbury’s well-known and popular 1950s story for the title of his 1972 academic paper “Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado In Texas?”
FOR FURTHER READING


OTHER RESOURCES

Ray Bradbury’s official website (www.raybradbury.com) contains his biography, links to other articles, information on his works, and many other key points about his life and career. Especially interesting for students may be “In His Words,” a moving account of what inspired twelve-year-old Bradbury to become a writer:

To watch an inspiring film of Ray Bradbury, go to: www.neabigread.org/books/fahrenheit451/filmguide.php. Students may also be interested in viewing the 2005 film *A Sound of Thunder*, starring Ben Kingsley and Edward Burns, directed by Peter Hyams, which is very loosely based on Bradbury’s story.

—Erika Koss

Amy Tan, *A PAIR OF TICKETS*, page 146

“A Pair of Tickets” is a story of self-discovery—born in pain but eventually resolved in joy. Pain unites characters from different countries and decades. The narrator’s still-fresh sorrow at her mother’s death, the mother’s abiding despair at losing her twin daughters on the war-torn road to Chungking, and the daughters’ ache at losing their mother not once, but twice (first as babies in 1944 and then again as adults after they learn their mother is dead) are all caused by the same tragic historical circumstance and its far-reaching consequences. Joy, however, eventually links June with her two half-sisters. Acknowledging what they have lost, they find that much remains.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “A Pair of Tickets.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. How is the external setting of “A Pair of Tickets” essential to what happens internally to the narrator in the course of this story? “A Pair of Tickets” is a story that grows naturally out of its setting. June’s journey to China is one of both external and internal discovery. Finding China, she also finds part of herself. Tan announces the theme at the end of the first paragraph: “I am becoming Chinese.” China becomes a spiritual mirror for the narrator, just as her glimpse of her half-sisters’ faces provides a living mirror of her own and her late mother’s face. One might say that “A Pair of Tickets” is the story of Americanized June May Woo (born, as her passport says, in California in 1951) becoming Jing-mei Woo by discovering her ethnic and cultural roots in her ancestral homeland.
2. How does the narrator’s view of her father change by seeing him in a different setting? Although June’s mother haunts the story, her father is also a quiet, important presence. As the title says, this story is about a pair of tickets. June’s seventy-two-year-old father, Canning Woo, accompanies her on the trip to China. He is returning after four decades. He is June’s physical and psychological link with the homeland, as well as her living link with the family history that she (like most children) only half knows. His revelations teach her about both her mother and herself. Seeing him in China, June gets a glimpse of his past, what he was like as a young man before she was born. “He’s a young boy,” she observes on the train to Shenzen, “so innocent and happy I want to button his sweater and pat his head.”

3. In what ways does the narrator feel at home in China? In what ways does she feel foreign? June is Chinese American, which means that she experiences the two cultures from both the inside and the outside. Just as going to China helps her understand how she is Chinese, it also reminds her how much she has been shaped by America. She understands Mandarin Chinese but cannot speak it well. She does not know the Cantonese of her relatives or her father’s Mandarin dialect. Although she is purely Chinese in ancestry, not only her clothes betray her American upbringing—she is also too tall. “I stand five-foot-six,” June observes, “and my head pokes above the crowd so that I am eye level only with other tourists.” And yet she physically resembles her half-sisters, realizing at the end of the story: “And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood.”

4. What do the narrator and her half-sisters have in common? How does this factor relate to the theme of the story? She and her half-sisters share a biological and spiritual link to their common mother, and through her they share a bond to one another. “Together we look like our mother,” June observes. “Her same eyes, her same mouth.” Their fates are interrelated, as reflected by their names. In China, June asks her father the meaning of her Chinese name, Jing-mei, and he interprets her name to signify the younger sister who is the essence of the other lost daughters. As she discovers on meeting them, she does share their essence—they are all daughters of the same mother.

5. In what ways is the story interesting because it explores specifically Chinese American experiences? In what other ways is the story grounded in universal family issues? Although “A Pair of Tickets” is saturated in Chinese history and culture, and its plot reflects a situation unlikely to be repeated in other contexts, it also explores nearly universal themes of self-discovery, cultural awareness, and family history. One might say that Tan’s broader theme is dual identity—an especially relevant theme for many Americans who come from immigrant families. Tan explores this quintessentially American experience with humor, compassion, and imagination.

Wayne Wang’s 1993 film version of The Joy Luck Club will probably disappoint most of Tan’s readers as much as it did movie critics. The subject matter is so interesting that it carries the film along, but Wang sentimentalizes and sensationalizes the story into a sort of Asian American soap opera. The final episode (drawn from “A Pair of Tickets”) is condensed and simplified. The pair of tickets is, alas, reduced to a single passage: June flies to China alone, and poor Canning Woo gets left in the States. The film may nonetheless be useful to students who need help in visualizing
the American and Chinese milieus of the story. Under pressure, one might assign a particularly movie-struck student the task of comparing and contrasting the movie's version of “A Pair of Tickets” to the original story.

**Writers on Writing**

**Amy Tan, Setting the Voice, page 160**

Tan’s 1989 essay on the relation between finding her authorial voice and remembering her mother’s “broken” English provides a fascinating glimpse into the relationship between life and art. It also highlights the issue of audience. An artist’s strategy of literary creation necessarily includes the image of his or her ideal reader. The act of imaginative identification has often been problematic for minority or immigrant writers. Should they address their own communities, or should they try to reach a mainstream that may be ignorant of their particular experiences? Such writers must often imagine an audience that does not yet exist and hope their work summons it into being. Tan’s immensely popular books have done just that by creating a huge diverse audience of readers. This passage describes how Tan gradually developed the distinctive style for the stories that made up *The Joy Luck Club*.

Amy Tan speaks further about her relationship with her mother in our interview on pages 2–3, where she also offers some interesting comments on how she became a writer, her literary models and influences, and the importance of reading.
Ernest Hemingway, A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE, page 167

This celebrated story is a study in contrasts: between youth and age, belief and doubt, light and darkness. To the younger waiter, the café is only a job; to the older waiter, it is a charitable institution for which he feels personal responsibility. Of course, he himself has need of it: it is his refuge from the night, from solitude, from a sense that the universe is empty and meaningless, expressed in his revised versions of the Hail Mary and the Lord’s Prayer. The older waiter feels kinship for the old man, not only because the waiter, too, is alone and growing old, but because both men are apparently atheists. Willing to commit suicide, the old man (unlike his pious daughter) evidently doesn’t think he has any immortal soul to fear for. Robert Penn Warren is surely right in calling Hemingway, at least in this story, a religious writer. “The despair beyond plenty of money, the despair that makes a sleeplessness beyond insomnia, is the despair felt by a man who hungers for the sense of order and assurance that men seem to find in religious faith, but who cannot find grounds for his faith” (“Ernest Hemingway,” in Warren’s Selected Essays [New York: Random, 1951] 80–118). What values are left to a man without faith? A love of cleanliness and good light, of companionship, of stoic endurance, and above all, of dignity. (Another attempt to state the theme of the story is given at the beginning of Chapter 6.)

At the heart of the story is the symbol of the café, an island of light and order surrounded by night and nothingness. Contrasting images of light and darkness begin in the opening paragraph: the old man, not entirely committed either to death or to life, likes to sit in the shadow of the leaves. Every detail in the story seems meaningful: even, perhaps, as L. Rust Hills points out, “the glint of light on the soldier’s collar . . . an attribute of sexual potency” (Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular [Boston: Houghton, 1977] 85).

The story has been much admired for Hemingway’s handling of point of view. The narrator is a nonparticipant who writes in the third person. He is all-knowing at the beginning of the story: in the opening paragraph we are told how the old man feels, then what the waiters know about him. From then on, until the waiters say “Good night,” the narrator remains almost perfectly objective, merely reporting visible details and dialogue. (He editorializes for a moment, though, in observing that the younger waiter employs the syntax of “stupid people.”) After the waiters part company, for the rest of the story the narrator limits himself to the thoughts and perceptions of the older waiter, who, we now see, is the central character.

It is clear all along, as we overhear the conversation of the two waiters, that Hemingway sides with the elder’s view of the old man. The older waiter reveals himself as wiser and more compassionate. We resent the younger man’s abuse of the old
man, who cannot hear his “stupid” syntax, his equation of money with happiness. But the older waiter and Hemingway do not see things identically—a point briefly discussed in the text in a comment on the story’s irony.

A small problem in reading the story is to keep the speakers straight. Evidently it is the younger waiter who has heard of the old man’s suicide attempt and who answers the questions at the beginning of the story.

Jan Hodge of Morningside College has written to contest our interpretation. He offers an interesting revisionist reading of the text:

I was a bit taken aback by your note [on paragraphs 20 and 21] that “The younger waiter perhaps says both these lines. A device of Hemingway’s style is sometimes to have a character pause, then speak again—as often happens in actual speech.” This may be the case, though I don’t know of any instances off-hand in his writing where there is not some kind of indication when this is what is happening, or where context wouldn’t make it clear that the same speaker speaks successive lines, each enclosed in quotation marks.

As I read the story, the young waiter speaks the first of the lines in question here, and the older waiter the second. This would be consistent not only with their respective characters, but with conventionally alternating lines of dialogue in the rest of that section if . . . and herein lies the critical problem, paragraphs 39–42 read in your text:

“You can’t tell. He might be better off with a wife.” [clearly the older waiter]
“His niece looks after him.”
“I know. You said she cut him down.”
“I wouldn’t want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing.”

[clearly the young waiter]

But the words “You said she cut him down” must be spoken by the young waiter, because the older waiter has told him that earlier. The passage makes perfect sense if the lines are adjusted this way:

“You can’t tell. He might be better off with a wife.”
“His niece looks after him. You said she cut him down.”
“I know.”
“I wouldn’t want to be that old . . .”

I haven’t checked the critical record recently, but many years ago a student doing a research paper on this story ran across an article on the passage which argued (as I recall, though I can’t swear to it) that the compositor had slipped, and that the manuscript has the dialog as in the second version above. Voila! All difficulties vanish.

Hemingway’s device of assigning two successive speeches to the same character without identifying him (par. 20–21 and probably 32–33) has given rise to much confusion among readers—also to twenty or more scholarly articles on the correct reading of the story. David Kerner’s “The Foundation of the True Text of ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place’” settles the question. Demonstrating that the device appears many times in Hemingway’s novels and stories, Kerner suggests—with evidence—that Hemingway may have learned it from Turgenev or Joyce.

How original Hemingway’s style once seemed may be less apparent today, after generations of imitators. Ford Madox Ford described the famed style: “Hemingway’s words strike you, each one, as if they were pebbles fetched fresh from a brook” (introduction to A Farewell to Arms [New York: Modern Library, 1932]). Students may be asked to indicate some of the more prominent pebbles: the repetitions of such words as night, light, clean, late, shadow, leaves, and (most obviously) nada. The repetitions place emphasis. Students may be asked, too, to demonstrate whether Hemingway’s prose seems closer to formal writing or to speech. It might help to have them notice the preponderance of one-syllable words in the opening paragraph of the story and to compare Hemingway’s first paragraph with that of Faulkner’s “Barn Burning.” Faulkner’s second sentence is a 117-worder, clearly more recondite in its diction (dynamic, hermetic). Most of Hemingway’s story is told in dialogue, and usually we notice that a character said (unlike Faulkner’s characters, who often whisper or cry their lines).

Frank O’Connor comments adversely on the Hemingway style:

“As practiced by Hemingway, this literary method, compounded of simplification and repetition, is the opposite of what we learned in our schooldays. We were taught to consider it a fault to repeat a noun and shown how to avoid it by the use of pronouns and synonyms. This led to another fault that Fowler christened “elegant variation.” The fault of Hemingway’s method might be called “elegant repetition.” (The Lonely Voice [Cleveland: World, 1963])

This criticism may be well worth quoting to the class. From “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” can students see what O’Connor is talking about? Do they agree with him?

In a preface written in 1959 for a selection of his stories that did not materialize as a book, Hemingway congratulated himself for his skill at leaving things out. In his story “The Killer,” he had left out Chicago; in “Big Two-Hearted River,” the war. “Another time I was leaving out good was in ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.’ There I really had luck. I left out everything. That is about as far as you can go, so I stood on that one and haven’t been drawn to that since” (“The Art of the Short Story,” Paris Review 79 [1981]: 100).

Hemingway himself had reason to empathize with the older waiter. “He was plagued all his adult life by insomnia and in sleep by nightmares,” notes biographer Carlos Baker (Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story [New York: Scribner, 1969] viii–ix).

William Faulkner, BARN BURNING, page 170

“Barn Burning” makes an interesting contrast to “A Rose for Emily.” Whereas the earlier story (first collected in 1931) is written in a realist mode with Gothic elements, “Barn Burning” (1939) shows Faulkner in his Modernist mode—not opaque...
but richly textured and subtly nuanced. There are many ways to contrast the two stories, but one interesting way for students is to discuss how the different narrative points of view help shape radically different styles and effects.

The unnamed narrator of “A Rose for Emily” speaks in a public voice; he intends to represent the town’s collective and considered view of Miss Emily Grierson. His style is lucid, measured, informed, and detached. “Barn Burning,” however, is narrated from an objective third person point of view that enters the main character Sarty’s mind. The objective external view is, therefore, constantly mixed with the confusion and emotions of a boy undergoing terrible stress. The narrator is not constrained to describe things only in the boy’s limited vocabulary but can examine and represent his innermost thoughts and feelings. The narrator also helps the reader understand the boy’s situation better than the character himself does.

The protagonist of “Barn Burning” is a poor ten-year-old boy with the unusual and very Faulknerian name of Colonel Sartoris Snopes (called Sarty by his family). His father, Abner Snopes, is a primitive and vengeful man who divides the world into two opposing camps—blood kin (“us”) and enemies (“they”). He is the poor, ignorant, and vicious patriarch of an impoverished family. The main psychological story of “Barn Burning” is Sarty’s growing awareness of his father’s depravity and the boy’s internal struggle between blood loyalty to his father and a vague but noble ideal of honor suggested by the aristocratic Major de Spain. The boy loves his father but also understands his immoral destructiveness. Sarty sees himself as an individual different from his father and kinfolk. By the end of the story he has achieved a difficult and tortured moral independence from his father.

From the opening paragraph, we can tell that the tone of the story will be excited and impassioned—at least in the moments when we see through Sarty’s eyes. Even his view of canned goods in the general store (where court is being held) is tinged with intense emotion. Fear, despair, and grief sweep over Sarty because his father is on trial as an accused barn burner.

The boy’s wonder and dismay are conveyed in a suitably passionate style. Whenever Sarty is most excited, Faulkner’s sentences grow longer and more complex and seem to run on like a torrent. The second sentence of the story is a good illustration, as is the sentence in which Sarty jumps out of the way of Major de Spain’s galloping horse and hears the barn going up in flames (at the climax of the story, the long sentence in paragraph 106). A familiar student objection is that Faulkner embodies the boy’s feelings in words far beyond a ten-year-old’s vocabulary—especially one who can’t even read, as we learn about Sarty in the opening paragraph. You might anticipate this objection by making clear that a story about a small boy, even when the story is presented largely in terms of his own perceptions, need not be narrated by the boy himself; nor does the author need to confine himself within the limit of the boy’s ability to comprehend and to express what he observes and feels (refer to the discussion of the quotation from As I Lay Dying at the beginning of the chapter). “Barn Burning” is told by an omniscient narrator who, much of the time, gives us the viewpoint of the main character.

Now and again, the narrator intrudes his own insights and larger knowledge. At times Faulkner rapidly shifts his perspective from outside Sarty’s mind to inside it. Two such shifts take place in a sentence in paragraph 7 (“For a moment . . .”), in which, first, we get the boy’s thoughts and then an exterior look at his crouched figure (“small for his age . . . with straight, uncombed, brown hair and eyes gray and wild as storm scud”), followed by a return to the boy’s perceptions. In paragraph 25, telling
how Ab Snopes’s “wolflike independence” impressed strangers, Faulkner makes a judgment far beyond the boy’s capacity. In paragraph 26, the narrator again separates his view from the boy’s to tell us what Sarty would have thought if he were older—“But he did not think this now.” The narrator is again clearly in evidence in the story’s last two paragraphs.

Lionel Trilling wrote a good defense of the style in this story: the complexity of Faulkner’s rhetoric reflects the muddlement and incompleteness of the boy’s perceptions and the boy’s emotional stress in moving toward a decision to break away from father and family (The Experience of Literature [New York: Holt, 1967] 745–48). He is perplexed and innocent, and we realize that somehow he loves his terrible father. In the next-to-last paragraph, Sarty’s impressions of his father’s war service are set beside the grim truth—which only the father (and the narrator) could know. Wayne C. Booth comments on this passage: “We can say with some confidence that the poignancy of the boy’s lonely last-ditch defense of his father is greatly increased by letting us know that even that defense is unjustified” (The Rhetoric of Fiction [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961] 308).

If you teach “Barn Burning” together with “A Rose for Emily” (Chapter 2) to demonstrate that point of view, remember that “Barn Burning” is the more difficult story. You may want to take up “A Rose for Emily” first and to spend a little while getting students into the universe of Faulkner. Any brief discussion of the Civil War and its effects will help prepare them for “Barn Burning.” Though her perch in society is loftier, Miss Emily, like Ab Snopes, is fiercely proud and capable of violent revenge, and she too holds herself above the law. As with Miss Emily, Snopes is characterized in part through the symbolic use of details. The neat, “shrewd” fire (par. 26) reflects his cautious nature; his weapon of revenge, fire, is to be “regarded with respect and used with discretion.” The rug that he soils and then ruins is emblematic of the social hierarchy that he defies and that he refuses to make amends to. His deliberately dirtied boots communicate his contempt for his employer as well as his own dirtiness of spirit. Clearly, Faulkner’s impressions of both Snopes and Miss Emily are as complex as his feelings about the South itself.

“A Rose for Emily” also introduces the legend of Colonel Sartoris, war hero, mayor, and first citizen, whose fame and influence linger. Coming to “Barn Burning,” students may then appreciate the boy hero’s given name. Addressing the boy (par. 10), the Justice foreshadows the story’s conclusion: “I reckon anybody named for Colonel Sartoris in this country can’t help but tell the truth, can he?” Truthfully, Sarty warns Major de Spain that his father is going to burn the major’s barn; in so defying Ab, Colonel Sartoris Snopes rises to his namesake’s nobility. (But, according to Frederick R. Karl, the line from Sartoris to Snopes is not one of simple degeneration. Karl points out that Colonel Sartoris “uses his power for white supremacy, harasses and even murders carpetbaggers, and makes certain that Negroes lose the vote. He . . . is a power-hungry, politically obsessed individual whose will is law. He establishes a dynasty, and its elements, while high and grand, are little different from the dynasties at the middle level established by Will Varner and at the lower levels by the Snopeses” [William Faulkner: American Writer, New York: Weidenfeld, 1989].)

Question 1 directs the student to paragraph 106, a crucial passage that repays close attention. From the roar Sarty hears, and from the detail that the night sky is “stained abruptly,” it is clear that Ab Snopes and Sarty’s older brother succeed in setting fire to de Spain’s barn. We had long assumed that, although a total of three shots ring out, the barn burners get away, for they turn up in a later volume of Faulkner.

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But Joseph L. Swonk of Rappahannock Community College, North Campus, persuades us that the outcome is grimmer. Sarty cries “Pap! Pap!”—then trips over “something,” looks back, and sobs “Father! Father!” “I contend,” says Professor Swonk, “that he tripped over the bodies of his father and brother, that he was looking backward at the bodies, and that his shift from ‘Pap’ to ‘Father’ was eulogistic. Furthermore, he continues in this manner: ‘Father. My Father . . . He was brave! . . . He was! He was in the war!’” Now referring to his father in the past tense, Sarty is delivering a final tribute over Ab’s corpse.

“Barn Burning,” to place the story in the chronicles of Yoknapatawpha County, is a prelude to the Snopes family history later expanded in Faulkner’s trilogy The Hamlet (1940), The Town (1957), and The Mansion (1959); in fact, a heavily revised version of “Barn Burning” forms the first chapter of The Hamlet. At the conclusion of “Barn Burning,” Sarty Snopes turns his back on his father and his clan; so, in the trilogy, the primary figure is Flem, Sarty’s brother, who remains. Meeting Flem Snopes, whose father Ab is still well known as a barn burner, Jody Varner in The Hamlet says dryly, “I hear your father has had a little trouble once or twice with landlords.”

“Barn Burning” was adapted for television by Horton Foote for the PBS television series The American Short Story and stars Tommy Lee Jones. It is available on DVD. A paperback, The American Short Story, Volume 2 (New York: Dell, 1980), includes short scenes from Horton Foote’s television script based on Faulkner’s story.

For a stimulating attack on Faulkner’s style, see Sean O’Faolain, The Vanishing Hero (Boston: Little, Brown, 1957) 101–3, 111–12, 133. Charging that Faulkner can’t write plain English because “his psyche is completely out of his control,” O’Faolain cites lines of Faulkner that he thinks rely on pure sound instead of sense (“the gasoline-roar of apotheosis”) and complains that Faulkner needlessly uses “second-thought words” (“He did not know why he had been compelled, or anyway needed, to claim it”; “This, anyway, will, shall, must be invulnerable”). In O’Faolain’s view, when Faulkner begins a sentence with “I mean,” it is a tipoff that he doesn’t know what he means and won’t know until he says it. O’Faolain’s objections might make for a provocative class discussion.

Irony

O. Henry, The Gift of the Magi, page 184

This classic tale by the master of irony is easily the most popular and beloved of his many stories, since it combines his favored surprise ending—familiar also from such stories as “The Cop and the Anthem” and “The Ransom of Red Chief”—with a sentimental glow and a wholehearted endorsement of the beauty of young love. Sophisticated students may groan a bit at the archness of some of the writing and the con-
trivance of the plot, but they will probably be touched in spite of themselves by its portrait of an immensely appealing and devoted young couple.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Gift of the Magi.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the style of this story? Does the author’s tone tell you anything about his attitude toward the characters and events of the narrative? Clearly, O. Henry does not hold with those who feel that the best style is a transparent medium between author and reader. His writing constantly calls attention to itself by its hyperbole, allusiveness, and chattiness; the style invites this scrutiny not only indirectly but even overtly, as in paragraph 18. Like a miniature Fielding or Thackeray, the author interposes himself between the material and the reader in such a way that his genial tone and his controlling presence reassure us that all will be well in the end.

2. What do the details in paragraph 7 tell you about Della and Jim’s financial situation? Here’s an opportunity to get students to do a bit of interpretive reading. We’ve just been told in paragraph 6 that “Twenty dollars a week doesn’t go far.” Even with no other guide to monetary values a century ago, we can conclude from that fact that an $8 flat is not a very sumptuous residence. And even though some grades of pier-glass (a long, narrow mirror usually set between windows) can be expensive, it is suggested here that a pier-glass in an $8 flat is of rather shoddy quality.

3. O. Henry tells us that Jim “needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves” (paragraph 25). Why do you think Della didn’t buy him these things for Christmas instead of a watch chain? Presumably for the same reason that your mother doesn’t want a blender for Mother’s Day. As paragraph 6 points out, she wants to buy him a gift that would be “fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.” It must be something precious and extravagant enough to convey her feelings for him, not something merely functional, however much in need of it he might be.

4. “Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer” (paragraph 34). What, in your view, is “the wrong answer,” and why is it wrong? What might the right answer be? A mathematician might talk about the differences in purchasing power, comfort, and security between the two amounts; a wit might counter the adage “Money can’t buy happiness” with the equally stale rejoinder, “No, but it sure helps.” The right answer might be that those who have less take it less for granted, and value what they have—including each other—that much more.

5. What is ironic about the story’s ending? Is this plot twist the most important element of the conclusion? If not, what is? The obvious irony is that what they sold to buy one another’s gifts made those gifts worthless from a practical standpoint. But the larger theme—or the larger irony, if you prefer—is that those gifts were of much greater value as expressions of the depth and selflessness of their love for each other.
Anne Tyler, TEENAGE WASTELAND, page 188

For more than forty years, Anne Tyler has been writing a series of remarkable novels that explore the mysteries, and often the miseries, of love and family relationships. Among her short stories, “Teenage Wasteland” stands out for the shrewdness, the humor, and ultimately the sadness with which it explores similar themes. With its presentation of conflicts and misunderstandings between teenagers and their parents, it is a story that students will identify with, and one that should make for some very lively class discussions. Don’t assume that students will reflexively identify with Donny and fault Daisy; young adults may feel that they see right through him and turn out to be among his harshest critics. Opinions may run the entire gamut—from a belief that Donny is crying out for the help that would have saved him if only he had had more caring and understanding parents, to the assumption that Daisy has done all she possibly could in dealing with an intractable child. Freud once famously described the bringing up of children as one of three “impossible professions.” Anyone who has ever tried to raise a child will understand what he meant; so will anyone who has ever read “Teenage Wasteland.”

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Teenage Wasteland.” Other questions and answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. From whose point of view is the story told? How would you characterize the method employed—omniscient, limited omniscient, or objective? The point of view employed is that of limited omniscience. The entire story is narrated from the perspective of Donny’s mother, Daisy Coble. Through this technique we are given a heightened sense of her feelings—her confusion, frustration, and helplessness—as she attempts to reach her son and deal with his ever-worsening situation.

2. What is the significance of the opening paragraph of the story? The story’s opening seems to suggest that Daisy holds to her memories of her sweet, adorable, innocent child, whose needs she could meet and whose problems she could deal with, before he morphed into this sulky and uncommunicative stranger. (One can almost imagine her and Matt beaming at their newborn child and thinking on some level that “We haven’t made any mistakes yet, we still have the chance to be wonderful parents and raise a happy, well-adjusted son.”) But reread paragraph 101 for a sense of how these memories may have been modified in light of recent events.

3. Daisy is extremely self-conscious and concerned about how others view her. Find instances of this trait in the text. How does it affect her approach to raising her children? As early as paragraph 3, we see that “It shamed her now to sit before this principal as a parent, a delinquent parent, a parent who struck Mr. Lanham, no doubt, as unseeing or uncaring.” In paragraph 8, when she and Matt sit in Mr. Lanham’s office a second time, she is heavily focused on her and her husband’s personal appearance and seems convinced that the principal regards them as “failures.” She is clearly very insecure; instead of acting consistently and firmly according to a deeply held set of beliefs, she conforms herself to others’ assumptions and expectations. As a result, she wavers, backtracks, and shifts direction in dealing with...
Donny. Not only does she spread her own confusion outward, she also opens herself to manipulation, as shown, for example, in paragraphs 61–63.

4. Why is it ironic that Daisy was once a teacher? Tyler's decision to include the detail about Daisy's past profession as a teacher highlights the irony of her inability to understand or fix Donny's academic problems. Daisy defers all responsibility for Donny's academic performance to Cal as she dismisses a teacher's suggestion that she should consider helping Donny with his homework.

5. What is ironic about the tutor Cal's appearance and behavior? What about Cal's attitude toward grades? Cal appears to be a youthful tutor who imitates the laid back style of his students, wearing faded jeans and the same “long and stringy” haircut as Donny. At first Cal's behavior appears to be an attempt to relate to the lifestyle of his students, but as the story progresses, Tyler's characterization suggests that Cal may be just as immature as the teenagers he instructs. Cal refuses to address or even acknowledge Daisy's legitimate concerns about Donny's declining grades even though she is paying him to be an academic tutor. Moreover, Cal completely endorses Donny's dubious conspiracy theory about his expulsion and undercuts all of Daisy's attempts to see if Donny is telling the truth. Tyler presents Cal not only as a character who adopts the lifestyle of his students, but as a man who uses the same faulty reasoning as the teenagers. This ironic resemblance between Cal and Donny's thinking becomes especially noticeable when they simultaneously cry out “Brantly” as the perfect new school for Donny after his expulsion. Ironically, Cal exacerbates Donny's academic problems and facilitates his students' worst habits.

6. Daisy's attitude toward Cal undergoes frequent and at times rapid changes. Find examples in the text. What does she seem to think of him by the end of the story? On first meeting Cal, Daisy seems a little put off by his hair and clothing and the loud rock music playing in his house—all attempts, she senses, to “relate” to teenagers in a superficial way. She takes a more sympathetic view of him in light of Donny's apparent improvement in school (fueled also, no doubt, by Cal's relieving her of the burden of helping Donny with his studies). She is persuaded by him to take a more indulgent view of Donny (par. 36–42) and to dismiss the concerns of Donny's history teacher (par. 53–55). She is jealous of Cal's influence over Donny and later exasperated by his constant making of excuses for the boy no matter what he does. In the end, she appears to regard him—accurately, no doubt—as an irresponsible fraud who has at best done Donny no good, and has in all likelihood helped—with her own unconscious complicity—to worsen the situation.

7. How does the portrayal of Donny's sister, Amanda, help to clarify the larger concerns of the story? Amanda's fleeting appearances in the story communicate the fact that her needs are being neglected (par. 5, 32) as Daisy involves herself more and more thoroughly—and ineffectively—in Donny's situation (similarly, the shadowy presence of in the story of Daisy's husband, Matt, reinforces our sense of him as remote and unhelpful). In paragraph 14, Daisy wonders whether her relative neglect of Donny when Amanda was a baby may have contributed to his present problems, which suggests that she may now be trying, at Amanda's expense, to redress the balance. At the end of the story, “Donny's sister seems to be staying away from home as much as possible.” Opposite ways of dealing with the two children seem to have led, sadly, to similar outcomes.
8. How do the other students tutored by Cal turn out? What is ironic about their outcomes? The school psychologist recommended Cal as a “tutor with considerable psychological training.” It is ironic that his psychological acumen is more successful at manipulating Daisy than in helping his students. The reader is not told much about Cal’s students, except that one was “recently knifed in a tavern. One had been shipped off to boarding school in midterm; two had been withdrawn by their parents” (par. 60)—hardly a successful track record.

9. Would you describe Tyler’s presentation of Daisy as satirical or sympathetic? Can it be both at once? Explain. There are strongly satiric elements in “Teenage Wasteland.” Matt, Donny, and especially Cal behave foolishly and/or self-servingly just about all of the time. While Daisy’s is a more nuanced characterization, her insecurity and indecisiveness make her appear somewhat ridiculous at times, and, in common with many parents of her generation, her dread of stunting her children by over-disciplining them leads to an often absurd tolerance and laxity. But, just as we have all immediately followed some stinging observation about a friend with “But he means well” or “She has a good heart,” Tyler shows us Daisy’s genuine love for Donny and her anguish as she sees him slipping away from her; to simply dismiss her as a fool would be to deprive the story of a good deal of its human richness. In the end, we are left feeling sad and sympathetic, not smugly superior.

Writers on Writing

Ernest Hemingway, The Direct Style, page 195

Hemingway was internationally famous during his lifetime, and he gave many interviews. He talked expansively about travel, sports, food, politics, and personalities, but he usually became evasive when asked about his own work. He was almost entirely silent on his immensely influential style. This passage from Edward Stafford’s “An Afternoon with Hemingway,” therefore, is especially valuable to students of the writer’s work. Connoisseurs of literary journalism may enjoy Stafford’s old style of interviewing, which has now been almost entirely replaced by the Paris Review question-and-answer format. The 1964 publication date may seem confusing, Hemingway having died in 1961; the interview was conducted in the late fifties, but Stafford did not publish it until after the novelist’s death.

Hemingway’s remarks are particularly interesting because he relates his style to his creative process. Hemingway wrote and revised his work in three stages—pencil, typescript, and proof. At each stage he consciously worked on conveying the “feeling or emotion” he wanted in each scene. Note, too, how Hemingway mentions that a writer needs to present the different sides of a story without judging. (His view here recalls John Keats’s theory of “negative capability” as the mark of a particular kind of literary artist.)
Instructors who wish to teach all the stories in the book according to themes (not just the stories in this chapter) will find suggestions in this manual in "Stories Arranged by Subject and Theme" (pp. 9–16).

*Stephen Crane, The Open Boat, page 201*

It may interest students to know that “The Open Boat” is based on Crane’s own experience of shipwreck, but they may need some discussion to realize that factuality does not necessarily make a story excellent. Newspaper accounts may be faithful to the fact, but few are memorable; on the other hand, fine stories are often spun out of imagined experience—as was Crane’s novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, a convincing evocation of the Civil War by a writer who was born six years after it ended.

For what reasons is “The Open Boat” a superb story? Its characters are sharply drawn and believable: captain, cook, oiler, and correspondent are fully realized portraits, etched with great economy. Crane deeply probes the mind of his primary character, the correspondent, from the point of view of limited omniscience. The author knows all, but he confines his report to what he sees through the correspondent’s eyes.

The story seems written with intense energy; students will find many phrases and figures of speech to admire. In a vigorous simile, Crane conveys the motion of the boat and a sense of its precarious balance: “By the very last star of truth, it is easier to steal eggs from under a hen than it was to change seats in the dinghy” (par. 31). In the same passage, a man changing places in the boat picks himself up and moves his body as carefully as if he were a delicate piece of china. One way to get students to sense the degree of life in a writer’s style is to have them pick out verbs. In the opening sentence of Part II (par. 21): “As the boat *bounced* from the top of each wave the wind *tore* through the hair of the hatless men, and as the craft *plopped* her stern down again the spray *slashed* past them.” Building suspense, Crane brings the men again and again within sight of land and then drives them back to sea. He aligns enemies against them: sharks, the ocean current, the weight of water that sloshes into the boat and threatens to swamp it. The climax of the story—the moment of greatest tension, when the outcome is to be decided—comes in paragraph 203, when the captain decides to make a run through the surf and go for shore.

The situation of having one’s nose dragged away before he can “nibble the sacred cheese of life” (par. 70, 143) is a clear instance of irony of fate, or cosmic irony. Crane, who sees Fate as an “old ninnywoman” (par. 70), knows that the rain falls
alike on the just and the unjust. There is no one right way to state the theme of this rich story, but here are some attempts by students, each with some truth in it:

The universe seems blind to human struggles.

Fate is indifferent, and it doesn’t always reward the brave.

It’s an absurd world; only people are reasonable.

This theme (however it is stated) may be seen also in the symbol of the giant tower (par. 202) and Crane’s remarks on what it suggests: “The serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual,” a presence not cruel or beneficent or treacherous or wise. Students who like to hunt for symbols sometimes want to see the boat as the universe, in which man is a passenger. A case can be made for reading the story in this way. But everything in the story (ocean, waves, shark, beach, lighthouse), however full of suggestions, is first and foremost a thing concrete and tangible.

Although the secondary theme of comradeship is overtly expressed only in paragraph 43 (“the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established”), it informs the entire story. Until they quit the boat, the men are willing to spell one another at the oars; and even in the water, the captain still thinks of the correspondent’s safety. The word “heroism” remains unspoken, but it is clearly understood: in “The Open Boat,” a hero seems to be one who faithfully does what needs to be done. All four men thus qualify for the name.

Remembering the scrap of verse by Victorian bard Caroline Norton (par. 178), the correspondent finds himself drawn into sympathy with any sufferer who, like himself, has to die in a remote place. The sentimental lines give rise to a feeling that, under the circumstances, seems heartfelt and real. In their time, the stormy life and dashing Byronic ballads of Caroline Norton (1808–1877), granddaughter of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, attracted wide notice. (James Joyce mentions another poem of hers in “Araby,” par. 23.)

For its view of people as pawns of nature, Crane’s story has been classified as an example of American naturalism. Clearly, “The Open Boat” also has elements in common with more recent fiction and drama of the absurd: its notion of Fate as a ninny, its account of Sisyphean struggles in the face of an indifferent universe. For critical comment on these aspects of the story, see Richard P. Adams, “Naturalistic Fiction: ‘The Open Boat,’” Tulane Studies in English 4 (1954): 137–47; and Peter Buitenhuis, “The Essentials of Life: ‘The Open Boat’ as Existentialist Fiction,” Modern Fiction Studies 5 (1959): 243–50.

The late William Maxwell, a novelist and for many years a New Yorker fiction editor, was once asked in an interview, “As an editor, in deciding whether or not to read a story how much weight do you place on the first sentence?” “A great deal,” Maxwell replied. “And if there is nothing promising by the end of the first page there isn’t likely to be in what follows. . . . When you get to the last sentence of a [story], you often find that it was implicit in the first sentence, only you didn’t know what it was.” Asked for his favorite opening lines in fiction, Maxwell’s first thought was of “None of them knew the color of the sky,” from “The Open Boat” (“The Art of Fiction,” Paris Review 82 [December 1982]). Students may be asked what this first line reveals. (That the sea compels the survivors’ whole attention.) How does the final sentence in the story hark back to the first?
Alice Munro’s ingeniously plotted story would make an interesting alternative selection to use in the discussion of plot in “Reading a Story” (Chapter 1). The development in the plot of this story reflects the young narrator’s growing awareness of how love and infatuation operate. “How I Met My Husband” would also work well in a discussion of “Point of View” (Chapter 2). Munro’s story shows how even a sensible and observant narrator can misjudge people and events, especially when she is involved in the action. Munro is masterful in portraying Edie’s opinions of her neighbors and employers. Edie is a richly realized narrator—engaging, complex, and human. At fifteen she is, ironically, too smart to appreciate how innocent she still is. She does not yet understand the sexual feelings she experiences. Previously in control of most social situations, she stumbles through this comic romance mostly in embarrassed confusion. Finally, the story cunningly demonstrates the power of the title as a literary device. By calling her story “How I Met My Husband,” she invites the reader to expect that this weirdly mismatched and overtly doomed infatuation between Edie and Chris Watters might actually work out.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you judge Edie as a narrator? Do we feel she is being objective about the people and events she describes? Take one character or incident and comment on her depiction of it. Edie is smart and sensible for her age, but she has a highly critical kind of intelligence and is apt to find fault with most people. She generally keeps her mouth shut in situations, but as a narrator, she speaks candidly to the reader. An amusing illustration of Edie’s narrative “objectivity” is her treatment of the gossipy Loretta Bird. Edie views Loretta Bird with delightful disdain and constantly comments on the hypocrisy or pretension behind everything Loretta Bird says. Her candor might be less agreeable if she was not equally candid in confessing her own failings. She readily admits how many dumb things her young self did or said simply because she could not think of anything better. Her narration may be subjective, but it is not overtly self-serving.

2. How does Munro present Chris Watters as a character? What do we know about him? The important thing for students to realize is that we see Chris Watters through Edie’s eyes. When she first meets him, Watters seems poised and charming. He flirts with her so suavely that at first she does not understand he is flirting. Nonetheless, she is affected by his compliments. (“I wasn’t even old enough then to realize how out of the common it is, for a man to say something like that to a woman . . . for a man to say a word like beautiful.”) She begins to fall in love with him without at first admitting it openly in her narrative, and she observes him with the obsessive attentiveness that characterizes sexual attraction. When his unglamorous fiancée, Alice Kelling, arrives, Edie does not waver in her affection. Observing Watters and his fiancée together, she senses that he has little attraction left for the woman. Her infatuation with Watters leads her (and probably the reader) to excuse the lapses in his character. Edie is utterly sympathetic to his flight (in both senses of the word) from the apparently unsuitable Alice Kelling. It is not until long after Watters has flown away, and Edie realizes that he is not going to write (and by impli-
cation, never going to see her again), that the reader begins to appreciate how untrustworthy he was. We actually know very little about Watters (except his exciting profession) beyond what Alice and Edie tell us, and both women have a vested interest in him.

3. Does the story have a climax? If so, when does it occur? Students may find this a surprisingly difficult question. Many of them will say the climax of the story occurs in the final paragraph when Edie starts dating Mr. Carmichael, the mailman. That moment may be the story’s unexpected conclusion, but the climax occurs a few pages earlier, when the women in the story are having dinner and after Chris Watters has flown away. Trouble erupts when Edie admits to being “intimate” with the pilot. That uproarious scene is the moment of greatest tension, when the real outcome of the story is being decided. Edie’s public humiliation pushes her into maturity, and her fervent loyalty to her errant airman will prove sadly misplaced, even though she does not fully understand its effects for some time. Mrs. Peebles protects her from the worst of the gossip by getting rid of Alice Kelling and keeping Edie on as help, but the key events that will affect Edie’s future life have now been set in place.

4. What effect does Munro achieve by titling her story “How I Met My Husband”? Isn’t that title misleading? Munro’s title is both accurate and misleading. Edie indeed tells the story of how she met her husband, but he is probably not the character the reader at first assumes she will marry. If the title is a trick, it is a brilliant and insightful one, because by assuming that Chris Watters will eventually marry Edie, the reader shares Edie’s own romantic illusions. We tend to give Watters the benefit of the doubt when, in retrospect, we see he was only a charming cad. Notice how Munro keeps other eligible males out of the first three quarters of the story. We—like Edie—have nowhere to fasten our romantic assumptions except on this exotic pilot (exotic to Edie, that is: “I only knew he wasn’t from around here” is how she describes him from their initial meeting. That may not sound like much to us, but to a fifteen-year-old farm girl, her words connote a world of mystery). Munro’s teasing title, therefore, is a psychological ploy that makes readers identify more closely with the narrator’s emotions than they themselves initially realize. Munro’s story is a good example for students of how a work’s title is an essential part of the text and contributes to its total meaning.

There is an excellent interview with Alice Munro in Volume 3 of *Short Story Criticism* (Detroit: Gale, 1989). This useful volume, which will be found in most large libraries or online, also contains excerpts from reviews and essays on Munro’s short fiction.


The original setting of this famous parable may help clarify its principal theme. Jesus has been preaching in the towns and villages along the road to Jerusalem. He has attracted great crowds, including many disreputable people whom Jewish religious leaders would traditionally have avoided or spurned. The Pharisees (strict practitioners of Jewish dogma) and the Scribes (doctors of religious law) express shock that
Jesus would be willing to receive and even dine with sinners (not to mention tax collectors). In Luke 15, Jesus answers their criticism with three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal (lost) son. These parables implicitly preach compassion and concern for sinners. The righteous, Jesus implies, don't reject sinners; they seek to bring them back to grace.

Most parables from the Gospels have a slightly abstract quality. Short, simple, and allegorical, they illustrate their morals through exemplary but deliberately generalized characters and action. The characters in “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” however, feel like individual human beings. We experience their motivations, emotions, and thoughts. The reader vicariously experiences the essential feelings at hand: the father's joy, the older brother's unforgiving heart, and the younger brother's humiliation. The parable reads like a short story. The philosopher George Santayana called it “a little masterpiece.”

This parable has been adapted and used by all kinds of artists, as John MacArthur explains in his book on this parable titled *A Tale of Two Sons* (2008):

Shakespeare, for instance, borrowed plot points and motifs from the parable of the prodigal son and adapted them in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry IV*. The Bard also alluded to this parable repeatedly in his other dramas. Arthur Sullivan used the exact words of the biblical text as the basis of an oratorio titled *The Prodigal Son*, Sergei Prokofiev cast the plot in ballet form, and Benjamin Britten turned the story into an opera. At the opposite end of the musical spectrum, country singer Hank Williams recorded a song called “The Prodigal Son,” comparing the prodigal’s homecoming to the joys of heaven. The world’s great art museums are well-stocked with works featuring scenes from the prodigal son’s experience, including famous drawings and paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens, Dürer, and many others.

An interesting writing assignment might be to ask students to compare the original parable with an artistic work it inspired.

You may also wish to store the prodigal’s phrase, “I will arise and go to my father” in your memory for the next time you teach William Butler Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” Yeats’s poem begins, “I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,” and the poet intends a biblical echo to let us know that his return to this spot is no mere weekend holiday. Finally, you might want to point out that phrases from this parable are well-known—how the phrase “killing the fatted calf” has become a traditional metaphor for extravagant and joyful feasting. (Students in the St. Louis area may also recognize it as the name of a local hamburger restaurant.)

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. This story has traditionally been called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” What does _prodigal_ mean? Which of the two brothers is prodigal? This parable is often remembered as the story of an ungrateful, dissolute younger son who returns to his father after years of a profligate lifestyle. (Its traditional title, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” surely contributes to this overly narrow focus.) However, the parable...
is more richly complex; it is, as the opening line tells us, the story of two brothers: “A certain man had two sons.”

Few students will be able to define the word *prodigal*. You may want to refer them to the dictionary definition: “reckless and extravagant waste of one’s property or means.”

The younger son “wasted his substance with riotous living,” and, from the elder son, we later learn that his brother has “devoured [their father’s inheritance] living with harlots.” There is no doubt that this younger son is all the synonyms of the word “prodigal”: wasteful, reckless, dissolute, profligate, extravagant, licentious, immoral, and shameless. However, the story’s twist is that the older son has wasted his father’s love in a different way, for he is bitter, angry, ungrateful, selfish, and disrespectful. (Timothy Keller, a popular writer and New York City pastor, suggests that it might be the father who was actually *prodigal* in his love for his sons.)

2. What position does the younger son expect when he returns to his father’s house? What does the father give him? Upon his return, the younger son’s greatest hope is that his father will deign to give him a job as a servant, but his father exceeds all his expectations.

It is essential to remember that this younger son had never experienced hunger under his father’s roof. The parable does not reveal what motivates him to ask for his inheritance prematurely, but the request would have been considered a sign of the greatest disrespect a son could give to his father; it would be like a son wishing his father were dead. Still, it seems that his father gives it over with little debate. As soon as the younger son squanders the inheritance he “began to be in want” because “there arose a mighty famine in that land.” It is so bad that the only available food is the leftovers from the pigs—unclean animals in the Jewish tradition—that it is his job to tend. Only then does his epiphany come: “when he came to himself.” Knowing that the servants are never hungry at his father’s house, the younger son’s first motive to return is merely to fill his stomach. Whether or not his rehearsed words are sincere—“Father I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants”—may be in question. The father, however, accepts his contrition and welcomes him back into the family.

3. When the older brother sees the celebration for his younger brother’s return, he grows angry. He makes a very reasonable set of complaints to his father. He has indeed been a loyal and moral son, but what virtue does the older brother lack? The older brother lacks forgiveness and compassion for his younger brother. This parable’s theme would be less dramatically presented if we did not see—and probably feel some sympathy with—the older brother’s uncharitable reaction to the prodigal’s return. We know nothing of his past relationship with his brother. But we do know that his anger is so inflamed that he does not join his father’s party; as this passage says, referring to the older son: “and he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him.”

Perhaps he is embittered because Jewish cultural expectations require elder sons to take care of his younger siblings. Perhaps part of his bitterness stems from the reality that the younger’s return means that the elder will have to share his future inheritance. Perhaps the older brother also feels jealous because he “missed out” on his chance to have fun. Whatever the motive, this elder son is now the one acting shamefully: his unwillingness to greet his brother, his refusal to attend the party, and his public disrespect of his father all demonstrate that the eldest son may be more lost than the youngest ever was.

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4. Is the father fair to the elder son? The elder son's jealousy is not directed at his brother per se; it has more to do with the father's reaction toward the younger son. It is true the older brother lacks compassion for his younger brother, but, from a contemporary point of view, the father has, perhaps, failed his elder son. Although the elder son has done everything expected of him, he feels unappreciated and unloved. He says to his father, "you never even gave me and my friends a kid."

The father, however, refuses to be drawn into an argument with his elder son. When the son complains to him, he answers with, to quote G. B. Caird, "the gentlest of rebukes": "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

5. Theologians have discussed this parable’s religious significance for two thousand years. What, in your own words, is the human theme of the story? The human theme of the parable might be summarized as "genuine virtue includes the power to forgive" or "true goodness requires love and compassion, not just outward virtue." The elder son has led an outwardly virtuous life, but when his prodigal brother returns home in disgrace, he cannot put aside his disapproval and jealousy to greet him. He resents his father's joy as well as his brother's behavior. His external righteousness has not nourished his heart: he feels neither joy nor compassion. The father, however, rejoices in the younger son's safe return. Santayana thought that the parable also had a psychological theme: "There is more joy in finding what was lost than there would be in merely keeping it."

SUGGESTED WRITING EXERCISES

A good writing exercise is to ask students to retell the parable from the older brother's perspective. Can they present his version of the story without losing the original theme? (For a comic retelling of the parable from just this slant, see Garrison Keillor's satiric skit, The Prodigal Son.)

Another version of the prodigal son's story occurs in Rainer Maria Rilke's novel, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (1910). Rilke's powerful retelling of the parable appears as the last few pages of the book, and it can be easily understood by someone who has not read the rest of the novel. (In the German-speaking world, his parable is frequently anthologized separately.) In Rilke's version, the younger brother is "a man who didn't want to be loved," a person who could not bear the weight and responsibility of another's affection. A savvy student could write an excellent term paper on comparing Rilke's parable to the Gospel original.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr., HARRISON BERGERON, page 231

"Harrison Bergeron" is a story that tends to divide teachers. Many instructors like Vonnegut's science fiction satire immensely, but a vocal minority of college instructors consider "Harrison Bergeron" too boisterously direct. Students, however, usually find the story powerful and provocative. They consistently rate it among their favorite works. (Science fiction remains one of the few literary genres truly popular among students.) Whenever we have dropped the story from the anthology, letters pour in asking for its reappearance.
We suspect that the gap between some instructors and students reflects differences between high literary culture and popular literary culture. By the Olympian standards of Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* or John Cheever’s “The Swimmer,” Vonnegut’s gutsy satire is no deathless masterpiece. Its humor is elementary, and its characters are flat. Vonnegut’s style has neither the evocative conciseness of a Hemingway nor the lyrical resonance of a Porter.

But to catalogue what Vonnegut is not misses what he is—a contemporary satirist who uses science fiction conventions to frame his iconoclastic ideas. Vonnegut’s roots are in science fiction. Viewed from the vantage of that genre, the particular qualities of “Harrison Bergeron” become more obvious. Science fiction short stories are more concerned with exploring ideas than with careful portrayal of psychological and social reality. The classic sci-fi short story makes a few changes in technology and then speculates on their social, political, psychological, or moral implications. The purpose is not to predict the future, but to explore the possible consequences of present trends abetted by future technology.

An interesting thing about Vonnegut’s story is that—like so many science fiction works—it predicted a powerful social trend before it became mainstream. Of course, Vonnegut greatly exaggerates this trend for the purposes of satire, but he did hilariously capture the dark side of social engineering.

Vonnegut’s story belongs to a long tradition of anti-utopian satire usually called dystopian fiction. (Modern dystopian fiction developed out of Menippean satire, which emphasizes ideas and employs loose form, a tradition that includes Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and François Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.) Among the best known dystopian literary works are George Orwell’s *1984*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Eugene Zamyatin’s *We*, Margaret Atwood’s *A Handmaid’s Tale*, and Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*, but there are countless other anti-utopian novels, stories, films, and television shows. Describing all sorts of possible nightmare futures proved one of the late twentieth century’s favorite pastimes.

Vonnegut insisted that his work is not confined to science fiction. In an essay titled “Science Fiction” in the *New York Times Book Review* (September 5, 1965), he said that until he read the reviews of his first novel, *Player Piano* (New York: Delacorte, 1952), he had not thought of himself as a science fiction writer.

I supposed that I was writing a novel about life, about things I could not avoid seeing and hearing in Schenectady, a very real town, awkwardly set in the gruesome now. I have been a sore-headed occupant of a file drawer labeled “science fiction” ever since, and I would like out.

Here are some possible answers to some of the questions given at the end of “Harrison Bergeron.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. **What tendencies in present-day American society is Vonnegut satirizing? Does the story argue for anything? How would you sum up its theme?** In “Harrison Bergeron” Vonnegut explores the idea of a futuristic society that has developed the technology to enforce an extreme version of social equality at all costs. The theme of “Harrison Bergeron” strikes most students with great force, and they can...
usually summarize it one way or another. “Down with mediocrity and conformity” is one common answer, or “Individual excellence involves risk.” A more elegant and comprehensive statement of the story’s themes might be: “By attempting to enforce equality too vigorously, society risks penalizing excellence.”

Vonnegut’s story objectifies the well-known American distrust of intellectuality, and it exaggerates this prejudice to an insane degree. Some students may read the story remembering how in high school or junior high they were ridiculed by classmates for showing interest in ideas or learning. Vonnegut imagines a society so dedicated to a perverse concept of equality that it condemns absolutely all excellence, including good looks, physical grace, and a creative imagination. In this sense, one could say that the story argues for a society that allows inequality, especially that which is natural (such as physical appearance). The story suggests that, in reality, all men are not created equal in many ways, and a government that tried to enforce equality for some would, by default, be enforcing inequality for others. This would—perhaps ironically—lead to tyranny rather than democracy.

2. Is Diana Moon Glampers a “flat” or “round” character? Would you call Vonnegut’s characterization of her “realistic”? If not, why doesn’t it need to be? Diana Moon Glampers, like many science-fiction characters, is definitely flat because she is in the story merely as a type; in this case, as a tyrant who enforces all the handicaps required to enforce perfect equality in the year 2081. Vonnegut’s characterization is not necessarily realistic since she—ironically displaying a more-than-average strength and intelligence herself—blazes into the story only for the last ten paragraphs, merely to murder Harrison and the ballerina with a “double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun” (par. 79). She then loads the gun, points it at all the musicians who have taken off their handicaps, and gives them ten seconds to put them back on. Her two-paragraph appearance in the story does not show any depth of character or change of heart.

“Harrison Bergeron” is probably best seen as a fable, and it certainly has a moral: don’t be afraid to excel. As in most fables, rounded characterization is unnecessary to its purpose. To help students understand this clearly, you may wish to use this story as a platform for examining the idea of genre. Have students compare it to a classic realist story like “Araby” or “Paul’s Case” and enumerate the differences in style, structure, setting, and characterization.

3. From what point of view is the story told? Why is it more effective than if Harrison Bergeron had told his own story in the first person? The story would hardly be able to be successfully told as a dystopian satire if Harrison Bergeron had told his own story. One obvious reason is that an important part of the story happens after Harrison’s death: the apathetic response of his parents after his tragic and violent murder shows the depths of the dehumanizing effects of a world without individual thought. In addition, Harrison would hardly have been able to see outside his own situation to give any kind of objective analysis. The tone of the story almost as a journalistic report is crucial to one’s interpretation. If the narrator had been Harrison Bergeron, we would probably interpret the story merely as a self-centered young man’s fixation about his own strength, intelligence, and good looks. This story is a perfect example of a narrative that needs a third person, omniscient narrator in order to capture the devastating consequences of dialing down emotions, severing family ties, and failing to praise genuine talents.

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4. Two sympathetic critics of Vonnegut’s work, Karen and Charles Wood, have said of his stories: “Vonnegut proves repeatedly . . . that men and women remain fundamentally the same, no matter what technology surrounds them.” Try applying this comment to “Harrison Bergeron.” Do you agree? For this frequently assigned question for student papers, it may be helpful for you to give your students the larger context of the quote, which asserts that Vonnegut’s works:

concern themselves repeatedly with technological problems only as those problems express and explicate character—the character of the human race. Vonnegut proves repeatedly, in brief and pointed form, that men and women remain fundamentally the same, no matter what technology surrounds them. The perfect example of this might be found in “Unready to Wear,” in which the shucking off of the physical bodies of men has not changed their basic identities, but only freed them to become more, not less, human. (“The Vonnegut Effect: Science Fiction and Beyond,” The Vonnegut Statement, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz, John L. Somer [New York: Dell, 1973] 143.)

Karen and Charles Woods suggest that the nature of mankind is immutable, and when interpreting this idea, you may have to explicitly ask your students to consider the theme of human identity (i.e., the nature of mankind).

But if you want to stir up a longer classroom debate, you could ask your students if the quote also implies that Vonnegut thinks men and women are exactly the same, or that men and women remain the same without regard to technology around them (i.e., technology does not truly change a human, or if it does, it changes men and women in the same ways). Then ask them to apply this to “Harrison Bergeron.” In what sense has the technology in the story especially impacted Hazel Bergeron? Is this any different than the way it has shaped her husband, George, or her son, Harrison? Whatever your students conclude, encourage them to support their ideas with textual evidence from “Harrison Bergeron.”

There is little criticism on Vonnegut’s short stories. What exists can mostly be found in Gale Research’s Short Story Criticism, vol. 8 (Detroit: Gale, 1991). There are many excellent books and articles on Vonnegut’s novels. The Vonnegut Statement, edited by Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (New York: Dell, 1973), is a lively anthology of criticism of Vonnegut’s work by various hands. Vonnegut’s most interesting commentator, however, may be the author himself. A thick book of interviews, Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut, edited by William Rodney Allen (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1988), contains a great deal of interesting biographical and literary material.

Harrison Bergeron was filmed in 1995. Directed by Bruce Pittman and starring Sean Astin, Andrea Martin, and Christopher Plummer, the film is available on DVD.

WRITERS ON WRITING

Kurt Vonnegut Jr., The Themes of Science Fiction, page 236

Kurt Vonnegut spent much of his career telling the literary world that he was not a science fiction writer. He realized that a genre label keeps a writer from serious crit-
ical attention. (Both he and Ursula Le Guin suffered from such critical stereotyping.) And yet Vonnegut’s literary roots are indisputably in science fiction, and his best novels—most notably *Cat’s Cradle* (1963) and *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969)—grow out of the genre’s enlivening traditions without being limited by its narrower conventions. In Vonnegut’s voluminous published interviews, these two passages best represent his interest in using the possibilities of science fiction to describe the technologically dependent modern world. He also discusses the ghettoization of science fiction writers by the literary establishment.
John Steinbeck was a writer whose best work came relatively early in his career. His later writing—much of it ambitious allegorical fiction or literary journalism—has tended to obscure his genuine achievement. In the second half of the 1930s Steinbeck published in quick succession his greatest works of fiction: *In Dubious Battle* (1936); *Of Mice and Men* (1937); *The Long Valley* (1938), the collection of stories that includes “The Chrysanthemums”; and his masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). With great feeling for his characters and often intense emotional impact, he shows us the lives of hard-working people whose desires for fulfillment are balked by custom, circumstance, powerful economic forces, and, at times, their inability to comprehend their own longings.

“*The Chrysanthemums*” is a good story to illustrate the objective point of view, or “the fly on the wall” method. After some opening authorial remarks about the land, Steinbeck confines himself to reporting external details. Although the reader comes to share Elisa’s feelings, we do not enter her mind; we observe her face and her reactions (“Elisa’s eyes grew alert and eager”). This cinematic method of storytelling seems a hardship for the author only in paragraph 109, when to communicate Elisa’s sadness he has to have her whisper aloud.

Critics note that out of all of Steinbeck’s short stories, this one gave him the most trouble and took him the longest to write. There were many revisions of the story, and its composition is best dated 1934, based on Steinbeck’s journals and letters. In a notebook dated January 31, 1934, while still crafting “*The Chrysanthemums*,” John Steinbeck says, “This is to be a good story. Two personalities meet, cross, flare, die and hate each other. Purple, if it were a little bit stronger, would be a good color for the story.” He later writes in the same ledger, “Now the story of the Chrysanthemums is to go on and may the Lord have mercy on it. A story of great delicacy, one difficult to produce. I must do this one well or not at all” (John Timmerman, *The Dramatic Landscape of Steinbeck’s Short Stories* [Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1990] 171). Thankfully for us, the Lord did have mercy on the story, as it is Steinbeck’s most anthologized more than seventy-five years after it was first published.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “*The Chrysanthemums*.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. **When we first meet Elisa Allen in her garden, with what details does Steinbeck delineate her character for us?** Elisa is a complex study in frustration. She is a
strong, intense woman with far more energy than she can put to use: we learn at the outset that “even her work with the scissors was over-eager, over-powerful” (par. 6). It is clear that she is a careful housekeeper from the details about her home, a “neat white farm house with red geraniums close-banked around it as high as the windows,” a house that looks “hard-swept” and possesses “hard-polished windows” (par. 7). (You might ask your students if this description of the house parallels Elisa Allen.) She is only thirty-five years old, with a face described as “lean and strong” with eyes “as clear as water.” The detailed description of her unflattering gardening clothes hides the femininity of the woman within—“clodhopper shoes,” “big corduroy apron,” “heavy leather gloves” (par. 5). But the narrator tells us her face is “eager and mature and handsome” (par. 6).

2. Elisa works inside a “wire fence that protected her flower garden from cattle and dogs and chickens” (paragraph 9). What does this wire fence suggest? Trapped under a “grey-flannel fog” that encloses the valley like a lid on a pot (par. 1), Elisa works behind the symbolic barrier of the wire fence that protects her flower garden and her from the wider world. Custom denies her and her restless energy the adequate outlets that men enjoy. She cannot buy and sell cattle as her husband does. As a rancher’s wife, she cannot drift about the countryside working as the traveling repairman does, though his unfettered lifestyle powerfully appeals to her. “That sounds like a nice kind of a way to live,” she declares on meeting him. “I wish women could do such things,” she tells him later (par. 82) and, before his departure, she adds, “I can sharpen scissors, too... I could show you what a woman might do” (par. 88). The story’s ending suggests that she will never be given such an opportunity.

3. How would you describe Henry and Elisa’s marriage? Cite details from the story. A few details suggest that their marriage focuses on their work—the farm and their house—not on their relationship. Although Henry is a considerate man, he is dull and lacks imagination. He has little conversation, but seems to care about Eliza, as evidenced by his plan for them to celebrate his cattle deal together by going to town and the movies. Their traditional marriage is evident when Elisa chooses Henry’s clothes for him and when she asks if they could have wine for dinner. Henry and Elisa seem ill-suited for one another in their passions and interests. She has channeled her energy into nurturing her flower garden as she has a special “gift for things” (par. 13) originating from her mother. They are childless, an important detail never overtly mentioned, but nevertheless essential to the story. Given to speaking in ardent, poetic phrases (“Every pointed star gets driven into your body”), Elisa’s passions are further thwarted by having to live a life devoid of romance. After she takes such great care in dressing for dinner, she sits on the porch to wait for Henry. When he finally looks at her, he tries to pay her a compliment, but the best he can do is, “Why—why Elisa. You look so nice!” (par. 99). When pressed for details, he elaborates with a farming analogy that hardly satisfies his wife: “You look strong enough to break a calf over your knee, happy enough to eat it like a watermelon” (par. 103).

4. For what motive does the traveling salesman take an interest in Elisa’s chrysanthemums? What immediate effect does his interest have on Elisa? The traveling salesman feigns interest in Elisa and her flowers in order to make a sale. However, though crafty and unkempt, the repairman does have a touch of the poet
that sparks Elisa’s interest. He describes a chrysanthemum as “a quick puff of colored
smoke” (par. 52). Elisa’s short-lived belief that he values her flowers (and by exten-
sion, recognizes her womanliness) causes an energetic loquaciousness, and her “irri-
tation and resistance” melt (par. 51). The conversation releases in her a long-pent
eroticism for which the repairman is ill prepared and takes care to avoid.

5. For what possible purpose does Steinbeck give us such a detailed account
of Elisa’s preparations for her evening out? Notice her tearing off her soiled
clothes, her scrubbing her body with pumice (paragraph 93–94). Steinbeck
wisely sets up the reader for this moment with the detailed description of her mas-
culine, dirty gardening clothes. After she begins to describe the seeding of the
chrysanthemums for the salesman, she begins to relinquish her clothes: first her
“battered hat” that reveals “her dark pretty hair” (par. 62) and then her gloves,
which she forgot in the garden.

As her strong hands press the seeds in the “bright new flower pot,” the traveling
salesman stood over her (par. 64). Elisa’s battle with her stifled sexuality is conveyed
in detail (“her hand went out toward his legs in the greasy black trousers. . . . She
crouched low like a fawning dog” (par. 75). William R. Osborne demonstrates that
Steinbeck, in revising the story, heightened Elisa’s earthiness and the sexual overtones
of her encounter with the repairman (Modern Fiction Studies 12 [1966]: 479–84). The
revised version as it appeared in The Long Valley (New York: Viking, 1938) is the text
used in this book.

Elizabeth McMahan finds a “purification ritual” in the scene that follows. Elisa
“felt shame after her display of passion before the stranger. Now she cleanses herself
before returning to her husband, the man to whom she should lawfully reach out in
desire.” McMahan believes that Elisa punishes herself with the abrasive pumice until
her skin is “scratched and red” (par. 93). (“The Chrysanthemums: A Study of a
Woman’s Sexuality,” Modern Fiction Studies 14 [1968]: 453–58). However, it is easy
enough to read this scene more simply: when Elisa puts on her best dress, which the
narrator says is “the symbol of her prettiness,” she wants to remember—and she wants
her husband to notice—her femininity (in contrast to the masculine gardening out-
fit), while preparing to enjoy a long-awaited evening in town, away from her farm.

6. Of what significance to Elisa is the sight of the contents of the flower pot
discarded in the road? Notice that, as her husband’s car overtakes the covered
wagon, Elisa averts her eyes; and then Steinbeck adds, “In a moment it was over.
The thing was done. She did not look back” (paragraph 111). Explain this pas-
sage. This is one of the saddest moments in the story. We already suspect—although
Elisa does not—that the traveling repairman assumed an interest in the chrysan-
themums in order to make a sale. But now we, like Elisa, know this to be true when she
sees the dark spot from a long distance away. It is even more hurtful when Eliza real-
izes that he has thrown her cherished seeds on the side of the road but kept the pot.

Perhaps her desire to “not look back” is a new-found determination to make the
most of her life as it is, rather than dreaming about the way it could be. Perhaps this
reveals a depth of pain so deep that she cannot bear to look at the destroyed seeds.
Either way, in the sight of the flower pot’s contents discarded in the road, Elisa sees
the end of her brief interlude of hopes, passions, and dreams.

7. How do you interpret Elisa’s asking for wine with dinner? How do you
account for her new interest in prize fights? In the end, Elisa tries to satisfy her spir-

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ritual and erotic cravings by asking Henry if they might order wine with their dinner. “It will be enough if we can have wine. It will be plenty.” It isn’t enough, of course, and she cries “weakly—like an old woman”—she who had briefly thought herself strong (par. 121).

Her new interest in prize fights, in the spectacle of blood-letting she had formerly rejected, might manifest Elisa’s momentary wish for revenge on men: her desire to repay them for her injured femininity. At least, this is the interpretation of Elizabeth McMahan as well as Mordecai Marcus (“The Lost Dream of Sex and Childbirth in ‘The Chrysanthemums,’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 11 [1965]: 54–58). Alternatively, one may see in this curiosity about the violence of the boxing ring a woman’s envy of the opportunities given to men to work off their aggressions and frustrations in socially acceptable ways. Another interpretation may be that she finally realizes that since men (represented in both Henry and the salesman) do not have any genuine interest in her chrysanthemums—and therefore they have no sincere interest in herself—she might as well try to understand the man with whom she is “boxing” inside her “wire fence.”

8. **In a sentence, try to state this short story’s theme.** Although there are several possible general themes (“the inequality of men and women” or “a California farm during the Depression”), ask students to articulate a more specific theme, such as a woman’s artistic frustration—whether spiritual, sexual, or emotional—and society’s failure to recognize her gifts.

Read paragraph 71 out loud, noticing that this is a compelling expression of what happens when an artist allows inspiration to come. After all, Elisa’s garden is an artistic expression (despite her repressed environment) and may be viewed as an extension of herself. Compare Elisa’s work in her garden to John Steinbeck’s own words about his work as a writer: “I work because I know it gives me pleasure to work. It is as simple as that and I don’t require any other reasons” (from a 1933 letter cited in *John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography*, by Jackson J. Benson [New York: Penguin, 1984] 272). As a point of context, Steinbeck himself experienced a great deal of failure and artistic frustration in 1934, the year that he struggled to write this story.

9. **Why are Elisa Allen’s chrysanthemums so important to this story? Sum up what you understand them to mean.** From a structural standpoint, the chrysanthemums allow the story to move toward its climax and heartbreaking conclusion. Because Elisa is rightly proud of her flowers, she happily shares them with whomever asks—and we intuit that this is a rare occurrence.

In addition to her frustration with her passive roles, Elisa is thwarted because her considerable gifts for nurturing—her “planting hands”—have little value in the wider world. To the “practical” men striving to make a living, beauty has little “use.” The remarkable chrysanthemums are richly symbolic of Elisa’s femininity and of her talents. Yet the matter-of-fact and shortsighted Henry, because the flowers are not a cash crop, says, “I wish you’d work out in the orchard and raise some apples that big” (par. 12). The traveling repairman only feigns an interest in the chrysanthemum shoots to ingratiate himself with her. Neither Henry nor the salesman appreciates the beauty of the chrysanthemums—or of Elisa.

Mordecai Marcus, in his critical commentary, sees Elisa’s flowers as substitutes for the children she (now thirty-five) was apparently unable to have. The suggestion is not unlikely; according to Elizabeth E. McMahan, however, “it does not necessarily have anything to do with a longing for children.”
Like his early model, D. H. Lawrence, Steinbeck is fond of portraying people swept up by dark forces of the unconscious. (A curious book for additional reading: Steinbeck's early novel To a God Unknown [New York: Viking, 1933], which shows the influence of both Lawrence and Robinson Jeffers.) "The Chrysanthemums" invites comparison with Lawrence's "The Blind Man," which also conveys a woman's struggle for intellectual survival while living with a mindless husband on a farm. Henry Allen is no match, though, for Lawrence's impressive Maurice. If the two stories are set side by side for evaluation, Lawrence's may well seem (in our opinion) the deeper and more vivid. Though finely perceptive, "The Chrysanthemums" has something methodical about it, as if the young Steinbeck were deliberately trying to contrive a short-story masterpiece. But this is to dissent from the judgments of Mordecai Marcus, who thinks it indeed "one of the world's great short stories," and of André Gide, who in his Journals finds it in a league with the best of Chekhov (Vol. IV [New York: Knopf, 1951] 79).

If your students are familiar with Of Mice and Men, you may encourage them to make connections between Elisa's situation and those of the many stunted characters—whether physically, mentally, or emotionally—in that classic novella. A particularly apt comparison, of course, is with Curley's wife, who speaks movingly of the loneliness and confinement of her life and complains, "Seems like they ain't none of them cares how I gotta live." One may also discuss Elisa in terms of George, the protagonist of Of Mice and Men, who also—albeit on a much more profound level—responds to the ruin of his dreams by resigning himself to being swallowed up in the emptiness and meanness of spirit all around him. The story and the novella also bear comparison on a technical level, in that both are attempts by Steinbeck to confine himself to the objective point of view, presenting his characters, as far as possible, from the outside only, and allowing us to deduce what is taking place within them.

The National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, California, can be visited in person or online at www.steinbeck.org. The museum has an extensive Steinbeck archive, permanent and temporary exhibits, special events, and more.

John Cheever, THE SWIMMER, page 249

John Cheever is the author of many justly celebrated and frequently anthologized stories, but "The Swimmer" has, since its original publication, been recognized as an extraordinary achievement even in such an extraordinary body of work. Cheever himself seems to have had some sense of just how special it was, for, as his biographer Scott Donaldson relates:

In talking about "The Swimmer," Cheever invariably stressed how difficult it was to write. He completed most of his stories in about three days, he said, but spent two months on "The Swimmer." "There were 150 pages of notes for 15 pages of story. . . . It was a terrible experience, writing that story." He was proud of having written it, but it left him—"not only I the narrator but I John Cheever"—feeling dark and cold himself. It was the last story he wrote for a long time. (John Cheever: A Biography [New York: Random, 1988])

What starts out seeming to be a realistic social satire, another of Cheever's patented surgical dissections of a self-indulgent, self-regarding suburban alcoholic,
gradually evolves into something much stranger, darker, and more disturbing—as well as something irreducibly mysterious. Is “The Swimmer” a symbolic representation of the course of Neddy Merrill’s adult life, a passage of years condensed into a single afternoon? Or does it literally unfold on a single afternoon, as viewed through the eyes of a severely traumatized man who is slowly forced out of his psychological refuge of unconsciously inhabiting a happier past that is now irretrievably gone? Intriguingly—and no doubt wisely—Cheever leaves the matter open, along with the details of Neddy’s loss. But what is beyond all doubt is the devastating power of the story as we slowly come to realize that he is a ruined man clinging pathetically to the life whose destruction he cannot bring himself to accept.

Critic George W. Hunt advances the thesis that “The Swimmer” is [Cheever’s] Odyssey, a surrealistic epic, deftly shortened, of a man condemned to wandering and eager to return home. Along the way he enjoys the hospitality of Alcinous, visits the land of the Lotus-eaters, who live on the fruit of forgetfulness, outwits (or so he thinks) the one-eyed Cyclops, dallies with Calypso and Circe, and attempts passage between Scylla and Charybdis and thinks he survives; and when he arrives home he is not recognized. (John Cheever: The Hobgoblin Company of Love [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983])

Hunt develops his argument over several pages, citing specific parallels, as he sees them, between Cheever’s story and Homer’s epic. His argument is an interesting one; how persuasive it is will be the judgment of each individual reader. But we must all concede one poignant breakdown in the comparison: for Neddy, unlike Odysseus, there is no tender marital reunion and no restoration of his kingdom in the end.

Students wishing to write on Cheever might find it interesting to compare “The Swimmer” to another of the stories first published in the same volume, The Housebreaker of Shady Hill (1958). Two excellent stories you might recommend are “The Country Husband” (which won the O. Henry Award in 1955) and the title story, “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill.” Francis Weed, in “The Country Husband,” has a brush with death when his airplane makes a crash landing. The title character of “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill” loses his job and begins to burglarize his wealthy neighbors to pay the bills. Both stories can also be found in The Stories of John Cheever (New York: Random, 1978), which is available in a Ballantine paperback. Cheever’s writings have now been collected in two volumes in the Library of America series: The Complete Novels (2009) gathers his five full-length works of fiction, and The Collected Stories and Other Writings (2009) includes all of The Stories of John Cheever, along with fifteen other stories and seven essays.

Most of the best writing on Cheever is biographical. The body of criticism on his work remains relatively small. In addition to Lynne Waldeland’s study, one might consult George W. Hunt’s interesting John Cheever: The Hobgoblin Company of Love (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983). Hunt’s book is an excellent appreciation of Cheever’s artistry, and it subtly reveals the essentially religious nature of the stories. Scott Donaldson’s John Cheever: A Biography (New York: Random, 1988) provoked complaints from the Cheever clan when it first appeared, but it remains valuable. It is both well researched and well written. Equally useful is Donaldson’s collection of Cheever’s many interviews, Conversations with John Cheever (Jackson: U of Mississippi, 1987). Blake Bailey’s Cheever: A Life (New York: Knopf, 2009) is scrupulously detailed and unsparing of either Cheever or his family (who have endorsed the biog-
raphy), but it is characterized by sympathy for its subject and judicious admiration of his work.

There is an interesting 1968 film adaptation of “The Swimmer,” starring Burt Lancaster, available on DVD.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Swimmer.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. How is setting used symbolically in the story? Focus on such details as the change in weather and specific locales such as the highway and the public pool. In the first few paragraphs of the story, we are told that “The day was beautiful” and “The day was lovely.” The setting is a world of wealth, comfort, and privilege, in which everyone has a large house with a swimming pool in the backyard. There are parties, good fellowship, and a seemingly endless river of liquor. At the outset, everything converges to give the (illusory) impression that life is as close to perfect as it could possibly be. The first disquieting notes come in paragraph 7, with the thunder that signals an approaching storm and the strange fact that the Levys are not home, even though there are “[g]lasses and bottles and dishes of nuts” on a table outside; even though the reader may begin to feel a bit of disquiet, Neddy at this point is still “pleased with everything.” The sense of unease reaches Neddy himself (though he quickly shrugs it off) in paragraphs 9—when he finds leaves on the ground in the Lindleys’ yard and their riding ring dismantled—and 10—when he finds the Welcher’s pool dry and a FOR SALE sign in front of their house. A definite break (as indicated by the space between paragraphs) occurs immediately thereafter, when we suddenly see Neddy amid the roadside garbage of Route 424, mocked and jeered at by passing motorists; all at once we see him not as he sees himself but from the outside, and he shockingly reminds us of King Lear’s description of humanity as a “poor, bare, forked animal.” Both the growing ugliness of his world and his own vulnerability are intensified at the public pool, when he submerges himself in “murk,” is pushed about by strangers, and is thrown out of the pool because he lacks—significantly and symbolically—an identification disk. The culmination of the symbolic use of setting comes, of course, at the end of the story when he confronts the abandonment and disrepair of his own house.

2. How is Neddy Merrill presented in the beginning of the story (especially paragraphs 2 and 3)? How would you describe the narrator’s tone, and what does that tone communicate about the narrator’s attitude toward Neddy? Emphasis is placed heavily on his youthfulness—he is slender and aggressively athletic, and he is still known by a childish-sounding nickname—but we are also told directly that “he was far from young,” which gives a somewhat desperate, if not pathetic coloration to his determined efforts to seem young. There is something arch, even a bit snarky, in the narrator’s tone, as in “He might have been compared to a summer’s day, particularly the last hours of one.” When the narrator tells us that “he had a vague and modest idea of himself as a legendary figure,” Neddy’s self-image takes on ludicrous dimensions. All in all, the descriptions carry a subcurrent that will come more and more to the surface as the story proceeds—that his golden and unruffled view of himself is at a dangerous remove from reality.

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3. At what point do you begin to realize that all is not what it appears to be on the surface? What textual details lead you to that realization? As indicated above, there are troubling details in paragraphs 9 and 10, but Neddy manages to explain most of them away to his own satisfaction—though paragraph 10 also contains this sentence: “Was his memory failing or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth?” In paragraph 11 we are told: “He could not go back, he could not even recall with any clearness the green water at the Westerhazys’, the sense of inhaling the day’s components, the friendly and relaxed voices saying that they had drunk too much.” These are disquieting hints, but they are unclear and irresolute. But when we reach Neddy’s conversation with Mrs. Halloran, especially her comments in paragraphs 19 and 21, it should be obvious to all but the most imperceptive reader that things are not at all as they seem to him.

4. How does Cheever communicate the passing of time and Neddy’s aging? Cite specific passages from the story to back up your answer. Once again, there are early hints with the changing of the color of the leaves and the other details in paragraphs 9 and 11. These indications become more frequent and more unmistakable as Neddy proceeds: the Hallorans’ yellow beech hedge and the fallen leaves in their pool (par. 14, 15); the looseness of his swim trunks, his feeling cold and achy, the falling leaves and the smell of wood smoke (par. 25); Eric Sachs having had a serious operation three years earlier (par. 29, 30); the coldness of the water in the Sachs pool (par. 32); Neddy’s contemptuous reception at the Biswangers’ (par. 33–36); the weakness in his arms and shoulders, the early dark, and the late-year constellations in the sky (par. 47).

5. Does Neddy himself function symbolically in the story? If so, what might he be a symbol of? Broadly speaking, we could say that he himself symbolizes a number of the story’s themes: the gap between appearance and reality; the inability to face the truth; the inevitable passage of time and loss of youth; the “wheel of fortune,” signifying the precariousness of man’s earthly estate and the ultimate unsustainability of a shallow and superficial existence.

6. In paragraph 3, Neddy decides that “he would name the stream Lucinda after his wife.” What does that decision suggest at the beginning of the story? What does it suggest at the end? At the beginning, we feel that his naming it the Lucinda River is a touching testimony to the depth of the affection between Neddy and his wife, and to what we presume to be the strength and happiness of their relationship. At the end, after all that we have learned, the name takes on a much more poignant resonance as the symbol of all that was once his, whose irretrievable loss he cannot bring himself to accept.

Ursula K. Le Guin, THE ONES WHO WALK AWAY FROM OMELAS, page 257

Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” may be the most unusual story in the book in its relation to the conventions of storytelling. It does not describe the actions of a particular character or small group of characters. It has
no plot or protagonist in the usual sense. A skeptical critic of old-fashioned taste might even claim that it is not truly a short story—a fiction, yes, but not a story. Le Guin’s central character is an imaginary society. Her plot is a survey of the civilization that leads up to a single shocking revelation. Yet this unusual work has been recognized as a small classic from the beginning. It won a Hugo (science fiction’s most prestigious award) after its first magazine appearance, and it has been frequently anthologized in both science fiction and mainstream anthologies.

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” seems only slightly less unusual when seen in the context of science fiction. The story belongs to a standard genre of science fiction that presents an imaginary civilization in order to criticize some aspect of our own culture, and yet even when viewed against such science fiction conventions, Le Guin’s story is an unusually plotless, subtly ironic, and intellectually complex piece. This story’s genre is often called utopian fantasy (after Thomas More’s 1516 Utopia), though some readers might claim that she actually describes a dystopia, a conspicuously flawed society. (Some famous dystopian fictions would include George Orwell’s 1984, Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, and Anthony Burgess’s A Clockwork Orange.) In fact, Le Guin’s story borrows elements from both the utopian and dystopian traditions. Le Guin’s narrator fervently wants to believe that Omelas is a perfect society; the narrator intends the story to be a utopian vision. The reader, however, sees the horrifying moral compromise at the center of the society, and, as the story’s title suggests, the author also sees Omelas as a covert dystopia.

Le Guin’s story is overtly disturbing—and all the more so because the narrator blithely accepts the undeserved suffering that shocks the reader. Her penetrating parable raises the same ethical issue as Dostoyevsky’s famous tale of “The Grand Inquisitor” from The Brothers Karamazov: would it be morally acceptable to purchase universal happiness at the cost of injustice to one innocent child? Le Guin appears to say that no society should rest on such injustice. Surely, it is not coincidental that by the time the narrator tells this story, the happy civilization of Omelas has apparently ceased to exist. In this detail, Le Guin suggests perhaps that Omelas has rotted from within and that any civic or cultural achievements purchased at such a price could not endure.

Although Le Guin admits she knew The Brothers Karamazov, she claims in a note on this story, in her collection The Wind’s Twelve Quarters (New York: Harper, 1975), that she got the idea for the story from William James’s essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.”

Two dominant symbols in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” deserve discussion. The first is the city of Omelas itself, “bright-towered by the sea.” What does Omelas symbolize? At the very least, it suggests the dream of human happiness. (“They were not simple folk, you see,” the narrator tells us, “though they were happy.”) The citizens of Omelas are “Joyous!” as well as “mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives are not wretched.” To the narrator at least, Omelas represents a happiness no longer possible in a cheerless time. In a moral sense, however, Omelas symbolizes the hidden compromises that prosperous societies must make. “It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence,” the narrator claims, “that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science.”

The unforgettable symbol of Le Guin’s story, however, is the filthy, feeble-minded child locked in the dark cellar. The symbolic significance of this pathetic figure and its grim setting ramifies in many directions. The child is imprisoned in
the basement of “one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas.” It is the hidden injustice on which the city is built. The child symbolizes all the evil that citizens in a society must learn to accept without question in order to enjoy their own position. “They all know that it is there, all the people of Omelas,” the narrator assures us. The child does not suffer because the good citizens of Omelas are ignorant: it suffers because the citizens are willing to trade its “abominable misery” for their peace, pleasure, and prosperity. Although the child is universally known, it is also kept out of sight. In psychological terms, the child symbolizes the horrible knowledge the conscious mind wishes to repress in order to maintain its happiness.

Students planning to write on Le Guin’s story might compare it to Dostoyevsky’s powerful “The Grand Inquisitor” (The Brothers Karamazov, Volume I, Book 5, Chapter 5). How does Le Guin’s parable differ from Dostoyevsky’s? How does her work resemble his? Le Guin’s other fiction will also provide fruitful areas for research. Her finest work is her novels, especially The Left Hand of Darkness (1969), The Lathe of Heaven (1971), and The Dispossessed (1974). (Her “Earthsea” trilogy of novels for young adults is also superb.) The Dispossessed would be a particularly interesting book to compare and contrast to “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” because the novel presents two radically different societies, each with conspicuous strengths and weaknesses that puzzle the narrator, who wrestles with the ethical issue of which to consider superior.

Shirley Jackson, THE LOTTERY, page 262

Shirley Jackson’s famous story shocks us, even as it shocked so many readers of the New Yorker after her story first appeared in June 1948. Perhaps one of the most well-known short stories of the twentieth century, partly because it is so frequently taught in the classroom, the horror of “The Lottery” comes, in part, through its objective narrator and apathetic characters. Set in an unnamed New England town, “The Lottery” focuses on an annual tradition so engrained in the community that no one remembers when it began or why it continues. By transferring a primitive ritual to a modern American small town and by making clear in passing that the same ritual is being carried out in surrounding towns, Jackson effectively creates a growing sense of horror (for the reader) over what is happening.

Students might be asked to sum up the rules of Jackson’s lottery, which are simple and straightforward. The male head of each household—or, if he is absent, another representative of the family—draws a slip of paper out of a big black box. One householder will pull out a piece of paper that has a black mark crudely penciled on it. Each member of his family is then obliged to participate in a second drawing. This time the unlucky recipient of the black spot is stoned to death by the other townspeople, including the members of his or her own family.

The story’s very outrageousness raises questions about unexamined assumptions in modern society. Do civilized Americans accept and act upon other vestiges of primitive ritual as arbitrary as the one Jackson imagines? Are we shackled by traditions as bizarre and pointless as the lottery in Jackson’s story? What determines the line between behavior that is routine and that which is unthinkable? How civilized in fact are we?
In “A Biography of a Story” in Come Along with Me, Shirley Jackson describes the bewilderment and abuse she received from the letters of many New Yorker readers. (The full essay is printed at the end of the chapter following the story.) There she notes that the magazine issued one press release about the story, saying it “had received more mail than any piece of fiction they had ever published.” The response was so strong that some cancelled their New Yorker subscriptions as a result. She reflects:

In the years since [1948], during which the story has been anthologized, dramatized, televised, and even—in one completely mystifying transformation—made into a ballet, the tenor of letters I receive has changed. . . . The letters largely confine themselves to questions like what does this story mean? The general tone of the early letters, however, was a kind of wide-eyed, shocked innocence. People at first were not so much concerned with what the story meant; what they wanted to know was where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch.

Jackson once remarked that in writing “The Lottery” she had hoped “to shock the story’s readers with a graphic demonstration of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives” (quoted by Lenemaja Friedman, Shirley Jackson [New York: Twayne, 1975]). Ask your students what they think Jackson might mean by this comment. Is it true? In our own society, what violent behavior is sanctioned? How are we comparable to Jackson’s villagers? Don’t we too casually accept the unthinkable?

“The Lottery” might invite comparison with Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown”: in each, an entire community is seen to take part in a horrifying rite.

In Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson (New York: Putnam 1988), Judy Oppenheimer offers some significant details regarding the story’s genesis. Jackson wrote “The Lottery” in 1948 while pregnant with her third child. She had been reading a book on ancient customs of human sacrifice and had found herself wondering how such a rite might operate in the village of North Bennington, Vermont, where she lived.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Lottery.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Where do you think “The Lottery” takes place? What purpose do you suppose the writer has in making this setting appear so familiar and ordinary? Although the town is never named, it seems clearly set in a small New England “our town.” The familiar and ordinary setting increases the spine-chilling matter-of-factness with which the ritual is carried out. Each June the townspeople assemble to murder one of their neighbors. The discrepancy between ordinary, civilized, modern behavior and the calm acceptance of something as primitive as human sacrifice augments this story’s terrible power. As a matter of course, even the small son of the victim is given some stones to throw at his mother. That is perhaps the most horrifying detail of all.

2. In paragraphs 2 and 3, what details foreshadow the ending of the story? Very early—in paragraphs 2 and 3—the narrator mentions the stones that have been gathered in preparation for the day’s events. Not until much later in the story does the importance of the stones begin to dawn. In addition, the story’s many ironies,
especially of setting and character, undercut the reader’s ability to foresee such a violent end. The beauty of the June day is out of keeping with the fact that what takes place on the town green is a ritual murder. The townspeople are perfectly ordinary types, “surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes” (par. 3). Mr. Summers is in charge because he “had time and energy to devote to civic activities” (par. 4). Old Man Warner is a stickler for tradition. Neighbors chat amiably. Children play. All are grateful that the proceedings will be over in time for them to enjoy their noon meal.

3. Take a close look at Jackson’s description of the black wooden box (paragraph 5) and of the black spot on the fatal slip of paper (paragraph 72). What do these objects suggest to you? Are there any other symbols in the story? Every year the townspeople consider replacing the shabby black box, but then no one acts to make any changes. There does seem to be a hint of superstition about this particular box’s importance, because of a rumor that some of its wood was from the previous box and therefore from the building of the town itself. The black wooden box has been used since before the oldest member of the community, Old Man Warner, was born, which suggests this horrendous tradition has taken place since the town’s beginning. That no one wants to improve this stained, faded box parallels the horrendous truth that no one wants to change the tradition itself; “No one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box” (par. 5).

The fatal piece of paper is marked with a “black spot that Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal-company office” (par. 72). This seems to be yet another part of the violent ritual. Mr. Summers does nothing to stop this event. Because of both objects, the reader assumes this lottery will continue to go on for many years since no one stands up to stop the killing or questions why the tradition exists at all.

The stones may be considered another symbol. When Mrs. Delacroix “selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands” (par. 74), she revels herself as a person who fully supports the ritual and who wants to get it over with. Mrs. Dunbar seems to use her physical limitations as a way not to participate when she tells Mrs. Delacroix to run ahead of her; she carries small stones. The village boys gather piles of little stones, and “someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles” (par. 76). It seems that Jackson uses the characters’ choice of stones to reveal something about character. Ask your students to consider if other objects can be considered symbolic.

4. What do you understand to be the writer’s own attitude toward the lottery and the stoning? Exactly what in the story makes her attitude clear to us? The point of view of Jackson’s narrator is crucial to any hint of the writer’s attitude. An objective narrator tells the story, remaining outside the characters’ minds, yet the narrator’s detachment contrasts with the attitude of the author, who presumably, like the reader, is horrified. That the day’s happenings can be recounted so objectively lends them both credence and force.

5. What do you make of Old Man Warner’s saying, “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (paragraph 32)? The people simply accept the proceedings as an annual civic duty, which, based on the saying “Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon,” can be interpreted as an up-to-date version of an ancient fertility ritual. The lottery takes place every year, even as the harvest comes every year, hinting that they view
the lottery and the resulting stoning as essential. Perhaps the people even believe the corn will fail to flourish unless there is a human sacrifice.

Peter Hawkes of East Stroudsburg University finds an obstacle to teaching “The Lottery” in that many students think its central premise totally unrealistic and absurd. How, they assume, can this story have anything to do with me? Hawkes dramatizes the plausibility of the townspeople’s unswerving obedience to authority. With a straight face, he announces that the Dean has just decreed that every English teacher give at least one F per class to reduce grade inflation, passes around a wooden box, and tells students to draw for the fatal grade! “While I pass the box around the room, I watch carefully for, and indirectly encourage, the student who will refuse to take a slip of paper. When this happens, I ask the class what should be done. Invariably, someone in the class will say that the person who refused to draw deserves the F. Hearing this, the student almost always draws.” See Hawkes’s account in “The Two Lotteries: Teaching Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’” (Exercise Exchange, Fall 1987). We would expect a class to greet this trick with much skepticism. But what if you were to try it on them before assigning the story?

In teaching freshman composition, Doris M. Colter of Henry Ford Community College reports terrific success with this story. She starts with the question, “What characteristics of human nature does Jackson’s story reveal?” Her students’ responses serve as thesis statements for thousand-word essays. Students have to quote from the story itself and must bolster their theses by citing current news stories, films and TV programs, fiction, and any other evidence. One obvious thesis statement, “Rational people can act irrationally,” drew a torrent of evidence showing that latent evil lurks in people you wouldn’t suspect, perhaps in every one of us (one bright student even cited Conrad’s Heart of Darkness). Even more stimulating was the thesis “What is fair is not always right” or “Doing things the right way doesn’t always mean doing what is right.” Jackson’s observation rang true: “The people had done it so many times that they only half listened to the directions.” Students recalled moments when they had vacuously recited words (prayers, the Pledge of Allegiance) or performed by rote, not thinking about the commitment they were making. One student recalled her own marriage vows, though the marriage had ended in divorce.

More controversial, Colter found, was the thesis, “‘The Lottery’ is a scathing parody of the biblical story of redemption.” Tessie, like Jesus, might be viewed as a sacrificial lamb whose death will save the community. The names of the characters carry religious connotations. Delacroix means “of the cross”; Adams connotes the first man. Colter remarks, “Jackson’s words—‘Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him’—are suggestive, at least subliminally, of a close association between the first sinner and the consequences of that sin.” If these interpretations seem far-fetched, perhaps they didn’t seem so to the members of one Michigan school board who thought Jackson’s story blasphemous and banned a textbook in which it appeared.

Yet another interpretation is possible. Jackson ran into parental opposition when she announced her intention of marrying fellow Syracuse University student Stanley Edgar Hyman, and some of her housemates warned her of the perils of living with a Jew. Shocked by these early run-ins with anti-Semitism, Jackson once told a friend (according to Judy Oppenheimer) that “The Lottery” was a story about the Holocaust. You and your students may offer other potential interpretations, but there
are dangers, of course, in reading more meaning into the story than it will sustain. Jackson herself, in *Come Along with Me* (New York: Viking, 1968), insists that we accept the story at face value.

\[\text{MyLiteratureLab}\] Resources. Biographical information on Jackson. Critical essay, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “The Lottery.”

**Writers on Writing**

*Shirley Jackson*, *Biography of a Story*, page 269

Shirley Jackson's commentary is appealingly coy in its refusal to interpret her celebrated story or even to tell us what she had in mind when she wrote it—why should she, after all, limit our responses to the dimensions of her achievement? It is also very interesting to discover that when “The Lottery” first appeared, it was not greeted with the universal acclaim that it now enjoys; it should be pointed out, however, that despite his confession of failure to fully understand the story, Harold Ross wrote to Jackson's husband shortly after its publication to say that “it was a terrifically effective thing, and will become a classic in some category.” The last sentence of Jackson's comment, while it may make us laugh out loud on first reading, is ultimately as disturbing in its implications about human nature as “The Lottery” itself.
Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, page 280

“Beyond any doubt,” said Tolstoy’s biographer Henri Troyat, writing of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, “this double story of the decomposing body and the awakening soul is one of the most powerful works in the literature of the world.” Completed in 1886, when its author was fifty-seven, this short novel stands relatively late in Tolstoy’s literary career. *War and Peace* had appeared in 1863–1869, *Anna Karenina* in 1875–1877. Still to come were *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889) and *Resurrection* (1899–1900). Tolstoy undertook *The Death of Ivan Ilych* as a diversion from writing his earnest sociological treatise *What Then Must We Do?*—a work that few readers have preferred. Apparently, however, he became deeply involved in the story, for he toiled over it for nearly two years. It was to be (he told a correspondent) an account of “an ordinary man’s ordinary death.” This irony is stressed in the opening words of Part II: “Ivan Ilych’s life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible”—a sentence that the poet Randall Jarrell called one of the most frightening in literature.

Tolstoy based details of his story upon actual life: his memories of the agonizing death of his brother Nikolai, whom he dearly loved, and a description of the final illness of one Ivan Ilych Mechnikov, public prosecutor of the Tula district court, which he had heard from Mechnikov’s brother.

Jarrell’s essay, “Six Russian Short Novels” (reprinted in his posthumous collection, *The Third Book of Criticism* [New York: Farrar, 1965]), supplies further insights. Ilych is a man whose professional existence—being absurd, parasitic, irrelevant, and (to take a term from Sartre) unauthentic—has swallowed up his humanity and blinded him to the real. A life so misled is terrible, more to be dreaded than “real, serious, all-absorbing death.” Revealingly, Jarrell quotes from Tolstoy’s autobiographical *Confessions*, in which the author tells how he felt himself, like Ivan Ilych, shaped by society into an artificial mold, encouraged in his “ambition, lust of power, selfishness.” Tolstoy himself had experienced a season of grave illness; it had given him time to reflect on his life (before his conversion to Christianity) and to find it meaningless. In his *Confessions*, Tolstoy also tells of the death of his brother, who “suffered for more than a year, and died an agonizing death without comprehending what he had lived for, and still less why he should die.” Some of the details in *Ivan Ilych* are believed to have been taken from Tolstoy’s memory of his brother’s struggles against disease and a futile search for a cure.

More clearly perhaps than any other modern writer, Tolstoy succeeds in raising an ordinary man to tragic dignity. As one critic observes, writing not of Tolstoy’s story but of the nature of tragedy, “To see things plain—that is *anagnorisis*, and it is the ultimate experience we shall have if we have leisure at the point of death. . . . It is what tragedy is ultimately about: the relaxation of the unthinkable.” This state-
ment, from *Tragedy* by Clifford Leech (London: Methuen, 1969), seems closely applicable. Only when Ivan Ilych accepts the unthinkable truth that his life has been lived in vain can he relinquish his tightfisted grip on life, defeat pain, and, on the brink of death, begin to live. Whether or not we accept Tolstoy's religious answer, the story compels us to wonder what in our own life is valuable—what is authentic beyond petty, selfish, everyday cares.

Tolstoy's subtle, complex history of a spiritual awakening may take a while to sink in. When she dealt with the story in class, Dr. Edna H. Musso of Daytona Beach Community College found her students' reaction to it "so lackluster" that she decided that they didn't like the story. The dissenters made a fair case. "Ilych's life was so drawn out," wrote one student, "that I was almost relieved when he finally died." In the end, however, the class voted by a margin of two to one that the story should remain in the book. Most students felt that "the interpersonal relationships are true to life" and decided (as one put it) that "it will wake somebody up to see their own life paralleling Ivan's."

Embedded in Ivan's story is another story: Praskovya's story, equally convincing as a study of character development. This insight comes to us from Nancy Adams Malone of Mattatuck Community College, who writes:

**Question:** How does the girl described in paragraphs 68–70 as "attractive, clever" and "sweet, pretty" turn into the appalling woman we meet at the beginning of the story? To a twentieth-century reader, it's a story as startlingly recognizable as Ivan's own. Praskovya's story begins in paragraph 72 with her first pregnancy. Like any thoughtless, well-meaning, ignorant young couple of our own time, they are not prepared for a change in emotional balance. The successful bride turns into an insecure woman rather suddenly. She's worried about losing her looks, she needs reassurance that her husband still loves her—in short, paragraph 73. Like many other young husbands, Ivan is dismayed by the new whiny, tearful, demanding wife, and does the natural (not the necessary) thing: he retreats. This move naturally increases the insecurity and the demands, a predictably vicious circle.

Paragraphs 80–81 show another recognizable pattern: the family moves, and although the husband may be absorbed in his work, the wife has been uprooted from whatever emotional supports she has had earlier, family or friends or both. Money troubles, of course, don't help. And two children died. Even in a century that didn't expect to raise all its children (as we do), this loss couldn't help being an emotional wound. Paragraph 82 shows how Ivan dealt with all these troubles: "His aim was to free himself more and more from unpleasantness . . . by spending less and less time with his family." Without making any kind of point of it, Tolstoy shows clearly how Ivan contributes to his wife's emotional and spiritual deterioration.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Sum up the reactions of Ivan's colleagues to the news of his death. What is implied in Tolstoy's calling them "so-called friends"? "The first thought of each of the gentlemen in the room was of the effect this death might have on the trans-
fer or promotion of themselves or their friends” (par. 5). Then, after these selfish hopes, they thought of their boring duties: to attend the funeral, to visit Ivan’s widow (par. 18). Tolstoy suggests Ivan had no true friends but only “so-called friends” (par. 18).

2. What comic elements do you find in the account of the wake that Peter Ivanovich attends? Comic elements include the deacon with his imperious tone (par. 24), Peter Ivanovich’s struggles with the rebellious springs of the couch (par. 33, 37), and his longing to escape to a card game—fulfilled at the end of Section I. The widow haggles over the price of a cemetery plot (par. 33–35) and utters the great comic lines (in paragraph 40) congratulating herself on enduring Ivan’s screams.

3. In Tolstoy’s description of the corpse and its expression, what details seem especially revealing and meaningful? See paragraph 27, especially the statement that the corpse’s expression contains “a reproach or a warning for the living.”

4. Do you think Tolstoy would have improved the story had he placed the events in chronological order? What if the opening scene of Ivan’s colleagues at the law courts and the wake scene were to be given last? What would be lost? Tolstoy’s arrangement of events seems masterly. We see from the first the selfish, superficial circle of colleagues among whom Ivan lived and his rather obtuse, querulous, self-centered wife. As the story unfolds, we follow Ivan’s progress from total absorption in his petty affairs to his final illumination. We begin with an exterior view of the context of Ivan’s society and end with one man, all alone, confronting eternity.

5. Would you call Ivan, when we first meet him, a religious man? Sum up his goals in life, his values, and his attitudes. Ivan seems a worldly, sensual man, able to minimize his feelings of guilt (par. 59). His life centers in the official world, and he believes it should flow “agreeably and decorously” (par. 82). “His official pleasures lay in the gratification of his pride; his social pleasures lay in the gratification of his vanity” (par. 108).

6. By what “virtues” and abilities does Ivan rise through the ranks? While he continues to succeed in his career, what happens to his marriage? Ivan performs his official duties with “exactitude and an incorruptible honesty” (par. 61). He is decorous and rule-abiding, wields power objectively and does not abuse it (par. 65). As he succeeds in the world, his marriage deteriorates (par. 82), and it improves only when Ivan and his wife see little of each other (par. 98).

7. “Every spot on the tablecloth, on the hangings, the string of a window blind broken, irritated him. He had devoted so much trouble to the arrangement of the rooms that any disturbance of their order distressed him” (paragraph 104). What do you make of this passage? What is its tone? Does the narrator sympathize with Ivan’s attachment to his possessions? Ivan’s excessive concern with every spot on the tablecloth seems part of his fussy overemphasis on material possessions. Tolstoy is suggesting, of course, that Ivan’s insistent worldliness goes together with a neglect for the welfare of his soul.

8. Consider the account of Ivan’s routine in paragraph 105 (“He got up at nine . . .”). What elements of a full life, what higher satisfactions, does this routine omit? Ivan’s routine (par. 105) omits love, worship, and any profound involvement with his friends and family. His social consciousness is confined to a little
chat about politics; his interest in art and science to a little chat about “general
topics.” Ivan devotes himself only to superficial courtesies and appearances—to
maintaining “the semblance of friendly human relations” without any deeper fond-
ness or compassion.

9. What caused Ivan's illness? How would it probably be diagnosed today?
What is the narrator's attitude toward Ivan’s doctors? The illness might be diag-
nosed as cancer of the abdomen complicated by falling off a ladder while hanging
curtains. (The fall is casually described in paragraph 99.) Tolstoy detested physicians
and implies (in paragraphs 115–120, 128, 152–153) that Ivan's doctors are know-
nothings. In paragraph 247, Ivan submits to an examination that he sees as “non-
sense and empty deception,” like the speeches of certain lawyers to whom he had lis-
tened as a judge. The “celebrated doctor” (par. 258–259) seems a quack.

10. In what successive stages does Tolstoy depict Ivan’s growing isolation as
his progressive illness sets him more and more apart? See especially paragraphs
308–311. (Tolstoy’s story has a theme in common with Thomas Mann’s The Magic
Mountain: the sick and the healthy are races set apart.)

11. What are we apparently supposed to admire in the character and conduct
of the servant Gerasim? From our first meeting with him, Gerasim radiates gen-
erosity, warm sympathy, and cheerful acceptance of God’s will. All men shall come
to death, even Ivan Ilych, he affirms (par. 50). Gerasim is the good peasant, faithful
and devoted, willing to sit all night holding his master's legs (par. 285).

12. What do you understand from the statement that Ivan’s justification of
his life “would not let him get forward, and it caused him the most agony of all”
(paragraph 346). By his reluctance to acknowledge that his life “has all not been the
right thing” (as he finally admits in paragraph 348), Ivan is hindered in his advance
toward enlightenment.

13. What is memorable in the character of Ivan’s schoolboy son? Why is he
crucial to the story? (Suggestion: look closely at paragraphs 349–350.) Ivan’s son,
though only briefly sketched, is unforgettable. Early in the story (par. 48), Peter
Ivanovich finds in his eyes (“red with crying” from genuine grief) “that look often
seen in unclean boys of thirteen or fourteen.” As in all masturbators (according to
popular lore), “the awful blue ring under eyes” (par. 268). Yet it is the schoolboy,
alone among Ivan’s immediate family, who loves Ivan and feels sorry for him. By kiss-
ing his father’s hand (par. 349), the boy brings on Ivan’s illumination.

14. What realization allows Ivan to triumph over pain? Why does he die
 gladly? It is revealed (in paragraph 350) that although Ivan’s life has been futile, he
still can set it right. “He whose understanding mattered” (par. 351) now understands
him. Able to love at last, Ivan feels sorry not for himself but for his wife and son.
When at last he is willing to relinquish the life to which he has desperately clung,
death holds no fear.

15. Henri Troyat has said that through the story of Ivan Ilych we imagine
what our own deaths will be. Is it possible to identify with an aging, selfish,
worldly, nineteenth-century Russian judge? Randall Jarrell seems right in his obser-
vation that “we terribly identify ourselves with” Ivan Ilych. “Ivan Ilych’s life has been
a conventional falsehood; The Death of Ivan Ilych is the story of how he is tortured
into the truth. No matter how alien they may have seemed to him to begin with, in
the end the reader can dissociate neither from the falsehood, the torture, nor the
truth: he is Ivan Ilych.”

Franz Kafka, THE METAMORPHOSIS, page 318

Few works of fiction have attracted more critical commentary than Franz Kafka’s The
Metamorphosis. This troubling, mysterious story leaves few readers unmoved, and the
tale is a regular favorite among students, who generally find its nightmarish premise
and tight family focus gripping. Teachers rarely have trouble getting students to talk
about the story; the challenge is to keep the classroom discussion from becoming
entirely impressionistic. Kafka has a famously strange effect on readers: they tend to
project their own concerns and obsessions into his stories. While it may be impossible
to come to one conclusive reading of The Metamorphosis, that impossibility
should not prevent readers from working toward careful and consistent readings.

Originally issued as a separate volume in 1916, The Metamorphosis is a particu-
larly interesting work to examine because it is the longest piece of fiction that Kafka
completed and published during his lifetime. (All three of his novels are in some
sense unfinished, and all were published posthumously.) Although the obsessively
self-critical Kafka considered the work “imperfect almost to its very marrow,” The
Metamorphosis shows his literary artistry at its most ambitious, powerful, and assured.

To what genre does The Metamorphosis belong? One can legitimately describe it
as a long short story or a short novel. German readers would generally consider it a
novella (a fictional tale of intermediate length), a form they see as one of their cen-
tral literary traditions, practiced by such masters as Heinrich Von Kleist, E. T. A.
Hoffmann, and Hermann Hesse. Famous novellas include Thomas Mann’s Death in
Venice, Henry James’s Daisy Miller, and Leo Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilych. In
America, there is no distinct tradition of the novella—despite the missionary efforts
of James—so our critics usually consider The Metamorphosis a long short story. In
any event, both terms imply an extended narrative that combines the concentrated
focus of a short story with the novel’s insistence on following a course of action to
its end. A novella—unlike a novel—almost inevitably centers on a single character
(e.g., Gregor Samsa, Ivan Ilych) in the same way that most short stories do, but the
author need not compress the narrative into a few exemplary incidents; there is
room for the story to unfold more fully. The Metamorphosis plunges us into the con-
sciousness of its protagonist, Gregor Samsa, in the way a novel might. There is no
sense that Kafka is curtailing the narrative at any point. Instead, the story unfolds
at its own deliberate pace.

The instructor may want to point out the overall structure of the story, which is
unique in Kafka’s fiction. The Metamorphosis is divided into three equal sections.
Many critics have noticed that this structure resembles a three-act play. In his intro-
duction to The Complete Stories of Franz Kafka (New York: Viking, 1983), John
Updike observes that in each “act,” “the metamorphosed Gregor Samsa ventures out
of his room, with tumultuous results.” The British scholar Ronald Gray elaborates
how each section ends with a climactic moment:

In the first, Gregor Samsa awakens to the realisation that he has turned into an
insect and emerges from his bedroom to be driven back by his infuriated father.
In the second, he tries to accommodate himself to his absurdly hideous predicament . . . again, a brief sally into the living room is repulsed by the father, this time even more violently, as he pelts Gregor with apples. In the third, Gregor comes out while his sister is playing the violin, entranced by the music which seems to be the “food” he has so long been unable to find, but a third attack drives him back to die alone and untended. . . . After Gregor’s death they turn with relief to the happier life that now awaits them. (Reprinted in Franz Kafka’s The Metamorphosis in Harold Bloom’s “Modern Critical Interpretations” series.)

Although Gray is wrong in citing a third “attack” on Gregor (he returns the last time to his room unmolested—at least physically), he does clarify the basic structure of the story. Heinz Politzer offers a more schematic structure in his Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1966): “The first part shows Gregor in relation to his profession, the second to his family, and the third to himself.” This structure does not become annoying, Politzer claims, “because the three parts are united by Gregor’s fate, which is and remains an enigma.”

The long list of questions at the end of the story is designed to focus students on interesting aspects of the plot and situation they may have overlooked in their initial reading. Considering these narrative details may suggest themes and interpretations that may not have initially occurred to them.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of The Metamorphosis. Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What was Gregor’s occupation before his transformation? How did he come to his particular job? What keeps him working for his firm? The question of Gregor’s employment is crucial to understanding the story. Gregor works as a traveling salesman—a situation he dislikes. He wants to quit his job, but the pressure to support his family and pay off his bankrupt father’s business debts keeps him trapped in his career. Gregor’s boss holds the father’s debts, so his job reinforces his sense of obligation to his family. The influential Kafka scholar Walter H. Sokel has observed that Schuld, the German word for debt, also means guilt in German. The symbolism of its double meaning has not been lost on Freudian and Marxist critics. Both family debts and family guilt force Gregor into intolerable employment.

2. When Gregor wakes to discover he has become a gigantic insect, he is mostly intent on the practical implications of his metamorphosis—how to get out of bed, how to get to his job, and so forth. He never wonders why or how he has been changed. What does this odd reaction suggest about Gregor? The only fantastic element present in The Metamorphosis is its opening sentence. After that unexplained event, the subsequent action unfolds in a bizarrely realistic fashion. Perhaps the strangest detail of all is Gregor’s matter-of-fact acceptance of his transformation into a monstrously large insect. He never wonders why or how he has been changed from a young man into vermin. Although he worries about a great many other things, he accepts his new situation absolutely. This narrative detail is surely part of what gives Kafka’s tale its uniquely brooding mystery. For some unstated reason, Gregor acknowledges the inevitability of his fate. Establishing why Gregor and his family so naturally accept his transformation into a despicable creature is central to any
interpretation of the story. (See comments on question 10 for some common interpretations of Gregor’s metamorphosis.)

3. When Gregor’s parents first see the gigantic insect (paragraph 25), do they recognize it as their son? What do their initial reactions suggest about their attitude toward their son? Although Gregor’s parents are horrified to see his new shape, they never doubt that the huge insect is their son. They do not, for instance, fear that some supernatural monster has occupied their son’s room. They instinctively recognize the vermin as Gregor. The mother’s first reaction seems to be horror or—some critics claim—deep shame. His father is angry and then starts to weep. The family is already publicly embarrassed that Gregor appears to have barricaded himself in his room and has missed his business trip. The suspicious chief clerk from his office has arrived to check on him. Kafka never explains why the parents recognize their transformed son, but the implication seems to be that his new monstrous form manifests something latent in the old Gregor. What that characteristic is has become the crux of most critical debates.

4. How does each family member react to Gregor after his transformation? What is different about each reaction? What is similar? Each of the family members acts differently to him although they all feel ashamed of his condition. His sister initially shows the most concern for him. Her loving care sustains him, and when she abandons him (in Part III), he loses his grip on life. Gregor’s mother is full of sympathy for her son but, old and asthmatic, she is ineffective in helping or defending him. Gregor’s father lacks all compassion for his son’s situation. He mercilessly drives Gregor back into his room the first two times he emerges. He resents having to work again, and subsequent events suggest that he had earlier been exploiting his son by forcing Gregor to pay off the family debts.

5. What things about Gregor have been changed? What seems to have remained the same? List specific qualities. While Gregor has undergone a complete physical metamorphosis, he changes very little mentally—at least at first. He is still beset by all his usual worries. Gradually, however, Gregor seems to regress. He accepts his own ineffectiveness and passivity; he also accepts his own monstrous unworthiness and repulsiveness. He becomes childlike in his complete dependence on his family, whereas earlier he had supported them. He not only becomes filthy but slowly loses any shame about his squalid condition. Eventually, he even accepts his own death. “His own belief that he must disappear was, if anything, even firmer than his sister’s” (par. 89). He has no resentment for his family; he thinks of them “with deep emotion and love.” Monstrous and dying, he remains an obedient son.

6. *The Metamorphosis* takes place entirely in the Samsa family apartment. How does the story’s home setting shape its themes? Except for the final scene, all of *The Metamorphosis* takes place in the Samsa family apartment. This claustrophobic setting underscores the domestic nature of the story. Kafka’s psychological and mythic focus is on the family—especially the relationship between child and parents. It is worth noting that the two Samsa children have Christian names—Gregor and Grete—whereas Mr. and Mrs. Samsa lack first names. In fact, the parents are usually called by the archetypal names of Father and Mother. (Curiously, although Kafka himself was Jewish, he makes the Samsas Christian—notice the reference to Christmas and how the family makes a sign of the cross over Gregor’s dead body; the story suggests Christian as well as Jewish readings.) As Gregor hides in his room, he listens
to his family. He becomes a passive witness to their lives. Some critics feel that the central action of the story involves the family more than Gregor; his transformation is only the catalyst to their drama. It might be worth asking the class if they agree or disagree with this emphasis.

7. What family member first decides that they must “get rid” of the insect? What rationale is given? In what specific ways does the family’s decision affect Gregor? Gregor’s sister ultimately decides that “we must try to get rid of it” (par. 80). Her attitude has gradually changed from one of solicitous concern to hostility. She does not refer to Gregor by name; he is now an it. “I refuse to utter my brother’s name in the presence of this monster,” she declares. At this point Gregor starts to lose his human identity. She argues that they have been mistaken to think that this creature is her brother. Why? If this were Gregor, she maintains, “he would’ve realized a long time ago that it’s impossible for human beings to live with a creature like that, and he would’ve left on his own accord” (par. 85). Gregor, in other words, would not have added to the family burden but would have eased it. His role, she implies, is that of a provider, not an embarrassing dependent. The sister’s announcement provides a turning point in the story. Already weak and injured, Gregor declines into death.

8. How does the family react to Gregor’s death? When the charwoman announces that Gregor is dead, the parents rush out of bed to check the evidence in their son’s room. “Well,” says Gregor’s father, “now thanks be to God.” They cross themselves, but only Grete shows some sympathy. “Just look how thin he was,” she observes. When Gregor’s mother invites her daughter to sit beside them in their bedroom, Mrs. Samsa already has “a sad smile.” When they finally emerge from the bedroom, they appear to have been crying, but their grief is short-lived. They are openly relieved that Gregor is gone. They soon appear more vigorous and determined. They make plans for the future. When the charwoman disposes of the body, she is grinning. The family is now openly confident and affectionate for the first time.

9. Does Grete change in the course of the story? If so, how does she change? One of the strangest features of The Metamorphosis is its closing paragraph. Having lost their only son, the Samsas undergo a quiet transformation into a secure and loving family. The final image is quite unexpected. The parents notice Grete becoming “more vivacious.” In spite of all their recent troubles, “she had blossomed into a pretty and shapely girl.” It is time, they decide, “to find her a good husband.” Immediately after Gregor’s unceremonious funeral, they are already planning a marriage. At least one critic has claimed that the title, The Metamorphosis, refers to Grete rather than Gregor; she has been transformed from a girl into a young woman. Her transformation brings the promise of new life while Gregor’s brought only death.

10. In what ways is Gregor’s metamorphosis symbolic? The chief concern in interpreting The Metamorphosis with students is to read Kafka’s story as symbolic rather than allegorical. Kafka resists conventional interpretation; no one tightly consistent reading will fit all the facts of the tale. Part of Kafka’s particular genius was in creating seemingly allegorical situations (as in The Castle and The Trial) that refuse to fall into neat patterns. Allegory’s central technique—like Kafka’s—is the extended metaphor, but whereas allegory consistently equates the metaphor with a specific meaning, Kafka’s metaphors suggest multiple interpretations. The thrill and mystery of reading Kafka’s fiction is the sense that one is always on the brink of
understanding everything followed by the discovery of some new fact that changes or contradicts one's own theory.

There are a great many interpretations of Gregor Samsa’s metamorphosis. One inarguable observation is that his transformation is horrible. He has become a huge insect that everyone finds disgusting; he himself is ashamed of his new form and hides when his sister enters his room to feed him. One can read the entire story as an extended metaphor, an anti-allegory that no single interpretive key will unlock, in which Gregor’s metaphorical identity as a revolting insect becomes literally true. This line of inquiry stills begs the question of why Gregor became an insect. Kafka’s text is famously silent on this crucial point; it can only be approached by implication. The two most common interpretations are that Gregor’s transformation is a retribution for some unstated crime (whether it is his own crime, his father’s, his family’s, or society’s, depends on the critic’s orientation) or that his change reflects a wish fulfillment on his part to abandon his job and be cared for by his family (whether this is a self-asserting wish for freedom or a shameful regression to childhood also depends on the critic’s approach).


Students curious to know exactly what sort of bug poor Gregor became should consult Vladimir Nabokov’s lively Lectures on Literature (New York: Harcourt, 1980). Nabokov, who was not only a magisterial novelist but also a renowned entomologist, explores the nature of the “ungeheures Ungeziefer” (Kafka’s German phrase for Gregor’s new shape, which can be translated either as gigantic insect or monstrous vermin). No one has been able to identify precisely what sort of insect Kafka had in mind—a mystery that almost certainly was the author’s intention. Nabokov, however, discusses what sort of bug he was not. Gregor, Nabokov resolves, was definitely not, as some readers often assume, a cockroach. Not all critical issues in Kafka are, it appears, beyond resolution. An interesting half-hour DVD of Vladimir Nabokov (played by Christopher Plummer) analyzing The Metamorphosis is available from Library Video Company at <www.libraryvideo.com>.

One final note: an intriguing tribute to Kafka, one that sums up the powerful appeal of his stories, is that of the dramatist Vaclav Havel, former president of Czechoslovakia:

In Kafka I have found a portion of my own experience of the world, of myself, and of my way of being in the world. I will try... to name some of the more easily defined forms of this experience. One of them is a profound, banal, and therefore utterly vague sensation of culpability, as though my very existence were a
kind of sin. Then there is a powerful feeling of general alienation, both my own and relating to everything around me, that helps to create such feelings; an experience of unbearable oppressiveness, a need constantly to explain myself to someone, to defend myself, a longing for an unattainable order of things. (From a lecture on Kafka delivered at Hebrew University in Jerusalem in April 1990; New York Review of Books, September 27, 1990.)

Has the mind of Gregor Samsa ever been more concisely or more accurately described? For a writing assignment, students might be given a copy of Havel's remarks and asked to show, by referring to particulars in the story, how they apply to The Metamorphosis.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biography, critical overview, and bibliography for Kafka.

WRITERS ON WRITING

Franz Kafka, DISCUSSING THE METAMORPHOSIS, page 348

What would a reader give for a Paris Review interview with Franz Kafka? There are so many unresolved issues about both his life and his work. The closest one will ever come is Gustav Janouch's Conversations with Kafka, a book-length memoir of the short-lived author by a young friend and admirer who knew him in Prague.

Janouch's father worked with Kafka at the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution and introduced his literary son to his colleague. Kafka soon became the boy's mentor. As Janouch records, Kafka was masterfully evasive about interpreting his work. His unguarded comments to the young Gustav about the autobiographical elements in The Metamorphosis are the closest the author ever came to discussing the personal origins of the novella. Janouch also intimately portrays the anguished self-doubt Kafka felt about his own work.

Be advised that there are two editions of Conversations with Kafka. The later edition (New York: New Directions, 1971) is by far the better one because it contains a great deal of material accidentally dropped from the first version.
Jorge Luis Borges, who considered himself primarily a poet, is almost certainly the most influential short story writer of the last half century. His mix of fantasy and realism was the catalyst to the Latin American literary “boom” of magical realism. His use of nonfiction forms—like the essay, book review, or scholarly article—as vehicles for the short story not only inspired experimental writers of metafiction, it also helped challenge, among literary theorists, the traditional distinctions between fiction and factual writing. Writers as diverse as John Barth, Italo Calvino, Gabriel García Márquez, John Updike, Thomas Disch, Donald Barthelme, J. G. Ballard, Michel Foucault, and Angela Carter all reflect Borges’s influence.

Many Borges stories—including “The Gospel According to Mark”—operate simultaneously on two levels. The surface of the story usually offers a conventional narrative, often with a surprise ending. Borges’s masters in fiction were traditional storytellers like Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, and G. K. Chesterton. (He was also particularly fond of mystery and supernatural tales.) Borges frequently employed old-fashioned narrative devices borrowed from their work, but he was equally fascinated by the literature of mysticism and the occult, not only the Christian and Jewish traditions but also the Islamic and Chinese. From these mystics and metaphysicians, he developed an obsession for speculating on secret patterns in reality. For Borges, the search for hidden significance was not a literary game; it was an essential undertaking, part of humanity’s attempt to uncover God’s plan, and the temporal world’s means of understanding eternity. Not surprisingly, one of Borges’s favorite modern writers was Kafka.

Borges’s fascination with hidden significance leads to a consciously constructed second level of meaning in many of his stories, in which surface details can be discovered to have secret implications. The amazing thing about Borges’s stories is the sheer density of meaning the careful reader will find embedded in the text. One need not catch or understand all these hidden clues to appreciate his stories, but discovering them does enrich one’s experience. They are not trivial details, but the individual threads to a complex pattern of expression.

“The Gospel According to Mark” is an example of how tightly interwoven Borges’s symbolic subtext can be. In this story, his main technique is irony, the traditional way of saying one thing while meaning another. Virtually everything that happens in the story has an ironic significance. The questions addressed below elucidate some, but by no means all, of the ironic underpinnings of this haunting story.
QUESTIONS

1. What is about to happen to Baltasar Espinosa at the end of this story? If students don’t understand Borges’s surprise ending—the point, that is, where the overt and ironic narratives meet—they will not be able to figure anything else out. Most students will catch the ending at once—Baltasar Espinosa is about to be crucified by the Gutre family. However, it may be worth asking this basic question to make sure no one misses it.

2. How old is Espinosa? What is ironic about his age? Espinosa is thirty-three, the age at which Jesus is traditionally thought to have been crucified.

3. Why is the isolated rural setting crucial to the story? Could the events have occurred in a large city like Buenos Aires? The setting is crucial for the reason suggested in the wording of the question—because it is isolated. Over time, the generations of Gutres have reverted to a sort of primal ignorance: they cannot read, they have no awareness of anything that has happened or is happening outside their immediate experience, they are completely unfamiliar with Christ and the Gospels. In Buenos Aires there would be far too much education, sophistication, interaction with other people, and access to the constant flow of information for such a series of events to be possible.

4. What lessons does Espinosa learn in the country? What important lessons does he not notice as the weeks of his stay drag on? He learns a few superficial things about how life is lived in the country, as described in paragraph 3. He fails to learn what will turn out to be much more important lessons, such as how the Gutres regard him as an exotic and superior being and obey him unquestioningly, paving the way for them to conflate him with Christ; how they literally accept and believe everything that is told or read to them; and how thoroughly primitive and unsophisticated they are, leading them to see a miraculous dimension to his curing the lamb with antibiotics. On a more immediate level, he fails to realize the significance of the hammering he hears in the middle of the night.

5. How does weather affect the outcome of the story? The flooding causes the roof of the Gutres’ house to leak, leading Espinosa to invite them into the main house and setting up the situation in which he will read them the Gospel According to Mark. It prevents the timely return of Espinosa’s cousin and intensifies the isolation of the farm. And it provides a convenient explanation for the Gutres to conceal from Espinosa the real reason for the hammering noises.

6. What is the background of the Gutre family? How did they come to own an English Bible? Why is it ironic that they own this book? Like America, Argentina is a country populated largely by immigrants. (Borges himself was a mixture of English, Italian, Jewish, Uruguayan, and Argentinean stock.) The Gutre family are the descendants of Scottish immigrants, but they have lived on the Argentinean pampas so long that they have forgotten not only their English but even their ancestry. Their name is a corruption of the name Guthrie. Significantly, Borges links their Scottish ancestry to Calvinism, with its belief in absolute predestination. (In retrospect, Espinosa’s sacrificial death seems fated.) The irony of their owning an English Bible is multiple: they cannot read; they know no English; they are seemingly
ignorant of Christianity; they have forgotten their Scottish roots. However, there is, of course, a deeper irony. Although they have forgotten everything else, the Gutres have unconsciously maintained a Calvinistic sensibility that leads them to interpret the Gospel with absolute literalism.

7. When Espinosa begins reading the Gospel of Saint Mark to the Gutres, what changes in their behavior does he notice? Once Espinosa begins reading the Gospel, he suddenly makes an intense connection with the Gutre family. Until then conversation had proved difficult. They treat him with ever-greater respect and follow his orders. He catches them talking about him respectfully, but he does not understand the significance of their change in behavior until too late.

8. What other action does Espinosa perform that earns the Gutres’ gratitude? Espinosa helps treat the Gutre girl’s injured pet lamb. (Borges’s choice of that symbolic animal is surely not coincidental.) The family seem to consider his intercession miraculous, although Espinosa does not understand their reaction. There is a consistently ironic gap between what he notices in their behavior and what their actions really signify. It is a good exercise to have students list as many ironic episodes or situations as possible.

9. Why do the Gutres kill Espinosa? What do they hope to gain? The Gutres kill Espinosa to achieve salvation. The father questions Espinosa quite explicitly on that point the morning before his execution. For obvious reasons, old Gutre is particularly anxious to know if the soldiers who executed Christ were also saved.

DISCUSSION TOPIC

Is the significance of Espinosa’s death entirely ironic? Or does he resemble Christ in any important respect? The central question in interpreting Borges’s story is whether it merely depicts a grotesquely ironic misunderstanding or rather suggests a deeper religious vision. Whatever one’s conclusions, it is certain that Borges had a lifelong fascination with the idea of Christ and redemption. Some of his best stories, like “Three Versions of Judas” and “The Circular Ruins,” explicitly concern the Incarnation. Borges never used the Christian mythos carelessly. A narrowly ironic reading of “The Gospel According to Mark” is easy to make. It is an ironic horror story in which the protagonist unwittingly creates the conditions for his own ritual murder. Read this way, the story is quite satisfactory—like a superior episode of The Twilight Zone. The story, however, also allows a deeper, though still ironic religious reading. Here, too, Espinosa is an unwitting Christ-figure, but one understands him not to represent real Christianity but a shallow parody of it. He is a Christ without divinity, a figure whose teaching lacks moral weight and whose death will save no one. When quizzed by the Gutre father about particular points in the Gospel, Espinosa asserts things he does not believe in order to save face. His theology is “a bit shaky,” and so he answers other questions without examining their logical or theological consistency. In his bewildered way, Espinosa enjoys the authority of his divine position, but he neither understands nor deserves it. He is a well-meaning sham, quite unable to comprehend that the Gutres (whom he unmaliciously, but also un-Christianly, considers beneath him) might take matters of salvation seriously. He is a dilettante unsuitably cast in the role of a deity. Although he seems to accept his death meekly (we do not know for sure what follows his realization), he has only the...
outward features of a redeemer. His dabbling in the divine has not only destroyed him, it has morally corrupted his followers. Espinosa may be a Christ-figure, but he is no Christ.

Students wishing to do a paper on Borges might profitably compare “The Gospel According to Mark” with Borges’s ingenious tale “Three Versions of Judas.” For more sophisticated students, a comparison between “The Gospel According to Mark” and Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” could be an absorbing project. Both stories end in senseless murders, and both depict complex and heretical reactions to the Gospels. A 75-minute video interview with Borges, Profile of a Writer, is available on DVD.

Gabriel García Márquez, A VERY OLD MAN WITH ENORMOUS WINGS, page 364

García Márquez’s story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” appeared in his 1972 volume The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother. (The English translation also appeared in 1972 as part of Leaf Storm and Other Stories. Since Leaf Storm was originally published in Spanish in 1955, the translation volume has led some American editors and critics to misdate “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” which is not an early work, but one written soon after García Márquez’s magnum opus, One Hundred Years of Solitude.)

The plot of García Márquez’s story is easily summarized. At the end of a three-day rainstorm Pelayo discovers an old man with enormous wings lying face down in the mud of his courtyard. He immediately returns with his wife, Elisenda, to examine the bald, nearly toothless man, who seems barely alive. They try to converse with him, but no one understands anything the winged ancient says. After consulting with a neighbor who identifies the man as an angel, Pelayo drags the filthy, passive creature into a chicken coop. Soon people visit—first to mock and tease the winged captive, then to seek miracles. The local priest tries to determine if the mysterious prisoner is truly an angel or merely some diabolical trick. He notices the old man’s stench and his parasite-infested wings, but writes to the bishop and eventually Rome for a verdict. (Rome seeks additional information but never makes a decision—a very Kafkaesque situation.)

Soon Pelayo and his wife begin charging admission to see their angel. The crowds grow until they draw other carnival attractions. One visiting sideshow features a young woman who was transformed into a tarantula the size of a ram with the head of a maiden. Since the spider woman eagerly talks to customers—unlike the silent, nearly immobile angel—she begins to draw the audience away. By now, however, Pelayo and his wife have earned enough to build a fine two-story mansion. Several years pass. Their child, who was a newborn at the story’s opening, is now old enough to start school. The feeble angel drags himself around their property, greatly to Elisenda’s annoyance. He also loses his last bedraggled feathers. That winter the old man almost dies of fever, but by spring his feathers begin to grow back. One day, as Elisenda watches from the kitchen, the old man clumsily takes flight and flaps away across the sea.

The plot of García Márquez’s story—the magical elements aside—is positively drab. The ending so conspicuously lacks any overt narrative ingenuity as to seem
anticlimactic. The flatness of the plot gives the story an odd quality—as impersonal as a newspaper article and as episodic as a legend. This feeling of detachment is heightened by the tale's omniscient narrator, who reports the odd events with deadpan objectivity. The story's particular power comes from its extraordinary details, which are seldom drab and often dazzling. A motley procession of people and things (ranging from an ordinary parish priest to an enchanted tarantula woman) parade by in such profusion that the reader never knows what to expect next—the mysterious, the mundane, or the magical? That distracting but disorienting effect is crucial to the experience of Magic Realism and, to a certain extent, it is the element that most clearly differentiates it from its predecessors. Gogol, Kafka, and Singer may have created similar modes of fiction, but they never lavished so many fabulous details with such profligate nonchalance.

"A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" seemingly invites all sorts of symbolic and even allegorical readings, but García Márquez constantly undercuts or frustrates any easy interpretation. If this bedraggled, sickly creature truly represents the descent of the miraculous into the everyday world, he does not fit the preconceptions of anyone in this world—priest, petitioner, or even paying sideshow customer. This putative angel not only remains uninspiring and unknowable, but slightly repulsive. No one in the story ever successfully communicates with him. If he speaks the language of the divine, we cannot understand a word of it. He arrives, stays, and leaves without explanation or apparent purpose. If the story is to be read symbolically, all one can ultimately say is that the winged old man embodies the impene-trable mysteries of both this world and the next one. Whatever he truly is—mortal or supernatural—he exists beyond our comprehension. We can project our own assumptions on the blank screen of his history, but his essence remains forever invisible. When he flies away, we know nothing important about him with any more certainty than when he arrived.

Isabel Allende, THE JUDGE'S WIFE, page 369

Isabel Allende, whose books of fiction and nonfiction have been enormously popular both in their original Spanish-language editions and in English translation, has been widely regarded as one of the foremost contemporary practitioners of magic realism. Allende herself has taken a somewhat ambivalent approach to her sense of her own role in this tradition. In the “Interview” section of her website (www.isabelallende.com), she says: “It’s strange that my work has been classified as magic realism because I see my novels as just being realistic literature. They say that if Kafka had been born in Mexico, he would have been a realistic writer. So much depends on where you were born.” Yet elsewhere in that same section, she says the following:

I think that every story has a way of being told and every character has a voice. And you can’t always repeat the formula. Magic realism, which was overwhelmingly present in The House of the Spirits, doesn’t exist in my second book, Of Love.
And Shadows. And that’s because my second book was based on a political crime that happened in Chile after the assassination of Salvador Allende, so it has more of a journalistic chronicle. There is no magic realism in The Infinite Plan, Aphrodite, Daughter of Fortune or Portrait in Sepia, yet there is a lot of it in my new novel for kids The City of the Beasts.

Sometimes, magic realism works and sometimes it doesn’t. On the other hand, you will find those elements in most literature from all over the world—not just in Latin America. You will find it in Scandinavian sagas, in African poetry, in Indian literature written in English, in American literature written by ethnic minorities. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Barbara Kingsolver, and Alice Hoffman all use this style.

For a while in the U.S. and Europe, a logical and practical approach to literature prevailed, but it didn’t last very long. That’s because life is full of mystery. And the goal of literature is to explore those mysteries. It actually enlarges your horizons. When you allow dreams, visions and premonitions to enter into your everyday life and your work as a writer, reality seems to expand.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Judge’s Wife.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. How are each of the three main characters described? Cite the specific details from the text. The first two words of the story are “Nicolas Vidal,” and the first thing we are told is that he has, in effect, a rendezvous with destiny. The lonely circumstances of his birth, his upbringing, his scars, his pride, and his independence all create a romantic aura about Vidal that inevitably directs our attention to him and leads us to view him as the story’s protagonist. He is a bandit who has “tempered his soul to the hardness of iron” (par. 2).

Twice his wife’s age and a lifelong bachelor with “fussy habits,” Judge Hidalgo is described as a harsh man, whose execution of the law with “severity and stubbornness . . . even at the expense of justice had made him feared throughout the province” (par. 1). The narrator states that Hidalgo “refused to apply any common sense in the exercise of his profession, and was equally harsh in his condemnation of the theft of a chicken as of a premeditated murder” (par. 1). He always wears black, and he always attends mass on Sundays with his wife.

Nicolas Vidal’s first impression of the Judge’s wife, Casilda, is unfavorable and misinformed. Even as the Judge’s verdicts are intolerant and narrow-minded, so are Vidal’s assumptions about Casilda. He describes her as an “ethereal slip of a girl” who “seemed to him almost ugly,” with “fingers obviously unskilled in the arts of rousing a man to pleasure” (par. 1). However, Casilda defies all expectations. She not only survives the harsh and unfamiliar climate to which she has been brought, but she actually thrives there. It is she who softens his husband, moving him from a rigid inflexibility in the administration of “justice” to a much more sensitive and compassionate approach (par. 1). The town is shocked when Casilda “emerged happy and smiling from three pregnancies in rapid succession.” It is she who demonstrates a level of heroism, resourcefulness, self-sacrifice, especially after her husband dies in the car crash. By the story’s end, the reader assumes that it is her “perfect
example of delicacy and refinement” (par. 1) mixed with her sensuality and sexual-
ity that transform both her husband and Nicolas Vidal.

2. If the bandit Nicolas Vidal is the protagonist of “The Judge’s Wife,” who
would be the antagonist? When the plot begins to concern itself with the trap that
Judge Hidalgo sets for Vidal, we might become ready to assume that the Judge is
Vidal’s antagonist; it is easy to focus on the struggle that ensues between the two
men. This emphasis is reinforced when Vidal decides to take vengeance on Hidalgo
for his own shame over his mother’s suicide.

However, it is important never to forget the story’s title and opening lines:
“Nicolas Vidal always knew he would lose his head over a woman. So it was foretold
on the day of his birth.” The story is, in actuality, about Vidal’s true antagonist—the
Judge’s wife, Casilda. As events ultimately unfold, we are led to see what has been
there for the reader to embrace from the very beginning: that she is the true center
of the story. It is she who, faced with her husband’s sudden death and the imminent
danger to her children, thinks swiftly and acts decisively to save them, at whatever
cost to her own body or morality. Her final triumph leaves the two principal male
characters—especially Nicolas Vidal—looking rigid, short-sighted, and doomed. It
could be argued that, in the end, these two prideful men are shaped much more by
Casilda and their own defects than by any larger destiny.

3. What elements in the plot of “The Judge’s Wife” don’t seem entirely real-
istic? Most of the plot details seem more hyperbolic or mythic than realistic. In real
life, a man like Judge Hidalgo, a stern, fussy, solitary, life-long bachelor, rarely trans-
forms into a man who flings off his gloomy robes and rollicks with his children and
chuckles with his wife (par. 1). It seems fairy-tale-like that not only would “gloomy
wedding-day prophecies remain unfulfilled” but also that “Casilda [would] emerge
happy and smiling from three pregnancies in rapid succession” (par. 1). It also seems
unrealistic that the town’s severe and stubborn judge would so “forget his scruples”
and commit this gross, very public, cruel injustice in order to defend justice (par. 5).
In a realistic story, the judge’s wife Casilda would have intervened with different tim-
ing and a different approach—instead of being prompted by priestly delegation and
defying her husband “in front of the whole town.”

4. What elements of fairy tale and legend does this story contain? From the
first sentence’s confession of intuitive destiny, to the final sentence’s prophetic ful-
fillment, the story’s tone and diction resonates like a legend. When Nicolas Vidal
“cast aside all precaution and, when the fateful moment arrived, forgot the predic-
tion that usually weighed in all his decisions” (par. 1), he unknowingly begins a
course of action that leads to his death. Both the reader and he know there is no
other ending.

In addition to this, Casilda’s final actions become legendary. At whatever cost
to her own body or morality, she becomes the sacrificial savior of her children, which
is always the stuff of legend.

5. What elements of magical realism does this story contain? There are unde-
niable elements of magical realism in “The Judge’s Wife.” From the very first sen-
tence we are in a world ruled, at least to some degree, by destiny, or fate, as opposed
to the realistic tradition, in which the emphasis tends to fall on chance and free will,
and events usually occur spontaneously through the often-random interactions of
individual psychological complexes known as human beings. Another passage in the
Allende interview cited above indirectly addresses just such issues:

The first lie of fiction is that the author gives some order to the chaos of life: chronological order, or whatever order the author chooses. As a writer, you select some part of a whole; you decide that those things are important and the rest is not. And you will write about those things from your perspective. Life is not that way. Everything happens simultaneously, in a chaotic way, and you don’t make choices. You are not the boss; life is the boss. So when you accept as a writer that fiction is lying, then you become free; you can do anything. Then you start walking in circles. The larger the circle, the more truth you can get. The wider the horizon, the more you walk, the more you linger in everything, the better chance you have of finding particles of truth.

Some specific elements of magical realism in “The Judge’s Wife” begin in the first sentence and continue until the last. Nicolas Vidal’s destiny is pronounced on the day of his birth, he believes that it will someday be fulfilled, and, at the end of the story, it is. He is born with four nipples. The cries of his mother in the cage of her torment are carried magically to every corner of the surrounding area. The final erotic encounter between Nicolas and Casilda, in its intensity, totality, and duration, takes on mythic proportions.

Inés Arredondo, THE SHUNAMMITE, page 375

In the foreword to Cynthia Steele’s volume of translations of Inés Arredondo’s short fiction, Arredondo’s friend and fellow author Elena Poniatowska called her “the most profound Mexican woman writer. It is difficult to find the same depth in other writers of our generation.” According to Steele herself,

Arredondo resisted being called a woman writer, since she believed that this label relegated women artists to a ghetto, to a second-class status with critics and readers. “I don’t want to be the best woman writer in Mexico,” she said in an interview. “I want to be one of the best Mexican writers.” At the same time, her short stories focus obsessively on female subjectivity . . . within the context of a perverse Gothic “family romance” set in provincial Sinaloa at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Revolution has not yet happened, or else it has passed through without disturbing centuries-old power relations. (Underground River and Other Stories [Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1996])

Alberto Manguel, the translator of our text “The Shunammite,” observes that

Unlike the vast majority of Mexican writing, which is deeply rooted in historical events, the stories of Inés Arredondo do not belong to one specific moment in history. They bring to life archetypal female figures—Eve, Jocasta, Medea, the Shunammite—seen from inside the women themselves. “Eve was framed,” which has now become a feminist slogan, was used by Arredondo in her first collection of stories, La señal (The Sign). (Other Fires: Short Fiction by Latin American Women [New York: Potter, 1986])
Despite the differences in emphasis and approach shown by these commentators, they all agree on two fundamental points—the artistry and depth of Arredondo's work, and her intense commitment to portraying the feelings and the situation of women in a strongly male-dominated society.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Shunammite.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. The story begins—and ends—with references to the summer heat, and there are several days of rain after the marriage takes place. Is this just scene-setting, or is there a larger significance to the descriptions? Even without cues from the author, we would be tempted to associate the summer heat with the fires of lust, especially at the beginning of the story. Arredondo makes the connection all but unmistakable when she refers, at the beginning of the second paragraph, to “the arrogance that precedes combustion,” and ends that paragraph by having her narrator, Luisa, tell us that “I was certain of having the power to dominate passions, to purify anything in the scorching air that surrounded but did not singe me.” The very last sentence of the story reinforces this connection.

The several dreary days of rain, following an “afternoon of menacing dark clouds” (par. 32) before the marriage, present a classic instance of the pathetic fallacy, which in its broadest definition signifies the ascription of human feelings to nonhuman things, but often—as here—indicates the use of nature to reflect emotions appropriate to a character or situation.

2. How would you characterize Luisa—her sense of herself, her attitude toward men, her feelings about her uncle—at the beginning of the story? At the outset, she is genuinely affectionate toward her uncle; as his illness and her visit awaken many positive childhood memories of him, she is saddened by his impending death and happy to care for him in what she takes to be his final days. Her sense of herself and her attitude toward men is very nicely summed up in her reference to “my haughty modesty” (par. 2): although aware of how men look at her and what they want from her, she is a true innocent, not only because she is lacking in experience, but also because her lack of experience enables her to make naive assumptions about her ability to control circumstances and to preserve her innocence.

3. How do the priest and Luisa’s other relatives respond to don Apolonio’s request to marry her? How does Luisa herself react? Why does she agree to do it? The others see it as an act of generosity that she deserves, and they feel that it would be churlish and ungrateful of her to refuse. Her own reaction is to stifle “a cry of horror” (par. 42) and to be “overcome by nausea” (par. 58). Though strongly opposed to the idea—revolted by it, in fact—she seems to acquiesce because of the pressure put on her by everyone else’s expectation of what her response should be.

4. Luisa says of don Apolono: “I realized he was fighting to be the man he once had been, and yet the resurrected self was not the same, but another” (paragraph 90). What differences do you see in him before and after his “resurrection”? When he calls out to Luisa upon her arrival, she refers to “[t]he dear voice” (par. 10), and shortly thereafter she says that “I began to nurse him and I felt happy doing it” (par. 17). We come to understand the basis of her affection for him as she
describes his reminiscences of his earlier life, especially his great love for and lavish treatment of his late wife. After his marriage to Luisa, this tender side of his nature disappears without a trace, totally swallowed up by his monomaniacal satyr-like obsession with her body as the force that keeps him alive.

5. Speaking to the priest near the end of the story, Luisa describes lust as “the most horrible of all sins.” Do you think that we are intended to agree with this assessment? Why or why not? One’s instinct is to feel that there are more horrible offenses—murder, rape, and treason, for instance, come immediately to mind—but the story does a very good job of reinforcing Luisa’s view of the matter, especially if we define lust properly, not as a neutral synonym for the sexual urge (which is, after all, a natural instinct, without which all life would cease), but rather as an obsessive desire that reduces its object to just that—an object, a mere instrument of gratification, without any regard for her own feelings or desires. It is indeed horrible that don Apolonio is ready to entrap and degrade an innocent young girl, one for whom he has previously felt the tender affection of an uncle for his niece, in order to briefly extend an existence that by this point has no other dimension or purpose than its own continuation.

6. At the very end, Luisa says: “I feel I have become an occasion of sin for all . . . the vilest of harlots . . . a sinner.” Do you think that we are intended to agree with this assessment? This judgment of Luisa’s will strike most readers as a gross exaggeration. She has done nothing to justify such a description. But the fact that her innocence has been taken from her to fuel the selfish desires of an old man, and that as a result she has been made to feel this way about herself, only reinforces her—and Arredondo’s—description of lust as “the most horrible of all sins.”

—Michael Palma
One useful way of studying Edgar Allan Poe is to place him in the context of literary history. Born in 1809, Poe came of age during the final flowering of the Romantic Era in Europe. Like the English and German Romantics who preceded him, particularly Samuel Taylor Coleridge and E. T. A. Hoffmann, Poe was a master at depicting altered mental states, surreal landscapes, tortured anti-heroes, and atmospheres of terror and awe. The Romantic fascination with dream states and the unconscious mind also finds expression in Poe's best work, and allegorical stories effloresce with meaning—laden with dream symbols, such as ticking clocks, blood red windows, rooms without exits, and characters whose identities are disguised.

A biographical approach to Poe will also yield useful material for analyzing the stories. Poe's cousin Neilson Poe noted that alcohol was the curse of the Poe family and it certainly cursed Edgar, his father, and his brother Henry. Edgar Allan Poe's alcoholism demonized his life and no doubt added to the repertoire of "altered states" he depicted in his stories. He may have begun drinking to self-medicate a depressive personality—during his brief stint at the University of Virginia, he was known as both a gifted, melancholy artist and an excitable, touchy belligerent—but the drinking soon became its own disease. According to Jeffrey Meyers's perceptive biography, Poe drank in a joyless, brisk fashion, his goal to become insensible as swiftly as possible—a feat he frequently achieved to the detriment of his friendships, family, and career. Contemporary accounts of Poe being found dead drunk on the streets of Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Richmond are sadly numerous.

Charles Baudelaire, his greatest champion in France, believed that Poe drank to drown suicidal thoughts. Certainly, one way to read his stories is in light of the effects of alcoholism. Denial, depression, despair, paranoia, and other disturbed perceptions—all are the hallmarks of alcoholism and all may be found in his stories. Psychoanalytical approaches to Poe also work well because Poe himself acknowledged that he sought to depict extreme mental states, such as terror. Marie Bonaparte, the Freudian psychoanalyst of Poe's life and work, believed Poe's necrophilia (many of his stories deal with beloved dead women) stemmed from witnessing his mother's death when he was a toddler. Bonaparte believes he never got over the tragic intensity of that loss and thus replayed it over and over in his stories, frequently making those beloved dead women come back to life, as in "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Poe himself refers to his topic of choice in his famous essay, "The Philosophy of Composition":

"THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION:"
I asked myself—"Of all melancholy topics what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?" Death, was the obvious reply. "And when," I said, "is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?" From what I have already explained . . . the answer here also is obvious—"When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover."

I D E A S F O R W R I T I N G

1. As students love creative writing assignments, you might consider giving them the chance to rewrite any of three stories using a different narrator. This will give them a much better sense of what Poe was talking about in "The Tale and Its Effect"; they will see how a writer's choices add up to either a successful or an unsuccessful narrative.

Edgar Allan Poe paid very careful attention to the technical details of his stories. He knew that craft led to effects and so he planned every detail of his stories from theme to character to point-of-view. As Daniel Hoffman shows, "The Tell-Tale Heart" wouldn't be half as effective without the madman himself as its narrator. Indeed, its climax would not occur without that point-of-view choice. An omniscient narrator in this case might reveal the mysteries that give the story its power (the idea that the dead man is in fact the narrator's father, as Hoffman suggests; the paranoa of the narrator would also be moot for an omniscient voice). The narrator of "Usher" is essential to the story by virtue of the fact that he is ostensibly "reliable" (not mad), but is relating a tale that otherwise would seem supernatural or sheer lunacy. Of course, Poe adds the doppelgänger theme to this story, so the narrator himself becomes increasingly like Usher (nervous, fearful, terrified) as the story goes on. Nevertheless, he lives to tell the tale, which would be impossible if the story were narrated by Roderick Usher.

2. Terror and humor are sometimes not far apart. Students can certainly tell stories of times they were terrified (about to be spanked, perhaps, for a childhood infringement) when their seemingly inappropriate response was laughter.

Flannery O'Connor noted that one of the great influences on her own writing was Edgar Allan Poe’s stories. She echoed him in the creation of bizarre characters and also in his use of the grotesque—mixing elements of humor with moments of horror. A stolen wooden leg, for example, is both hilarious and horrendous. In Poe's stories, Prospero’s attempt to stab Red Death is funny in its foolhardiness (what a conceited chump this prince must be to think he can kill death) and tragic—he dies instantly and then so does everyone else. Even the fountains of blood are both funny and scary, in the same way that the nineties movie version of Dracula, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (with Winona Ryder and Gary Oldman), reveled in blood, splashing it with great gusto through scene after scene. Anyone who saw that movie and didn’t grin at the playful flood of blood missed director Coppola's joke. The paranoid narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is likewise amusing—the way he “thrusts” his head into the room of the sleeping victim, for example. One can imagine him caricatured in a skit on *Saturday Night Live*. Lastly, the end of “The Fall of the House of Usher” is both
terrifying and amusing; when Madeline leaps on her brother and bears him, dead, to the ground, who can fail to imagine little kids wrestling? Madeline has been locked in a closet and now she's getting revenge on her bullying brother.

3. Father and son relationships in Poe's stories are virtually never good. Sons want to kill fathers and fathers want to kill sons, either explicitly or implicitly. Poe felt himself to be a victimized son, first of David Poe who abandoned him, his mother, and his sister; and later of John Allan, his oppressive foster father. Biographical information works well in understanding relationships among characters in Poe's stories.

THE TELL-TALE HEART, page 387

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, the celebrated study of the psychological dimension of fairy tales, Bruno Bettelheim maintains that people who read fairy tales to children should not talk to them about what the stories mean. Thus, it could be argued that a story such as Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" is not meant to be picked apart and subjected to analysis. XJK remembers that once, after a class had read a Poe tale, a wonderful controversy broke out when someone complained, "this story doesn't really say anything." Everyone tried to sum up the story's theme, he reports, but failed miserably, and at last decided that there is a place in literature for stories that don't say anything in particular, but supply their readers with memorable nightmares and dreams. Many a writer of horror stories might summarize his or her intentions in the famous words of Joe the fat boy in Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*—"I wants to make your flesh creep"—and leave it go at that.

On the other hand, "The Tell-Tale Heart" must have something more than a good scare going for it to have attracted the attention of so many critics over the years. Daniel Hoffman, for instance, in his highly personal and deeply stimulating *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (1973), sees the old man as a father-figure, even a Father-Figure, and suggests that in striking at his eye "the young madman strikes, symbolically, at his sexual power." Hoffman also says that the narrator "is full of the praise of his own sagacity, a terrible parody of the true sagacity of a Dupin or a Legrand. For what he takes to be ratiocination is in fact the irresistible operation of the principle of his own perversity, the urge to do secret deeds, have secret thoughts undetected by the otherwise ever-watchful eye of the old man."

This and other demonstrations of the narrator's imbalance come at the very beginning of the story, and they provide the context in which we will evaluate everything else that he says and does. The teller of Poe's tale is a classic unreliable narrator. The narrator is not deliberately trying to mislead his audience; he is delusional, and the reader can easily find the many places in the story where the narrator's telling reveals his mistaken perceptions. His presentation is also deeply ironic: the insistence on his sanity puts his madness on display. The first paragraph alone, brief as it is, should provide fertile ground for students sent to find evidence of his severe disturbance. From there, you can lead the class into a discussion of the subsequent manifestations of his madness—his perception of the old man's eye as a thing in itself, independent of its admittedly benevolent possessor; his extreme attention to details and matters that others could find insignificant; his fixation on a single objec-
tive for an insanely long period of time; his need to flaunt his brilliance, even if only to himself, by inviting the police into the house, and so on.

Is it his own heart that the narrator hears at the end, as Hoffman and others have suggested, or is it the wholly imaginary manifestation of his own guilty conscience? No one can say for certain, and perhaps no one should. As suggested above, the claim that the story contains no larger meaning represents one extreme of possible responses, but it may be an equally extreme response in the opposite direction to impose a strict—and potentially reductive—interpretation upon every last detail. At least some of the story’s considerable power lies in the fact that we can’t explain everything away.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” was adapted for television in the PBS television series The American Short Story, and is available on DVD. Additionally, an A & E biography of Edgar Allan Poe is also available on DVD.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Poe. Longman Lecture, video essay, and critical essay on “The Tell-Tale Heart.”

THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO, page 391

In The Tell-Tale Heart: The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe (1978), the late British crime novelist and literary critic Julian Symons says of Poe’s best tales that “the lasting power of the stories rests in the feeling one has of a terrible experience being conveyed without any of the subterfuges and evasions commonly used by fiction writers. . . . Poe shows us, through the thin veil of his narrators, the agonies suffered by torturer and victim alike.” Here, as in the classic Poe tale whose title Symons borrowed, a murderer speaks to an unknown listener and, at the same time, directly to us, describing in precise detail his preparations, the act itself, and its aftermath. But, where the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” can barely contain his grandiosity and hysteria, Montresor is chillingly calm and rational-seeming throughout his confession. In fact, considering his fierce pride in his lineage and the horrifying lengths to which he goes to satisfy that pride, he much more closely resembles the Duke in Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess.”

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Cask of Amontillado.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What is Fortunato’s crime? Does it seem to be a crime commensurate with Montresor’s deadly punishment? All that we are told about Fortunato’s offense is in the very first sentence of the story, that to “the thousand injuries” he has inflicted upon Montresor, he has now added “insult,” provoke Montresor to vow revenge. As with the insult, he specifies none of the presumed injuries, though it is clear enough that a “thousand” is an immense exaggeration. The two men obviously remain on excellent terms with one another, Montresor frequently describes Fortunato as his “friend,” and Fortunato himself shows no awareness of having inflicted any harm, grievous or otherwise, upon Montresor. It is possible, then, that this cata-
logue of crimes exists largely in Montresor’s mind, intensified by his oversensitivity and self-importance. It is also in his mind alone that the justice of the punishment exists, underwritten by his fanatically exacting application of his family’s motto.

There are those who have seized upon Montresor’s frequent references to the nitre in the vault and its potential ill effects upon Fortunato, claiming that—since nitre, or saltpeter, was commonly (and mistakenly) believed to induce impotence—Fortunato’s offense must have been sexual in nature, most likely the seduction of Montresor’s wife. This strikes us, however, as quite tenuous, to say the least.

2. Why does the narrator pretend to be so agreeable to Fortunato? Montresor provides us with an insight into his twisted personal code in the opening paragraph: “I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.” By this code, he must punish Fortunato in such a way that Fortunato will be aware of what is happening and why it is happening, and he must get away with it. To satisfy both these ends, he has concocted the scheme of luring his victim into the catacombs beneath his palazzo and walling him up in a recess, where he will die an agonizing death, either suffocating or starving. He tells us (though the story furnishes no evidence of it) that Fortunato is “a man to be respected and even feared.” Thus, he must be very careful not to tip his hand by even so much as a harsh word or a cross look as he draws his prey into the trap, with the supposed cask of Amontillado as the bait.

3. How does Poe prefigure the narrator’s dark motives? When we reread and discuss the story, we do so with full knowledge of the outcome, a knowledge that colors everything that comes before. We know from the outset that Montresor feels aggrieved and that he intends to take some sort of revenge upon Fortunato. But if we re-examine the text carefully, we will see that nothing in the early part of the story suggests that he has murder in mind, and it is not until relatively near the end that we realize the full extent of what he intends to do. Still, there are hints along the way. He puts on a black mask and cloak to walk the streets with Fortunato, presumably so that there will be no witnesses who see them together at the time of the latter’s disappearance. Immediately thereafter, he tells us that he ordered his servants to stay home, knowing full well that this would “insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.” The catacombs—dank, dark, strewn with moss and bones—give off very creepy vibrations, as does Montresor’s immediate response of “True—true” when Fortunato says, “I shall not die of a cough.”

4. What does this story suggest about the nature of hypocrisy and evil? Montresor’s glad-handing of Fortunato almost inevitably calls to mind Hamlet’s famous comment about his murdering uncle Claudius: “O villain, villain, smiling, damnèd villain! / My tables—meet it is I set it down / That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain— / At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.” Despite Hamlet’s droll qualification in the last line, we may be sure that it is so just about everywhere, and certainly in the unnamed European city where Montresor and Fortunato live. Given that his villains are customarily men who teeter on the edge of insanity, and frequently tumble over the edge, we might also wonder if Poe is suggesting that it requires derangement—or, at the very least, severe abnormality—to dedicate oneself so coldly and obsessively to the destruction of another human being. Another intriguing possibility also suggests itself. Kurt Vonnegut’s brilliant 1961 novel Mother
Night turns on the central thesis that no one can carry off a deception for any length of time unless there is some part of that person, even an unconscious part, that honestly believes in the pretense. Despite his feeling that his code compels him to take a terrible revenge on his wronger, is there a part of Montresor that feels a genuine affection for Fortunato? As indicated above, he calls him “my friend” several times in the narration. In the last paragraph, he says, “My heart grew sick—on account of the dampness of the catacombs.” In spite of, or perhaps because of, his quick cover story, we may well wonder.

—Michael Palma

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Poe.

The Fall of the House of Usher, page 397

Perhaps Poe’s greatest story, “The Fall of the House of Usher” makes use of all of his major themes. A beautiful and beloved woman’s death and resurrection are at the core of this story; two melancholy men bear the weight of that core. Of these two men, friends from their school days and clearly intended by Poe as alter egos, one is obviously mad (Roderick Usher), and the other less certain daily of his sanity (the narrator). Poe dramatizes one of his favorite conflicts, the struggle to remain sane when the evidence of the senses distorts reality and threatens to unseat reason. He sets the tone of an altered mental state—one of terror—from the first sentence of the tale. Ask students to read it aloud so that they may hear the echoing “doom” that Poe conveys through the use of alliteration (a reiterated sound: during, dull, dark, soundless, day, dreary). Doom suffuses the senses for all the other images are negative and foreboding, too: “alone,” “insufferable gloom,” “melancholy.” And that is just the first sentence. Poe keeps up the tone of anxious apprehension throughout the story not only thematically, but linguistically with scores of dark images and heavy consonants.

Many critics find this tale allegorical, with the house itself representing the tortured mind of the protagonist. Deep inside this house (which has eyes and other human features, in addition to a “fissure” showing it is shattering) is a dark secret, just as deep inside the Usher family there is a secret that threatens its destruction. Georges Sayed, in “The Genius of Edgar Allan Poe,” believes the house represents a mind threatened with insanity and of course the house corresponds exactly to Usher himself, even in “the mind of the peasantry.” Let your students find all the words describing the house and see if they can make connections between the ruined house and landscape and the desolate mind of Roderick Usher.

The narrator comes to visit Usher because they were boyhood friends, though the narrator admits that he never felt he knew Roderick well. What the narrator does not know well is the dark side of himself, the buried fount of despair that, when it seeps up to the conscious mind, precipitates madness. Roderick is the narrator’s doppelganger, what he would be in the same oppressive environment, with the same dark secret, and what he is becoming in the course of his stay with his friend.

Roderick has a “peculiar sensibility of temperament,” a quality that runs in the Usher family, leading both to artistic genius and severe nervous agitation. Usher is
a poet, a painter, and a musician. All of his artistic creations, however, show the
strain and terror of his mental state. His paintings are stark nightmares, reminiscent
of Fuseli (bring in a few images from this painter to show students what Poe meant).
His guitar playing is frenzied and bizarre and his poem, “The Haunted Palace,”
details the downfall of his own mind from a beautiful, happy, blessed place to one
cursed and dark. “Evil things, in robes of sorrow” assailed Usher’s high estate, the
throne of his reason. But where did those evil things come from? Certainly, their
“robes of sorrow” are the cloaks of deep depression, but why have they invaded the
palace of Usher’s mind?

That returns us to the core of the story, Roderick’s sister Madeline. We know
that the Usher family has only had one thin line of descendants, from father to son,
in generation after generation. Why? Based on the behavior of Roderick and Made-
line, the hereditary curse of the Usher family seems to be incest and Madeline’s mal-
ady is very likely pregnancy—with her brother’s child. This child would be the next
in the cursed line of Ushers, heir to all of his ancestors’ moral and genetic weak-
nesses. Roderick is clearly terrified of having this family secret get out and so he
immures his sister in the family tomb (with its echo of “womb”). When he hears her
later, he realizes that he can’t hide the family secret any longer—the truth, like his
sister, will out—and it will bring him (and the house) down with it.

Sigmund Freud would doubtless recognize that Roderick Usher is paranoid and
he might look for the source of that paranoia. (Freud’s own theories suggest that para-
noia is related to a fear of homosexuality—”someone is out to get me and it’s me or
my own carnal impulses”—but he would probably also see the link to incest in this
story.) He would certainly believe, as his student Marie Bonaparte did, that the
author of this story has his own conflicted feelings about incest (he married his 13-
year-old first cousin) and suffers from past emotional traumas (dead parents and
therefore a lack of adequate maternal or paternal love) leading to a present sense of
anxiety, depression, and guilt.

EDGAR ALLAN POE ON WRITING

THE TALE AND ITS EFFECT, page 410

This early review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s tales serves to highlight one of Poe’s
favorite critical theories, that of “unity of effect.” The idea, however, was not a new
one: it was originally propounded by Aristotle in his Poetics. According to Aristotle,
a good story (or play) has a “unity of action” achieved by presenting the reader with
a complete and ordered set of actions, or incidents, all of which are designed to pro-
duce a particular “effect” on the reader, and no one of which can be left out without
disjointing the artistic whole.

Poe is talking about the same thing in both this review of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told
Tales and in “The Philosophy of Composition.” To achieve the maximum effect on the
reader, the artist’s creation needs to be short, something that can be read in one sit-
ting—in other words, a short prose tale or a poem. Poe’s literary criticism distinguished
him in his own day as much as his tales and poems did. He was the first person to define
the short story as a distinct literary form and to outline its component parts.
A useful exercise for students is to look for “unity of effect” in Poe’s own tales and poems. You can decide whether he has met his own criteria in statements such as, “If his very initial sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then [the writer] has failed in his first step.” See if the first sentences of these tales by Poe measure up to his strict rules for creative writers.

**Creative Assignment Idea.** For a more creative assignment, ask students to write their own short story with an eye to “unity of effect.” To structure the task, give students several elements that must be integral to the story, for example, “a black cat”; “an atmosphere of terror, disgust, or hilarity”; “an orphan”; “an abandoned warehouse”; “a silver flute.” You can add or subtract elements as you like, but such an assignment is sure to appeal to the more creative among your students.

**ON IMAGINATION, page 411**

The notion of combining beauty and deformity—“combinable things hitherto uncombined”—suggests a quality to be found in stories by both Edgar Allan Poe and Flannery O’Connor. That quality is “the grotesque,” where humor and horror go hand-in-hand, as do beauty and deformity (“a beautiful dead woman,” Poe’s subject of choice, suggests the combination of beauty and deformity—the beauty is necessarily deformed by the decomposition of the corpse).

Again, Poe’s ideas here are influenced by Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Aristotle believed there was nothing new under the sun, but originality could be achieved by new combinations of already extant elements. In this way, “the range of Imagination is unlimited.” A nearer influence, however, was probably Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the English Romantic poet. The Romantics believed fervently in the imagination as a “vital” quality of the creative mind. This imagination can look upon fixed and dead objects, dissolve their fixities and “generate . . . a form of its own,” an organic whole re-created from disparate parts. In the fourteenth chapter of his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge writes that the “synthetic” power of the imagination “reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image. . . .”

What Poe shared with Coleridge was a tendency to abuse substances (alcohol for Poe, opium for Coleridge) to achieve these effects of heightened imagination. In the case of O’Connor, intense religious belief heightened her imagination and also her belief that average readers needed strong and violent imagery to awaken them to the reality of their plight in a fallen world—the necessity of struggling for salvation on a daily basis.

**THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION, page 411**

Poe wrote this essay to explain how he composed his poetic masterpiece, “The Raven.” He wants to counter the idea of the poet as an “artiste” who only works when inspiration strikes, and then in a “fine frenzy” of “ecstatic intuition.” On the contrary, Poe describes the poet as an architect who carefully selects every incident, character, and metrical device with which he will build his poem. The effect he produces may be magical, but the actual work of creating the effect is rational and painstaking.

A very conscious craftsman, Poe’s essays on composition belie the biographical image of him as a drunken madman, scribbling away without forethought or design.
Assignments: 1. Can you apply Poe’s philosophy of composition to one of his tales or poems collected in this book? In particular, look for instances of beauty and deformity and extremity of atmosphere (paranoia in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” anxious anticipation in “The Fall of the House of Usher”). 2. What poetic devices does Poe use to good effect in his prose compositions?

Critics on Edgar Allan Poe, pages 412–419

Daniel Hoffman, The Father-Figure in “The Tell-Tale Heart”
Robert Louis Stevenson, Costume in “The Cask of Amontillado”
Elena V. Baraban, The Motive for Murder in “The Cask of Amontillado”
Charles Baudelaire, Poe’s Characters
James Tuttleton, Poe’s Protagonists and the Ideal World
Carl Mowery, Madness in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”

Daniel Hoffman’s psychological reading of “The Tell-Tale heart” will help students see below the story’s surface into its fascinating subtext. His penetrating analysis of a fictional character—the story’s narrator—may allow students to see this favorite story in an entirely different light.

Considering “The Cask of Amontillado,” master storyteller Robert Louis Stevenson provides a craftman’s insight into the details Poe selects that give this story such power. Elena Baraban speculates on a possible motive (beyond pure insanity) for Montresor’s horrific crime.

The French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire did more than any other writer to elevate the reputation of Edgar Allan Poe. Upon first reading Poe, he exclaimed, “mon semblable, mon frere” (“my double, my brother”), and his identification with the American writer led him to dedicate a good part of the rest of his life to translating Poe’s works into French. He spent five hours a day on his translations and a good deal of his correspondence treated his favorite subject. Much of what he has to say, as in this excerpt about Poe’s characters, shows his critical acumen in regard to Poe’s life and work.

James W. Tuttleton was an American literature professor and critic at New York University who died in 1999. His incisive and well-written commentaries on American writers from Washington Irving to Kurt Vonnegut defy political correctness; as in this redemptive essay on Edgar Allan Poe, Tuttleton says what he thinks and supports his opinions with compelling evidence. Carl Mowery provides a straightforward, text-based questioning of the narrator’s reliability in “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

Flannery O’Connor

Flannery O’Connor is generally acknowledged as one of the greatest American fiction writers of the last century—a reputation that rests mostly on her emotionally powerful, incisively drawn, and exuberantly original short stories. In fact, in 2009
O'Connor's *The Complete Stories* (1972) was voted the “Best” of all the National Book Awards in Fiction of the past sixty years. But although her prose style is lucid and accessible, her fiction is by no means easy going. The stories violate the usual standards of good taste—presenting violence, racism, madness, deceit, despair, and sexual perversity—and challenge the reader's worldview. She is at once the darkest satirist and brightest religious visionary in modern American fiction. Students may find her initially troubling, perhaps even infuriating, but few contemporary writers so deeply reward study and discussion.

If you think Flannery O'Connor’s Southern world is likely to strike your students as remote and unfamiliar, you might begin by telling the class a little about it. Should your library own a copy of Barbara McKenzie’s book of photographs, *Flannery O’Connor’s Georgia* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980), by all means bring it in and show it around. McKenzie recalls John Wesley’s remark in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “Let’s drive through Georgia fast so we won’t have to look at it much,” and supplies a series of pictures of some “oppressive” landscapes. Besides, there is a stone marker announcing Toomsboro, a town whose name foreshadows the ending of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” and a glimpse of a pig parlor of which Mrs. Turpin of “Revelation” might have been proud.

An essay worth quoting aloud is Alice Walker’s sympathetic tribute, “Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O’Connor,” *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, 1983). “She was for me,” declares Walker, “the first great modern writer from the South,” and she praises O’Connor for not trying to enter the minds of her black characters, not insisting on knowing everything, on being God. “After her great stories of sin, damnation, prophecy, and revelation, the stories one reads casually in the average magazine seem to be about love and roast beef.”

O’Connor’s *Collected Works* has been accorded the honor of appearing in the Library of America series. This volume, along with three works of O’Connor criticism, was reviewed by Frederick Crews in the April 26, 1990, issue of the *New York Review of Books*. Crews has interesting things to say about O’Connor’s debt not only to New Criticism, but also to Edgar Allan Poe and Nathanael West. He offers insight as well into what he calls her “stern fanaticism” and her “twisted feelings about segregation.”

**A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND, page 420**

Without some attention to its Christian (specifically Catholic) assumptions, this story won’t make much sense to students, who might mistake it for a tale of meaningless violence. Their seeing what O’Connor is driving at depends on their reading with great care the conversation between The Misfit and the grandmother about Jesus, and the account of the old woman’s epiphany and death (par. 136).

Who is the central character? Clearly, the grandmother. This is her story from beginning to end, the story of her long overdue moral and spiritual growth. She causes things to happen; The Misfit merely reacts to her. She persuades the family to depart from the main road to see the old plantation. She causes the accident by letting the cat out of the basket. She dooms the family when she recognizes The Misfit. Her final gesture incites The Misfit to murder her.

An insightful and outspoken student might wonder about the appropriateness of imposing Catholic terms of redemption on all these Southern Protestants. (That the
eight-year-old is named John Wesley suggests that the family is at least nominally Methodist.) The story may draw other objections as well. O'Connor's use of familiar racist epithets will outrage some students unless they see that O'Connor is only reporting faithfully how the characters think and talk, not condoning it or thinking that way herself. This will be a problem, too, in teaching "Revelation" (and most Faulkner novels and Huckleberry Finn).

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. How early in the story does O'Connor foreshadow what will happen in the end? What further hints does she give us along the way? How does the scene at Red Sammy's Barbecue advance the story toward its conclusion? The foreshadowing of the story's tragic end comes as early as the opening paragraph. The grandmother doesn't want to go to Florida because the newspaper says, "this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida." The irony of this first paragraph's last two sentences—"I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did"—becomes evident several paragraphs later. Baily does not listen to her, so the grandmother addresses the children. John Wesley suggests that she stay home if she doesn't want to go to Florida (par. 3), and June Star says her grandmother "wouldn't stay home for a million bucks" because she would be "afraid she'd miss something" (par. 7). Of course, if the grandmother had stayed home, she—along with her entire family—would neither have met nor been murdered by this same Misfit.

Along the way, O'Connor provides many other hints. The grandmother brings the cat in specific defiance against Baily's wishes (par. 10). She wears a dress and hat as they travel so that "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (par. 12). She points out a family graveyard to her grandchildren (par. 22).

But the scene at Red Sammy's Barbecue remains one of the most important scenes as it advances the story to its conclusion. No mere filler, this scene tightens the suspense and enforces the hint that the much talked-about Misfit is bound to show his face. In his highway signs, Red Sammy boasts of his uniqueness: NONE LIKE FAMOUS RED SAMMY'S. He considers himself a hard-to-find good man. In calling him "a good man" (par. 37), the grandmother first introduces the theme. The barbecue proprietor agrees with her, even declares, thinking of how many bad characters are on the loose these days, "A good man is hard to find" (par. 43). In the end, the title leaves us thinking: yes, a good man (a saint) certainly is hard to find. We find, at the end, a serenely good woman whose salvation has come only through traumatic suffering and the amazing arrival of grace.

2. When we first meet the grandmother, what kind of person is she? What do her various remarks reveal about her? Does she remain a static character, or does she in any way change as the story goes on? O'Connor loves to pick unlikely, ordinary people and show how, by the sudden and unexpected operation of God's grace, they are granted the possibility of sanctity. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" the nitwit grandmother dies loving (and presumably forgiving) The Misfit. In the course
of the story, the grandmother grows and changes; she does not remain flat or static. At first, she seems a small-minded biddy, selfish or at least self-centered, prone to stupid remarks like “Oh look at the cute little pickaninny!” (par. 18) and “People are certainly not nice like they used to be” (par. 35), capable of blaming Europe for “the way things were now” (par. 44), and regretting that she hadn’t married Mr. Teagarden “because he was a gentleman and had bought Coca-Cola stock when it first came out” (par. 26). These remarks reveal her to be a manipulative, self-centered, silly woman, but by the end, she gives a final gesture that indicates a radical infusion of grace and compassion. As Flannery O’Connor herself wrote, “I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work” (“On Her Own Work”).

3. When the grandmother’s head clears for an instant (paragraph 136), what does she suddenly understand? In the end, when we are told “her head cleared for an instant,” the grandmother becomes newly perceptive. She reveals—and offers to The Misfit—her vast, compassionate heart. When she declares, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children” (par. 136), she is not—as some students have suggested—recognizing The Misfit as a bastard son who she didn’t know existed; she here accepts responsibility for him “joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots deeply in the mystery she has merely been prattling about so far” (O’Connor, “On Her Own Work”). We have no reason to doubt The Misfit’s shrewd remark, “She would of been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (par. 140), meaning that it took an act of violence to push her toward this moment of grace.

In O’Connor’s Catholic worldview, The Misfit has perhaps, ironically, actually done the grandmother a favor. She has been redeemed and is headed straight to heaven for her final Christ-like act of love the moment before she dies. She realizes that there is a chance that The Misfit will repent, and she reaches out to him lovingly, as though he were a child. By this time, she already knows that The Misfit’s gang has murdered her son and daughter-in-law and all the children. The Misfit may be a ruthless murderer, but that doesn’t prevent her from loving him and hoping for his redemption. Symbolically, in death the old woman’s body lies with legs crossed, a look of sweetness on her face. The Misfit, naturally, is glum, having just declined a chance for his own salvation.

4. What do we learn from the conversation between The Misfit and the grandmother while the others go out to the woods? How would you describe The Misfit’s outlook on the world? Compare it with the author’s from whatever you know about Flannery O’Connor and from the story itself. As O’Connor herself says about this story, “The heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death. And to all appearances she, like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for it. She would like to see the event postponed. Indefinitely” (Excerpt from “On Her Own Work”). It may seem hard for some students to accept the possibility that the grandmother is the story’s heroine, but a close reading of the long conversation between The Misfit and the grandmother may help your students see the story more clearly.

The Misfit reveals to the grandmother many details about his past: his many jobs and several experiences. The most life-changing of these experiences occurred when a psychologist accused him of killing his father—although he says his father died
from the flu epidemic—because the authorities “had the papers” on him, he was thrown in the state penitentiary. There, The Misfit develops his peculiar worldview, identifying himself with Jesus Christ, since they both suffered unjustly for crimes they did not commit. He laments that they never showed him the supposed papers, and the injustice of years of punishment has led him to a hedonistic philosophy of life; and his pleasure comes from violent murders.

The reader may be surprised to learn that The Misfit believes the Bible and interprets it literally, going so far as to agree with the grandmother's religious cliché, “if you would pray . . . Jesus would help you” (par. 118), but he replies that he doesn’t want any help because he's “doing all right by myself” (par. 121). He is neither agnostic nor atheist, but he believes that Jesus's miraculous resurrection has “thrown everything off balance” (par. 133). He named himself The Misfit, explaining “I can't make what all I did wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment” (par. 129). He admits that he has done wrong, and a sympathetic reader may be able, like the grandmother, to see behind this murderer is a man who deeply mourns the wasted years he spent in a prison for a crime he did not commit.

The grandmother is not the only one changed by this encounter. The Misfit is also changed. A subtle shift takes place in his attitude about his violent murders, going from believing there's “no pleasure but meanness” (par. 134) to the final paragraph's “Shut up, Bobby Lee, . . . It's no real pleasure in life.”

At first glance, The Misfit and O'Connor have nothing in common, but perhaps what they share may be one of the story's central mysteries—a deeply rooted belief in the literal death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The difference, of course, is that O'Connor embraces this conviction with faith, while The Misfit struggles with doubt, claiming that he needs visual evidence of Jesus's resurrection in order to “throw away everything and follow Him” (par. 134).

5. **How would you respond to a reader who complained, “The title of this story is just an obvious platitude”?** At first glance, the title may appear to be a platitude, but a careful reading of the story proves that it is much more than that. A story's title is often a way to draw a reader into the plot, setting, or characters, but here O'Connor uses the phrase with much irony. From the title alone, students may be tempted to assume the story follows a “single-woman-can't-find-a-man-to-marry” or “married-woman-discovers-her-husband-is-cheating” plot. Of course, nothing could be farther from the truth.

A full appreciation of the title hinges on students' understanding of at least two issues. First, what does it mean to be a “good man” from the Southern perspective, and second, what does it mean to be a “good man” from a Christian perspective? From a mid-century Southern point of view, a good man comes from a “good family” and is well-mannered. The grandmother wants to believe The Misfit really is such a man, coming from good blood and with a good name. “‘Listen,’ the grandmother almost screamed, ‘I know you're a good man. You don’t look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!’” (par. 88). O'Connor shows the irony of this assessment, when The Misfit and his gang show good manners to the women, although they are about to kill them. “The children's mother had begun to make heaving noises as if she couldn't get her breath. 'Lady,' he asked, 'would you and that little girl like to step off yonder with Bobby Lee and Hiram and join your husband?''” (par. 124).

Keep in mind that O'Connor, as a devout Catholic who lived in the largely Protestant “Bible Belt” South, would have strong opinions about what it means to be a “good
man” or a “good woman” from a spiritual perspective. You might ask your students to write about what their religious tradition—or their lack of—proposes about what it means to be “good,” and whether or not this view is upheld or undermined in the story.

For O’Connor’s own reading of this famous story, see her critical comments following the stories in this chapter. Her interpretation will certainly startle many students reading the story for the first time. If you choose to consider O’Connor’s comments in class, it may be worth asking how authoritative a writer’s interpretation of her own work is. Are there limitations or inherent biases in a writer’s self-assessment? According to the intentional fallacy, we cannot uncritically accept an author’s statement of intended meaning, because the author is unable to see his or her own work objectively. An author necessarily sees the finished work through the veil of the original intent, with the possibility of projecting onto the text meanings that were intended but that have not been realized and therefore are not communicated to any other reader through the text itself. Still, knowing an author’s conscious intentions may help point a reader in the right direction—at least in general terms.

In an incisive essay on Flannery O’Connor, Clara Claiborne Park points out that while O’Connor may have objected to readers’ attempts to reduce her stories to literal meanings or themes, she herself tended to do so in her own commentaries on the stories. Despite their excellence, the stories, when so reduced, may be faulted as oversimplified fables of Christian salvation through suffering. “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” seems vulnerable to this charge. Park observes: “As incursions of grace through arson and through murder and through sudden stroke become familiar to the point of predictability, all moral ambiguity evaporates, leaving the stories that puzzled us all too clear” (Rejoining the Common Reader, Chicago: Northwestern UP, 1991). A question for class discussion is: Can O’Connor be defended against this charge? (Perhaps she intends no ambiguity.) Evidence of the story’s depth and complexity can be found in a volume containing critical essays by various hands, A Good Man Is Hard to Find, edited by Frederick Asals (in the series “Women Writers: Texts and Contexts,” New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993).

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information and links for O’Connor. Longman Lecture, interactive reading, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.”

REVELATION, page 430

One of the last stories Flannery O’Connor finished, “Revelation” appeared in her posthumous collection Everything That Rises Must Converge (New York: Farrar, 1965). The story stands as “a kind of final statement, a rounding off of her fiction taken as a whole” writes Walter Sullivan, who believes that Mrs. Turpin’s vision of the bridge of souls, with its rogues, freaks, and lunatics, is the author’s vision of humanity and her favorite cast of characters (“Flannery O’Connor, Sin, and Grace,” in The Sounder Few: Essays from the Hollins Critic, ed. R. H. W. Dillard, George Garrett, and John Rees Moore [Athens: U of Georgia P, 1971]).

Epiphanies, O’Connor finds, are imminent in the drabbest and most ordinary of life’s moments. In “Revelation,” she makes a doctor’s waiting room the setting for
prophecy, and constructs a pigpen as the doorstep of beatitude. Like Malamud's Angel Levine, Mary Grace, a pimpled, fat Wellesley girl with emotional difficulties, seems an unlikely messenger of the Lord. But Mary Grace—an agent of redemption, as her name indicates—announces herself as a kind of biblical prophet: with "churning face," she goes into a trance. Her eyes change color, and Mrs. Turpin knows that the girl is about to utter some profundity meant for Mrs. Turpin alone. Significantly, the book Mary Grace hurls at Mrs. Turpin that shatters her view of herself is called *Human Development*.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of "Revelation." Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. **How does Mrs. Turpin see herself before Mary Grace calls her a wart hog?**

   Mrs. Turpin is a self-satisfied, self-righteous woman, who sees herself as a model Christian. Her reaction to the girl's message includes her assessment, "The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman" (par. 129). Later she rails at God, "Why me! . . . It's no trash around here, black or white, that I haven't given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church." (par. 181).

   The reader is also quickly aware of how important social hierarchy is to Mrs. Turpin, and that she derives great satisfaction in quickly judging people and establishing her assumed superiority to most of them. O'Connor tells us “sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people” (par. 24) and wondering “who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself,” and wrestling with the question of whether or not she would choose to be “white trash” or a “nigger” (par. 24).

2. **What is the narrator's attitude toward Mrs. Turpin in the beginning of the story? How can you tell? Does this attitude change, or stay the same, at the end?**

   Mrs. Turpin, bigoted and smugly self-congratulatory, seems an unlikely recipient for a revelation direct from God; yet even she is capable of accepting such a revelation and of being transformed and redeemed by it. In "Revelation" the smug Mrs. Turpin is blessed with a vision of salvation, but it is clear that the narrator denounces Mrs. Turpin's behavior and thought patterns wholeheartedly. Since it is only at the very end of the story that Mrs. Turpin experiences the full impact of her revelation, the narrator continues to condemn her attitude up until the end.

3. **Describe the relationship between Mary Grace and her mother. What annoying platitudes does the mother mouth? Which of Mrs. Turpin’s opinions seem especially to anger Mary Grace?**

   Clearly, Mary Grace and her mother disapprove of one other. The tension grows between them in the waiting room as Mary Grace's mother recites several annoying platitudes to Mrs. Turpin (“Takes all kinds to make the world go round” [par. 60] or “there are just some people you can’t tell anything to” [par. 100]). The mother's comments seem directed toward Mary Grace, a manipulative strategy that starts the girl's anger smoldering. For example, Mary Grace's response to her mother's platitude "As long as you have a good disposition . . . I don't think it makes a bit of difference what size you are. You just can't beat a good disposition" (par. 18) is to scowl “at Mrs. Turpin as if she did not like her looks” (par. 19).
Mary Grace clearly lacks this “good disposition,” but is nevertheless the messenger of truth in the doctor’s waiting room. She gets more and more agitated as her mother and Mrs. Turpin talk. But when Mrs. Turpin answers the mother’s comment about ungratefulness by proudly declaring “If there’s one thing I am . . . it’s grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, ‘Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!’” (par. 101), Mary Grace finally hurls the book and strikes Mrs. Turpin over her left eye.

4. Sketch the plot of the story. What moment or event do you take to be the crisis, or turning point? What is the climax? What is the conclusion?

“Revelation,” a beautifully plotted story, builds slowly to its crisis or turning point: Mary Grace’s assault on Mrs. Turpin in the doctor’s office or, more specifically, the moment when she declares, “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.” The climax we take to be Mrs. Turpin’s challenge to God, “Who do you think you are?”; and the conclusion, her shocked acceptance of the final revelation—the vision of the bridge to heaven.

5. What do you infer from Mrs. Turpin’s conversation with the black farm workers? Is she their friend? Why does she now find their flattery unacceptable (“Jesus satisfied with her”)?

Ruby Turpin is not the friend of her farm workers. They listen to her story with awe, but the reader knows this is purely a charade. The reader senses that this is the first time they’ve had such a long “conversation,” and their words are empty flattery. It seems this is also the first time Mrs. Turpin has been dissatisfied with their flattery of her, for before this moment, she has believed that she really was the “sweetest white lady” on earth (par. 159). This encounter moves her an inch closer to her final epiphany, leading to her “moment of grace.”

6. When, near the end of the story, Mrs. Turpin roars, “Who do you think you are?” an echo “returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood” (paragraph 188). Explain. Like the handwriting on the wall, Mary Grace’s utterance is baffling and mysterious. Sorely troubled, Mrs. Turpin turns it over and over in her mind all afternoon. She knows from Whom the message came: “What do you send me a message like that for?” (par. 179), and her impulse is to defend herself, to argue back at God.


That Mrs. Turpin is a “country female Jacob”—a reference to the Old Testament patriarch who famously “wrestled” with God—is evident from the story’s end. Her irate challenge to the Almighty, “Who do you think you are?” is exactly the question God is asking her. God replies immediately: He is Lord of all creation, whose natural world “burned for a moment with a transparent intensity” (par. 188). He is the giver of life and of death, as Mrs. Turpin realizes when she sees Claud’s truck, whose driver and passengers at any moment could be destroyed.

7. What is the final revelation given to Mrs. Turpin? (To state it is to state the theme of the story.) What new attitude does the revelation impart? (How is Mrs. Turpin left with a new vision of humanity?) In the final revelation, God
shows Mrs. Turpin exactly who she is: just another sinner, whose pride in her virtues
must perish in eternal light. For her, the hard road toward sainthood lies ahead.

Even the hogs are fat with meanings. They resemble Mrs. Turpin, who is over-
weight, with eyes small and fierce, and whom Mary Grace calls a wart hog. In her
perplexity, Mrs. Turpin is herself like the old sow she blinds with the hose. Her
thoughts about pigs resemble her thoughts on the structure of society, “creating a
hierarchy of pigs with a pig astronaut at the top,” writes Josephine Hendin in *The

Mrs. Turpin gazes into her pig parlor “as if through the very heart of mystery.”
As darkness draws near—and the moment of ultimate revelation—the pigs are suf-
fused with a red glow. Contemplating them, Mrs. Turpin seems to absorb “some
abysmal life-giving knowledge.” What is this knowledge? Glowing pigs suggest, per-
haps, the resurrection of the body. As Sister Kathleen Feeley says in her excellent
discussion of this story, “Natural virtue does as much for fallen men as parlor treat-
ment does for pigs: it does not change their intrinsic nature. Only one thing can
change man: his participation in the grace of Redemption” (*Flannery O’Connor:
Voice of the Peacock* [New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1972]).

We would be remiss not to comment that O’Connor herself would not have appre-
ciated this question about theme. In “Writing Short Stories” O’Connor commented:

> People talk about the theme of a story as if the theme were like the string that a
> sack of chicken feed is tied with. They think that if you can pick out the theme,
> the way you pick the right thread in the chicken-feed sack, you can rip the story
> open and feed the chickens. But this is not the way meaning works in fiction. . . .
> A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes
every word in the story to say what the meaning is. (Mystery and Manners: Occa-

In a classroom, we obviously sometimes find it useful to decide upon a story’s main
ideas. But meaning radiates beyond these conclusions. You might ask students about
some of the meanings in “Revelation” that we could miss focusing on theme.

Joyce Carol Oates, in a comment on “Revelation,” finds the story intensely per-
sonal. Mary Grace is one of those misfits—“pathetic, overeducated, physically unat-
tractive girls like Joy/Hulga of ‘Good Country People’”—of whom the author is espe-
cially fond. “That O’Connor identifies with these girls is obvious; it is she, through
Mary Grace, who throws that textbook on human development at all of us, striking
us in the foreheads, hopefully to bring about a change in our lives” (“The Visionary
Art of Flannery O’Connor,” in *New Heaven, New Earth* [New York: Vanguard,
1974]). In a survey of fiction, Josephine Hendin also stresses O’Connor’s feelings of
kinship for Mary Grace. As the daughter of a genteel family who wrote “distinctly
genteel books,” O’Connor saw herself as an outsider: “She covered her anger with
politeness and wrote about people who did the same.” In “Revelation,” Mary Grace’s
hurling the book is an act of violence against her mother, for whom Mrs. Turpin
serves as a convenient stand-in (“Experimental Fiction,” *Harvard Guide to Contem-
porary Writing* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979]).

At least one African American student has reacted angrily to “Revelation,” call-
ing it the “most disgusting story I’ve ever read” and objecting to “the constant repe-
tition of the word nigger.” This is a volatile issue and involves a genuine concern. If
possible, the matter should be seriously addressed in class rather than ignored or brushed aside. No one would assume that because Othello depicts several murders, it therefore endorses murder, but some students will take the occurrence of racial epithets in a story as proof of racism on the part of the author. Thus, you might begin by pointing out—or better, lead the students to point out—that while the word appears frequently in the dialogue and in Mrs. Turpin's interior monologues, O'Connor does not employ it when speaking in her own voice: her depiction of the reflexive racism of her characters does not constitute an endorsement of racism. The use and repetition of the word nigger will inevitably create an uncomfortable atmosphere in class and may upset students; such usage is to be found in much literature of the past, as witness the constant controversy over Huckleberry Finn. But literature must be given the scope to tell the truth about human experience including its uglier manifestations, however painful the truth may sometimes be. We cannot properly come to terms with the endemic racism of America's past (and present) by euphemising it out of our collective memory. It seems rather ironic, to say the least, that we should insist—quite rightly—that our culture is profoundly racist and at the same time seek to suppress classic works of literature for their accurate depiction of that racism.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information and links for O'Connor. Interpreting “Revelation,” and short evaluation questions for “Revelation.”

PARKER’S BACK, page 444

“Parker’s Back” is a fitting coda to Flannery O’Connor’s life work in that, like so many of her finest fictions, it concerns itself with a flight from—and ultimate submission to—the relentless power of saving grace.

Students schooled in and comfortable with the prevailing tendencies of contemporary American short fiction may initially have a hard time with O’Connor for a number of reasons, one of which is the “Southern grotesque” element in her fiction. Another, of course, is the all-pervading religious sensibility in her work; as her fellow Southern novelist Madison Jones has observed,

O’Connor is one of only a tiny few Southern writers who survived—with strong faith intact—the rapid diminishment after World War II of the older vision . . . a fundamental assumption that individual human beings are participants in the mystery of a universal drama of good and evil directed by some kind of divinity beyond man’s understanding. (“O’Connor and Current Fiction,” Flannery O’Connor: In Celebration of Genius, ed. Sarah Gordon [Athens: Hill Street P, 2000])

Yet another of the difficulties that she presents, and far from the least of them, is the cool detachment, even steeliness, of her approach to her graceless protagonists. As Fred Chappell points out in the same volume, “O’Connor is cooler than [Baudeelaire, Mark Twain, Poe, and other ‘masters of the sardonic’]. Icy disdain pervades her pages, and she is as religiously pitiless as Virgil admonishes Dante to become as he guides the trembling poet through the horrors of the Inferno” (“Vertigo”).

O’Connor herself was neither unaware of nor uncomfortable with this tendency in her work as she makes clear from a passage in her essay “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction”:
It’s considered an absolute necessity these days for writers to have compassion. Compassion is a word that sounds good in anybody’s mouth and which no book jacket can do without. It is a quality that no one can put his finger on in any exact critical sense, so it is always safe for anybody to use. Usually I think what is meant by it is that the writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human. The kind of hazy compassion demanded of the writer now makes it difficult for him to be anti-anything. Certainly when the grotesque is used in a legitimate way, the intellectual and moral judgments implicit in it will have the ascendancy over feeling.

O’Connor never possesses a “hazy compassion” for her characters, despite their evident flaws. Lack of grace in O’Connor’s characters usually manifests itself in one of two forms: her protagonists may be smug, self-assured, and self-righteous (like the grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” or Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation”), or else stricken and floundering, like O. E. Parker in “Parker’s Back.” Both types are on display in this story, since Sarah Ruth Cates fits into the former category. However, it is important to realize that, despite her all-encompassing religiosity, Sarah Ruth is very far from being a role model or spiritual guide.

“Parker’s Back” is the last story that O’Connor wrote. Although she started it five years before her death in 1964, she was still revising in bed during her last long-term, unplanned hospital visit, against her doctor’s orders. (It was published posthumously a year after her long fight with lupus ended.)

Students may find it surprising that Flannery O’Connor stated, in a letter just nine days before her death in August 1964, that “Sarah Ruth was the heretic—the notion that you can worship in pure spirit.” In the fifth century, St. Augustine warned, “All heresy does begin in being too holy,” meaning that a heretic is out of balance. In telling Parker that God “don’t look. He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face” (par. 185), Sarah Ruth rejects the Incarnation, one of the central mysteries of the Christian faith.

Whatever his faults, Parker is no heretic. He has no false beliefs, since he has no beliefs at all. As a man in flight from religion from an early age, he is prideful, apathetic, and seeks his own satisfaction. By the end of the story, Parker’s tears indicate that, in contrast to his earlier days of running from God, he will come to the Christ whose image he has placed on his back. Parker’s central transformation occurs when he humbles himself to embrace the mystery of the Byzantine Christ, who offers him mercy and not judgment. Readers can assume that the tattoo on his back will be his last.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Parker’s Back.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Why, in your judgment, did Parker marry Sarah Ruth? Why did she marry him? These are puzzling questions, especially the second. The opening sentences of the story state “Parker understood why he had married her—he couldn’t have got her any other way—but he couldn’t understand why he stayed with her now.” Still, this beginning answer seems hardly satisfactory after we learn later that Parker has had involvements with a number of women (from which he seems to have formed the impression that he is devastatingly irresistible) and that he had no intention of ever
getting married. At the beginning of the story, Parker is genuinely disgusted and “ashamed” with himself for not being able to leave his pregnant wife: “he stayed as if she had him conjured” (par. 1).

Indeed, this odd couple seems to be grossly mismatched. Although the story suggests they come from similar backgrounds—little education and even less money—they have little else in common. From a sermon preached by Father Paul Yerger of the Orthodox Church in 2004, which interestingly enough took “Parker’s Back” as its text: “something attracts him to Sarah Ruth; he is hungry for something: to love something greater than himself, to partake of beauty and glory and mystery, like the tattooed man he saw at the fair.”

Harder to understand may be Sarah Ruth’s motive for marrying O. E. Parker. In “The Ultimate Heresy: The Heartless God in ‘Parker’s Back,’” Stephen Sparrow suggests one possibility: “Sarah Ruth is also a girl who, in the manner of most Old Testament women, expected some day to become somebody’s wife, and in spite of O. E.’s naturally crude nature, for her there was a certain amount of attraction in that his name’s initials stood for two Old Testament characters.”

2. At the end of the second paragraph, the author says of Parker and Sarah Ruth: “He could account for her one way or another; it was himself he could not understand.” How accurate is each part of this assumption? Parker is wrong about Sarah Ruth and right about himself. From their first meeting after his truck broke down on the highway until the story’s climactic ending, it is clear that Parker fails to understand his wife. He never sees her clearly, even as he is blinded to himself. He overestimates his physical attractiveness both to his wife and his employer, he never questions why he continually obtains new tattoos, and he fails to consider why after running his whole life, he settles down with a plain, overbearing woman whom he doesn’t love.

Despite his attempts to read into Sarah Ruth’s words and actions, he is consistently unable to interpret her with any degree of accuracy or certainty: “Sometimes he supposed that she had married him because she meant to save him. At other times he had a suspicion that she actually liked everything she said she didn’t” (par. 2). He has neither insight nor opinion into her feelings, even as he had “no opinion” about their wedding ceremony in “the County Ordinary’s office” which took place there “because Sarah Ruth thought churches were idolatrous” (par. 72). Still, despite her fervent opinion on several religious and practical matters, Sarah Ruth’s deeper motives remain hidden from the reader, even as they are for her own husband. She is extremely overbearing and narrow-minded about her interpretation of Christian values—disapproving of automobiles, smoking, drinking, make-up, and cussing—and the reader, like Parker, wonders what, if any, human feelings lie behind her brazen exterior and harsh doctrinal beliefs.

3. What does Parker’s employer think of him? How valid is her estimation? Parker’s employer is rightly dissatisfied with both his performance and his manners since he breaks her tractor on his second day of work and takes off his shirt while he works (breaking the social code for a Southern man in the presence of a lady). According to Parker, this seventy-year-old female employer is “too dried up to have an interest in anything except getting as much work out of him as she could” (par. 5)—and he is right. One of the most comical descriptions in the story is Parker’s view
of his employer: “this old woman looked at him the same way she looked at her old tractor—as if she had to put up with it because it was all she had” (par. 5). The same might be said of why Sarah Ruth stays married to Parker.

4. What is the basis of Parker’s fascination with tattooing? What kinds of feelings usually prompt him to get a new tattoo? O. E. Parker is an unsatisfied man who seeks fulfillment and beauty with his tattoos. After his marriage, he becomes “gloomier than ever” and so “whenever Parker couldn’t stand the way he felt, he would have another tattoo” (par. 72). His life plays out a cycle of restlessness, as he imagines a new tattoo, acquires it, and remains satisfied with it for about a month: then the pattern repeats.

It is interesting to observe that despite the seemingly static nature of this procedure, there is some subtle but steady movement taking place throughout. As we see in paragraph 22, his tattoos progress from inanimate objects (anchors and crossed rifles) through animals (a tiger, a panther, a cobra, hawks) to humans (Queen Elizabeth II and her husband Prince Philip—which demonstrates as well as anything could O’Connor’s contention that “He did not care much what the subject was as long as it was colorful”).

His encounter at age fourteen with the tattooed man at the fair marks the beginning of his discontentment with life and his wrestling with God. Like the prophet Jonah, Parker runs from the truth he knows intellectually but does not want to accept emotionally. It could be said that the final step in this progression is his leap from the human to the divine with the tattoo of Christ on his back. All of his previous tattoos have been where he could see them; perhaps in having his back tattooed for Sarah Ruth, he has broken free of the limits of his self-preoccupation by reaching out to another, which foreshadows his leap (by the story’s end) to seeking God.

5. “Long views depressed Parker. You look out into space like that and you begin to feel as if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion” (paragraph 36). What insights does this statement give us into Parker’s character—and, consequently, into his behavior? This quote provides an essential insight into O. E. Parker: he is very much a creature of the moment and does not want to think about the future. His existence has been a series of impulsive actions—he fled from a church revival to the navy, then fled from the navy, and so on—and he has thrashed his way blindly through his life. He is out of touch with his own inner needs and discontents, and nothing has ever touched that part of himself except the tattooed man at the fair and his own subsequent pursuit of tattoos: “Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed. Even then it did not enter his head, but a peculiar unease settled in him. It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed” (par. 19). Parker’s indifference to the finer points of religious belief is part of a much larger indifference to just about everything beyond himself and his immediate needs and gratifications.

6. What motivates Parker to get the tattoo on his back? How does he expect Sarah Ruth to respond to it? Parker only has one place on his body without a tattoo—his back. Unlike all his other tattoos, this is the first time Parker wants to acquire more pictures on his body to please someone other than himself, as he thought: “He visualized having a tattoo put there that Sarah Ruth would not be able
to resist—a religious subject” (par. 79). He is so disappointed that she will not look at
his other tattoos that he wants something on his body that will “bring [her] to heel”
(par. 80). He seems to honestly think that his wife will be happy to see art on the only
place he lacks it. In this sense, a sympathetic reader may feel pity for such blindness.

It is a measure of how far Parker is from understanding his wife’s religious views
that he can for even a moment entertain the notion that she will be pleased by the
tattoo of Christ on his back. From their first meeting, “Vanity!” and “Idolatry!” have
been among her favorite exclamations and she seems to enjoy describing the “judg-
ment seat of God” for her husband (par. 77). She believes that any pictorial repre-
sentation of Jesus is idolatry—worshipping an image rather than God himself. She is
fanatical on this point of theology. “No man shall see his face,” she remarks as she
adamantly declares that God is only spirit (par. 185). When she, of course, despises
the tattoo and barely looks at it, “Parker was too stunned to resist” the beating that
she gives him with her household broom.

7. While waiting for the “artist” to finish the “God” tattoo, Parker feels that
“his sensations of the day and night before were those of a crazy man and that he
would return to doing things according to his own sound judgment” (paragraph
117). How much self-awareness does this observation demonstrate? This insight
from the story’s narrator demonstrates that Parker is still running from God—much
like the Old Testament’s Moses and Jonah. He wants to sleep as he has done when
he acquired all his other tattoos, but he cannot. His body is tense, his mind is racing.
Even after the burning bush-like epiphany of the tractor collision, Parker is still try-
ing to deny that his life has changed. His near-death experience and the burning
shoes (where his feet are not but should have been) jolt him into a reality that he
never wanted to accept. Even as he continually thinks that he will not return to
Sarah Ruth’s bed, Parker thinks that he wants nothing to do with God—yet his soul’s
dissatisfaction will not allow him to ignore either.

8. When the artist asks him if he’s “gone and got religion,” Parker says, “I
ain’t got no use for none of that. A man can’t save his self from whatever it is he
don’t deserve none of my sympathy” (paragraph 119). What does this attitude
illustrate about Parker’s personality? By his own standard, how much of his own
sympathy does he deserve? This is a confusing response to a seemingly honest ques-
tion from the tattoo artist. Despite his chosen tattoo, O. E. Parker remains a stub-
born man who enjoys ridiculing religion, especially when he’s away from Sarah Ruth.
He deserves no one’s sympathy, not even his own.

This rebellious attitude is especially noticeable in the barroom/pool room scene,
which occurs immediately after the tattoo artist finishes the Byzantine Christ tattoo
on Parker’s back. Finally, his upward progress is clear, not only in his seeking the
Christ tattoo for Sarah Ruth, but also in the development and refinement of his
motivations in doing so.

Although he seems concerned to find one that she will not, in spite of herself, be
able to resist, in the end it is Parker himself who cannot resist the “all-demanding eyes”
on his back. After the barroom fight leads him to examine his soul deeply for the first
time in his life, he determines that “she would at least be pleased. It seemed to him
that, all along, that was what he wanted, to please her” (par. 151). From wishing to sub-
jugate her to his will, to wanting to give himself over to her wishes, his feelings toward
Sarah Ruth parallel his feelings toward Christ, and thus prefigure his salvation.
9. Why does Sarah Ruth refuse to recognize Parker by his initials? What is the significance of his whispering his name through the keyhole, and what effect does doing so have on him? Sarah Ruth dislikes her husband's initials because she prefers his given name of Obadiah Elihue Parker with its biblical associations. Obadiah is the name of an Old Testament prophet, and it means "servant of God"; Elihu (the more common spelling) is one of Job's comforters, and his name signifies "my God is he."

Parker, however, hates his original names because their oddity left him open to ridicule throughout his life. His substitution of initials for his names at some level also symbolizes his rejection of the biblical Christianity of his parents—or so it seems to Sarah Ruth. Her insistence that he whisper his full name, therefore has a symbolic importance—an acceptance of who he truly is. But he soon discovers that despite his acceptance of his name and his tattoo (which suggests his own mysterious and muddled turn toward God), his wife's religion gives him no peace or comfort.

The couple end at a terrible stalemate—psychologically and theologically. The tattooed Christ with its “all demanding eyes” is like a shrine complete with crucifix erected next to their little embankment house. For Sarah Ruth, so long as her marriage survives, there can be no escape now from awareness that Jesus Christ is both God and Man; and for O. E. there is the realization that there is a God who must not be resisted as His eyes are—quite literally—on his back, following him everywhere. Sarah Ruth’s deepest fears about traditional and orthodox Christianity come to haunt her through her husband’s tattoo, and her only defense is to beat him. O. E., despite the scorn for religion he expressed both to the tattooist and the men in the pool room, has unwittingly stumbled and fallen over the very thing he didn’t want to know.

The Stephen Sparrow essay quoted earlier is worth consulting in its entirety. The text can be found online at Comforts of Home, a site dedicated to Flannery O’Connor: http://mediaspecialist.org.

—Michael Palma and Erika Koss

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information and links for O’Connor.

FLANNERY O’CONNOR ON WRITING

EXCERPT FROM “ON HER OWN WORK”: INSIGHTS INTO “A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND,” page 458


Southern students, she had learned, tended to recognize the grandmother as exactly like one of their own relatives, “and they knew, from personal experience, that the old lady lacked comprehension, but that she had a good heart.” When her head clears for an instant, the grandmother
realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she has merely been prattling about so far. At this point, she does the right thing, she makes the right gesture. I find that students are often puzzled by what she says and does here, but I think myself that if I took out this gesture and what she says with it, I would have no story.

It is important to note O'Connor's warning against equating The Misfit with the devil. Instead, in her view, this murderous criminal is a potential saint gone terribly wrong. She even claims that the grandmother's gesture, “like the mustard seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in The Misfit’s heart” and redeem him. Can we accept O'Connor's statement that “in this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies”?

Frederick Asals points out in a fruitful critical reading that it remains hard to ignore all those dead bodies. In Asals's view, no other O'Connor story sets up such extreme tension between matters sacred and profane, between comedy and violence. See Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1982), 142–54.

ON HER CATHOLIC FAITH, page 460

O'Connor's brief statement on her faith is extraordinarily revealing. To say that her self-description avoids conventional Catholic pieties is an understatement. The Church itself, she maintains, is part of the burden a Catholic bears only because one believes in the divinity of Christ. The key statement is her explanation why her violent and grim stories are never bitter: “You have to cherish the world at the same time you struggle to endure it.”

EXCERPT FROM “THE GROTESQUE IN SOUTHERN FICTION”: THE SERIOUS WRITER AND THE TIRED READER, page 461

O'Connor’s remarks about “the serious writer” and “the tired reader” constitute a brilliant defense of real literary artistry in an age that mostly demands light entertainment. Now decades later, O'Connor’s tough-minded and commonsensical stance seems more relevant than ever. She insists that storytellers aim for their art to be a “redemptive act.” Art seeks to transform its audience, not merely to entertain it. Such art, O’Connor states, does not come without cost. The cost to the writer is the requirement “to operate at the maximum of his intelligence and his talents.” The cost to the tired reader is to wake up and pay attention. There was nothing middlebrow about O'Connor's aesthetic; she aimed high and expected her readers to do the same.

QUESTIONS

1. What is Flannery O'Connor's opinion of book clubs? Explain her remark on this subject in the second paragraph.
2. Does O'Connor condemn people who want fiction to leave them “lifted up”? What is her attitude toward them?

3. By what means can writers write the great novels of the future?

CRITICS ON FLANNERY O’CONNOR, pages 463–470

J. O. Tate, A Good Source Is Not So Hard to Find: The Real Life Misfit
Mary Jane Schenck, Deconstructing “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”
Louise S. Cowan, The Character of Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation”
Kathleen Feeley, The Mystery of Divine Direction; “Parker’s Back”
Dean Flower, Listening to Flannery O’Connor

We have presented a selection of critical perspectives on O’Connor to supplement the three statements she made on her own work. (She was a formidably lucid explicator of her own methods.) The four articles excerpted on her work by literary critics provide different perspectives. Louise S. Cowan considers O’Connor’s fiction in a larger social context, stressing the importance of religion in the value system of the South, to present a nuanced, somewhat sympathetic view of Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation.” J. O. Tate provides a historical analysis of the factual sources of O’Connor’s memorable character, The Misfit, in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” (We even reproduce the original newspaper article O’Connor saw in 1952 that inspired the story.) Mary Jane Schenck deconstructs the same story. Kathleen Feeley contrasts Sarah Ruth’s narrowness of spirit with her husband’s openness to mystery, and thus redemption, in “Parker’s Back.” Smith professor Dean Flower writes about the only known recording of O’Connor reading “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” aloud—at Vanderbilt University in 1959—remarking on both the warmth and humor in her voice and comments.
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, THE YELLOW WALLPAPER, page 472

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is now such a famous short story that it is interesting to recall its relatively recent rescue from oblivion. The facts behind the original creation of the tale and its modern rediscovery are worth recounting. Charlotte Perkins Gilman completed the story in 1890 after the breakup of her first marriage. Based on her own experience with depression and the debilitating effects of her medical treatment for the condition, “The Yellow Wallpaper” was written, she later claimed, to “save people from being driven crazy.” Gilman sent the story to William Dean Howells, then the most influential critic in American fiction. Admiring it, he sent the story to Horace Scudder, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, who turned it down on the basis of its stark and unsettling contents. As Howells later commented, it was “too terribly good to be printed” there. When the story was published in New England Magazine in 1892, it stirred up a minor controversy. Howells later reprinted it in his 1920 anthology, The Great American Short Stories. For the next fifty years the story remained out of print. In 1973, the Feminist Press reissued it as a separate pamphlet with an admiring afterword. Six years later, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar discussed it in their pioneering feminist study, The Madwoman in the Attic (1979). Soon thereafter, “The Yellow Wallpaper” became one of the most widely discussed texts in feminist criticism of American literature and is now extensively anthologized.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” lends itself to many different readings, but most obviously it invites—some critics might say demands—a feminist approach. Gilbert and Gubar explore the rich subtext of the story. The narrator is not only physically imprisoned in her comfortable, airy room; she is spiritually and intellectually confined in a patronizing male world that reduces her to childish dependency. Whatever critical approach one adopts, the important thing is not to simplify Gilman’s complex and richly ambiguous narrative.

It is also useful to consider the biographical importance of the story for Gilman herself. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is Gilman’s response to her own experience in 1887 with “the rest cure,” which she describes in a 1913 article in her self-published, monthly magazine The Forerunner—“Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” (reprinted in full for students in the casebook following the story). In her experience,
intellectual stimulation and work produces joy and growth. She writes her intent in writing “The Yellow Wallpaper” was not “to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked.”

The first issue for students to deal with is the narrative situation. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is told by a woman undergoing a nervous breakdown. She suffers visions and is plagued by obsessions. Forbidden to write by her concerned but patronizing husband, she secretly jots down her thoughts and experiences. Her prose is conspicuously anxious and disconnected. Not only is the narrator unreliable, her reports are complicated further by the untrustworthy behavior of her husband and his sister, who take care of her. With seemingly good but misguided intentions, they talk down to her, and much of what they say appears to be deliberately misleading. A chief irony of the story is that the further the narrator sinks into madness the more clearly she understands the hypocrisy and paternalism of her keepers. Nothing anyone says in the story can be accepted uncritically, even the comments of the narrator herself.

A good way to acclimatize students to the uncertainty of the narrative situation is to ask them to recount everything they know about the room the narrator shares with her husband in the rented mansion. (The husband, however, has also selected the room because it has another bedroom nearby that he can move into if need be.) The narrator initially describes it as follows:

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was a nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge, for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls. (par. 31)

No one in the story ever questions that the room was once a nursery, but as later details pile up (the striped wallpaper, the bolted-down bed, the stairway gate), the alert reader wonders if it was not really once a genteel cell for an affluent lunatic. Like many other things in the story, a pleasant surface covers an authoritarian reality. Encourage students to examine every aspect of “The Yellow Wallpaper” with equal care and skepticism.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Several times at the beginning of the story, the narrator says such things as “What is one to do?” and “What can one do?” What do these comments refer to? What, if anything, do they suggest about women’s roles at the time the story was written? When the narrator repeats, “What is one to do?” at the beginning of the story, she draws the reader into her situation in order to evoke sympathy. Locked in a “nursery” by family members who claim to love her, the narrator feels powerless and helpless at the beginning—a reality only worsened because her husband, John, is also her doctor, who “does not believe I am sick” (par. 8). At the beginning of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator is not willing to openly question her husband’s decisions for fear of losing his love and affection, and thereby her only means of survival—a common circumstance for nineteenth-century
women. With very little power to change her situation, she has at least one place for self-expression: the yellow wallpaper in her room.

2. The narrator says, “I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes” (paragraph 24). How unreasonable is her anger at him? What does the fact that she feels it is unreasonable say about her? Until the end of the story, the narrator accepts her role as John's wife and all that this meant in the late nineteenth century. Traditionally, it was unacceptable for a wife to question her husband's decisions or authority. It was a husband's duty to provide for his family, and it was his wife's role to submit to him with gratitude. Naturally, this dependence—economical, political, and social—made it difficult for many talented, opinionated women to voice opinions. In this context, the narrator's anger becomes clearer; while she verbally says it is unreasonable, she seems to feel it is justified—and a compassionate reader would agree with her. She tries to do her “duty,” but this is precisely what leads to her breakdown.

Gilman's 1916 piece, “The Nervous Breakdown of Women” (also included in the casebook), sheds further light on this issue. This article is remarkable for the force and directness of its style, for its sympathy and understanding, and especially for its central insight: that while men have been supported and sustained by women throughout history, everything accomplished by women has been achieved in the face of objections and opposition from men. Gilman writes that even as woman has fought to make societal changes she knows are right, it “too often cost her man's love, respect and good will.”

3. What do her changing feelings about the wallpaper tell us about the changes in her condition? The narrator's feelings about the wallpaper parallel the changes in her condition. Like Gilman herself, this narrator's condition gets worse as time goes on. At first, the pattern seems nothing more than a random assortment of lines that she says is “one of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin” (par. 32), but it soon becomes “torturing” (par. 141). The initial curiosity she felt quickly turns into anxiety, and later moves from fear to terror. One of her many poignant descriptions of the wallpaper occurs in paragraph 142: “It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream.”

She cannot sleep because she watches the supposed movement in the wallpaper. She is not allowed to write, and so she hides her writing from husband John and his sister, afraid they will take away her one outlet of self-expression (par. 73–74). Her attempts to gain mastery over the untamable wallpaper are fruitless, until the very end. Her struggle to decipher a pattern in the wallpaper highlights the futility of her efforts to “recover” when she is, in essence, in perpetual solitary confinement. Ironically, as time goes on it is this increased isolation that causes a mental deterioration.

4. As the story progresses the wallpaper begins to acquire powerful associations. What does it come to symbolize at the story's end? Exploring the complex central image of Gilman's story, the yellow wallpaper, is essential. The “repellent, almost revolting: a smouldering unclean yellow” (par. 34) wallpaper resists neat allegorical interpretation; it is a troubling, changing symbol of the forces that haunt, imprison, and torment the narrator. At first its “bloated curves and flourishes” (par. 96) seem to have no shape, but gradually the obsessively observant narrator starts to comprehend its form.
In a probing essay, “Feminist Criticism, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’ and the Politics of Color in America” (Feminist Studies 15:3 [Fall 1989]), Susan S. Lanser compares the narrator’s analysis of the wallpaper to deciphering the text of her own imprisoned female identity:

The narrator is faced with an unreadable text, a text for which none of her interpretative strategies is adequate. . . . But from all this indecipherability, from this immensely complicated text, the narrator—by night, no less—finally discerns a single image, a woman behind bars, which she then expands to represent the whole.

Ask students if they respond favorably or unfavorably to this interpretation, asking them to use specific passages from the story to support their opinions.

5. “It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so” (paragraph 122). His wisdom is, to say the least, open to question, but what about his love? Do you think he suffers merely from a failure of perception, or is there a failure of affection as well? The narrator reveals that John is “practical in the extreme” and “scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (par. 6). As a doctor, it seems John’s opinions are usually accepted as fact. As a husband, the narrator believes at first that he loves her, which becomes even more clearly debatable to the reader as the story progresses. He tells her that he will repaper the walls and alter the room (the bed, the bars), but never does. He treats her as one would treat a child, often calling her names such as “a blessed little goose” (par. 53) and “little girl” (par. 129).

Other details suggest that all may not be well in their marriage, and the acute reader may wonder if he has been entirely faithful to his wife. For example, he has long absences on “serious cases,” which may or may not be valid (par. 89). He argues that the upstairs room doesn’t have enough room for two beds, so he remains in the downstairs room. Whatever one’s interpretation of these details may be, there is one aspect of their marriage that is consistently clear: John does not listen to his wife. She often makes seemingly casual comments like “he knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him” (par. 42) or “he laughs at me so about this wallpaper” (par. 48). That she keeps telling the reader that he loves her seems to be a way for her to cope with her imprisoned state.

6. Where precisely in the story do you think it becomes clear that she has begun to hallucinate? After only two weeks in this “haunted house,” the narrator begins to see two eyes attached to a broken neck in the wallpaper (par. 64). This seems to be the beginning of a deeper decline in frame of mind. However, by paragraph 121, the narrator sees, behind the pattern, something “like a woman stooping down and creeping about.” Ask students to consider who this woman might be. If this were a supernatural tale, the reader might eventually assume that a ghost or demon inhabits the yellow wallpaper, and there are overtones of the macabre in Gilman’s story.

However, Gilman—like Poe before her—uses the outward narrative forms of Gothic and supernatural fiction to explore uncomfortable psychological territory. The woman imprisoned in the wallpaper is the narrator’s double, probably the parts of her being confined and repressed by her suffocating life. Only as the narrator sinks into madness do her own inhibitions drop sufficiently that she can liberate these forbidden or unacknowledged aspects of her psyche.
7. What does the woman behind the wallpaper represent? Why does the narrator come to identify with her? The narrator identifies with the woman in the wall because they are in the same situation. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman uses the traditional figure of the doppelgänger (a German term that, translated literally, means “double-goer”) in an original, feminist way. In Romantic literature the double usually represented an evil self that had broken free of the dominant, moral, conscious self. The evil double often battles the “real” self for control of the person’s life. In Gilman’s story, the repressed self that is finally liberated also wants to take over the narrator’s life, but the double is neither obviously evil nor morally dangerous. Once free, the double seems to merge into the narrator. “I wonder if they all come out of the wallpaper as I did?” she suddenly comments. Although the narrator’s outer life is crumbling, she is achieving a new authenticity in her inner life. Robert Louis Stevenson’s classic doppelgänger story, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, was published with immense acclaim in 1886—only four years before Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper.” One wonders if Gilman knew it. She seems to take Stevenson’s conventional moral themes and revise them radically from a feminist perspective.

8. How ill does the narrator seem at the beginning of the story? How ill does she seem at the end? How do you account for the change in her condition? At the beginning, the narrator does not seem that ill at all. Although disturbed and nervous, she does not seem to need “the rest cure” or medical treatment. She describes the house, the gardens, the long paths, and the grape-covered arbors with vivid detail, and the reader may at first think she is on a pleasant vacation. But by the end, this seemingly “most beautiful place” and the “treatment” has hurt her, not cured her. As Gilbert and Gubar say, “the cure, of course, is worse than the disease” (The Madwoman in the Attic, 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. 89).

Still, by the story’s end, the narrator faces her prison guard, and can “creep over him” (par. 262). She finds a kind of liberation when she says, “I’ve got out at last, in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (par. 261). Somehow, the hallucination becomes the narrator’s reality, and she breaks out of the cage (whether literally or figuratively is something to consider with your students). Part of this story’s power comes from this mysterious ending. Discuss it with your students, asking them for evidence from the text to back up their interpretations.

Students wishing to write on Gilman may want to read her feminist utopian novel, Herland (1915), which describes a trio of American men visiting an all-female country. Gilman was, first and foremost, a writer on social issues. Even her champions concede that none of her other short stories is up to the level of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Herland, a novel of ideas, shows Gilman at her best—it is a radical, progressive questioning of the traditional assumptions of her age. They may also wish to consult Carol Farley Kessler’s interesting long essay on Gilman’s life and work in Modern American Women Writers (New York: Scribner, 1991).


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Those who want to read more about Gilman’s life and work may be interested to read Cynthia Davis’s definitive work *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Biography* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010). Additionally, you might direct students online to the Charlotte Perkins Gilman Society for information about Gilman, Gilman scholarship and conferences (the most recent being at the University of Montana in Missoula in June 2011), an annual newsletter, and even a Gilman listserv.

Two stories in this book could provide students with particularly interesting topics to compare and contrast with “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” uses Gothic conventions and an unreliable narrator to depict the consequences of a mental breakdown; William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” provides interesting parallels to Gilman’s story, as Faulkner’s mad Emily Grierson is trapped in an old house by different sorts of male presences.


**CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN ON WRITING**

*Why I Wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper,”* page 484

*Whatever Is,* page 485

*The Nervous Breakdown of Women,* page 485

Gilman’s “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” and “The Nervous Breakdown of Women” appeared in her monthly magazine *The Forerunner,* which she published—and wrote the entire contents of—from 1909 to 1916. According to Gilman’s biographer, “Reading through these issues, one gets a sense of Gilman’s virtuosity, of the range of her interests and attitudes. . . . The overriding commitments reflected in the magazine were to the belief in the rights of women and the superiority of a collective social order” (Ann J. Lane, *To Herland and Beyond: The Life & Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* [New York: Pantheon, 1990] 278). One can see the commitment to women’s rights in both these short pieces. Despite the artistry of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the story’s symbolic and psychological richness (perhaps the “embellishments and additions” she alludes to?), her account of the story’s origins is focused exclusively on practical and didactic concerns. “The Nervous Breakdown of Women” is remarkable for the force and directness of its style, for its sympathy and understanding, and especially for its central insight, that while men have been supported and sustained by women throughout history, everything that women have accomplished has been achieved in the face of objections and opposition from men. Gilman’s poem “Whatever Is” shows similar commitments in its rueful awareness that Truth must always fight a long, uphill battle against the dull weight of tradition and received opinion.
CRITICS ON “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER,” pages 486–490

Juliann Fleenor, GENDER AND PATHOLOGY IN “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER”
Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, IMPRISONMENT AND ESCAPE: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONFINEMENT
Elizabeth Ammons, BIOGRAPHICAL ECHOES IN “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER”

In an excerpt from their groundbreaking study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar emphasize Gilman’s feminist focus on the marginalization, isolation, and silencing of women, along with her awareness that freedom from these confinements can be brought about only by women themselves in acts of self-empowerment. Combining a biographical and feminist approach, both Juliann Fleenor and Elizabeth Ammons make use of Gilman’s own experiences to illuminate aspects of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Fleenor concentrates on Gilman as wife and mother, Ammons on Gilman’s childhood relationships with both her parents, and both conclude that the obstacles to women’s freedom and fulfillment are not only men but also those women who allow themselves to be defined and limited by traditional assumptions regarding a woman’s “place.”

Alice Walker, EVERYDAY USE, page 490

Alice Walker originally published “Everyday Use” in her collection of short stories *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* in 1973, a year before her now-famous essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” where she first articulated the importance of quilting as a literal and metaphoric creative legacy of African American women. Walker’s essay was prompted by her visit to one of the Smithsonian Museums in Washington, D.C., where she saw a quilt on display that she describes as:

unlike any other in the world. . . . It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by “an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago.” If we could locate this “anonymous” black woman from Alabama, she would turn out to be one of our grandmothers—an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use.

Walker continued to utilize the quilt metaphor in many of her future works, including *The Color Purple*, and has even referred to her own writing process as one that emulates a patchwork quilt. The genesis of Walker’s insights about quilt-making could add an interesting dimension to your students’ assessments about the characters in “Everyday Use.”
Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of the story. Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. **What is the basic conflict in “Everyday Use”?** On the surface, the main conflict is a fight between two sisters over possession of two old quilts that have been in their family for three generations. On a deeper level, however, the conflict goes beyond the objects and centers on the way one does—or does not—understand one’s heritage. Older sister Dee wants to hang the family’s quilts on her wall as an expression of African American folk art; to her, these are family heirlooms that should be preserved and displayed. Mama and Maggie want to put the quilts to “everyday use” for their original purpose—to provide warmth or comfort.

Perhaps on the deepest level the story presents another serious conflict. The mother, who loves her two daughters, must make an important choice by the story’s end: either to please her worldly successful elder daughter (whom she has not seen in a long time), or to keep her promise to her homely younger daughter who is getting married. In the end, the reader is satisfied when Mama does “something [she] never had done before”: she “hugged Maggie . . . then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero’s hands and dumped them into Maggie’s lap” (par. 76).

2. **What is the tone of Walker’s story? By what means does the author communicate it?** “Everyday Use” is a comic story with serious undertones. Narrated by the mother, whose wry good sense contrasts vividly with her older daughter’s pretensions, the story highlights not only a generation gap, but also a contrast between two sharply different attitudes toward the ideas of heritage and family.

“Ream it out again” (par. 41), says Mama, as she tries to learn her eldest daughter’s new name. Throughout the story, she keeps—probably with tongue in cheek—calling her eldest daughter several variations of Dee or Wangero, a name she obviously finds ridiculous.

Another poignant yet funny moment occurs after Dee’s arrival with a man and Mama notes, “they didn’t tell me, and I didn’t ask, whether Wangero (Dee) had really gone and married him” (par. 44). This “short, stocky man” with “hair all over his head a foot long and hanging from his chin like a kinky mule tail” has a name “twice as long and three times as hard” as her daughter’s moniker Wangero Lee-wanika Kemanjo. After Mama keeps tripping over his name, he tells her “to just call him Hakim-a-barber.” She “wanted to ask him was he a barber, but [she] didn’t really think he was, so [she] didn’t ask” (par. 42). This kind of dry humor pervades the story, making it a pleasure to read.

3. **From whose point of view is “Everyday Use” told? What does the story gain from this point of view—instead of, say, from the point of view of Dee (Wangero)?** “Everyday Use” is told in retrospect from the first person point of view of the mother. Mama is an opinionated narrator with a good sense of reality, and it seems we are privy to some of the inner feelings she rarely shares. We sense Mama has sacrificed for her older daughter her entire life, without receiving any appreciation or thanks. Mama knows that Dee is disappointed in her, a feeling that gives the sensitive reader a great deal of sympathy. “In real life I am a large, big-
boned woman with rough, man-working hands . . . My fat keeps me hot in zero weather. I can work outside all day” (par. 5). But when Mama imagines herself on TV with Dee, she is “the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue” (par. 5). By seeing the story from Mama’s point of view, the reader is clear about the emotional importance of the objects Dee wants to take away from Maggie. While certainly biased, Mama is probably far more objective about her family than either daughter would be.

“Everyday Use” would be an entirely different story if it were told from another point of view, especially Dee’s. Sophisticated and educated Dee would hardly be able to imagine her mother’s or sister’s point of view. Her whole focus has been leaving the life they embrace.

4. What does the narrator of the story feel toward Dee? What seems to be Dee’s present attitude toward her mother and sister? That the mother loves Dee is clear. Although she’s aware of the unattractive elements in Dee’s nature, her dream of Dee showing her appreciation for her mother on a television show reveals wistfulness: the older woman longs for Dee to return her love. Instead, Dee is condescending to her younger sister and unappreciative of her mother. “You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie,” she says as she departs, as if she herself were a superior being, to be emulated (par. 81). Dee, in spite of her education, has never learned to imagine how she appears to others.

5. What do you take to be the author’s attitude toward each of her characters? How does she convey it? The author provides several details to give the reader a sense of her view of her characters. Determined to give her daughters a better life, Mama—a hardworking woman with only a second grade education—raised enough money through her church to send Dee to school in Augusta. Dee fails to appreciate her mother’s sacrifices: “[Dee] used to read to [Maggie and me] without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks’ habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice” (par. 11).

The author is clearly sympathetic to Maggie, who was hurt in the mysterious fire that burned down their house. Although in a formal sense, Maggie is uneducated, in another sense, she is the most grounded character in the story. She knows details about her history, and she is intuitive about her surroundings. She does not want to fight with her sister, a woman who clearly has little regard for others. From the triumphant tone of the story’s end, it might seem that the author wants us to feel sympathy for Mama and Maggie and perhaps a feeling of “good riddance” for Dee.

But perhaps the author has a sense of ambivalence about “Miss Wangero.” Although she pokes fun at Dee’s posturing and false sense of superiority, she also admires Dee’s determination to succeed and her strength of character. As Mama says with an obvious sense of pride: “Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? . . . Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature” (par. 7).

6. What levels of meaning do you find in the story’s title? Both sisters want to use the quilts and dasher for “everyday use,” but the motives for doing so, and the actual usages, are remarkably different. The reason Dee returns home is not to visit her Mama and younger sister, but to take pictures and perhaps try to acquire certain
objects in order to “display” her family heritage to her friends, although she knows little about that legacy. In contrast, Mama and Maggie value the quilts and kitchen tools because they were used by their mothers and grandmothers in everyday life during difficult times. While these objects are practical, they also have emotional value to Mama and Maggie because the women appreciate why they were originally created and what they were originally used for.

Dee is appalled that Mama would give the quilts to Maggie, who would actually “use” them for their intended purpose, and let them become worn out. While hanging a quilt on a wall has its decorative and artistic uses (and so is still, in one sense, “everyday use”), Dee’s inability to value her heritage as symbolized in the objects leads the reader to be pleased Mama stands up for Maggie’s version of “everyday use.”

7. Contrast Dee’s attitude toward her heritage with the attitudes of her mother and sister. How much truth is there in Dee’s accusation that her mother and sister don’t understand their heritage? Dee, having suddenly discovered that old quilts and dashers are fashionable collectibles, accuses her mother and sister of not understanding their heritage because they fail to appreciate the artistic value of such objects. However, she herself is so divorced from her cultural heritage that she does not know which member of the family made the dasher. It may be true, as Dee accuses, that Maggie and her mother don’t “understand” their heritage—at least not in its historical or sociological context. The story suggests, however, that by using the quilts, and by having learned the traditional skills passed from generation to generation, Maggie, the homely, uneducated sister, knows more about her African American heritage than does Dee. Maggie and her mother live their cultural heritage; they are nourished by it through everyday use and versed in the craftsmanship needed to pass it on to future generations.

8. Does the knowledge that “Everyday Use” was written by a black writer in any way influence your reactions to it? Explain. “Everyday Use” is an accessible story that explores powerful issues. Although the setting is specifically African American, the themes of family identity, intergenerational conflict, cultural heritage, and self-esteem are universal. The basic narrative situation—the educated daughter returning on a family visit to criticize her mother and stay-at-home sister—is also particularly relevant to many college students, and most students find it interesting to see this situation from the mother’s perspective. Do any of your students side with Dee, who has succeeded at leaving poverty and rural life behind? If the students in your class are willing to be drawn out on this subject, the discussion might be lively and valuable.

William Scurrah of Pima Community College in Tucson, Arizona, developed with his students a provocative revisionist reading of “Everyday Use.” If one views Mama as an unreliable narrator, it changes the reader’s view of Dee:

First person narrators are not necessarily to be believed (not so much on the facts they describe, but on the perspective they bring to those facts) just because it’s their words printed on the page. To whom, for example, is Mama speaking?
One student pointed out that the audience couldn’t be, say, her neighbors, for they would not need to be told what Mama could do (e.g., kill hogs and butcher bull-calves)—only people for whom such activities were unfamiliar would need to have them described. And is Mama bragging? Why do people brag? Is she talking to herself? Is she imagining herself on television, on that program she envisioned at the beginning of the story, explaining to that video world her way of life? Is so, what is the irony in that?

By the end of the period, some students were energized (“I always thought this story was so dumb, but it isn’t!”), others were upset (“We’ve just ruined my favorite story!”). But none of us, including me, was taking the story, or the author, at face value anymore.

Scurrah’s skepticism on Mama’s reliability as a narrator provides a provocative way of analyzing a story that is deceptively simple on the surface.


**ALICE WALKER ON WRITING**

**THE BLACK WOMAN WRITER IN AMERICA, Interview by John O’Brien, page 497**

**REFLECTIONS ON WRITING, Interview by William R. Ferris, page 499**

John O’Brien’s interview with Alice Walker was conducted in 1973, the year in which “Everyday Use” was published in book form. In speaking of the situation of the black woman writer, Walker quite rightly complains of any emphasis—whether on biographical details or on interactions with white culture—that takes away attention from the work itself. She also calls for work “that exposes the subconscious of a people, because the people’s dreams, imaginings, rituals, legends, etc. are known to be important, are known to contain the accumulated collective reality of the people themselves”—a prescription that is very applicable to “Everyday Use” itself. Two decades later, in her conversations with William R. Ferris, Walker made further comments that bear directly on the story, touching on quilting as one of the “art forms that were not necessarily recognized as art forms” which gave generations of black women one place to fulfill that human need to “to create.”
The themes discussed by Walker in the interview excerpts are also prevalent in the critical pieces on “Everyday Use” that we have presented here. **Barbara T. Christian**’s historical critical approach explores the political and cultural background of the period when Walker wrote “Everyday Use.” She points out that, despite being a participant in and beneficiary of the social revolution of the 1960s, Walker took a realistic view of society and of the male excesses of the Black Power movement and refused to dismiss the dignity of her foremothers and the richness of their culture. **Mary Helen Washington** has extremely interesting insights about the three characters in “Everyday Use” reflecting different parts of Walker’s artistic self. **Houston A. Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker** contrast the synthetic cultural values of the progressive Dee (Wangero) with the authenticity of the tradition carried on by her mother and sister. Following their lead, **Elaine Showalter** also provides some interesting historical background on the unique place of quilting in the aesthetic heritage of black women.
Chinua Achebe, *Dead Men’s Path*, page 508

Chinua Achebe is the senior eminence of English-language African fiction. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), almost immediately achieved classic status, and his subsequent books have only reinforced his reputation. Achebe’s literary sensibility is rooted in British Realist fiction, and he stands unapologetically in the tradition of George Eliot, Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, and even—despite the evident differences of themes and settings—Jane Austen. Part of the pleasure of reading Achebe surely comes from his penetrating social intelligence and capacity for realistic psychological portrayal. He is also masterfully concise. (His short novels brilliantly depict broad canvases just as this very short story tells a great deal about Nigerian society.) Achebe’s great innovation is to bring these Austen-like qualities to the complex and turbulent world of post-colonial West Africa. His forms feel familiar but his content is strikingly new and historically significant. Achebe directly addresses social and political issues in his work, but he never puts his fiction in the service of a particular ideology.

“Dead Men’s Path” enacts in miniature one of the central themes of Achebe’s novels—the clash between modern European ideas and traditional African values, progressive international standards and deeply rooted local custom. The story’s protagonist, Michael Obi, is a well-educated, forward-thinking idealist with a passion for “modern methods.” Quite intelligent and undoubtedly dedicated to education, Obi is more comfortable in abstract thought than in facing the complexities of real life. He doesn’t notice unspoken feelings; for example, his wife’s considerable disappointment upon learning that the other teachers are all unmarried. His view of the world is rational and therefore incapable of fully understanding the parts of life ruled by emotion, intuition, or custom. Obi looks down on the older headmasters of the Mission schools. Note how Achebe subtly undercuts Obi in the opening paragraphs. Only twenty-six, the newly appointed headmaster appears much older with his “stoop-shouldered” posture and “frail” build.

Achebe’s story was first published in 1953 just as the newly independent nations of Africa were making their first strides towards modernization. Michael Obi represents the new African, the progressive who hopes to rebuild his society. The tragic histories of most post-colonial African nations in the latter half of the twentieth century reveal how prescient Achebe’s diagnosis of modernization was. No standardized international idea of progress could be imposed on traditional African societies without terrible cost and probable failure.

Names are often significant in Achebe’s fiction. Michael Obi’s name demonstrates his divided heritage. Michael is a Christian baptismal name of European heritage.
(Remember, Obi works for “Mission” schools—as did Achebe’s father, who was a devout Christian.) Obi, by contrast, is an African name. His name itself embodies the cultural conflict he is about to enter.

Having introduced his protagonist and set up the narrative premise, Achebe focuses his story on a single incident—Obi’s attempt to close the footpath that the locals believe is used by dead and unborn souls to enter the village. Obi uses rational, progressive arguments in discussing the matter with the village priest (who, ironically, seems both more rational and more open-minded than the ideological headmaster). “What you say may be true,” admits the priest, adding “but we follow the practices of our fathers.” The results of Obi’s idealistic obstinacy ultimately prove disastrous for both the school and his own career.

Sherman Alexie, THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO SAY PHOENIX, ARIZONA, page 511

Over the past two decades Sherman Alexie has become the best-known and most widely read Native American novelist and poet. His work is often a remarkable blend of tenderness, lighthearted humor, and biting satire, a combination that is shown to especially good effect in the story “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”—and also in Smoke Signals, a well-received, award-winning independent film written and co-produced by Alexie himself, for which this story is the principal source.

Satiric elements in the story tend to be brief but telling, a series of quick jabs that produce a cumulative effect. In a flashback to the teenage years of the two main characters, Thomas makes the observation that “It’s strange how us Indians celebrate the Fourth of July. It ain’t like it was our independence everybody was fighting for” (par. 36). Later that night, Thomas tells Victor the story of two boys who wanted to be warriors, “but it was too late to be warriors in the old way,” so they stole a car, drove to the city, and abandoned the car in front of the police station, then returned to the reservation to be greeted rapturously by their friends and parents (par. 43); the satiric point seems to be lost on the two young men themselves, but the reader can hardly fail to miss it. Near the end of the story, with a lyrical turn setting us up for a bitter sting, Alexie writes: “Victor and Thomas made it back to the reservation just as the sun was rising. It was the beginning of a new day on earth, but the same old shit on the reservation” (par. 167). Yet, as we see as early as the second paragraph, his shots are not directed exclusively at the larger, controlling society: “Victor didn’t have any money. Who does have money on a reservation, except the cigarette and fireworks salespeople?”

One of the more obvious instances of Alexie’s humor comes early in the story: Victor encounters Thomas at the trading post, and, after Thomas expresses his sympathies, Victor asks him how he knew that Victor’s father had died. Thomas replies: “I heard it on the wind. I heard it from the birds. I felt it in the sunlight. Also, your mother was just in here crying” (par. 23). Another example, using the same comic device of buildup and deflation, occurs in the description of how Norma Many Horses had broken up a fistfight between Victor and Thomas when they were fifteen: “She could have picked up any two of the boys and smashed their skulls together. But worse than that, she would have dragged them all over to some tipi and made them listen to some elder tell a dusty story” (par. 60).
It is a demonstration of Alexie's artistry that each of these instances, in addition to making us smile, has a larger thematic value. The first, by showing that Thomas has a sense of humor and doesn't take himself too seriously, creates a favorable impression of him to balance the negative context in which he was introduced into the story a few paragraphs earlier. The second reminds us why Thomas is disliked by the rest of the tribe, helping to explain—though not justify—Victor's distance from him; and it also engages another of the story's concerns, the fact that most of the younger generation are indifferent to and disconnected from their own heritage.

That disconnection—and Victor's desire to repair it, however slightly—lies at the heart of "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." And here is an opportunity to reinforce, through questioning and class discussion, your students' appreciation of the difference between plot and theme. The story's plot involves Victor's journey to and from Phoenix, Arizona, to retrieve his father's ashes. Its theme—"what it means to say"—is bound up in Victor's journey of self-discovery and the consequent readjustment, however temporary and partial, of his relationship with Thomas.

Victor and Thomas grew up together. When they were twelve, Thomas rescued Victor, and possibly saved his life, when Victor had caught his foot in the hole of an underground wasps' nest (par. 111). Yet, when they were fifteen Victor beat Thomas up; we're told that it was "for no reason at all" (par. 58), but the fact that it was done in front of "all the other Indian boys" makes it pretty clear that Victor felt the need to publicly break away from someone whose friendship had become a public embarrassment to him. Not a great deal has changed in the intervening years: at the trading post, "all the other Indians stared, surprised that Victor was even talking to Thomas. . . . Victor was embarrassed, but he thought that Thomas might be able to help him. Victor felt a sudden need for tradition" (par. 24).

Throughout the story, Thomas wins the reader's admiration and affection through his sensitivity, his generosity to someone who has been very ungenerous to him, his unembittered acceptance of his status, and the integrity of his stubborn adherence to what he considers his mission in life in spite of near-universal scorn (see especially paragraphs 164–66). There's even a suggestion that at least a part of everyone else's dislike may be rooted in an envious resentment at being shown up by him: "He broke his wing, he broke his wing, he broke his wing," all the Indian boys chanted as they ran off, flapping their wings, wishing they could fly, too. They hated Thomas for his courage, his brief moment as a bird. Everybody has dreams about flying. Thomas flew" (par. 137; notice also, in the preceding paragraph that it was Victor—the same Victor whom Thomas had rescued from the wasps—who responded to Thomas's injury by being the one to start the chant of "He broke his wing").

Victor is the story's protagonist, the character who undergoes the experiences that cause him to take stock of himself and his situation and to make thematically meaningful choices as a result. The story's central theme is stated directly by Thomas in paragraph 123: "Take care of each other is what my dreams were saying. Take care of each other." We see Victor take some steps toward recognizing and acting on this principle. Following the easy conversation with the gymnast on the plane, he muses, "It's too bad we can't always be that way" (par. 93). Immediately after that, he apologizes to Thomas for having beaten him up years before. On their return to the reservation, Victor feels the need to do something for Thomas to repay him and is ashamed because he's still too concerned with peer pressure to be friends with Thomas once again. Thomas and Victor seem satisfied with the minimal favor agreed upon at the
end. It should make for a very interesting class discussion if you ask your students whether they find it satisfactory, whether they feel that Victor has done enough to make it up to Thomas.

—Michael Palma

Margaret Atwood, HAPPY ENDINGS, page 519

Margaret Atwood’s “Happy Endings” is a representative as well as an unusually engaging example of post-modern metafiction. Like much metafiction, it makes no attempt to make the reader believe in the verisimilitude of the narrative but instead overtly and exuberantly explores the nature of narrative structure. The author sets up the simple situation in one short line, “John and Mary meet.” Then she asks the obvious narrative question, “What happens next?”

The bulk of the story consists of six mutually exclusive or minimally overlapping “endings” to the story. Despite the story’s title, most of the endings are not “happy.” Only the first alternative is unconditionally blissful. The second involves suicide, the third includes a triple murder, the fourth presents a tidal wave that kills thousands, the fifth depicts mortal illness. By now even the dimmest reader will begin to suspect that the piece’s title was ironic.

Atwood is making several points through her multiple endings. First is that there is something unconvincing and inauthentic about most narrative endings. Second, all human endings are ultimately the same—we all die. Mortality is the central fact of human existence. Finally, Atwood suggests that “Beginnings are always more fun,” possibilities are more pleasant than actualities. A sure sign of Atwood’s literary talent is her ability to communicate these often disturbing, slightly abstract themes in such an accessibly comic way. Her humor may be dark, but it is genuine. Grim as the narrative often is in parts, “Happy Endings” nonetheless has fun with the conventions of storytelling in a way most readers can appreciate.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Atwood.

Ambrose Bierce, AN OCCURRENCE AT OWL CREEK BRIDGE, page 522

“Bitter Bierce” was what his contemporaries called him, and as both man and writer he earned the title. In life, he seems to have quarreled with and become estranged from everyone he ever met, including his wife and sons. In literature, he is still best known for The Devil’s Dictionary, among whose acid definitions are: “History: an account mostly false, of events unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools” and “Marriage: the state or condition of a community consisting of a master, a mistress, and two slaves, making, in all, two.”

But “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” remains Bierce’s most popular piece of writing. One reason for its enduring popularity is, of course, the surprise ending. Yet this story affects the reader on a deeper level than those of some of Bierce’s clever contemporaries, such as Frank L. Stockton’s “The Lady or the Tiger?” One reason for
the story’s greater expressive power is certainly Bierce’s superior artistry. Another
must surely be his evocation of life, in all of its splendor and its “blessings,” through
the heightened senses of a man about to die. Here as elsewhere in his work, life turns
out to be a cruel cheat in the end; but here much more than elsewhere, he makes
clear, in vivid and sensuous detail, why we cling to it so desperately.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What has brought Peyton Farquhar to the brink of hanging? Incited by the
   Federal Scout, he has apparently tried to burn down Owl Creek Bridge, which is in
   the hands of the Union Army.

2. One student, after reading Bierce’s story, objected to it on the grounds that
   the actions of the Federal Scout (paragraphs 9–17) are not believable. “Since
   when do military men dress up like the enemy and incite civilians to sabotage?”
   was her question. How would you answer it? One possible answer might be that
   Farquhar, “a slave owner and like other slave owners a politician,” has managed in
   his own way to engineer damage to the enemy and so has become a marked man. A
   believer in “at least a part of the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and
   war” (par. 8), Farquhar is lured into a fatal trap by someone in the enemy camp who
   assents to the same view.

3. Are you surprised by the story’s conclusion? Can you find hints along the
   way that Farquhar’s escape is an illusion? At what point in the story does the illu-
   sion begin? Bierce lays in enough hints to make most readers accept the surprise end-
   ing, though they may want to reread the story just to make sure. In paragraph 5,
   though Farquhar makes a conscious effort to think about his wife and children, he
   has already begun to experience an alteration in his sense of time. Recall the old gen-
   eral belief that at the moment of death we see our whole lives pass by again in a flash.
   As soon as an escape plot forms in Farquhar’s mind (par. 6), the sergeant moves off
   the plank and the noose tightens around the doomed man’s neck. Since we know
   from the ending that the rope does not break, what happens to Farquhar after the
   flashback (par. 8–17)—except for the physical sensations of hanging—has to be a
   fast-moving hallucination in the mind of a dying man.
   Bierce has planted clues that this is so. With “superhuman” effort Farquhar man-
   ages to free his bound hands. His senses are “preternaturally keen and alert” (par. 20).
   His ability to dodge all the bullets fired at him seems miraculous. The forest through
   which he walks is unfamiliar and menacing; the stars above him are “grouped in
   strange constellations”; he hears “whispers in an unknown tongue” (par. 34). Soon
   “he could no longer feel the roadway beneath his feet” (par. 35). His wife greets him
   with “a smile of ineffable joy” (par. 36)—then he is dead.

4. From what point of view is “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” told?
   In the third person by a nonparticipating narrator able to see into Farquhar’s mind.

5. At several places in the story Bierce calls attention to Farquhar’s height-
   ened sensibility. How would you explain those almost mystical responses to ordi-
   nary stimuli? They are the out-of-body sensations of a dying man. Much has been
   written about such experiences in the popular press. For some interesting, serious
   comments on the subject see Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying (New York:
Macmillan, 1969). Dr. Ross quotes the testimony of persons who, after being declared clinically dead, were resuscitated. Some reported finding themselves floating in space, gazing down upon their own bodies.

6. Where in Bierce’s story do you find examples of irony? There is irony in the contrast between the understated title and the extravagant style of the narrator. Ironic, too, is the mention of Farquhar’s belief that “all’s fair in love and war”—a belief shared by the Federal Scout who lures Farquhar to his capture and death. Verbal irony occurs in “Death is a dignitary who when he comes announced is to be received with formal manifestations of respect, even by those most familiar with him” (par. 2), and “The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded” (par. 3). Students may find other examples as well.

7. Do you think the story would have been better had Bierce told it in chronological order? Why or why not? In defense of the way the story is told, we’d argue mainly that Bierce’s use of flashback heightens the suspense created by the opening scene on the bridge.


A famous French film adaptation of “Owl Creek” won an Academy Award in 1964 for best short subject and was later used by Rod Serling for a Twilight Zone episode. It has almost no dialogue and is available on DVD and videocassette from Library Video Company at <www.libraryvideo.com>.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, eAnthology, and links for Ambrose Bierce. Video essay and questions on “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.”

T. Coraghessan Boyle, GREASY LAKE, page 529

First published in The Paris Review in 1982, “Greasy Lake” is a story about growing up, about nineteen-year-old young men whose seemingly insignificant decisions lead to disastrous, unanticipated consequences. The story’s narrator experiences a transformative epiphany by the end, but this revelation comes at a high price.

An important element of “Greasy Lake” is the change in the narrator’s outlook. There are several hints that Boyle gives us, showing that some time has elapsed since the events of the fateful night. The narrator’s sarcastic tone shows that he looks with distaste on this night, as when he speaks of “new heights of adventure and daring” (par. 6). The maturity the narrator acquired that night seems to have been permanent. Like the boy in James Joyce’s “Araby,” these three nineteen-year-olds have grown up painfully. (For other stories of a young man’s initiation into maturity, see “A & P” and “Barn Burning.” A young woman who is similarly initiated, or seems about to be, appears in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”)

In a letter to the editor of the New York Times Book Review (February 27, 2000), Boyle took issue with a critic who had thought “Greasy Lake” to be about characters in a popular song:

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The story itself was inspired by Bruce Springsteen's song “Spirit of the Night” and employs an epigraph from that song, but it is not . . . “about its characters.” As anyone who has read the story will know, the characters and situations are wholly invented. I see “Greasy Lake” as a kind of riff on the song, a free take on its glorious spirit.

Critics have cited Boyle as a writer socially and politically disengaged; but satire, he points out, can be corrective. “It can hold up certain attitudes as being fraudulent, and in doing that suggest that the opposite might be an appropriate way to behave. And I hope that if my work is socially redemptive, it is in that way” (interview with David Stanton in Poets & Writers, January/February 1990). Surely “Greasy Lake,” a story some readers find shocking, is socially redemptive.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Around what year, would you say, was it that “courtesy and winning ways went out of style, when it was good to be bad, when you cultivated decadence like a taste”? It is rebellious adolescence in general that Boyle describes in his opening paragraph; but he’s also talking about the late 1960s, when adolescents were in plentiful supply, “bad” behavior was much admired, and “courtesy and winning ways went out of style.” In 1967, when the American attack on Khe Sanh (mentioned in paragraph 7) took place, Boyle himself was nineteen years old. We can guess that’s the year in which “Greasy Lake” is set. But the epigraph and the story’s title come from that bard of a slightly later era, Bruce Springsteen, whose first album appeared in 1973.

2. What is it about Digby and Jeff that inspires the narrator to call them “bad”? These college students who are home on summer break were “dangerous characters then,” because they wore “torn-up leather jackets,” “sniffed glue and ether,” and read novels by André Gide. In particular, the narrator calls Digby bad because he has a gold star in his right ear. Jeff thinks of quitting school to become an artist/businessman. They can both roll a tight joint while driving 85 miles per hour; they are “quick with a sneer”; they always wear their mirror shades. On the night of the story, they are restless: They have been in and out of every bar, they have thrown two dozen raw eggs at mailboxes, and, at 2 A.M., they have no place else to go but Greasy Lake.

Are Digby and Jeff really “bad”? Debate this with your students. Certainly they are engaging in the kind of behavior they think is expected of them, which they have seen in films and read in novels (par. 1, 3, 4). When, on the night of the story, their rebellion backfires, throwing them into a grimmer world than they had bargained for, they feel revulsion. As is clear at the end, they have had enough of being “bad.”

3. Twice in “Greasy Lake”—in paragraphs 2 and 32—appear the words, “This was nature.” What contrasts do you find between the “nature” of the narrator’s earlier and later views? That the narrator of “Greasy Lake” grows and changes during his adventures is apparent from the two views of “nature” he voices. Early in the story, “nature” was wanting “to snuff the rich scent of possibility on the breeze, watch a girl take off her clothes and plunge into the festering murk, drink beer, smoke pot, howl at the stars, savor the incongruous full-throated roar of rock and roll against the primeval susurrus of frogs and crickets” (par 2.) By the end of the
story, these swinish pleasures have lost their appeal. When, at dawn, the narrator experiences the beauties of the natural world as if for the first time, he has an epiphany: “This was nature” (par. 32).

4. What makes the narrator and his friends run off into the woods? As they drive up to Greasy Lake, they blast the car horn and flash its brights on a parked car they think belongs to their friend Tony. They think the joke will lead him to “experience premature withdrawal and expect to be confronted by grim-looking state troopers with flashlights” (par. 6). When they realize it’s not Tony’s car at all, it is already too late. The man gets out of the car and starts a violent fist fight with Digby, Jeff, and the narrator. This “greasy character” is much stronger than all three and has no intention of losing the fight. After the narrator gets a tire iron out of his car, he delivers a blow to the man that—surprisingly—causes him to collapse in an instant. The boys think they’ve killed him, so they turn to the girl and begin to rape her. They are “dirty, bloody, guilty, dissociated from humanity and civilization” (par. 16). Before they accomplish their second “Ur-crime” (par. 17), they see the flashing headlights from another car. Terrified, they run into the woods in an attempt to escape punishment for their two crimes, and as the narrator hides in Greasy Lake, he experiences an unexpected epiphany when he sees Al’s dead body.

5. How does the heroes’ encounter with the two girls at the end of the story differ from their earlier encounter with the girl from the blue Chevy? How do you account for the difference? When at the end of the story the girl offers to party with the three friends, what makes the narrator say, “I thought I was going to cry”? In its way, Greasy Lake is a force for change, despite its “fall” from a prior state of beauty. Caught trying to rape the girl in the blue car, the narrator is grateful to be alive and feels horror at the death of the “bad older character” whose body he meets in the slime. His growth has begun. When at the end of the story, two more girls pull into the parking lot, the subdued narrator and his friends are harmless. Cold sober and bone tired, they know they have had a lucky escape from consequences that might have been terrible. Also, the narrator knows, as the girls do not, that Al is dead, his body rotting in the lake. He won’t “turn up”—except perhaps in the most grisly way. It is this knowledge and the narrator’s new reverence for life that make him think he is going to cry.

6. How important to what happens in this story is Greasy Lake itself? What details about the lake and its shores strike you as particularly memorable (whether funny, disgusting, or both)? Students can have fun demonstrating how Greasy Lake is the perfect setting for Boyle’s story. Like the moral view of the narrator (at first), it is “fetid and murky, the mud banks glittering with broken glass and strewn with beer cans and the charred remains of bonfires. There was a single ravaged island a hundred yards from shore, so stripped of vegetation it looked as if the air force had strafed it” (par. 2). The lake is full of “primordial ooze” and “the bad breath of decay” (par. 31). It also hides a waterlogged corpse. Once known for its clear water, the unlucky lake has fallen as far from its ideal state as the people who now frequent its shores have fallen from theirs. (If you teach the chapter on symbol, hark back to Greasy Lake once more.)

Candace Andrews of San Joaquin Delta College argues that, while on the surface “Greasy Lake” seems merely to recount the misadventures of a nineteen-year-old
delinquent, a careful reading will show that much of the story retells the narrator’s experience in Vietnam—“It is a tale of a young man who has been to war and back.” For a writing assignment, she had her students list every reference or allusion to war, and she told them, “Then bring your ‘research’ together into some kind of coherent statement which supports the idea that the narrator is a Vietnam veteran.” We do not believe, ourselves, that Boyle’s several references to war necessarily require the narrator to be an ex-GI. He would have followed the war news and come to feel that the war was senseless violence—like the action out at Greasy Lake on a Saturday night. When he tells us (in paragraph 40) that he and Digby looked at the girl “like war veterans,” we take that to be a metaphor: he too feels a sort of battle fatigue. However, you may care to check out Professor Andrews’s provocative theory for yourself. What do your students think of it?

Willa Cather, PAUL’S CASE, page 536

“Paul’s Case” may put you in mind of several other intractable “cases” in modern American fiction, for example, the title character of Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts or Tommy Wilhelm in Saul Bellow’s Seize the Day. Both protagonists move us by their zeal to live meaningfully in a world of callousness and easy accommodations, and both appall us with their idiotic choices and almost willed self-destructiveness. If you have ever tried teaching either of these short novels, you will have realized the difficulty of leading students to understand the complexities of the characters and the themes, especially when most of their questions begin with “Why doesn’t he just . . . ?” Such youthful frustration is surely appropriate. There would be something freakish about young people embracing middle-aged defeat and disillusion. But with an adolescent protagonist such as Paul, a teacher might assume a greater degree of understanding and sympathy in students’ responses—and perhaps be surprised at their hostility toward or even rejection of Paul. Perhaps it isn’t too surprising: imagine for a moment how students would react to him if he were one of their classmates. And remember that it is much easier to sympathize with Paul as a fictional character than it would be to deal with him as one of your own students.

Even within the context of the fiction, it is a tribute to the depth of Cather’s art and insight that she has not made it easy for us. What Paul aspires to be is, from any mature perspective, hollow and superficial. What he rejects, however unglamorous it may be, is not on its face hateful. The reactions of his teachers and even his father to Paul’s behavior are not harsh or punitive; just about everyone, including his fellow ushers as they sit on him until he has calmed down, seems to want to help. And he is, after all, a thief and an unrepentant one at that—a fact that will no doubt be seized upon by students seeking justification for their dislike of him.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is it about Paul that so disturbs his teachers? Recall any of his traits that they find irritating, any actions that trouble them. Do they irritate or trouble
you? The boy's dandyism, his defiance, and his unconcealed contempt disturb his teachers beyond all reason. They also disturb many readers, who find a discrepancy between their own negative feelings about Paul and the fondness Cather seems to feel toward him. The school principal and Paul's art teacher are able to muster sympathy for the boy (par. 7–8), but they don't claim to understand him.

2. What do the arts—music, painting, theater—mean to Paul? How does he react when exposed to them? Is he himself an artist? Oddly, when he hears a concert, it's "not that symphonies, as such, [mean] anything in particular to Paul" (par. 11). The romance and beauty in the air excite him to hysteria. He reacts in the same way to fine food and wine, good clothes, a lavishly decorated room. For all his sensitivity, he is not an artist, and he doesn't respond to art as an artist would. It's the idea of art and beauty, the pleasure they afford his senses, that evoke a response in him. In Willa: The Life of Willa Cather, Phyllis C. Robinson points out that Paul "may have had the sensitivity of an artist but, unlike his creator, he was without discipline, without direction and, saddest and most hopeless of all, he was without talent." In that fact lies his private tragedy.

3. In what different places do we follow Paul throughout the story? How do these settings (and the boy's reactions to them) help us understand him, his attitudes, his personality? Cather shows us Paul in school, at home, in the art gallery, in the theater, and, finally, in the big city. Everywhere, he functions apart from the ordinary beings who surround him. Isolated and unhappy, Paul regards his aesthetic longings as evidence of his superiority to other human beings. Absence of hope and cool disdain for the ordinary ways of attaining wealth and finery and an invitation to New York drive him to one grand, suicidal fling in the beautiful, glamorous world where he imagines he belongs.

4. Does Cather's brief introduction into the story of the wild Yale freshman from San Francisco (in paragraph 54) serve any purpose? Why do you suppose he and Paul have such a "singularly cool" parting? What is Cather's point? In New York Paul expects to find wealthy persons of taste and temperament similar to his own. He finds instead the disappointing Yale student who, far from sharing Paul's reverence for beauty, seems to the boy hopelessly crass. Ironically, though he seems to have grown up with all the advantages Paul has lacked, this worldly student disappoints Paul as much as do his family and friends at home. Who could measure up to Paul's impossible standards? For the rest of his stay, Paul is content to observe his fellow guests from afar.

5. Is Paul a static character or a dynamic one? If you find him changing and developing in the course of the story, can you indicate what changes him? The only change in Paul's character during the story seems to be the fairly minor one mentioned in paragraphs 42–43. Once settled in at the Waldorf, he realizes he is no longer "dreading something." Is this change enough to justify our calling him a dynamic character? The change seems to signal in Paul a deepening involvement in an unreal world rather than any growth. We think he's a static character. His perceptions and values, and the actions that follow from them, remain unchanged.

6. Comment on some of the concrete details Cather dwells on. What, for instance, do you make of the portraits of Washington and John Calvin and the motto placed over Paul's bed (paragraph 18)? Of the carnation Paul buries in the snow (paragraph 64)? Paul's sensibilities recoil from all that is ugly, even ordinary.
His room, featuring pictures of those austere and well-disciplined heroes George Washington and John Calvin, is hateful to him. Working-class Cordelia Street, where he lives, induces in him “a shuddering repulsion for the flavorless, colorless mass of every-day existence; a morbid desire for cool things and soft lights and fresh flowers” (par. 19). By paragraph 64, after Paul has run away from New York, he realizes that fresh flowers do not stay fresh forever. He sees the parallel between “their brave mockery” and his own “revolt against the homilies by which the world is run” and characterizes both as “a losing game in the end.” He dies like the flowers, his “one splendid breath” spent.

7. What implications, if any, does the title “Paul’s Case” have for this story? Is Paul mentally ill, or does Cather place the roots of his malaise elsewhere? Robinson has this to say about Cather’s view of Paul:

As if to underscore her own intuition in regard to the story, Willa gave it the subtitle “A Study in Temperament,” and to the modern reader the pathological attributes of Paul’s malaise are more persuasive than the romantic aspects. Willa told George Seibel that she drew on two boys who had been in her classes for the character of Paul, but to others she confessed how much of her own hunger and frustration were embodied in the unhappy boy’s flight from the drab reality of his daily life and in his instinctive reaching out for beauty.

In other words, we today tend to think Paul seriously disturbed, but apparently Cather didn’t see him that way. In conflict with school, neighbors, and family, Paul seems to her an admirable victim. Cather often sticks up for the lonely, sensitive individual pitted against a philistine provincial society—as in her famous story “The Sculptor’s Funeral.”

“Paul’s Case” was featured in the PBS television film series The American Short Story. It is available on video and DVD from Library Video Company at <www.libraryvideo.com>. Short scenes from the script of Ron Cowen’s adaptation are included in The American Short Story, Volume 2 (New York: Dell, 1980), and invite comparison with the original.

A detailed plan for teaching “Paul’s Case” is offered by Bruce E. Miller in Teaching the Art of Literature (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1980). To get students involved in the story before they read it outside of class, Miller suggests reading passages from the early part of the story (before Paul flees to New York) and summarizing what happens, and then asking students how they’d imagine Cather would continue the story. He advises the instructor to show the class a few photographs of adolescent boys and to ask how closely the pictures reflect students’ mental images of Paul. The point is to spark a discussion of Paul’s complex character. Is he a cheat? A victim? A hero? Various opinions are likely to emerge, and students may come to see “that the different views of Paul are not necessarily incompatible with each other, and that Cather has accomplished the difficult feat of delineating a complex character who, though flawed, engages the reader’s sympathy.”

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, eAnthology, and links for Willa Cather. Audio essay, video essay, critical essay with questions, comprehension quiz on “Paul’s Case.”

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Kate Chopin, *The Story of an Hour*, page 549

By all accounts, Oscar Chopin seems to have been, by the standards of the time, a loving and quite indulgent husband to his wife, Kate. “The Story of an Hour” is, of course, fiction, but underlying the key fourteenth paragraph are such facts as Chopin’s marriage when she was only twenty, her giving birth to six children in the space of eight years, and the family’s move from sophisticated New Orleans to the rural Louisiana Bayou—along with the fact that her writing career seems to have begun only after his early death. Both here and in “The Storm,” Chopin presents her characters and situations without judging or moralizing. Instead, she dramatizes situations in which basically decent people find themselves in honest conflict between duty and desire, between one kind of love and another, situations in which they have strong and sincere feelings on both sides of the issue.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is Mrs. Mallard’s sorrow at the news of her husband’s death merely feigned? Try to account for her sudden changes of feeling. Undoubtedly her grief is sincere. Caught within a conventional marriage, she has not realized the freedom she has been denied. Notice that her rush of new joy, her looking forward to a whole new life, begins when she observes that spring is bursting forth, too, in the natural world.

2. Some stories—for instance, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”—are noted for their surprise endings. How can it be claimed that “The Story of an Hour” has a triple surprise ending? Surprise ending 1: Mrs. Mallard realizes that her husband’s death has left her unexpectedly happy. Surprise ending 2: Her husband is still alive. Surprise ending 3: She dies herself. “The Story of an Hour” has been criticized for having a rigged ending that strikes some readers as a cheap trick. But the convention is used here not merely for its shock value but also to illuminate Mrs. Mallard’s repressed resentment against her husband.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Chopin. Longman Lecture, comprehension quiz, and essay questions for “The Story of an Hour.”

Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, page 551

Sandra Cisneros began as a poet, and “The House on Mango Street,” the opening piece of her 1984 collection of the same name, achieves its principal effects through techniques associated as much with poetry as with short fiction—brevity, economy of style, and the use of detail, rather than narrative or statement, as the primary vehicle of theme. In this regard, “The House on Mango Street” has much in common with Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl.” You might also, if you are familiar with it, be reminded of James Joyce’s masterful “The Sisters,” which, like the Cisneros and Kincaid selections, is the first story in the volume in which it appears. Like Joyce, Cisneros presents her material through the eyes and the sensibility of a very young first-person narrator; also like Joyce, Cisneros employs a certain amount of indirection. This technique can make for a useful exercise in close, interpretive...
reading. Ask the class whether the narrator is male or female, and they will no doubt automatically assume the latter because the author is a woman; then ask them what details in the story “prove” the point (the narrator shares a bedroom with Nenny [end of paragraph 5], who is “my sister” [end of paragraph 1]). Ask them how old they think the narrator is, and why they think so; you’ll probably get a number of answers, but it will be interesting to see if anyone points out the narrator’s assumption, at the end of paragraph 5, that, like the children, her parents have to share a bedroom because the house is too small for them to have their own rooms.

But while “The Sisters” depends almost entirely on the reader’s understanding the significance of things that the narrator does not, the young speaker in “The House on Mango Street” is for the most part acutely aware of her situation and its larger implications. She knows that the new house represents both a pause from, though not necessarily an end of, the rootlessness (and its consequent insecurity) that she and her family have experienced; it also represents freedom from the restrictions that she and her family have had to endure, restrictions that are focused in large part on the lack of privacy—having to be careful not to make too much noise, having to hear about it when too much noise is made, being unable to keep one’s personal business to oneself, even something so private as taking a bath. And even worse is the sense of what such a lifestyle means in the eyes of others, as is vividly portrayed in paragraphs 6 through 10: when the nun from the narrator’s school passes by the flat on Loomis and says “You live there?,” the narrator’s internal reaction is: “The way she said it made me feel like nothing.”

Yet, brief as “The House on Mango Street” is, it does much more in its eleven paragraphs than celebrate such things as striving, upward mobility, and the fulfillment of the American dream. The dream that the narrator’s mother has spun and clung to is a dream of a very different house from the small, cramped one on Mango Street, and so is the house that her father talked about whenever he bought a lottery ticket. Although they recognize that “the house on Mango Street isn’t it,” both parents seem to see the house—whether truly so in their own minds or simply in an attempt to keep their children’s hopes alive—as a way station in the fulfillment of their dreams, not as the end of the line, the outer limit of their real-life possibilities. But the narrator seems to have been around enough blocks—Loomis, Keeler, Paulina, and others that she can no longer remember—to have already grasped a sense of the limits of the American dream for people like her and her family, people who don’t win lotteries and whose dreams are destined to remain merely dreams: “I know how these things go.”

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information on Cisneros. Comprehension quiz and essay questions on “The House on Mango Street.”

**Ralph Ellison**, *Battle Royal*, page 552

Ralph Waldo Ellison—his father named him after Emerson—was born in Oklahoma City in 1914, in a state without a history of slavery. In “Battle Royal,” he transfers his protagonist to an unidentified town in the South. With the aid of a State of Oklahoma scholarship, Ellison attended Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. “Ellison has been everything,” Langston Hughes once noted, “from shoeshine boy to first trumpeter in
a jazz orchestra.” In 1936 he moved to New York City to study sculpture and music composition. But befriended by Richard Wright, at the time working on the novel *Native Son*, Ellison was encouraged to become a writer. *Invisible Man*, which took Ellison seven years to write, clearly owes something to Wright’s fiction: naturalism based on autobiography. Wright’s work seemed too limited to realism, however, to suit Ellison, who said he wanted to introduce “imagination . . . a sense of poetry” to the fiction of black experience. (Ellison discusses his complex relationship with Wright in several places in his 1964 collection of essays, *Shadow and Act*—especially in his long interview with fellow novelist Richard G. Stein, which opens the volume.) In its portrait of the artist as a young man, Ellison’s novel also seems more than fleetingly indebted to James Joyce.

In a 1963 interview with Ellison, Allen Geller asked whether the writer agreed with the advice of the dying grandfather in “Battle Royal.” Does the old man advocate divorce from society—to go along with society on the surface only, while actually working to undermine it? Ellison replied:

> Not to act without it but act against it, to collaborate with its destruction of its own values. That’s the way that a weak man, that weak old grandfather—physically weak, that is—found for dealing with a circumstance, but his grandson actually writes his memoirs. *Invisible Man* is a memoir of a man who has gone through that experience and now comes back and brings his message to the world. It’s a social act; it is not a resignation from society but an attempt to come back and be useful. There is an implied change of role from that of a would-be politician and rabble-rouser and orator to that of writer. No, there’s no reason for him to lose his sense of a social role. But I think . . . *Invisible Man*, his memoir, is an attempt to describe reality as it really exists rather than in terms of what he assumed it to be. (“An Interview with Ralph Ellison,” *The Tamarack Review*, reprinted in *The Black American Writer*, vol. I: Fiction, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby [Baltimore: Penguin, 1971])

Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), the founder of Ellison’s alma mater, takes some hard satirical jabs in “Battle Royal” (and in the college memories in *Invisible Man*). Students may need to know that, although widely admired in his day as the nation’s outstanding black leader and educator, Washington has been regarded more critically by later black intellectuals. In his autobiography, *Up from Slavery* (1901), Washington tries to show that black people’s best hope for advancement lies in humility, self-improvement, and conciliation. Ironically, Ellison quotes a speech given by Washington in 1895 (par. 67 of “Battle Royal”), calling on blacks to cultivate friendship with the Southern white man. “In those pre-invisible days,” the narrator tells us, “I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington” (par. 95).


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Hurston’s stark tale of a bitter marriage turned murderous first appeared in the one and only issue of the Harlem arts journal Fire!! in November 1926. Fire!!, which carried the subtitle “A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists,” presented some of the leading talents of the new generation, including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Arna Bontemps. “Sweat,” with its use of authentic black dialect and folkways, its forthright presentation of harsh subject matter, and (to quote Alice Walker) its “sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings,” makes it a representative work of the Harlem Renaissance.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What importance does the setting of “Sweat” have to its action? The story takes place mostly in a house on the outskirts of a small Florida town (which critics identify with Hurston’s hometown of Eatonville). The isolation of Delia’s home is essential to the plot. Its distance from town means that she has no protection there from Sykes’s violence, just as its isolation ultimately gives Sykes no escape from his slow, painful death by snakebite. The setting is also important to the story’s motivation. Delia has bought the house with her own hard work. Sykes wants to kill her for the house so that he can bring another woman home to it. The house also becomes a symbol to the otherwise disappointed Delia of what she has managed to accomplish in her hard, painful life. (“It was lovely to her, lovely.”)

2. What has Delia and Sykes’s marriage been like? Delia married out of love. Sykes, she believes, brought only lust to the union (“a longing after the flesh”). Two months after the wedding, he gave her the first of many brutal beatings. In town, he is notorious for beating her and she for surviving his savage assaults. Sykes has frequently disappeared to squander his irregular earnings while Delia has worked as a laundress to pay their bills. Delia’s hard work wounds Sykes’s masculine pride: it reminds him that he cannot support her. Sykes is now adulterously involved with Bertha. Delia is not surprised to discover that he is trying to kill her.

3. What is the significance of the story’s title? Hurston’s title describes Delia’s existence. Trapped in a brutal, loveless marriage and getting no help from Sykes in supporting the two of them, Delia has almost nothing in her life except work. Defending herself against Sykes’s threats, she summarizes her life as “Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!” The title also suggests why Delia is deaf to Sykes’s pleas at the end of the story: love and compassion have been sweated out of her.

4. Is Delia right to let Sykes die at the end of the story? This may be an uncomfortable question for students, but the point of Hurston’s story is to make us consider uncomfortable issues. It may be important to remind students that Delia is not responsible for Sykes’s being bitten by the snake; he has fallen into his own trap. If she is guilty of anything, it is only of not trying to help her husband—a sin of omission rather than commission. There is little question that a jury would acquit her of any charge. If ever a woman could claim extenuating circumstances, it is Delia. The more interesting question is whether Delia is morally culpable. In this regard, Hurston seems to suggest that Sykes has made Delia a person callous enough to watch coldly her own husband die. The ending has led one critic, Robert Bone, in...
his Down-Home: Origins of the Afro-American Short Story (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), to call “Sweat” a self-indulgent “revenge fantasy.” But most critics have agreed with Lillie P. Howard, who viewed “Sweat” as a complex moral investigation of a good woman in an extreme situation:

Delia could have warned him, saved him, but she understandably does not. She has been hardened by his constant abuse and has built up a “spiritual earth-works” against him. Poetic justice has been rendered. (Zora Neale Hurston [New York: Twayne, 1980] 65)

What do your students think?

5. How does the language of “Sweat” contribute to the story’s effect? There are two different levels of language employed in the story. Hurston presents the narration in sharp and evocative standard English, whereas the dialogue is written in the rural black dialect of her native Central Florida. Their constant alternation heightens the story’s considerable nervous energy and suspense. The dialect also adds realism to the story: it evokes real people and a real region. Students sometimes experience some initial difficulty in reading dialogue in dialect because it looks different from conventional English. It is important to get them to hear it. You might ask the class why Hurston chose to write the dialogue in dialect. Would the story be different if the dialogue were written in standard American English?

A volume of critical essays dealing with “Sweat,” edited by Cheryl Wall, is available from Rutgers UP (in its series dealing with short fiction, “Women Writers: Texts and Contexts”). Students planning to write on Hurston will find it helpful to read Laura M. Zaidman’s comprehensive article on the author in Dictionary of Literary Biography 86: American Short-Story Writers, 1910–1945, edited by Bobby Ellen Kimbel (Detroit: Gale, 1989), which provides an insightful and highly readable introduction to her life and work.

Beverly Bailey of Seminole Community College in Sanford, Florida, has informed us that Hurston’s hometown of Eatonville hosts an annual festival in her honor. In addition to music, crafts, food, and entertainment, there are also scholarly presentations. For information on the Zora Neale Hurston Festival see www.zoranealehurstonfestival.com. Prof. Bailey also recommends Steven Glassman and Kathryn Lee Seidel’s Zora in Florida (Orlando: U of Central Florida, 1991), which Bailey calls “a fine study of the place that nurtured and inspired Hurston’s work, the frontier wilderness of central Florida and the all-black town of Eatonville.”

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, eAnthology, and links for Zora Neale Hurston. Longman Lecture, interactive reading, reading, interpretation, and writing questions on “Sweat.”

James Joyce, ARABY, page 571

Set in the city Joyce called “dear old dirty Dublin,” “Araby” reveals a neighborhood so dreary that it seems no wonder a sensitive boy would try to romance his way out of it. In paragraphs 1–3, details stack up tellingly, painting a scene of frus-
tration and decay. We see the dead-end street with an abandoned house at its “blind end”; the boy’s house where the priest had died, its room full of “musty air” and “old, useless papers”; dying bushes; a rusty bicycle pump; a street of shadows and dark, dripping gardens lit by somber violet light. Still, the description is not unrelievedly sad. Playing in the cold, the boys feel their bodies glow. From “dark, odorous stables” comes the “music” of jingling harnesses. And for the boy, Mangan’s sister lends the street enchantment.

Most students won’t need help to see that “Araby” is told by its main character. They may need class discussion, though, to realize that the narrator is a man who looks back on his boyhood memories. One indication of the narrator’s maturity is his style. In the first paragraph, he remarks, in unboyish language, that the houses, “conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.” Besides, this mature storyteller is about to step back and criticize his younger self: “her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood” (par. 4).

Mangan’s sister, whose name is never told, seems an ordinary young woman who summons her kid brother to tea. She is a vague figure: the boy glimpses her from afar, sometimes while peering at her from shadow. John J. Brugeletta and Mary H. Hayden suggest that the conversation in which the boy promises to bring her a gift takes place only in his mind. Mangan’s sister, they argue, may never have set foot in the room where the priest died (par. 6), into which the boy retreats to have his visionary experience. In this musty shrine, his senses swoon. He clasps his hands in an attitude of prayer, murmurs an incantation over and over (O love! O love!), and conjures her face before him—“At last she spoke to me.” Even the spikes he sees her clasping are unreal, for they couldn’t be there in the dead priest’s drawing room. In the end, at the bazaar, the image of Mangan’s sister fades before the physical presence of the banal, flirtatious English salesgirl who says, “O, I never said such a thing.” Neither did Mangan’s sister say a word to the narrator that bound him to his imagined promise (“The Motivation for Anguish in Joyce’s ‘Araby,’” Studies in Short Fiction [Winter 1978]: 11–17). Professor Roger Silver of the University of Maryland takes issue with this interpretation. He writes:

If one looks at the text, paragraph 6 ends with the narrator “murmuring: O love! O love! many times.” Then Joyce begins a new paragraph, “At last she spoke to me.” Why does this paragraph have to take place in the priest’s room? I would think that some time has gone by, and the narrator has now met Mangan’s sister outside the house. Brugeletta and Hayden say that Mangan’s sister doesn’t answer the narrator when he promises to bring something from the fair. That doesn’t mean that the narrator is having a vision. After all, Joyce does mention in paragraph 9 that she spoke, and does have her say, “—it’s well for you.” We could still agree with Tindall that Mangan’s sister symbolizes Ireland’s Church and keep all the other religious symbolism.

The boy’s daydreams of Mangan’s sister are difficult to take seriously. Amid barrels of pigs’ cheeks, he carries her image in his mind as a priest carries a chalice. He regards her with “confused adoration” and feels himself a harp on which she plays (par. 5). From early in the story, the boy has projected a dazzling veil of romance over the commonplace. At the end, he realizes with shock that illusion has had him in thrall. Araby, the enchanted fair, turns out to be merely a drab charity bazaar where gimcracks are peddled, men count money, and a scatter-
brained salesclerk makes small talk till the lights go out. The boy's intense anguish seems justified.

Nearly everything Joyce wrote has a thread of allegory, and “Araby” may be no exception. Making much of the identity of Mangan’s sister, William York Tindall remarks: “Since [James Clarence] Mangan, one of Joyce’s favorite poets, dedicated ‘Dark Rosaleen,’ his most famous poem, to his country, it seems likely that Mangan’s sister is Ireland herself, beckoning and inviting.” Tindall thinks the boy’s frustrated quest is for Ireland’s Church, toward which Joyce, too, felt bitter disillusionment. Rather than pursue Dark Rosaleen, the mature Joyce (and his protagonist Stephen Dedalus) chose exile. “Araby” makes a good introduction to Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. (Tindall discusses the story in A Reader’s Guide to James Joyce [New York: Noonday, 1959] 20.)

Araby, the bazaar with the “magical name,” is paramount. Besides, the apple tree in the unkempt garden (par. 2) hints of the tree in some lost Eden. Dublin, clearly, is a fallen world. Other items also suggest sterility and decay: the “blind” or dead-end street and its “uninhabited house . . . detached from its neighbors” (par. 1); the dead priest’s rusty bicycle pump (par. 2). Counting coins on a tray like that used to serve communion, the men in paragraph 25 perform a little act with symbolic overtones. The darkening hall has seemed to the boy “a church after a service,” and the two money changers are not driven out of the temple—they drive out the boy.

Elizabeth A. Flynn compares reactions to this story by twenty-six male and twenty-six female college students in “Gender and Reading,” College English 45 (Mar. 1983): 236–53. Some men felt uncomfortable with the boy’s solipsistic infatuation. Recalling similar experiences of their own, they had trouble attaining distance. Several men, Flynn reports, were harsh in their judgment on Mangan’s sister. They saw the girl as manipulating the boy for her own ends: “just using him,” “playing him along.” Most of the women students made better sense of the story. They didn’t condemn Mangan’s sister, and they understood the ending. They recognized that as the lights of the bazaar go out, the boy passes a painful judgment on himself; he has been a vain fool. Some women saw him gaining from his experience. Freed from his delusion, he can now reenter reality. If your men students have trouble understanding the story, you might have them take a good look at the last line.

On the popular poem “The Arab’s Farewell to His Steed,” which the uncle remembers, Matthew A. Fike of the University of Michigan writes, citing an insight by Stanley Friedman: “Joyce’s reference to this poem, a work notable for its sentimentality, directs attention to the main significance of ‘Araby’: the assault on sentimentality and illusion” (Friedman, The Explicator 24:5 [Jan. 1966], item 43). There seems more than a little resemblance between the boy’s worship of Mangan’s sister for “the white curve of her neck” and the Arab’s devotion to his horse, with its “glossy neck.” Ironically, the Arab’s glamorized view of his steed contrasts with the awareness that Joyce’s narrator achieves, or as Fike puts it, “The nomad never parts with his horse, but the boy abandons his illusion.” (Thanks to Mr. Fike for prompting XJK to greater precision in his footnote on “The Arab’s Farewell.”)
“Girl” is the first story in Jamaica Kincaid’s first book, *At the Bottom of the River*. As such, it might be seen—like Hemingway’s “Indian Camp” in *In Our Time*—as a kind of keynote to the body of her work. It is also worth noting that the first half of the volume’s dual dedications reads: “For my mother, Annie, with love.”

The form of “Girl” is worth considering in class because its compact length makes it easy for students to see the parts and the whole simultaneously. The form of “Girl” can be reasonably viewed in at least two ways. It can be cogently argued that “Girl” is a character sketch rather than a short story. Kincaid does not—at least overtly—describe a significant action with its motivations and consequences. Instead she presents a memorable character (and deftly implies another) through a speech. If “Girl” is viewed as a character sketch, therefore, it must be considered a sketch of two people—mother and daughter. The story reminds us that a person need not be presented at length to be credibly characterized. The daughter has only two short and perhaps silent (but italicized) comments. Yet we see her life vividly rendered throughout her mother’s torrent of advice. Its use of a second-person point of view narration should also be pointed out.

Considered as a sketch in this fashion, “Girl” could conceivably be analyzed as one would analyze a poem, emphasizing such things as tone, voice, rhythm, and selection and placement of detail as vehicles and even components of meaning. From the most trivial of matters to the most significant, the recurring theme of the mother’s advice is that there is one right way to do everything, and that way must be followed in order to avoid all of life’s many dangers. (Again, one may draw a comparison with Hemingway.)

If “Girl” is viewed as a short story, however, then the mother’s speech is itself the central action. Her motivations are almost self-evident—love, worry, and a conviction that traditional ways are best. Her speech to the girl even hints at the central conflicts in their relationship—the mother’s desire for her daughter to be a lady and the girl’s feeling of being unjustly criticized (not to mention being overwhelmed by so many orders all at once).

Without much difficulty, students (who may have heard from their own parents long lists of advice more or less similar in tone) will identify the speaker in “Girl” as a mother and the listener as her daughter. The mother’s diatribe is interrupted only twice, when the daughter protests. (The italics leave it ambiguous whether the daughter responds aloud or merely mentally.) From the language, such as the names of foods (*dasheen, doukona*) and the details of daily life, we soon see that the setting is another country—the author’s native Antigua, we might guess. The mother’s words seem an accumulation of instructions repeated over many years. Her intent is to teach her daughter to measure up, to grow into a lady and not a “slut.” Any deviation from her rules, the mother worries, may be a fatal step toward sluthood. Clearly, she sees a woman’s role in life as traditionally restricted and restricting. But the mother is not merely delivering negative, binding orders; she tries to impart a whole body of traditional wisdom about the right way to do things. She offers her daughter the secrets of catching fish, avoiding bad luck, curing a cold (or a pregnancy), bullying a man, lovemaking, and making ends meet.

Some students, especially female students, will no doubt roll their eyes in recognition at the portrait of the mother and identify with the daughter, although they will grudgingly acknowledge that the mother is motivated by love and concern for her daughter’s well-being. They may identify more directly with the mother—and
find a greater depth and resonance in the text—if they perceive her to be also motivated, no doubt unconsciously, by self-concern as well: by the need to justify the choices and especially the sacrifices that she has made in her own life, and by the need to validate her own insights through their adoption by someone else.

The poet Cindy Milwe, who teaches at Santa Monica High School in Santa Monica, California, has contributed this note on teaching “Girl”:

“Girl” never fails to engage teenagers and, despite its brevity, has proven useful in many classroom contexts. I have even used it with ninth graders as an introduction to Romeo and Juliet, with tenth graders as a way into A Doll’s House, and with seniors in a creative writing class to help them understand the notion of voice (focusing on the imperative nature of the piece and its almost relentless repetition).

Regardless of grade level, I have students read the story the night before and ask two good readers to be prepared the following day to read aloud (one as the mother and one as the daughter). During the in-class reading, I ask students to focus on the voices of these two characters and then I ask the following discussion questions:

1. What do we know about the mother and daughter? What don’t we know? What can we infer? (For critical reading purposes and to facilitate a richer discussion, I will often have students jot down what they consider to be important lines from the text and then have them explain, in writing, what they are able to infer from those lines.)

2. What kinds of things is the mother trying to teach her daughter? Which commands and instructions seem particularly useful or problematic? Why?

3. Do you think she’s a good mother based on the advice and warnings she offers? Why or why not?

4. Why is this story called “Girl” when the girl only “speaks” two sentences? What might Kincaid be suggesting about being a girl in general or about being a girl in this situation?

After talking about the story at length, I open up the discussion by asking students to share the various things they’ve learned about being a “boy” or a “girl” and from whom they’ve learned them. In a creative writing class, I ask students to make two columns on a piece of notebook paper and list the various “commands”—using the imperative—and the various “instructions” (using the repeated phrase “This is how to . . .”) that they’ve heard from people in their own lives. They will then use these lists as preliminary notes to craft their own story with two voices, using “Girl” as a model.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information on Kincaid. Longman Lecture, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “Girl.”

Jhumpa Lahiri, INTERPRETER OF MALADIES, page 577

That Jhumpa Lahiri should have come out of nowhere to win the Pulitzer Prize with her first book seems less startling after one has experienced her work. “Interpreter of Maladies” catches the reader’s attention from the very first sentence and never
relaxes its hold until the end. Its quiet mastery is evident throughout, in the beautifully controlled writing, in the eye for vivid and telling detail, in the expert dialogue and sharp characterization, and especially in the wise and sympathetic portrayal of the complexities of the human heart.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. From whose point of view is the story told? How would you characterize the method employed—omniscient, limited omniscient, or objective? The correct answer is, of course, limited omniscient. The method is not objective: we do not see everything from the outside as we would if we were present, but we are given insights into the unspoken thoughts and feelings of someone other than ourselves. The author has limited her omniscience in this story to Mr. Kapasi; it is his inner state that we are privy to, and everyone and everything else in the story is presented through his viewpoint.

2. Mr. Das tells Mr. Kapasi (paragraph 20), “In a way we have a lot in common . . .” What does he mean by this? Do they in fact have much in common? As a science teacher in a middle school who takes his classes to the Museum of Natural History in New York City, Mr. Das expresses a sense of kinship with Mr. Kapasi in his role as a tour guide. Also, although unknown to Mr. Das, both are the fathers of three children, and both are in less than totally satisfactory marriages. But beyond such superficial resemblances, everything in the text suggests the great differences between the two: Mr. Das is somewhat immature, quite unselfconscious, a bit crass, seemingly satisfied with his life and himself; Mr. Kapasi is older, a person of dignity and reserve, greatly concerned with his appearance and the impression he makes on others, who has established a life of comforting rituals to cope with his unhappiness in his marriage.

3. What can we determine about the relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Das from the details given in the first few pages of the story? The first clause of the very first sentence of the story is “Mr. and Mrs. Das bickered.” Mrs. Das agrees to take their daughter to the toilet only after he points out that he gave Tina her bath the previous night: they do not freely assist and support each other as partners in a mutually loving relationship, but instead keep strict domestic accounts, as if each fears to be taken advantage of by doing more than the other. While Mr. Das is eager to enjoy the sights of the tour (though he derives more enjoyment from reading descriptions in his tour book, even when he is standing right in front of the thing being described), he makes no real effort to communicate that eagerness to his wife, who is clearly, behind her sunglasses, bored and apathetic. Their annoyed exchange over his supposed stinginess (par. 46–48), as well as their readiness to act this way in front of a stranger, also shows the strains in their relationship.

4. On one level, “Interpreter of Maladies” is about a clash of cultures. In what ways do the members of the Das family seem particularly American to Mr. Kapasi? How are these characteristics contrasted with Indian life and behavior? Though Indian in appearance, Mr. and Mrs. Das dress like Americans and speak with American accents (unsurprisingly, as they were born and raised and have lived their entire lives in America). Their reactions to the monuments of their ancestral culture range from shallow to indifferent and are expressed in terms such as “neat” and
“cool.” They seem incapable of—and, except for a few perfunctory tries, uninterested in—disciplining their children, and in fact they seem to Mr. Kapasi more like children than parents: “it was hard to believe they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves” (par. 45). As Mrs. Das later makes clear, they were thrown together from a very early age and allowed to explore and fashion their own relationship: “The things we did those Friday and Saturday nights, while our parents sat downstairs drinking tea . . . I could tell you stories, Mr. Kapasi” (par. 141). This is in sharp contrast to Mr. Kapasi’s arranged marriage, with its total lack of physical joy and intimacy (par. 99).

5. When Mrs. Das comments on Mr. Kapasi’s responsibilities as an interpreter of maladies (paragraph 74), her remarks underline the importance of subjective perceptions. People don’t usually change in the space of an afternoon, but our perceptions of them may shift profoundly, especially if we don’t know them very well. How would you characterize and describe the separate stages of Mr. Kapasi’s evolving feelings about Mrs. Das? Through the first part of the story, Mr. Kapasi’s impressions of Mrs. Das are, if not exactly contemptuous, then certainly condescending. He seems to see her as somewhat inappropriately dressed, and he notices that she is indifferent and a bit sullen, more interested in applying her nail polish than in observing the sights or even controlling her daughter’s behavior. The first real shift in his view of her comes when she describes his job as an interpreter of maladies as “so romantic” (par. 61); not insignificantly, two paragraphs later he bites into the piece of gum she has offered him and “a thick sweet liquid burst onto his tongue”: she has already provided him, as it were, with a taste of life’s possibilities. By paragraph 79, he is flattered by her interest in his job and stirred by her use of the word “romantic” in connection with him; from that point, he builds an increasingly detailed fantasy of two soul mates, each trapped in a sterile marriage, who will ultimately reconnect and bond with one another, a bond that in his mind grows from friendship and shared amusements to incorporate, by paragraph 99, at least the hint of a physical dimension. In his loneliness he has fastened on her as his salvation from a life that he now regards as empty and sterile. After she tells him the story of Bobby’s conception, his feelings toward her begin, at paragraph 145, to take a very different and decisive turn.

6. Why does Mrs. Das tell Mr. Kapasi such intimate details about her life? How does she respond to his interpretation of her malady? How accurate, in your view, is his interpretation? Having suffered for eight years, as she says, with a need to unburden herself, Mrs. Das is drawn to Mr. Kapasi because she is impressed by his skills as an interpreter of maladies; she sees him as sensitive, wise, and, above all, possessed of a healer’s gifts (he is also no doubt an acceptable confidant because he is a stranger and they will never see one another again). With her revelation, she has punctured his fantasies of a soul mate and has diminished herself in his eyes. “Mr. Kapasi felt insulted that Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her common, trivial little secret” (par. 161). Struggling with his disillusionment and his sense of obligation to try to help, he seems not to realize how brusque, unsympathetic, and even offensive his question must sound to Mrs. Das, just as he seems not to realize that pain and guilt are not mutually exclusive feelings. Mr. Kapasi had sought romance and found squalor instead; Mrs. Das had sought understanding and received only judgment. In the end, one may feel sadness for both of them, each trapped in his or her limitations and each unable to give what the other needs.
Students have no difficulty with the conventions of Realism, for it is the dominant narrative mode of the fiction and the films with which they are most likely to be familiar. Likewise, the popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, superhero comics, and the Star Wars movies indicates that students are equally at home with the mode of Romance, especially fantasy. But they may find themselves uncomfortable with mixing the two, as in “The Rocking-Horse Winner,” a fantastic story that takes great pains to create a generally realistic atmosphere and to have its characters respond to external stimuli in the ways that “normal” people would. They may be resistant to details such as the picking of winning horses through a frenzied and debilitating ride on a rocking-horse, especially when such things are central to the unfolding of the narrative. Thus it might be advisable at the outset of the presentation of “The Rocking-Horse Winner” to frame the discussion in terms of the conventions of magic realism. Past a certain point, however, explanation is useless: one either accepts the conventions or does not.

“The Rocking-Horse Winner” has occasioned some superb criticism. Any student wishing to write on the story should read the excerpt from Daniel P. Watkins’s penetrating economic analysis of the tale found in this anthology in “Critical Approaches to Literature.” The poet W. D. Snodgrass has also written a brilliant essay on the subject, “A Rocking-Horse: The Symbol, the Pattern, the Way to Live,” which examines the psychological and symbolic underpinning of “the perfect story by the least meticulous of serious writers.” Originally published in the Hudson Review (Summer 1958), Snodgrass’s essay has been widely reprinted and still represents one of the foundational articles in Lawrence studies.


**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. The family members in Lawrence’s story harbor a number of secrets. What are they? The mother’s secret is that “at the center of her heart was a hard little place that could not feel love, no, not for anybody” (par. 1). Paul’s secret is that, by furiously riding his wooden rocking-horse, he is often able to predict which horses will win races. Bassett’s secret, and Uncle Oscar’s, is that they profit from Paul’s predictions, even while the boy is on his deathbed. Their winnings are kept secret. Paul gives his mother 5,000 pounds but does it anonymously. The house itself whispers a secret, “There must be more money” (par. 5, 6, 181). The three children hear the whisper, but no one talks about it.

2. What motivates each main character? What sets Paul’s quest apart from that of the others? It is the desire for more money that motivates them all. Perhaps the most blatant evidence of the family’s obsession with riches appears in Uncle Oscar’s attempt to console his sister after her son’s death: “My God, Hester, you’re eighty-odd thousand to the good and a poor devil of a son to the bad” (par. 244)—as if he were enumerating her assets and liabilities on an imaginary balance sheet.

Paul’s frenzied pursuit of money differs from the greed of the others in that he wants wealth not for himself but for his mother. Clearly he hopes that, by being “luckier” than his father, he will win his mother’s love and attention.
3. Some details in Lawrence's story are implausible. What are they? Those students who can appreciate Lawrence's particular blend of reality and fantasy will like "The Rocking-Horse Winner." A house that whispers is unusual, but even a hard-headed realist can probably accept it at least as a metaphor. That a boy can learn to predict the winner in a horse race by riding his rocking-horse is perhaps harder to believe.

4. At what places in his story does Lawrence make use of irony? Paul, intent upon stopping the whispers in the house, anonymously gives his mother 5,000 pounds as a birthday present. Ironically, his gift has the opposite effect. The whispers grow louder. Given his mother's insatiable greed for money, this result comes as less of a surprise to the reader than to Paul.

There is irony in the story's title. Paul, the rocking-horse winner, loses his life.

David Leavitt, A PLACE I'VE NEVER BEEN, page 602

With a slight modification of Langston Hughes's famous question, we might suggest that one of the themes of David Leavitt's touching story is an answer to "What Happens to a Dream Denied?" Himself a gay man, Leavitt uses the surprising device of filtering our view of a gay man through the mind and emotions of a woman who has loved him hopelessly for a decade. We sympathize wholly with Celia as she struggles with her developing and sometimes conflicted feelings for Nathan. Through her eyes, we come to see him as something of an emotional vampire and to understand her growing resentment of him and his demands. And with her we achieve a breakthrough of understanding as she comes to realize the vast and unprecedented need that haunts him in a place she's never been, a place where he is condemned to spend the rest of whatever life he has left to him.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Approximately how old are Nathan and Celia? How long have they known one another? In paragraph 11, Celia refers to "our earliest time together, . . . those days just past the brink of childhood." In paragraph 80, she says to Nathan, "I'm going to be thirty soon," just after he has called himself "Your best friend for nearly ten years." In paragraph 90, she reflects on "how Nathan looked the first time I saw him, in line at a college dining hall."

2. What were Celia's original feelings toward Nathan? How have they changed? She had fallen in love with him when she first knew him, before either of them realized he was gay. Hopelessly enamored, she had let him depend on her for emotional sustenance. Over time, however, the one-sidedness of the relationship had begun to wear on her, and when Nathan went to live in Europe, she found that, despite missing his company, "maybe it was a good thing after all, that maybe now, with Nathan gone, I would be forced to go out into the world more, make new friends, maybe even find a boyfriend" (par. 1). On his return from Europe, she feels a growing resentment at his assumption that she will always be there for him, no matter what, expecting nothing in return.

3. What has been Celia's self-image? How is she trying to change it? She has thought of herself as "ugly and fat" (par. 11), a feeling constantly reinforced by
Nathan’s inability to respond to her romantically and sexually. With Nathan safely away in Europe, she has had a makeover, has striven to lose weight, and has begun to cultivate a possible relationship with a co-worker.

4. What concerns affect Nathan’s self-image? How has he adapted his life as a gay man to reflect those concerns? Nathan has had an HIV-positive diagnosis for over a year. (You should point out to your students that when the story was written, in the 1980s, there was no effective treatment for AIDS, no means of preventing a certain and agonizing death.) Nathan hasn’t contracted AIDS itself; in fact, it is a striking demonstration of how dramatically his values have changed that he is happy to be gaining weight, since his health now matters much more to him than vanity about his personal appearance. He has become celibate and somewhat isolated, repeatedly making the point that, as far as he’s concerned, there’s no such thing as safe sex. As he tells Celia (par. 89), “It’s bad enough to be afraid you might get it. But to be afraid you might give it—and to someone you loved. . . .”

5. What does Nathan expect from Celia? What does he give in return? In paragraph 20, confronting the wreck of Nathan’s apartment, Celia comments on “what Nathan was now asking of me: to take care, to resolve, to smooth.” In the café in Manhattan after Lizzie Fischman’s birthday party, she tells him directly, “I love you and I want to be your friend, but you can’t expect me to just keep giving and giving and giving my time to you without anything in return” (par. 82). When Nathan responds after a moment, he doesn’t dispute this characterization, but simply (and pleadingly) says, “You’re all I have.”

6. How does the game Deprivation become a symbol in this short story? What does it suggest ironically about Nathan’s life? In connection with the game, Celia points out in paragraph 50 that “There was a tacit assumption among my friends that ‘experience’—by that term we meant, I think, almost exclusively sex and drugs—was something you strove to get as much of as you could, that innocence, for all the praise it received in literature, was a state so essentially tedious that those of us still stuck in it deserved the childish recompense of shiny new pennies.” She immediately adds that none of them foresaw—who could?—how quickly AIDS would ravage their circle and turn that equation inside out. Consequently, deprivation has become the keynote of Nathan’s existence—he has deprived himself of intimacy, and will very possibly be deprived of decades of his life—as is reinforced by the story’s closing sentence: “He looked away from me, across the café, listening, I suppose, for that wind-chime peal as all the world’s pennies flew his way.”

—Michael Palma

Naguib Mahfouz, THE LAWSUIT, page 612

Under Islamic law, polygamy is legal in Egypt, and a man may have as many as four wives. But, for a variety of reasons, it is rarely practiced: many regard it as an antiquated custom; most husbands do not wish to disrupt the emotional bond they share with their wives; and the vast majority of the population simply cannot afford to maintain multiple households. According to some estimates, no more than three percent of Egyptian men (if even that many) have more than one wife at a time—
a statistic implicitly borne out in the story by the fact that the father’s second marriage is as unexpected as it is unwelcome.

Like the narrator, the reader is curious about the second wife’s current circumstances—and appearance—and her motives for bringing the lawsuit, but the focus of the story is clearly upon the character of the narrator himself. It is his actions and reactions, in both the past and the present, that most concern us.

Best known for long, richly detailed novels of life in modern Egypt, Mahfouz demonstrates in “The Lawsuit” that he is also a master of the short story.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What impressions do you form about the narrator after reading the first three paragraphs? Are those impressions confirmed or overturned as the story unfolds? With the news of the lawsuit, the narrator finds that long-buried feelings have resurfaced. The vehemence with which he expresses those feelings to his lawyer shows that time has not eroded his sense of grievance, even outrage, over what took place decades earlier. At the same time, he has a genuine curiosity about the widow’s present situation and her motives in bringing the suit. By his own assessment, this curiosity does not involve “any temptation to gloat over her”—though he does experience “a feeling of gratification” when he later learns how she was robbed in turn (par. 29). And his several intense testimonies to her youthful beauty suggest that his feelings about the woman are, at the very least, a bit complicated. All of these impressions are largely confirmed as the story proceeds.

2. Would you call the narrator a round character or a flat one? Explain your reasons why. We gain a further significant insight into the narrator’s personality in paragraph 7 when we learn of his tendency to mask his true feelings in the interest of “smoothing things over,” but even this comes relatively early. Throughout the story, his feelings and actions are quite consistent with what we have seen of him from the beginning; even in his reaction to meeting his father’s widow in the courtroom, he acts as we would expect him to, based on what we already know about him. Therefore, he fits the definition of a flat character.

3. In your judgment, do the members of the narrator’s family behave rationally? If not, how would you characterize their actions? It is all but impossible to fault the behavior of the mother. Even beyond her husband’s emotional betrayal of her and the humiliation he subjects her to, she has quite legitimate—and, in the event, well founded—fears about the financial security of her family. Yet, despite these pressures, she bears her situation with quiet dignity, and she shows an admirable sense of values in appearing to be “more worried about my brother than she was about the fortune” (par. 10). The brother himself acts in a manner that is, at the very least, counterproductive, and that proves self-destructive in the end. Some might call him unhinged; others might maintain that, for a young man with no talents and no other prospects, his is a rational response to the threatened loss of his inheritance and security.

4. How would you describe the behavior of the lawyer? Does he seem to be an effective advocate for his client’s interests? Explain. If part of a lawyer’s function in a case such as this one is to provide a sympathetic ear and a kind of emotional
hand-holding for his client, the lawyer in the story seems to perform these duties in a rather perfunctory manner. He seems more concerned with a clear-eyed assessment of the situation, which might lead us to another question: What exactly are his client's best interests—to avoid piling further insult on top of an unrightable wrong, to save money, to have the therapeutic satisfaction of openly airing his grievances, or to make the problem go away with as little stress as possible so that he can resume his even-keeled life? As the lawyer points out, there's no evidence against the widow, and denouncing her in court might backfire and create sympathy for her. In his view, then—a very detached and professional view—the narrator's interests would be best served by letting go of his feelings and getting away as cheaply as he can.

5. How does the narrator react to seeing his father's wife in the courtroom at the end of the story? How do his reactions influence his attitude toward the lawsuit? The narrator speaks of his "mysterious desire to set eyes on her" (par. 30), once again suggesting that his feelings are more complicated than he realizes. His anger and hostility seem to be considerably muted at his first sight of her, with her lost beauty, her weight gain, and her "veneer of perpetual dejection." If not exactly overwhelmed by a rush of compassion, he appears not unsympathetic, and he speaks to her with such civility and even grace that she is surprised and flustered. In light of this reaction, his adversarial attitude toward her seems to have largely disappeared.

6. What does the narrator mean by his comments in the last paragraph? What resolution of the case do you think he anticipates? If, in his view, the "farce" is going to play out to its presumably farcical conclusion, it would seem to imply that he expects her to prevail and to be awarded maintenance at his expense. Yet, if this is so, he seems quite resigned to the prospect, going so far as to say that he feels "an inner peace." His preference for smoothing things over, his sympathy for her situation, and his fundamental decency appear to have overcome his sense of being wronged.

—Michael Palma

Bobbie Ann Mason, SHILOH, page 616

In reviewing Bobbie Ann Mason's Love Life, the critic Robert McPhillips summarizes the special appeal of her first book, Shiloh and Other Stories (1982). "In one volume," McPhillips observes, "Mason had populated a literary landscape almost as distinctive as Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio." He goes on to say:

Formerly ordered by the rhythms of farm life, these lives are now lived against the manufactured hum of television shows, rock and country music and MTV. Mason is at her best when evoking the confusion—sometimes comic and sometimes troubling—that this radical cultural upheaval creates in people who have lost touch with their past but who suddenly face a dizzying number of options—educational, occupational and sexual—from which they must try to piece together their present lives. (New York Post, 19 Mar. 1989.)

Although McPhillips was discussing the entire collection, he could have been specifically addressing the title story.
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. “Shiloh” is told by a third-person narrator who observes both Leroy and Norma Jean Moffitt. Does the narrator present one character more deeply than the other? Although the narrator appears initially to be impersonal, the story presents Leroy’s thoughts and feelings more deeply than Norma Jean’s. We see Norma Jean mainly from the outside. We follow her actions closely but don’t always understand her motivations. Leroy’s psychology is much more clearly presented—perhaps because he himself understands it. Having been partially crippled in a truck accident, Leroy has been forced to reexamine his life. He has discovered things about himself that his formerly busy schedule did not allow—his newfound passion for building things, for example, and his new appreciation for his wife. He also sees how much his hometown has changed. He seems to see his life up close for the first time. “He has begun to realize that in all the years he was on the road,” Mason writes, “he never took time to examine anything. He was always flying past scenery.”

2. What role does the electric organ play in Norma Jean and Leroy’s relationship? Does it in any way influence the breakup of their marriage? Leroy enjoys his wife’s obsession with the electric organ he bought her for Christmas. He loves the music, though he mainly uses it to drift off into his daydreams. For Norma Jean, however, the music unleashes her frustrations. She buys a “Sixties Songbook” and, playing through these old tunes, she feels dissatisfied with what she has done with her youth. “I didn’t like these old songs back then,” she tells her husband. “But I have this crazy feeling I missed something.” Characteristically, Leroy cuts off the conversation. “You didn’t miss a thing.” In the background is the real hole in their life—their son, Randy, who died in infancy. They never speak about him, a silence that is symptomatic of the couple’s inability to address and resolve the real issues in their marriage. The couple has had no other children. Possibly, motherhood and family life is one of the other things Norma Jean has missed and that might have offset her sense of having missed being young. Norma Jean’s new smoking habit is surely also significant. Is it the sign of delayed adolescent rebellion in a woman approaching middle age?

3. What does the story’s title contribute to its meaning? Isn’t the Shiloh battleground incidental to the couple’s situation? The trip to the Shiloh battleground becomes a symbol for the failure of the Moffitts’ marriage. As the British writer Francis King observed in a review of Shiloh and Other Stories, when Leroy takes Norma Jean “to the Civil War battlefield of Shiloh, she in effect, vanishes out of sight, leaving him with the desolating sense that, just as he never understood the inner workings of history that erupted in so much carnage, so he has never understood the inner working of the marriage that is now causing his own inner death” (The Spectator, August 20, 1983). Norma Jean’s mother has urged them to visit the battleground as she did on her honeymoon. Now that Leroy is injured, he has warmed to the idea, but his notion that their aimless visit to Shiloh would remedy or improve their relationship reflects how poorly he understands his wife. Leroy has good intentions; he wants to improve their marriage. But he has grown so remote from his wife’s inner life that his solutions—building a log cabin she does not want or having a picnic in Shiloh—have no connection to her still only half-realized aspirations.

MyLiteratureLab® Resources. Biographical information, eAnthology, and links for Bobbie Ann Mason. Longman Lecture, comprehension quiz, reading, interpretation, and writing questions on “Shiloh.”

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Joyce Carol Oates, Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?, page 626

Like many another celebrated work of fiction, Oates’s story was inspired by an account of an actual event. As she has pointed out, the germ of the story was an article, “The Pied Piper of Tucson,” which appeared in Life magazine in 1966. The article concerned a man in his twenties, dressing and acting like a teenager, who seduced (and sometimes murdered) young girls. Interesting as this fact may be, one should avoid overemphasizing it in presenting the story. For one thing, Oates used the article only as a starting point, and in fact she claims that she never finished reading it, so as to leave room for her imagination to do its work. For another, literature seeks not merely to record fact but to transform it by incorporating it into a larger, meaningful whole. Serious fiction—especially fiction like that of Oates, which is often drawn from violent and sensational occurrences—is at pains to dispute the journalistic cliché by probing the recesses of human nature to show that there is no such thing as “a senseless act.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe Connie as you see her in the first few paragraphs of the story. In what ways is she appealing? In what respects is she imperceptive and immature? Connie, Oates implies, is still growing and doesn’t know whether to act “childlike” or “languid.” Still discovering her identity, she behaves one way at home and another way elsewhere. Her mind is “filled with trashy daydreams,” and the first caresses of love seem to her just “the way it was in movies and promised in songs.”

2. Describe the character of Arnold Friend. In what ways is he sinister? What do you make of his strangely detailed knowledge of Connie and her family, of his apparent ability to see what is happening at the barbecue, miles away? Is he a supernatural character? Perhaps Arnold’s knowledge was obtained merely by pumping Connie’s friends for information and by keeping close watch on her house, and perhaps his reported vision of the barbecue is merely feigned for Connie’s benefit. Much about him seems fakery: his masklike face and “stage voice”; his gilded jalopy; his artificially padded boots; his affecting the speech, dress, and music of the youth culture (although he is over thirty). Still, there are hints that he is a devil or a warlock. Perhaps Ellie Oscar, the “forty-year-old baby,” is his imp or familiar; perhaps his bendable boot conceals a cloven hoof. He works a kind of magic: on first spying Connie he draws a sign in the air that marks her for his own. He threatens to possess her very soul: he will enter her “where it’s all secret” and then, after the sex act, she will give in to him (par. 104). A charismatic person like Charles Manson, he seeks young girls to dominate.

3. Why doesn’t Connie succeed in breaking loose from Arnold Friend’s spell? She seems entranced, like a dazed and terrified bird facing a snake. Everything appears unreal or “only half real” (par. 94). Like a practitioner of brainwashing, Arnold Friend denies reality: “This place you are now—inside your daddy’s house—is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time” (par. 152). Arnold suggests that Connie’s beating heart isn’t real (“Feel that? That feels solid too but we know better”) and soon she thinks her body “wasn’t really hers either” (par. 155).
Perhaps some student will suggest that Connie really wants to give in to Arnold Friend—after all, she loves to flirt with danger and when Friend first looked at her in the parking lot, she looked back. But Connie’s terror seems amply justified; Friend after all has threatened to kill her family unless she submits to him.

4. **What seems ironic in the names of the leading characters?** Friend is no friend; a more appropriate name for him would be Fiend. Ellie Oscar, like his first name, seems asexual. His last name suggests a trophy from the Motion Picture Academy—fitting for a media slave who keeps his ear glued to his transistor radio. His androgynous name perhaps recalls that of another assassin, Lee Oswald. Connie is a connee—one who is conned.

5. **What is the point of view of this story? How is it appropriate?** Limited omniscience, with the author seeing into only one character’s mind. The author perceives more than Connie does and observes Arnold Friend and Ellie more shrewdly than Connie could observe them.

6. **Explain the title. Where is Connie going, where has she been?** She has been living in a world of daydreams, and now, at the end, she is going out into a sunlit field to be raped. In the beginning of the story we are shown that Connie lives mainly in the present; in the opening paragraph she sees “a shadowy vision of herself as she was right at the moment.” She doesn’t seem bothered by the ultimate questions asked in the title of the story. Arnold Friend answers the questions in paragraph 152: “The place where you came from ain’t there any more, and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out.” She has been nowhere, she is going nowhere—for in his view, there is no reality.

7. **What significance, if any, do you find in this story’s being dedicated to Bob Dylan?** No doubt some of Dylan’s music flows through Connie’s mind, and some of Friend’s repartee seems a weak-minded imitation of Dylanese: surreal and disconnected, as in his tirade to Ellie (par. 133): “Don’t hem in on me . . .” Arnold Friend bears a faint resemblance to Dylan: he has “a familiar face, somehow,” with hawk-like nose and hair “crazy as a wig,” and he talks with a lilting voice “as if he were reciting the words to a song.” His approach is “slightly mocking, kidding, but serious and a little melancholy,” and he taps his fists together “in homage to the perpetual music behind him” (par. 77). Joyce Carol Oates has remarked that Dylan’s song “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” (1965) was an influence on her story. Dylan’s lyric addresses a young girl, Baby Blue (“My sweet little blue-eyed girl,” Arnold calls Connie), who must make a hasty departure from home across an unreal, shifting landscape. A vagabond raps at her door, and she is told, “Something calls for you / Forget the dead you’ve left.” Oates’s title recalls a line from another Dylan song, “Mr. Tambourine Man”: “And there is no place I’m goin’ to.”

In teaching this story to her students at the University of Georgia, Professor Anne Williams had “a couple of minor epiphanies.” She has written to share them with us:

“Ellie” may be a diminutive of “Beelzebub,” lord of the flies. The story is certainly full of references to flies. I also noticed a series of comic allusions to various fairy tales, all of which, according to Bettelheim, concern the difficulties of coming to terms with adult sexuality:

“Snow White” (in reference to the mother’s jealousy over Connie’s looks, so much like her own faded beauty [par. 1–2]);

“Cinderella” (the pumpkin on Arnold’s car [par. 36]);
“Little Red Riding Hood” (here, there seems a fundamental structural parallel—and Arnold is described: “the nose long and hawk-like, sniffing as if she were a treat he was going to gobble up” [par. 46]).

In spite of hawk-like, we agree that the description makes Arnold sound distinctly like a wolf. Professor Williams refers, of course, to Bruno Bettelheim’s The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Knopf, 1976). Perhaps Oates’s story might be taken up together with the Grimm tale “Godfather Death.”

Deborah Louvar, who teaches at Seminole State College in Sanford, Florida, had a student who made an interesting discovery about the “secret code” numbers on Arnold Friend’s car (par. 37) which she has shared with us:

I taught “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” for the first time last summer and am teaching it now. This semester, James Mullady, a student of mine made an interesting discovery about the origin of the title.

The student, a deputy sheriff, did something he wasn’t supposed to do: he did a web search for the code numbers 33, 19, 17 on Arnold’s car. He found a reference to Judges 19:17. How curious! The title of the story repeats the question in the biblical passage. It must be more than a coincidence. [Judges 19:17 in the NIV version reads: “When he looked and saw the traveler in the city square, the old man asked, ‘Where are you going? Where did you come from?’” It begins a particularly gruesome passage about a violent rape and murder. —Editors]

I went home that night and read the verse and the surrounding chapters. Well, that Bible story gives a new level of meaning to Oates’s story! But the violence in the biblical account is far worse than that in the story.

Is the numerical code an allusion? I told students no at first because the connection between the two stories is so rarefied that few readers would catch it. But after reconsidering, I said yes, it is an allusion. The number of readers who would understand doesn’t matter.

The student went on to explain the number 33 as Jesus’s age at the time of the crucifixion. But I’m not convinced, for many reasons. I’ve looked through other biblical texts to find meaning in this number but found nothing.

In class we considered other explanations for the code, but none for 19 and 17 are as striking as the one that unfolds through Judges.

Although Louvar later learned that an earlier scholar had identified this hidden allusion, both she and the editors of this book remain impressed by Deputy Sherriff Mullady’s keen detective work.

A film has been based on Oates’s story: Smooth Talk (1987), directed by Joyce Chopra, with screenplay by Tom Cole. In an interview, Oates remarked that although she had nothing to do with making the movie, she respects the “quite remarkable” results. “The story itself is a Hawthornian parable of a kind, ‘realistic’ in its surface texture but otherwise allegorical” (interview with Barbara C. Millard, Four Quartets, Fall 1988). Is it, then, an account of a confrontation with the Devil, comparable with “Young Goodman Brown”?

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Oates. Longman Lecture, evaluation questions, comprehension quiz, writing prompts, and essay questions on “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

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Tim O’Brien, THE THINGS THEY CARRIED, page 637

In 1987 Tim O’Brien published a wonderfully odd and powerful short story in Esquire, “How to Tell a True War Story.” (It was reprinted in his 1990 collection, The Things They Carried.) In “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien mixes the techniques of memoir, literary criticism, and fiction to discuss how one conveys the grotesque atmosphere of the Vietnam War. Early in the story O’Brien’s narrator observes:

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 they have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it.... You can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.

That artistic credo illuminates but does not entirely describe “The Things They Carried.” This story includes the obscene, the immoral, and the improper, but it uses those darker elements to portray a certain harsh and uncomfortable sort of virtue. By incorporating the evil and the obscene, “The Things They Carried” transcends the rules of the genre that O’Brien proclaims—admittedly through the voice of a fictionalized narrator—in “How to Tell a True War Story.”

O’Brien’s style in “The Things They Carried” (and in several other works) is both distinctive and unusual. He builds the story out of a series of fragmentary portraits, and he shifts aggressively from one character to another. He relishes bold shifts in tone or setting. His diction is omnivorous—from the soothingly domestic to the gritty and bellicose. He often provides elaborate catalogues as if the reality of the Vietnam War could be described only by listing all the disparate persons, places, and things it brought together. On some level the entire story is a list—the things the platoon carry into combat. The bold juxtaposition of scenes and the evocative catalogues give O’Brien’s story a strongly poetic quality, and his expressive effects are as often lyric as narrative.

The reader soon recognizes that “the things” these young men carry into battles are as often mental as material. Along with weapons, food, supplies, and personal effects, they also carry hope, fear, love, hate, and belief. Kiowa, for example, carries both his Christianity and his distrust of white men. These internal possessions are reflected by two physical objects—an illustrated New Testament given to him by his Sunday-school-teaching father, and his grandfather’s hunting hatchet. Each of his fellow soldiers carries a similarly complex load of objects and obsessions.

The ending of “The Things They Carried” is especially suggestive. After Lavender’s death, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross burns his most precious possession—the letters and photographs from Martha, a college girl back home. Destroying these physical objects represents an emotional change inside Cross. Burning letters he knows by heart and cherishes as his most intimate connection with the innocent world of home, Cross deliberately razes part of himself, a source of his own humanity. He seemingly destroys this part not out of anger but from both duty and resolve. He must become a stronger if narrower person to protect his men. He must distance himself from his own civilian identity to become a better combat officer. The incident is simultaneously grim, tender, and honest. Now Cross carries something else into combat—perhaps the heaviest burden of all—Lavender’s death and the fate of his men.

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O'Brien's story teaches itself in a classroom. One sure-fire approach is to ask students to list all the members of the platoon with their combat specialties and then add the most important things (internal and external) each carries into combat. Then ask what these things suggest about the person in question. A good writing assignment is to ask students what three things they would carry into combat and why. (Conscientious objectors can choose what they would carry into the Peace Corps.)

Daniel Orozco, Orientation, page 649


John Williams reviewed Orientation in the New York Times, saying:

The stories in Daniel Orozco's debut collection convey a sense of workplace alienation that would make Karl Marx cringe. The opening lines of "Orientation," the first story, place us squarely under the fluorescent lights of comically absurd employment: "Those are the offices and these are the cubicles. That’s my cubicle there, and this is your cubicle. This is your phone. Never answer your phone. Let the Voicemail System answer it. This is your Voicemail." . . . Orozco allows his readers to breathe even as his characters suffocate. The stories demonstrate less interest in dystopia than in the real world, and offer many accessible pleasures that cut their taste of ennui and desperation. Also, though his concerns—corporate enervation and jittery social isolation, among them—are postmodern, he’s refreshingly allergic to formal gimmickry. ("Tales from the Cubicle," 22 July 2011.)

In a talk at the Bethesda Writers’ Center in Maryland in May 2011, Orozco poignantly generalized all stories: "All stories ask of their protagonist, ‘Who am I?’ and another way of putting this is to ask ‘Where do I belong?’ or ‘Do I belong anywhere?’" When answering a question about structure and tradition in his work, Orozco replied, "the thing I am interested in is how constraints reveal."

The constraints in "Orientation" perfectly display this sentiment. Although Orozco never reveals the sex of either the narrator or the new employee, many characteristics of both are revealed. For example, the anonymous narrator is paradoxically apathetic yet meticulous about the job. He/she is a wry observer of co-workers' sins and foibles, yet displays little enthusiasm for the new employee and doesn't ask any personal questions. The humor is dark, the tone deadpan. These features make some parts of the story feel satirical, while others feel like farce.

Set in a bland office filled with cubicles, the story itself is, quite literally, an orientation. A mid-level staffer—the story's unannamed narrator—gives a new (also
unnamed) employee an office tour. Taking place at the beginning of the newcomer’s first day of work, the tour is by turns predictable and unique, and what becomes clear to the reader is the mindless, soul-crushing work that takes place among all the cubicles. Along the way, the narrator points out where things are, identifies (but never introduces) co-workers, and highlights many rules. Many of the rules the narrator lists are familiar to anyone who has worked in an office. Breaks are a “privilege, not a right” that can be rescinded, but lunch is a “right, not a privilege” and must be taken (par. 17). As the orientation proceeds, the speaker’s comments become odder. The idea that you may not answer your phone when it rings, or that you must ask permission from your supervisor before making an emergency call, is outright funny. The coffee pool that does “not do decaf,” the “group discounts for the symphony,” and co-workers who steal from the office refrigerator are experiences shared in many workplaces.

The cubicle is the central space in this office. As we travel through the orientation, the narrator’s first comment about each co-worker is the location of his or her cubicle. Only the Unit Manager, Matthew Payne, has an office, and “his door is always closed. We have never seen him, and you will never see him. But he is here. You can be sure of that. He is all around us” (par. 20). This paradoxically absent-yet-present boss suggests an ominous tone to this workplace, like the Wizard of Oz who remains behind the curtain, watching from a distance.

Several moments in the story demonstrate, as the narrator says, that “the world [is] a funny place” but “not in a ha-ha sense, of course” (par. 9). Most notable, perhaps, is when the narrator describes the company’s full array of medical benefits that cover “any catastrophic illness” or “any unforeseen tragedy” (par. 13). With the monotone feel of the first-day orientation, the narrator gives a macabre, hypothetical example using Larry Bagdikian, a co-worker with six daughters. The narrator dryly claims that if any of Larry’s girls were “sprayed with semi-automatic gunfire while on a class field trip, or attacked in their bunk beds by some prowling nocturnal lunatic” that he “would have nothing to worry about” (par. 13).

Some of the humor comes when the narrator repeatedly notes behavior that may lead to the new employee’s dismissal: “If you make an emergency phone call without asking, you may be let go” or “Ask too many questions, however, and you may be let go” (par. 1, 3). That this threat pervades the first hour of this person’s first day at a new job belies a deeper truth: the need to keep one’s job constrains everyone’s behavior in the office.

Outside the mundane routines of the office, Kevin Howard is a serial killer called the “Carpet Cutter” and Amanda Pierce comes to work every morning with fresh bruises from her abusive husband. Co-workers have complicated relationships marked with flirtation and betrayal, with unrequited love and illicit affairs. These “office secrets” are, of course, not really secrets at all. Everyone knows the “truth” about everyone else, yet everyone tacitly chooses to pretend otherwise. And, as expected, if any of this were to interfere with anyone’s work, they “might have to be let go” (par. 23).

Part of what makes “Orientation” so enjoyable is that the reader is swept along this bizarre first-day tour along with the new worker. But the narrator’s tone slightly shifts from dry humor to melancholic reflection in the last paragraph, when the new employee is shown the photocopier room and given a momentary glimpse of the outside world from the office. When the narrator sees the new employee waving in the reflection of the building across from them, he also observes Anika Bloom waving back from the kitchenette. Of course, this “magnificent view” from the seventeenth...
floor may only be enjoyed “while photocopying,” and the reader wonders if the people in this office linger in this room, or avoid it. Whichever it is, the story suggests that nature is only ever seen through a small window in the monotonous spaces that symbolize the constraints of office life.

**TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. After working eleven years in an office, Orozco knows first-hand that the workplace, especially the office, can be like theater. As he observed, “It is a drama that causes characters’ strengths and weaknesses to bubble up, where people discover who they really are.” Do we see that in this story? Have you or your students experienced this in life?

2. If your students have worked in an office, are there parts of the story that feel familiar or made them laugh? Is “Orientation” only applicable to office life or to other kinds of jobs?

3. In “Orientation,” what are the some of the specific things that are “revealed” by the constraints of this office’s life? Discuss other situations where “constraints reveal” with your students. When is this true for a workplace, classroom, or in family life?

—Erika Koss

*Tobias Wolff, THE RICH BROTHER, page 653*

Discussing this story with your students and seeing how they react to the personalities of Pete and Donald—which brother do they relate to and which one do they reject, and why?—should provide an interesting insight into how young people currently feel about such things as success, materialism, spirituality, and the larger purposes of life. But you should be careful not to let such discussions, fascinating as they may be, overwhelm or distort Tobias Wolff’s story. It is clear enough that Pete is far from being a wholly admirable character: he is extremely materialistic and rather hard-hearted; the concept of schadenfreude, the taking of a (perhaps self-justifying) pleasure in the failures and misfortunes of others, is introduced in the second paragraph, and later in the story (par. 61–64) Pete heartily endorses the concept. Like Dr. Sloper in Henry James’s *Washington Square*, he takes a great satisfaction in being in the right, even at the expense of the needs and feelings of others.

But Bertrand Russell remarks somewhere that if one party to an argument is wrong, that doesn’t necessarily prove that the other one is right; and so we should bear in mind that Pete’s being a limited and unsatisfactory soul does not automatically confer moral superiority upon Donald. Donald may talk a good spiritual game, and he can be impulsively generous, but he is also laughably inept and almost boundlessly naïve; it isn’t clear that the family to whom he gave the farm’s groceries were even in need, and one needn’t be as cynical as Pete to see right through the vagueness and the grandiosity of Webster. Wolff is not a nineteenth-century Russian novelist, and if Donald is a holy fool, the emphasis in the phrase should fall heavily on the noun. (Similar tendencies toward idealizing a character—or at least taking his
self-assessment at face value—will probably be shown by students in appraising Sammy, the narrator of John Updike's “A & P.”

It is all but impossible to discuss this story without raising the question “Who is really 'The Rich Brother'?” To respond as Hemingway might have, “Pete—he has more money,” is obviously flip and unsatisfactory. But it seems equally glib, if not fatuous, to settle for “Donald—he's rich in spirit.” If it doesn’t sound unduly cynical, we might float the suggestion that if Donald is the richer one, it is because (thanks to Pete's sense of brotherly obligation or psychological need) he can live in Pete's Darwinian universe without being exposed to its risks. For all the superficial differences between the two brothers, in some fundamental ways they are strikingly similar: each is pig-headed to the point of incorrigibility and smugly convinced of his superiority to the other.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Are the brothers in the story developing characters or static ones? Does either of them undergo a change, or do we simply learn more about their established personalities as the story proceeds? There are shadings and complexities, and one or two revelations along the way, but both brothers are basically static characters who conform throughout the story to the descriptions of them given at the beginning. Even the conclusion is not an epiphany or a breakthrough: Pete's need to take care of Donald has already been shown by his taking the long drive to get him, and his attitude in the last paragraph feels much more like resignation than revelation.

2. What point of view does Wolff employ in this story? Do Pete's perceptions of Donald seem fundamentally sound to you, or is it necessary to go beyond them for a more objective appraisal? The point of view employed is limited omniscience, and the point-of-view character is Pete. Everything is seen from, and colored by, his perspective. Even though we are given a rich sense of Donald's character, he is presented entirely from the outside. Nonetheless, even acknowledging that Pete's view of his brother is jaundiced, there isn’t much that Donald says or does that would contradict or significantly undercut that view.

3. Donald tells Pete that “you don’t have any purpose in life. You're afraid to relate to people who do, so you make fun of them. . . . You're basically a very frightened individual.” Do you agree with this analysis or not? Explain. Webster certainly deserves Pete's scorn, and perhaps Donald does as well, but scorn as zealous and pervasive as Pete's does have something defensive about it. His vigorous acquisitiveness and his dream of being blind and cared for by Donald (see question 5) would seem to provide some substantiation of Donald's analysis here.

4. Do you believe Donald's claim that Pete tried to kill him when they were children? Why or why not? According to some views, Pete's comment that “Mom was in a state every time you burped” (par. 100) establishes the truth of Donald's claim, but such an interpretation strikes us as a wild inflation of normal sibling rivalry and resentment at feeling like the less favored child. Pete may be insensitive and competitive, but nothing else in the story suggests that he is vicious or violent, let alone fratricidal. And Donald is somewhat dramatic. In all likelihood, the truth lies somewhere in between, probably closer to Pete's version.
5. In one of Pete’s dreams he is blind and dependent on Donald to take care of him. Does Pete really need Donald? If so, for what? Donald certainly needs Pete, as much as he hates to admit it, and the dependency does appear to be mutual, as much as Pete would hate to admit it. What does he need Donald for? Moving from the most Pete-like to the most Donald-like response, we might say: (1) to feel superior to him; (2) to help Donald as a way of proving to himself that he’s not completely selfish; (3) to get from Donald the sense of a larger purpose and spiritual dimension that are otherwise missing from his life.

6. Near the end of the story, Pete wants to know what Donald means when he says “I don’t blame you.” What do you think he means? Moving this time from the most Donald-like to the most Pete-like view, we offer these possibilities: (1) “I am a true Christian who doesn’t hold a grudge”; (2) “I know you can’t help being what you are”; and (3) “Playing the moral superiority card is my way of proving to both of us that I’m better than you—and maybe driving you a little crazy in the process.”

7. Could this story have been called “My Brother’s Keeper”? Explain. The obvious allusion is to the story of Cain and Abel in Chapter 4 of the Book of Genesis. “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” is Cain’s reply, after he has killed Abel, to the Lord’s question, “Where is your brother?” (see the last sentence of “The Rich Brother”). Clearly, in his awareness that he will go back for Donald, Pete recognizes that he is compelled to be his brother’s keeper, a fact that he sees as his cross, but one that others might see as his redemption.

Virginia Woolf, A HAUNTED HOUSE, page 665

In order to appreciate the originality of this very short story, it helps to compare it to a conventional ghost story. Normally the genre would include vengeful ghosts haunting the scene of past crimes, and the protagonist would be an endangered mortal who uncovers the terrifying truth. Woolf’s radical revision of the genre features a pair of ghostly lovers who gently haunt the scene of their past happiness and blissfully observe the mortal couple who have taken their place.

The structure of the story seems less plot than theme. Can anybody state it? What does the story say? The theme might be put simply: “How happy I am to be living in this house with my loved one.” Other statements include: “Happiness can live on after death,” “Happiness is a treasure,” and “Living lovers take over not only a house, but also the joys of its former occupants.”

The setting of “A Haunted House” profoundly affects the story’s characters, both living and dead. It might be interesting for students to compare the setting of “A Haunted House” with Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Both stories describe supernatural events in ancient houses. In Poe’s story, an uncanny heartbeat is terrifying; in Woolf’s, it arouses happiness. For Woolf’s narrator, “The pulse of the house beats gladly”—also “softly” and “gently,” “wildly” and “proudly.” To Woolf the ghosts seem friendly, benevolent, and practically lovable. Unlike Poe’s dark and oppressive house, Woolf’s is full of beauty, love, and light.

If you want to devote a class to Modernist fiction, you might center the discussion on “A Haunted House.” Woolf’s story displays many of the key features of Mod-
ernism and is short enough to read aloud and analyze carefully in class. Some of the Modernist characteristics that you may wish to point out include: its musical organization (Modernist literature often aspired to the form of music, with its elaborate repetitions of sound and its abstract organization); its compression (the story is hardly longer than a page and yet it presents or evokes a great deal of material; the texture of the story is dense and richly detailed); its associative organization (Woolf’s story moves sideways by implication and nuance rather than in a straightforward narrative manner); and its self-conscious artistry (Modernist fiction revels in its differences from popular fiction; it minimizes the use of conventional devices—such as linear plotting—and achieves unity through style and thematic structure). “A Haunted House” offers a small encyclopedia of high Modernist technique.

QUESTIONS

1. **Who is telling this story?** One of a couple who now live in an old house, which is haunted by a pair of ghosts.

2. **Note Woolf’s pronoun usage, especially in the story’s opening paragraphs. Why does she deliberately shift among first-, second-, and third-person perspectives?** Poet and critic R. S. Gwynn addresses this issue as follows:

“A Haunted House” is clearly an experimental piece, using such Modernist techniques as fragmentation, repetition, and multiple perspectives, the same methods that T. S. Eliot, a frequent visitor to Bloomsbury, would employ in his famous poem of the same year, *The Waste Land*. Cubism, just coming into vogue in painting, seems most relevant to the story’s opening, where the perspective rapidly shifts from “you” to “us” to “they’re” to “one” to “i” in a few sentences. The deliberate ambiguity in pronoun reference has the effect of merging the presence of the couple who presently occupy the house with that of the long-dead pair who haunt it. Since the story has no exposition in the usual sense, the reader is challenged to fill in the blanks.

3. **What does the narrator report that she herself could not have seen or heard? How can she tell us things that she couldn’t possibly know?** The ghosts wander the house and talk to each other while the narrator is sleeping—“not that one could ever see them.” Perhaps she sees and hears them in a dream; or perhaps she imagines them.

4. **“A Haunted House,” according to critic David Daiches, is not a story at all, but “simply an exercise in the writing of fluid associative prose.” What do you think? Can any elements we usually find in a story be found in “A Haunted House”?** Daiches’s comment may confirm what some students feel, but are too reticent to say. This brief work reads less like a conventional, plotted story than like a lyric poem in its brevity, its rhythmic language (“the wind drives straightly; the flame stoops slightly”), the slightness of its narrative, and its metaphors (happiness is a treasure; “death was the glass, death was between us”). Still, “A Haunted House” tells a story, whose events we can cast into chronological order. The piece is also animated by characters whose motives make it resemble fiction more than merely “associative prose.”
5. What is the treasure that is being sought? Notice Woolf’s use of “silver” at several points of the story. What is the real treasure in the house? The narrator attempts to discover what the ghosts are seeking. She knows they search for their “treasure,” but what precisely is that precious hoard? She gradually pieces together that this treasure is emotional rather than material. In the last line, she realizes that it is “the light in the heart.” The living lovers have unwittingly inherited the dead couple’s “treasure”—a wealth of private joy.

6. What are the implications of the repeated phrase “Safe, safe, safe”? The narrator hears the house repeat to the ghosts that the treasure is “safe,” assuring them that the love they shared lives on in the house, transcending the ravages of death and inspiring the present-day couple who live and love in their home.
POETRY
This list sorts out and classifies most of the poems in the entire textbook. Besides subjects or themes, it includes some genres (i.e., elegies, poems of spring and other seasons).

**How to Use This Information.** Browse through this list and you will find many poems worth teaching side by side. This list will be particularly helpful to the instructor who wishes to organize a whole poetry course differently from the way the book is structured: to teach poetry not by the elements of poems, but by themes. However you prefer to organize your course, you will find this list a ready source of possible writing assignments.

**For Writing Topics.** You might have students read three or four poems in a group (say, those in the category “Apocalypse,” or a few of your choice from “Coming of Age”), then ask them to reply, in a page or two, to the question, “What do these poems have in common?” Or, “How do these poets differ in their expressions of a similar theme?”

What follows is thorough, but not exhaustive. We have left out some categories that sounded unpromising. Would you have cared that the book has four locomotive poems (by Dickinson, Stillman, Whitman, and William Carlos Williams)? Not all these themes and subjects are central to their poems, but all will be fairly evident.

**ANGELS, DEVILS, GHOSTS, WITCHES, AND ASSORTED MONSTERS**

Anonymous The Three Ravens
Atwood Siren Song
Bogan Medusa
Keats La Belle Dame sans Merci
Martin Taken Up
Orr Two Lines from the Brothers Grimm
Poe Annabel Lee
Robinson Luke Havergal
Sexton Her Kind
Simic Fork
Yeats The Second Coming

**ANIMALS (BEAST AND BIRD)**

Anonymous Dog Haiku
Blake The Tyger
Collins Care and Feeding
Frost Design
Hardy The Darkling Thrush
Hollander Swan and Shadow
Hopkins  The Windhover
T. Hughes  Hawk Roosting
Jeffers  Rock and Hawk
Keats  Ode to a Nightingale
Levin  Brief Bio
Lowell  Skunk Hour
Oliver  Wild Geese
Ryan  Turtle
Serrano  Golondrinas / Swallows
Shakespeare  Hark, hark the lark
Smart  For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry
Tennyson  The Eagle

APOCALYPSE
Alexie  The Powwow at the End of the World
Dylan  The Times They Are a-Changin’
Frost  Fire and Ice
L. Hughes  Harlem [Dream Deferred]
Wiman  When the Time’s Toxin
Yeats  The Second Coming

ART
Auden  Musée des Beaux Arts
Blake  The Tyger
Dickinson  There is no Frigate like a Book
Keats  Ode on a Grecian Urn
Keats  Ode to a Nightingale
Stevens  Anecdote of the Jar
Walcott  Sea Grapes
W. C. Williams  The Dance

ASIAN EXPERIENCE / ASIAN POETRY
Basho  Heat-lightning streak
Basho  In the old stone pool
Buson  On the one-ton temple bell
Buson  The piercing chill I feel
Issa  Cricket
Issa  Only one guy
Jin  Missed Time
Khayyam  Rubaiyat
Kim  Occupation
Lim  Learning to love America
Lim  Riding into California
Li Po  Drinking Alone by Moonlight
Matsushita  Cosmos in bloom
Moritake  The falling flower
Ozawa  The war—this year
Satyamurti  I Shall Paint My Nails Red

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Song
Stamp Collecting

Wada
Even the croaking of frogs

BEARING TO A MINORITY (see also BLACK EXPERIENCE, NATIVE AMERICAN LIFE)
Abeyta
thirteen ways of looking at a tortilla

Alarcón
Frontera / Border

Alarcón
The X in My Name

Alexie
The Powwow at the End of the World

Brooks
Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward

Cofer
Quinceañera

Dunbar
We Wear the Mask

Espaillat
Bilingual / Bilingüe

L. Hughes
Harlem [Dream Deferred]

L. Hughes
My People

L. Hughes
Nightmare Boogie

L. Hughes
Theme for English B

Lim
Learning to love America

Olds
The One Girl at the Boys’ Party

Trethewey
White Lies

Valdés
English con Salsa

Walker
For Malcolm X

BLACK EXPERIENCE (see also BEARING TO A MINORITY)
Brooks
the rites for Cousin Vit

Brooks
The Bean Eaters

Brooks
Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward

Brooks
We Real Cool

Cullen
For a Lady I Know

Dunbar
We Wear the Mask

Hayden
Frederick Douglass

Hayden
Those Winter Sundays

L. Hughes
Dream Boogie

L. Hughes
Harlem [Dream Deferred]

L. Hughes
I, Too

L. Hughes
My People

L. Hughes
The Negro Speaks of Rivers

L. Hughes
Nightmare Boogie

L. Hughes
Song for a Dark Girl

L. Hughes
Theme for English B

Nelson
A Strange Beautiful Woman

Randall
A Different Image

Randall
Ballad of Birmingham

B. Smith
Jailhouse Blues

Stillman
In Memoriam John Coltrane

Trethewey
White Lies

Walker
For Malcolm X

Young
Doo Wop
CARPE DIEM
Herrick To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time
Horace “Carpe Diem” Ode
Housman Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Khayyam Rubaiyat
Marvell To His Coy Mistress
Millay Second Fig
Pollitt Mind-Body Problem (she missed the day)
Waller Go, Lovely Rose

CHILDHOOD (see also FATHERS AND CHILDREN, MOTHERS AND CHILDREN)
Bishop Sestina
Blake The Chimney Sweeper
Cleghorn The Golf Links
Cummings in Just–
Espaillat Bilingual / Bilingue
Frost Birches
Justice On the Death of Friends in Childhood
Lawrence Piano
Olds The One Girl at the Boys’ Party
Orr Two Lines from the Brothers Grimm
Prufert Pause, Pause
Roethke My Papa’s Waltz
Simic The Magic Study of Happiness
Smith American Primitive
Thiel The Minefield
Thomas Fern Hill
Trethewey White Lies

CITY LIFE
Blake London
Brooks We Real Cool
Eliot The Boston Evening Transcript
Eliot The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
Eliot The winter evening settles down
Hardy The Ruined Maid
L. Hughes Ballad of the Landlord
L. Hughes Prayer (“Gather up”)
Millay Recuerdo
Pound The Garden
Sandburg Fog
Simic Butcher Shop
Swift A Description of the Morning
Whitman I Hear America Singing
Wilbur Love Calls Us to the Things of This World
Wordsworth Composed upon Westminster Bridge
COMING OF AGE

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<th>Poem Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cofer</td>
<td>Quinceañera</td>
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<td>de los Santos</td>
<td>Perfect Dress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Espaillat</td>
<td>Bilingual / Bilingüe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housman</td>
<td>When I was one-and-twenty</td>
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DEATH (see also ELEGIES)

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<th>Author</th>
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<td>At North Farm</td>
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<td>Auden</td>
<td>Funeral Blues</td>
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<td>Brooks</td>
<td>the mother</td>
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<td>the rites for Cousin Vit</td>
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<td>Collins</td>
<td>The Names</td>
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<td>Dickinson</td>
<td>Because I could not stop for Death</td>
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<td>Dickinson</td>
<td>I heard a Fly buzz – when I died</td>
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<td>Donne</td>
<td>Death be not proud</td>
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<td>Frost</td>
<td>Birches</td>
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<td>“Out, Out—”</td>
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<td>Harjo</td>
<td>Mourning Song</td>
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<td>Housman</td>
<td>To an Athlete Dying Young</td>
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<td>Jonson</td>
<td>On My First Son</td>
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<td>Justice</td>
<td>On the Death of Friends in Childhood</td>
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<td>Keats</td>
<td>Ode to a Nightingale</td>
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<td>Keats</td>
<td>This living hand, now warm and capable</td>
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<td>Keats</td>
<td>When I have fears that I may cease to be</td>
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<td>Kooser</td>
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<td><strong>ELEGIES</strong> (see also DEATH)</td>
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FAMILIES / PARENTS AND CHILDREN
Bishop Filling Station
Brooks the mother
Brooks Speech to the Young, Speech to the Progress-Toward
H. Crane My Grandmother's Love Letters
Dove Daystar
Espaillat Bilingual / Bilingüe
Foley Learning to Shave
Hayden Those Winter Sundays
Heaney Digging
Hecht The Vow
Hudgins Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead
Kees For My Daughter
Kooser Abandoned Farmhouse
Larkin Home is so Sad
Lawrence Piano
Olds Rite of Passage
Orr Two Lines from the Brothers Grimm
Plath Daddy
Roethke My Papa's Waltz
St. John Hush
Stevens The Emperor of Ice-Cream
Thiel The Minefield
Wilbur The Writer
Wright Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio

FARM AND COUNTRY
Frost Birches
Frost "Out, Out—"
Frost Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
Hardy The Ruined Maid
Kooser Abandoned Farmhouse
Stafford The Farm on the Great Plains
Toomer Reapers

FATE
Anonymous The Three Ravens
Atwood Siren Song
Crane The Wayfarer
Hardy Hap
Hardy The Convergence of the Twain
Horace "Carpe Diem" Ode
Khayyam Rubaiyat
Machado The Traveler
Walcott Sea Grapes

FATHERS AND CHILDREN
Hayden Those Winter Sundays
Heaney Digging
Hudgins Elegy for My Father, Who Is Not Dead
Jonson On My First Son
Kees For My Daughter
Plath Daddy
Roethke My Papa's Waltz
St. John Hush
Stallings Sine Qua Non
Thiel The Minefield
Thomas Do not go gentle into that good night
Wilbur The Writer
Wright Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio

FRIENDSHIP
Brontë Love and Friendship
Fulton What I Like
Justice On the Death of Friends in Childhood
Markham Outwitted
Shakespeare When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
Whitman Song of the Open Road

GLORY BE TO GOD / RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
Donne Batter my heart, three-personed God
Herbert Easter Wings
Herbert Love
Hopkins God's Grandeur
Hopkins Pied Beauty
Hopkins The Windhover
Levertov O Taste and See

GRIEF (see also ELEGIES)
Collins The Names
Dickinson Success is counted sweetest
Dickinson After great pain, a formal Feeling comes
Hecht The Vow
Jonson Slow, slow, fresh fount, keep time with my salt tears
Majmudar Rites to Allay the Dead
Niedecker Sorrow Moves in Wide Waves
Poe Annabel Lee
Shakespeare Fear no more the heat o’ the sun
Shakespeare When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
Tennyson Break, Break, Break
Thomas In My Craft or Sullen Art
Wiman When the Time’s Toxin

HAPPINESS
Anonymous Carnation Milk
Cummings somewhere i have never travelled
Dickinson I taste a liquor never brewed
Kenyon The Suitor
<table>
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<td>Atwood</td>
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<td>H.D.</td>
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<td>Cummings</td>
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<td>Whitman</td>
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<td>W. C. Williams</td>
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<td>Behn</td>
<td>When maidens are young</td>
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<td>First Love: A Quiz</td>
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<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Lord Randall</td>
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<td>Donne</td>
<td>A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning</td>
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**HATRED AND INVECTIVE**

**INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE**

**LANGUAGE (see also WRITING)**

**LEAVE-TAKING**
208  POETRY

Drayton  Since there’s no help, come let us kiss and part
Larkin  Poetry of Departures
Lovelace  To Lucasta
Mann  Deathly

LONELINESS AND ALIENATION
Bogan  Medusa
Bukowski  Dostoevsky
Collins  Embrace
Dickinson  After great pain, a formal feeling comes
Dickinson  I felt a Funeral, in my Brain
Dickinson  I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Dickinson  Much Madness is divinest Sense
Dickinson  Success is counted sweetest
Dickinson  The Soul selects her own Society
Eliot  The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
Eliot  The winter evening settles down
Frost  Acquainted with the Night
Frost  Desert Places
Ginsberg  A Supermarket in California
L. Hughes  Homecoming
Jonson  Slow, slow, fresh fount
Joyce  All day I hear
Kooser  Abandoned Farmhouse
Lim  Learning to love America
Li Po  Drinking Alone by Moonlight
Lowell  Skunk Hour
Mann  Deathly
Millay  What lips my lips have kissed
Nelson  A Strange Beautiful Woman
Oliver  Wild Geese
Poe  A Dream within a Dream
Ransom  Piazza Piece
Robinson  Luke Havergal
Shakespeare  When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
Simic  My Shoes
Stafford  The Farm on the Great Plains
Stevens  The Snow Man
Thomas  In My Craft or Sullen Art
W. C. Williams  El Hombre
W. C. Williams  Smell!

LOVE AND DESIRE
Addonizio  First Poem for You
Anonymous  Bonny Barbara Allen
Anonymous  Lord Randall
Arnold  Dover Beach
Atwood  Siren Song

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Baca  Spliced Wire
Bloch  Tired Sex
Brontë  Love and Friendship
E. B. Browning  How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Ways
Burns  Oh, my love is like a red, red rose
Campos  For J. W.
Chaucer  Merciless Beauty
Ciardi  Most Like an Arch This Marriage
Cope  Lonely Hearts
Cummings  somewhere i have never travelled
Dickinson  The Soul selects her own Society
Dickinson  Wild Nights – Wild Nights!
Donne  A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
Donne  The Flea
Drayton  Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part
Essbaum  The Heart
Frost  The Silken Tent
Graves  Counting the Beats
Graves  Down, Wanton, Down!
H.D.  Oread
Hardy  Neutral Tones
Hayden  Those Winter Sundays
Hoagland  Beauty
Housman  When I was one-and-twenty
Jonson  To Celia
Keats  La Belle Dame sans Merci
Khayyam  Rubaiyat
Mann  Deathly
Marvell  To His Coy Mistress
Millay  What lips my lips have kissed
Mullen  Dim Lady
Poe  Annabel Lee
Poe  To Helen
Pound  The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter
Rich  Living in Sin
Sexton  Cinderella
Shakespeare  My mistress' eyes
Shakespeare  Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Sheehan  Hate Poem
Stallings  First Love: A Quiz
Stevenson  Sous-entendu
Thomas  In My Craft or Sullen Art
Waller  Go, Lovely Rose
W. C. Williams  Queen-Anne's-Lace
Wyatt  They flee from me
Yeats  Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop
Yeats  When You Are Old
Young  Doo Wop
MAGIC AND VISION
Alexie The Powwow at the End of the World
Anonymous The Three Ravens
Atwood Siren Song
Bogan Medusa
Coleridge Kubla Khan
Cummings somewhere i have never travelled
Keats La Belle Dame sans Merci
Mason Song of the Powers
Sexton Cinderella
Sexton Her Kind
Simic The Magic Study of Happiness
Yeats The Second Coming
Yeats Who Goes with Fergus?

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE
R. Browning My Last Duchess
Ciardi Most Like an Arch This Marriage
Donne A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning
Dove Daystar
Hardy The Workbox
Hecht The Vow
Kooser Abandoned Farmhouse
Pound The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter
Rich Living in Sin
Shakespeare Let me not to the marriage of true minds
W. C. Williams The Young Housewife

MEDICINE
Frost “Out, Out—”
Majmudar Rites to Allay the Dead
W. C. Williams Spring and All (“By the road to the contagious hospital”)

MOTHERS AND CHILDREN
Bradstreet The Author to Her Book
Brooks Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward
Dove Daystar
Lawrence Piano
Lim Learning to love America
Niedecker Sorrow Moves in Wide Waves
Olds Rite of Passage
Olds The One Girl at the Boys’ Party
Plath Metaphors
Randall Ballad of Birmingham
Stallings First Love: A Quiz
Trethewey White Lies

MUSIC
Atwood Siren Song
L. Hughes Song for a Dark Girl
L. Hughes The Weary Blues
Kaufman No More Jazz at Alcatraz
Ryan Mockingbird
Shakespeare Fear no more the heat o’ the sun
Shakespeare Hark, hark the lark
Stillman In Memoriam John Coltrane
Whitman I Hear America Singing
Young Doo Wop

MYTH AND LEGEND (other than poems in Chapter on “Myth and Narrative”)
Alexie The Powwow at the End of the World
Atwood Siren Song
Tennyson Ulysses
Walcott Sea Grapes
Yeats Leda and the Swan
Yeats Sailing to Byzantium
Yeats Who Goes with Fergus?

NATIVE AMERICAN LIFE
Alexie The Powwow at the End of the World
Anonymous Last Words of the Prophet (“Navajo Mountain Chant”)
Jeffers Hands
Momaday Simile

NATURE (see also ANIMALS, THE SEASONS)
Alexie The Powwow at the End of the World
Anonymous Dog Haiku
Bishop The Fish
Blake To see a world in a grain of sand
Blake The Tyger
Dickinson I taste a liquor never brewed
Dickinson The Lightning is a yellow Fork
Dickinson A Route of Evanescence
Frost Desert Places
H.D. Oread
H.D. Storm
Hardy The Darkling Thrush
Hollander Swan and Shadow
Hopkins Pied Beauty
Hopkins Spring and Fall
Hopkins The Windhover
Housman Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
T. Hughes Hawk Roosting
Jeffers Rock and Hawk
Joyce All day I hear
Keats To Autumn
Kostelanetz / Gómez de la Serna Simultaneous Translations
Levin Brief Bio

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Oliver Wild Geese
Roethke Root Cellar
Ryan Blandeur
Ryan Turtle
Ryan Mockingbird
Sáenz To the Desert
Sandburg Fog
Serrano Golondrinas / Swallows
Shakespeare Hark, hark the lark
Smart For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry
Snyder Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain
Stafford Traveling Through the Dark
Stephens The Wind
Stevens Anecdote of the Jar
Stevens The Snow Man
Stevens Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird
Tennyson Flower in the Crannied Wall
Tennyson The Eagle
W. C. Williams El Hombre
W. C. Williams Smell!
W. C. Williams Spring and All
Wordsworth I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
Yeats Lake Isle of Innisfree

OLD AGE (AND AGING)
Borges On his blindness
Brooks The Bean Eaters
Collins Care and Feeding
Hardy The Darkling Thrush
Larkin Aubade
Pollitt Mind-Body Problem
Shakespeare That time of year thou mayst in me behold
Tennyson Ulysses
Yeats Sailing to Byzantium
Yeats When You Are Old

POVERTY
Alarcón The X in My Name
Blake The Chimney Sweeper
Brooks The Bean Eaters
Cervantes Cannery Town in August
Cleghorn The Golf Links
L. Hughes My People
L. Hughes Prayer (“Gather up”)
Niedecker Popcorn-can cover

PRAISE AND EXALTATION
Blake To see a world in a grain of sand
Burns Oh, my love is like a red, red rose
Hopkins God’s Grandeur
Hopkins  Pied Beauty
L. Hughes  My People
Oliver  Wild Geese
Prufrock  Pause, Pause
Ryan  Mockingbird
Shakespeare  Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Tennyson  The splendor falls on castle walls
Whitman  I Hear America Singing
Whitman  Song of the Open Road
Wilbur  Love Calls Us to the Things of This World

PROTEST POEMS
Alarcón  The X in My Name
Alexie  The Powwow at the End of the World
Blake  London
Cervantes  Cannery Town in August
Cleghorn  The Golf Links
Cullen  For a Lady I Know
Cummings  next to of course god america i
Dunbar  We Wear the Mask
Dylan  The Times They Are a-Changin'`
Hayden  Frederick Douglass
L. Hughes  Dream Deferred
L. Hughes  I, Too
Kim  Occupation
McKay  America
Owen  Dulce et Decorum Est
Randall  Ballad of Birmingham
Rich  Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
Wordsworth  The World Is Too Much with Us

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
Alexie  The Powwow at the End of the World
Baca  Spliced Wire
Eberhart  The Fury of Aerial Bombardment
Frost  Design
Martin  Taken Up
Reed  Naming of Parts

THE SEASONS
Spring
Frost  Nothing Gold Can Stay
Housman  Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
W. C. Williams  Smell!
W. C. Williams  Spring and All

Summer
Cervantes  Cannery Town in August
Snyder  Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain
Toomer  Reapers
Autumn
Hopkins  Spring and Fall
Keats     To Autumn
Longfellow Aftermath
Robinson  Luke Havergal
Stephens  The Wind
Wright    Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio

Winter
Bly       Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter
Frost     Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
Hardy     The Darkling Thrush
Hayden    Those Winter Sundays
Niedecker Popcorn-can cover
Stevens   The Snow Man

SPORTS
Fehler    If Richard Lovelace Became a Free Agent
Housman   To an Athlete Dying Young
Updike    Ex-Basketball Player
Whitman   The Runner
Wright    Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio

TIME, THE PASSAGE OF (see also CARPE DIEM, OLD AGE)
Auden     As I Walked Out One Evening
Cummings  anyone lived in a pretty how town
Eliot     The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
Hoagland  Beauty
Horace    "Carpe Diem" Ode
Housman   Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Keats     Ode to a Nightingale
Khayyam   Rubaiyat
Levertov  Ancient Stairway
Pollitt    Mind-Body Problem
Shakespeare That time of year thou mayst in me behold
Shelley    Ozymandias
Stafford   The Farm on the Great Plains
Yeats     Sailing to Byzantium

VIOLENCE
Eberhart  The Fury of Aerial Bombardment
L. Hughes Song for a Dark Girl
Orr       Two Lines from the Brothers Grimm
Owen      Dulce et Decorum Est
Randall   Ballad of Birmingham
Turner    The Hurt Locker

WAR
Arnold    Dover Beach
Cummings  next to of course god america i

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Eberhart  The Fury of Aerial Bombardment
Jarrell  The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner
Kees    For My Daughter
Komunyakaa Facing It
Lovelace To Lucasta
Nemerov The War in the Air
Owen    Anthem for Doomed Youth
Owen    Dulce et Decorum Est
Ozawa   The war—this year
Reed    Naming of Parts
Turner  The Hurt Locker
Whitman Beat! Beat! Drums!
Whitman Cavalry Crossing a Ford

A WOMAN'S IDENTITY
Brooks  the mother
Brooks  the rites for Cousin Vit
Cofer   Quinceañera
de los Santos Perfect Dress
Dove    Daystar
Haaland Lipstick
Hoagland Beauty
Kizer   Bitch
Nelson  A Strange Beautiful Woman
Niedecker Sorrow Moves in Wide Waves
Olds    The One Girl at the Boys' Party
Plath   Daddy
Pollitt Mind-Body Problem
Rich    Aunt Jennifer's Tigers
Rich    Women
Sexton  Cinderella
Sexton  Her Kind
Stallings First Love: A Quiz
W. C. Williams The Young Housewife

WORK
Alarcón  The X in My Name
Blake   The Chimney Sweeper
Bukowski Dostoevsky
Cleghorn The Golf Links
Dove    Daystar
L. Hughes My People
Kooser  Abandoned Farmhouse
Kooser  Carrie
Larkin  Poetry of Departures
Niedecker Sorrow Moves in Wide Waves
Robinson Miniver Cheevy
Whitman I Hear America Singing

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POEMS FOR FURTHER READING,
ARRANGED BY ELEMENTS

Many instructors tell us that they use the poems in Chapter 33, “Poems for Further Reading,” as an extra reservoir or second fuel tank of illustrations. Others, to be sure, think the book already offers too many examples; if that is your feeling, don’t bother with this section.

If, however, you would like a few more poems (or some different poems) to illustrate matters taken up in the body of the book, then the following list can help you put your finger on them. It classifies only poems in the “Poems for Further Reading” section, and it works through the book chapter by chapter.

For Writing Topics. After your students have studied a chapter of the book, you can direct them to certain poems in the “Poems for Further Reading.” Assign a poem or two and a short paper that springs from their reading. (An essay of two or three paragraphs might be enough: at this stage, overlong papers on topics such as figures of speech, rime and meter, stanza form, etc., might be debilitating.) Topics will occur: The Character of the Soliloquist in Browning’s “Spanish Cloister” (after studying The Person in the Poem); The Attitude of the Daughter in Plath’s “Daddy” (Tone); and more.

For suggesting that this manual could use such a classification of the “Poems for Further Reading,” our thanks to Professor Harvey Birenbaum of San Jose State University.

Chapter 14: Listening to a Voice

TONE

Poems in which the poet’s attitude is especially clear:

Brooks the rites for Cousin Vit
Jonson On My First Son
Owen Anthem for Doomed Youth
Plath Daddy
Shakespeare My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun
Whitman I Hear America Singing
Wordsworth Composed upon Westminster Bridge

Poems that express, as Auden says, “a clear expression of mixed feelings”:

Bishop Filling Station
Hardy The Darkling Thrush
Larkin Poetry of Departures
Lowell Skunk Hour
Nelson A Strange Beautiful Woman
Nemerov The War in the Air
THE PERSON IN THE POEM

Poems in which the identity of the speaker is interestingly different from the poet’s “I”:

R. Browning       Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister
Pound             The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter

IRONY

Other kinds besides ironic point of view, as in the poems just listed:

Hardy             The Convergence of the Twain (irony of fate)
Reed              Naming of Parts (a discrepancy between the study of a gun and the study of nature, between the voice of the instructor and the view of the soldier; verbal irony in the pun “easing the spring”)

Chapter 15: Words

LITERAL MEANING: WHAT A POEM SAYS FIRST

Poems that can be taken at face value, without looking for symbols, endless suggestions, huge significance (not that they won’t repay thought and close reading):

Hoagland          Beauty
Larkin            Poetry of Departures
Millay            Recuerdo
Poe               A Dream within a Dream
Updike            Ex-Basketball Player
Whitman           Song of the Open Road

THE VALUE OF A DICTIONARY

Poems containing two or more brief allusions:

Hecht             The Vow
Nemerov           The War in the Air

Poems with central allusions:

Atwood            Siren Song
Auden             Musée des Beaux Arts
Eliot             Journey of the Magi
Milton            When I consider how my light is spent
Tennyson          Ulysses
Walcott           Sea Grapes
Yeats             The Magi

WORD CHOICE AND WORD ORDER

Poems in Middle English:

Chaucer           Merciless Beauty

Poems whose diction and syntax depart from those of speech:

Blake             The Tyger
Coleridge          Kubla Khan
Cummings          somewhere i have never travelled
Hardy             The Convergence of the Twain

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Hopkins     Spring and Fall
Hopkins     The Windhover
Keats       To Autumn
Moore       Poetry
Thomas      Fern Hill

Poems containing technical words:
Reed         Naming of Parts

Poems in colloquial diction:
Frost       Birches
Frost       Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
Olds        The One Girl at the Boys’ Party
Updike      Ex-Basketball Player

Poems containing an interesting mix of formal and colloquial diction:
Bishop      Filling Station
Ginsberg    A Supermarket in California
Larkin      Poetry of Departures

Chapter 16: Saying and Suggesting

Poems especially full of words rich in connotations:
Anonymous    The Three Ravens
Coleridge     Kubla Khan
Cummings     somewhere I have never travelled
Keats        To Autumn
Ransom       Piazza Piece
Thomas       Fern Hill

Chapter 17: Imagery

Bishop       Filling Station
Cervantes    Cannery Town in August
Jeffers      Rock and Hawk
Keats        To Autumn
Kooser       Abandoned Farmhouse
Randall      A Different Image
Ransom       Piazza Piece
Swift        A Description of the Morning
Thomas       Fern Hill
W. C. Williams Spring and All

Chapter 18: Figures of Speech

METAPHOR AND SIMILE

Poems with central metaphors:
Baca         Spliced Wire
Hopkins      The Windhover
Song         Stamp Collecting
Wordsworth   Composed upon Westminster Bridge
Wroth        In this strange labyrinth
Other poems with prominent metaphors:
Shakespeare  That time of year thou mayst in me behold
Wilbur  The Writer

Poem with a prominent simile:
Ciardi  Most Like an Arch This Marriage

OTHER FIGURES OF SPEECH
Blake  The Sick Rose (apostrophe)
Donne  A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning (paradox)
Frost  Birches (understatement)
Keats  To Autumn (apostrophe, personification)
Marvell  To His Coy Mistress (hyperbole)
Plath  Daddy (hyperbole)
Reed  Naming of Parts (pun)
Waller  Go, Lovely Rose (apostrophe, personification)
W. C. Williams  Spring and All (personification)

Chapter 19: Song
BALLADS
Anonymous  Lord Randall
Anonymous  The Three Ravens

A balladlike poem:
Auden  As I Walked Out One Evening

Chapter 20: Sound
ALLITERATION AND ASSONANCE
Blake  The Tyger
Coleridge  Kubla Khan
Hopkins  Spring and Fall
Hopkins  The Windhover
Thomas  Fern Hill
Waller  Go, Lovely Rose

RIME
Poems whose rimes may well repay study:
Blake  The Sick Rose
Lowell  Skunk Hour
Owen  Anthem for Doomed Youth
Plath  Daddy

Chapter 21: Rhythm
STRESSES AND PAUSES
In any good metrical poem, rhythms matter, of course, and can’t be disentangled from meanings. Here are some poems in open or syllabic forms in which rhythms play strong parts:
Reed  Naming of Parts
Smart  For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry
Chapter 22: Closed Form

FORMAL PATTERNS, SONNETS, OTHER FORMS

Poems in blank verse:
- Frost: Birches
- Justice: On the Death of Friends in Childhood
- Tennyson: Ulysses
- Updike: Ex-Basketball Player

Poems in closed (heroic) couplets:
- Jonson: On My First Son
- Swift: A Description of the Morning

Poem in tercets:
- Hardy: The Convergence of the Twain

Poems in tightly structured rimaing stanzas:
- Donne: The Flea
- Frost: Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
- Hardy: The Darkling Thrush
- Hecht: The Vow
- Herbert: Love
- Keats: To Autumn

Poems in syllabic stanzas:
- Moore: Poetry
- Thomas: Fern Hill

Sonnets:
- Brooks: the rites for Cousin Vit
- E. B. Browning: How Do I Love Thee?
- Hopkins: The Windhover
- Keats: When I have fears that I may cease to be
- Milton: When I consider how my light is spent
- Owen: Anthem for Doomed Youth
- Shakespeare: My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun
- Shakespeare: That time of year thou mayst in me behold
- Shakespeare: When, in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes
- Shakespeare: When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
- Wordsworth: Composed upon Westminster Bridge
- Wroth: In this strange labyrinth

Villanelle:
- Bishop: One Art
Chapter 23: Open Form

Classics of open form poetry:
- Cummings: somewhere i have never travelled
- Eliot: Journey of the Magi
- Ginsberg: A Supermarket in California
- Pound: The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter
- Roethke: Elegy for Jane
- W. C. Williams: Spring and All

Chapter 24: Symbol

- Ashbery: At North Farm
- Blake: The Sick Rose
- Jeffer: Rock and Hawk
- Lowell: Skunk Hour
- Randall: A Different Image

Chapter 25: Myth and Narrative

- Atwood: Siren Song
- Eliot: Journey of the Magi
- Ransom: Piazza Piece
- Walcott: Sea Grapes
- Yeats: The Magi

Chapter 26: Poetry and Personal Identity

- Brooks: the mother
- Brooks: the rites for Cousin Vit
- Browning: How Do I Love Thee?
- de los Santos: Perfect Dress
- Dove: Daystar
- Hayden: Those Winter Sundays (being a son)
- Heaney: Digging
- Hecht: The Vow (fatherhood as an identity)
- Jonson: On My First Son
- Larkin: Poetry of Departures
- Lowell: Skunk Hour
- Milton: When I consider how my light is spent (Milton on his disability)
- Nelson: A Strange Beautiful Woman
- Niedecker: Sorrow Moves in Wide Waves
- Owen: Anthem for Doomed Youth (war poem written by a soldier)
- Plath: Daddy
- Thomas: Fern Hill
- Walker: For Malcom X
POEMS STUDENTS LIKE MOST

In previous editions, at the end of the book was a short student questionnaire that solicited each student’s opinion about his or her reactions to the book. The editors read and saved each completed questionnaire they received. These candid student responses often help improve the anthology from edition to edition.

One of the most interesting insights afforded by these questionnaires is a good sense of the poems students like most. (Their favorites often differ from the poems instructors rate most highly, though there is also much overlap.) Significantly, both students and instructors lean heavily toward twentieth-century poems and poets. Instructors might enjoy learning what poems and poets are most frequently chosen by students. Some choices may be surprising.

Students often identify their favorite poets rather than a specific poem. The five poets most frequently named by students are (in order):

**FAVORITE POETS**
1. William Carlos Williams
2. Robert Frost
3. E. E. Cummings
4. Emily Dickinson
5. Langston Hughes

The individual poems most frequently praised by students are listed below. Some are familiar favorites; others are pleasant surprises. There may be poems high on this list that some instructors do not teach. It might be worthwhile to consider adding them to your reading list.

**FAVORITE POEMS (Student Choices in Rank Order)**
1. Robert Frost, “Fire and Ice”
2. Stevie Smith, “Not Waving but Drowning”
3. Walt Whitman, “O Captain! My Captain!”
4. Margaret Atwood, “You fit into me”
6. Elizabeth Bishop, “The Fish”
7. Robert Browning, “My Last Duchess”  
8. Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”  
9. Sylvia Plath, “Metaphors”  
11. W. H. Auden, “The Unknown Citizen”  
12. William Blake, “The Tyger”  
13. E. E. Cummings, “anyone lived in a pretty how town”  
14. Emily Dickinson, “Because I could not stop for Death”  
15. Stephen Crane, “In the desert”  
16. A. E. Housman, “To an Athlete Dying Young”  
18. Theodore Roethke, “My Papa’s Waltz”  
19. Lewis Carroll, “Jabberwocky”  
20. William Shakespeare, “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”

This list of student favorites is not statistically reliable, but the results are nonetheless interesting to ponder. A purist might blanch at the particular Whitman poem chosen from the many in the book, but if the list indicates anything, it is that the students responding have pretty good taste in poetry. No matter how discouraging some days in the classroom may occasionally feel, you can take heart that you are making a strong impression on many students.
As a young man in London in 1887–1891, Yeats found himself hating the city and yearning for the west of Ireland. He recalled: “I was going along the Strand, and passing a shop window where there was a little ball kept dancing by a jet of water, I remembered waters about Sligo and was moved to a sudden emotion that shaped itself into ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’” (Memoirs [New York: Macmillan, 1972] 31). In London (he recalled in his Autobiography), he sometimes imagined himself “living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill.” The nine bean rows of the poem were evidently inspired by Thoreau’s bean patch.

Yeats’s lines provide rich rows of sound for the student to hoe: assonance (from I . . . arise in the first stanza through the o-sounds in the closing stanza), onomatopoeia (lapping), initial alliteration, internal alliteration (arise, Innisfree; hear, heart’s core). Sound images of bees, cricket, linnet, and lake water are predominate. Whatever noises come from roadway or pavement, however, are left unspecified.


In later years, according to John Unterecker, Yeats was shocked that “The Lake Isle” had become his most popular poem. He had taken a dislike to its “biblical opening lines.” But audiences always demanded it of him, and his sonorous reading of the poem is available on a recording (Spoken Arts, 753).

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Yeats. Longman Lecture and critical essay on “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.”

### Lyric Poetry

*Robert Hayden*, *Those Winter Sundays*, page 677

This brief poem, simple in the word’s best sense, has a depth that rewards close reading. It appears that years have intervened between the speaker today and his previous self, the observing child. Now the speaker understands his father better, looks back on himself, and asks, “What did I know?”
The poem states its theme in its wonderful last line (worth quoting to anyone who distrusts abstract words in poetry). Students can miss Hayden's point unless they understand its vocabulary. Auster can mean stern, forbidding, somber, but it can also mean (as it does here) ascetic, disciplined, self-denying. To rise in the freezing house takes steely self-discipline. That the father's life is built on austerity we get from his labor-worn hands. What is an office? A duty, task, or ceremony that someone assumes (or has conferred on him): the tasks of shining shoes, of stirring banked fires in a furnace (or a coal-burning stove?). James Wright, a keen admirer of Hayden's poem, spoke of it in an interview:

The word offices is the great word here. Office, they say in French. It is a religious service after dark. Its formality, its combination of distance and immediacy, is appropriate. In my experience uneducated people and people who are driven by brute circumstance to work terribly hard for a living, the living of their families, are very big on formality. (The Pure Clear Word: Essays on the Poetry of James Wright, ed. Dave Smith [Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982] 10)

Perhaps the “chronic angers” belong to the father: the boy gets up slowly and fearfully as though in dread of a tongue-lashing. Yet this reading does not seem quite in keeping with the character of the father as he emerges: stoic, patient, long-suffering, loving. Hayden does not invest these angers in the father exclusively. Perhaps any tenant of this bitterly cold house has reason to dread getting up in it.

When read aloud, the opening stanza reveals strong patterns of sound: the internal alliteration of the k-sound in blueblack, cracked, ached, weekday, banked, thanked (and, in the next stanza, in wake, breaking, chronic)—staccato bursts of hard consonants. Rather than using exact rime at the ends of lines, Hayden strengthens lines by using it internally: banked/thanked (line 5), wake/breaking (6); perhaps off-rime, too: labor/weather (4), rise/dress (8). Alliteration and assonance occur in clothes . . . cold (2), weekday weather (4). If you assign this poem early in your investigation of poetry, probably it matters more that students hear and respond to the rich interplay of repeated sounds than that they be able to give these devices labels.

“Those Winter Sundays” is the most often reprinted poem of Robert Hayden. A black poet who grew up in Detroit and who for many years was an English professor at the University of Michigan, he has written other poems apparently drawn from childhood and memory, among them “Obituary,” another moving tribute to his father. Hayden's posthumous Collected Poems (New York: Norton/Liveright, 1985) belongs, we think, in every library.

Adrienne Rich, AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS, page 678

Rich's own comments on “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers” provide an interesting view of the poem. Rich explains how an artist can put many things into a poem which he or she is not fully conscious of until much later. Today Rich is universally recognized as the chief poet of American feminism, but that was neither her public image nor her private identity in 1951. Yet Rich's feminist perspective had already begun to emerge intuitively in her early poems such as “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers.”
It is apparent in the poem that the poet perceived something wrong with the passive role assigned to women. The pride, confidence, and fearlessness ("masculine" virtues, whatever the sex of the tigers) of Aunt Jennifer's imaginary creations contrast sharply with Aunt Jennifer herself—a frail lady with fluttering fingers, terrified hands. Worth comment is the poet's use of the word *ringed*—suggested "encircled"—to refer both to the wedding ring that "sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand" and to "ordeals she was mastered by," specifically marriage and being expected to conform. Although she goes down in defeat, her tigers triumph.

Possible questions for discussion include:

1. In literal terms, what are Aunt Jennifer's tigers? What sort of "panels" does she appear to be making?

2. The speaker depicts Aunt Jennifer mainly through her hands. What specific details characterize these hands?

3. Why are Aunt Jennifer's hands "terrified"?

4. What attributes characterize the tigers?

5. What does Aunt Jennifer express in the panel she weaves that she does not so easily express in her daily life?

Compare Aunt Jennifer with the dead woman who once embroidered fantails in Wallace Stevens's "The Emperor of Ice-Cream." For another contrast between a dull world of reality and the colorful life of the imagination, see Stevens's "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," in which:

Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.

For an interesting classroom discussion, ask students why this poem is lyric rather than narrative. There is certainly a story implied in the images that describe Aunt Jennifer and her surroundings, and Rich surely intends us to ponder the significance of these images. The poem remains essentially lyric, however, in its brevity, musicality, and evocative emotionality. A lyric poem characteristically focuses on a particular instant in time and explores—usually in subjective and imagistic terms—the emotional, intellectual, and imaginative implications of that instant. (A narrative poem, by contrast, must move from one significant point in time to another.) A good lyric poem, however, will often contain secondary narrative elements, just as a strong narrative poem will incorporate lyric effects to heighten its impact.


MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Rich.
NARRATIVE POETRY

Anonymous, Sir Patrick Spence, page 679

On the questions in the book: We really don’t think the king’s motive can be known for sure from this bare portrait of him; we ask this question mainly to prompt students to pay attention to what they find on the page and to be wary of deep extrapolations. As far as we see him in the poem, the king sits around drinking wine, leading a life of ease, and (with a deliberate official gesture) sends his best sea-captain and a loyal contingent of naval officers to their doom. Although the poet takes a sour view of the comfortable life at court, he feels for the Scots nobles, and we too are moved by his spare sketch of the bereaved ladies, futilely waiting for their men, who will never return. The great stanza about the new and old moons, apparently an ill omen, serves further to heighten the tension of the story and foreshadow its conclusion.

Here are two more questions:

1. Comment on Sir Patrick’s character. What do you make of his abrupt transition from laughter to tears (lines 13–16)? He is not only brave and loyal to obey the king’s order; he is a passionate man with quick, open, unconcealed feelings.

2. In what lines do you notice a wry comment on the soft life that the nobles led at court? What does this attitude suggest about this anonymous poet? Lines 29–30: The nobles are loath to get their fine shoes wet. Probably the poet wasn’t a noble, but a sarcastic commoner.

In the famous image of the slim new moon, W. D. Snodgrass finds visual reminders of the king’s golden crown and of the gold combs in the ladies’ hair. For him, withering scorn for the Scottish lords afraid to dampen their fancy French pumps comes naturally to the singer, who probably went barefoot for much of his life. And he concludes: “This ballad, at least partly because of its scorn for the ignorant court, seems superbly successful in recognizing a more genuine nobility. Not that I need agree with its values: personally, I’d prefer (though not expect to find) a captain with more loyalty to his men than to king and office. Yet while the song lasts, I partake of the Scottish singer’s world, and am broadened by entrance to another’s experience, another’s values.” See “Shapes Merging and Emerging,” Shenandoah (Winter 1991): 58–83.


Like Sir Patrick Spence’s, the boy’s initial reaction to his terrible realization is to laugh; then, almost at once, dismay sets in. And like the folk ballad, “Out, Out—” tells a story of sudden, meaningless death, and does so with spare economy.

Perhaps the “they”—the doctor and the hospital staff—who turn to their own affairs are not merciless. The “watcher at his pulse” grows frightened when the pulse fails; no one wants to believe the boy will die. Radcliffe Squires finds no one to blame for the “faceless accident.” In his view, “Simultaneously, one sees the human watch-
ers touched by normal griefs and fears. And yet life must turn to a more important task finally, that of continuing. . . . Only the grand composer could hold together in one poem the two severe and mutually accusing ideas that one must be moved to pity and compassion and that one must coldly and sternly pursue the duty of endurance and survival" (The Major Themes of Robert Frost [U of Michigan P, 1963] 46). Frost’s poem offers no comfort, but it seems a realistic view of what happens in an emergency ward. Any student interested in a career in medicine might be asked for a response to this poem.

Frost’s allusion to Macbeth is part of the meaning of the poem, and students may be asked to think about it. Perhaps Frost suggests that the snarling buzz-saw full of sound and fury, reaching out its friendly handshake, just doesn’t make sense. This, as Stanley Burnshaw has noticed, is one among several of Frost’s poems that seem to question the existence of a benevolent order in the universe. Others include “A Servant to Servants,” “The Housekeeper,” “Home Burial,” and (we would add) “Design” (Robert Frost Himself [New York: Braziller, 1986] 298).


In the article just cited in the previous entry, W. D. Snodgrass contrasts “Sir Patrick Spence” with “‘Out, Out—.’” The first poem is about a man who looks unflinchingly at the world’s horror (“the buzz-saw of the world”); the second, about a boy who tries to avoid beholding it.

Of Frost’s poem, he remarks: “The one thing you must never do while working with machinery is to lift your eyes. The boy does just that—not to count ranges, but perhaps to count time ‘saved from work’ by his sister’s call. A horrifying salvation is granted him: not just a half hour, but a lifetime, saved from work.” Why the vision of five mountain ranges on the horizon (lines 4–6)? “To lift one’s view from saw to horizon, reveals a terrifying similarity. We are given one glimpse, ironically lovely, of the edged and jagged teeth of a world only too ready to take us for its ‘Supper.’” If the poem had a superscription, it ought to come from the old hymn: “Work, for the night is coming when man (or boy) works no more.”

Jean Tobin, who teaches at the University of Wisconsin Center in Sheboygan County, reports the powerful effect Frost’s poem usually has on students.

Your discussions of narrative, lyric, and dramatic poetry work well for the kinds of students I have. I read Frost’s “‘Out, Out—’” and was pleased by absolute silence at the end followed by one student’s under-the-breath “Damn.” As the discussion roared along, even that first hour, one student remarked how strange it was that the boy’s first reaction was to laugh. “Oh, no,” said a girl, holding up a hand and keeping it raised until we all saw it had no fingers, “that’s exactly what you do.” After that I didn’t have to convince anybody about the relevance of poetry to daily life.
DRAMATIC POETRY

Robert Browning, My Last Duchess, page 682

We include this famous dramatic monologue in the book because of instructor demand; we received more requests to reinstate the poem after dropping it from a revised edition than any other selection. Students generally find it fascinating, and instructors consider it an invaluable means of teaching the idea of a persona poem.

Some teachers may want to assign this poem in conjunction with Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," which is in the "Poems for Further Reading" chapter. These two dramatic poems, both uttered by speakers we find unsympathetic, may be taken together as memorable works of character-drawing. In each poem, Browning places us in the midst of a society remote from our own in time and thoroughly undemocratic. Of the two, only "My Last Duchess" is a typical dramatic monologue. "Soliloquy," as its title indicates, addresses no listener.

"My Last Duchess" may be familiar to students from high school literature courses; if a show of hands indicates that they have met it before, we would spend less time with it. Whether or not it is familiar, it makes a useful companion to "Soliloquy." Students may be asked to define their feelings toward the Duke, to point to lines in the poem that helped define those feelings. Browning stresses the Duke's arrogance ("I choose / Never to stoop"); "I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together") and engages our sympathies for the poor Duchess in lines 21–31, despite the Duke's contempt for her facility to be gladdened. We know one instructor who in teaching this classic takes the tack, "Shouldn't we feel sorry for the Duke, with all his marital troubles?" (Students of both sexes are usually provoked to rise and trounce him.) Another question: to what extent is the Duke's attitude toward women presumably typical of his society? That the Count, the visitor's master, would offer a daughter to a man who had just disposed of his wife, suggests that the Duke is not alone in regarding women as chattel. Still, even for a Renaissance duke he seems cold-hearted: wives and works of art seem identified as objects to collect.

What were the Duke's commands that stopped the Duchess's smiles? "That she should be put to death, or he might have had her shut up in a convent," Browning once explained. But lines 2 ("Looking as if she were alive") and 46–47 ("There she stands / As if alive") seem to hint that she was executed. Hypocrisy is still another aspect of the Duke's character: compare his protest that he lacks skill in speech (lines 35–36) with his artful flattery of the Count (49–53).

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information and links for Browning. Longman Lecture, video clip, audio essay, critical essay, and student essay on "My Last Duchess."
THINKING ABOUT PARAPHRASING

William Stafford, Ask Me, page 685
William Stafford, A PARAPHRASE OF “Ask Me,” page 685

The author himself so skillfully paraphrases this poem in the prose excerpt that follows it, that an editor offers further analysis at his own risk. A few comments, however, may provide a departure point for classroom discussions. Notice how the speaker asks several questions in the poem that are never specifically answered. What mistakes has the speaker made? What difference has love or hate made in his life? Is what he has done his life? The speaker answers the questions only with the final enigmatic and imagistic line. Stafford clearly trusts the reader’s intuition to understand the ending.

Stafford’s paraphrase is a bit freer and more interpretive than we might want from a student, but he proceeds through the poem line by line, image by image. Notice how Stafford spends more time on the final image than on earlier ones. He knows it requires more commentary—and a small imaginative leap—to explain. Stafford’s deft paraphrase of “Ask Me” should demonstrate to students that close reading and critical discussion are not antithetical to the spirit of poetry.
TONE

Theodore Roethke, My Papa’s Waltz, page 687

Theodore Roethke’s poem is one of the most widely taught selections in the book, and it usually proves a provocative topic for classroom discussion. We revised the critical discussion of the poem in earlier editions to reflect the broad range of opinion on this powerful poem. We have also included a student essay focused directly on the main issues that usually emerge from classroom discussions.

Many instructors have shared their reactions with us. Steven Hind of Hutchinson Community College disagreed with a previous edition’s comments on this poem—“It seems to me that the poem is richer than Professor Kennedy’s discussion would allow”—and finds its view of Papa ambivalent. “Kennedy hears a ‘playfulness’ in the slant rhyme dizzy and easy. Would it be possible to hear that as a slight dissonance? The only other double rhyme in the poem is knuckle and buckle, which has a hard edge to it, to my ear, [Mother] doesn’t seem to be having such a good time. The involuntary response suggests that this isn’t a novel experience. She will be the one who picks up the pans, one supposes. Scraped is a harsh verb. The ear is a sensitive organ. Certainly the boy loves his father and relishes the recollection of the dear brute’s drunken revelry that included him, but these verbs present an unavoidable tension, it seems to me. The father may, as Professor Kennedy says, be ‘happily using his son’s head for a drum,’ but that doesn’t mean the drum is entirely comfortable with the impact.”

Hind adds a sobering anecdote:

Last year in composition class I taught the recovering alcoholic son of an alcoholic father. He wrote papers about the loving and terrible bond he felt with his father, and some of his experiences reminded me of this poem. I saw Rick in the hall two weeks ago and asked how his summer had gone. “It would have been better if I hadn’t learned that my father has been molesting his daughter the past four years and I didn’t know about it,” he said. They are in therapy. “My mother’s countenance / Could not unfrown itself.”

Ann Barnard of Blackburn College, in a provocative article, also thinks the poem’s dark side worth emphasis. She and a colleague had expressed chagrin that half their students had read “My Papa’s Waltz” as a poem about child abuse, reducing it to a social tract. But their mutual rediscovery of the poem “included the idea of covert emotional abuse.” Papa, whose waltz gives the child both pleasure and pain, is
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Fred Roux of Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania reports that his students’ interpretations of “My Papa’s Waltz” have differed according to sex. Young men almost unanimously respond to the poem as a happy childhood memory of a loving father’s exuberant horseplay. A few young women react negatively. For them, “I hung on like death” and “You beat time on my head,” as well as “battered” and “scraped,” suggest that the speaker’s recollection is unhappy. They also assume that a man with whiskey on his breath must be drunk. None has perceived an ironic parallel between their responses and that of the speaker’s frowning mother. “From this,” adds Professor Roux, “it would appear that student response to ‘My Papa’s Waltz’ is, to a degree, the result of a difference in socializing experiences during early childhood.” Haven’t any young women had boisterous fathers? We’d like to hear about other classroom experiences.

As Alan Seager discerns in his biography of Roethke, *The Glass House* (New York: McGraw, 1968) 23, the mature Roethke seems to have felt a certain guilty resentment against his father, a sense of how (as an awkward, chubby, bookish, and sensitive child) the young poet had failed to make the old man proud of him. “My Papa’s Waltz” may have had its genesis in a wish-fulfilling dream. After his father’s death Roethke wrote a memoir (calling himself “John”): “Sometimes he dreamed about Papa. Once it seemed Papa came in and danced around with him. John put his feet on top of Papa’s and they’d waltz. Hei-dee-dei-dei. Rump-tee-tump. Only babies expected dreams to come true” (qtd. in Seager, 24).

![MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information and links for Roethke. Longman Lecture, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “My Papa’s Waltz.”](Image)

**Countee Cullen, For a Lady I Know, page 688**

From Cullen’s first book, *Color* (1925), this is one of a series of twenty-nine epitaphs, the tone of which seems to be wry amusement at stupidity.

Cullen’s early biography is sparsely documented. Raised by his grandmother until he was eleven, he was then adopted by the Reverend Frederick A. Cullen, pastor of a Methodist church in Harlem, who gave the future poet not only a name but a new life of books and conversation. Famed as the leading poet of the Harlem Renaissance, Cullen suffered a decline in reputation when militant black critics of the 1960s reevaluated his work and found it wanting in anger and social consciousness. But his wit can bite, as it does in “For a Lady I Know”; and Houston A. Baker has rightly called much of his work an “ironical protest . . . against economic oppression” in his short study of Cullen, *A Many-Colored Coat of Dreams* (Detroit: Broadside, 1974).

**Anne Bradstreet, The Author to Her Book, page 689**

The “rags” (line 5) worn by this bastard brat of a book may have been the first edition’s abundance of typographical errors. Although Bradstreet patiently revised her work, she did not live to see her “brat” appear in better dress. This poem prefaced the Boston edition published in 1678, six years after the author’s death.
Robert Hutchinson, in the introduction to his edition of *Poems of Anne Bradstreet* (New York: Dover, 1969), gives a concise account of the book’s publication. Evidently the author’s family, proud of her poetry, felt that it deserved more notice than New England could then give. The Reverend John Woodbridge, Bradstreet’s brother-in-law, took with him to England the manuscript of the collection. London at the time had sixty printers; New England, one—and so it must have been difficult, even then, to print poetry in America. “The fact,” notes Hutchinson, “that Herrick’s *Hesperides* had just appeared in England while the latest venture of Samuel Green, the Cambridge, Massachusetts, printer, was a revision of *The Bay Psalm Book* to rid it of its crudities, gives an indication of the intellectual distance between the two countries.”

*MyLiteratureLab™ Resources.* Biographical information on Anne Bradstreet.

**Walt Whitman, To A LOCOMOTIVE IN WINTER**, page 690  
**Emily Dickinson, I LIKE TO SEE IT LAP THE MILES**, page 690

Though both of these great nineteenth-century Americans take almost the same subject, in tone and in form the two poems differ as sharply as opera differs from chamber music. (Some students might argue that the mutual subject isn’t a moving locomotive but the poet’s praise of it. While seeing a real similarity, they would be missing the distinction between subject and tone.) Whitman addresses his machine in awe and exultation. In lines 14–19 he practically prays to it (almost like Henry Adams on bended knees before the dynamo in *Education*). Dickinson is evidently more playful in her affectionate view of the locomotive as a great beast. It is horse-like in that it neighs and has a stable, but it isn’t quite a horse: it crawls and hoots. Both poets, incidentally, see not only a locomotive, but a whole train. Dickinson’s seeing it “chase itself” suggests cars trying to catch their locomotive as they roll downhill. Dickinson’s allusion to Boanerges means no more, we think, than that the locomotive is a servant and is thunderous.

Whitman’s poem is full of diction from music: *recitative*, *beat*, *ringing bell*, *notes*, *chant*, *harp*, *piano*, *trills*. The locomotive embodies poetry, too, in its *metrical* pant and roar, and in its ability to serve the Muse. The word *recitative* indicates the form the poem will be cast in. In Italian opera, to which Whitman was devoted, Rossini had introduced the use of the full orchestra to accompany the recitative, the passage of half-sung, half-spoken declamation; and it may be that, as Robert D. Faner has argued, such recitative was a basic model for Whitman’s poetry. “The recitative, highly rhythmic and emotional, punctuated by instrumental accompaniment with thrilling effect, and in its chanted delivery giving the impression of the rhythms of speech, he found well adapted to the bulk of his work, which he thought of as a sort of bardic chant” (*Walt Whitman and Opera* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1951] 234).

*MyLiteratureLab™ Resources.* Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Whitman and Dickinson.
Benjamin Alire Sáenz, *To the Desert*, page 691

Benjamin Alire Sáenz's passionate “To the Desert” is an unrhymed sonnet—fourteen lines of blank verse. (There is also a conscious pattern of assonance at the line ends to suggest rhyme—*night/sky, your/thirst, dios/me*—as well as one slant rhyme, *bend/brand*.) Sáenz’s language is both erotic and religious, which is not an unusual situation for Catholic religious poetry, especially in the Spanish tradition. (Sáenz once studied for the priesthood, and the poem’s bilingual diction and religious language announce its Latin Catholic heritage.)

“I came to you one rainless August night,” the poem begins as it sets up thirst as its central metaphor. In the poem thirst becomes both physical and spiritual, emotional and topographic. Students should be asked to consider how Sáenz’s title helps us understand the meaning of the poem. A reader can learn much not only from understanding the speaker of a poem but also from its stated listener. In religious writing, the desert is the place of spiritual self-knowledge, trial, and purification. Sáenz’s poem uses that archetype to build a compressed drama of spiritual discovery.

Gwendolyn Brooks, *Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward*, page 692

In the first half of her career, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote poetry of observation, of psychological studies and portraits of individuals and groups. Her work communicated its intentions largely through descriptions and images that were often complex and sometimes ambiguous in meaning. In the late 1960s, after meeting African American poets of a younger generation and being moved by their pride in and commitment to their heritage, she determined to write poems of open social engagement and more direct statement. But even with this major change in the emphases and purposes of her work, she remained a true poet, delighting in the sounds that words make and in the ways that putting them into new combinations create endless possibilities for the renewal of the language. As is clear even from its title, both her commitment and her craft are displayed in “Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward.”

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. This poem was the concluding text in Brooks’s 1970 chapbook *Family Pictures*. In what sense, then, is this a poem about family relationships? When we take the subtitle into account, with the awareness that Nora and Henry are the poet’s children, “Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward” can be read in the context of such classic texts as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” and William Butler Yeats’s “A Prayer for My Daughter,” poems in which the speaker expresses his highest hopes and deepest desires for the way in which his child will grow up and the kind of person that he or she will become. At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that *Family Pictures* presents portraits of African Americans—both prominent
and private—who are not blood relatives of the poet’s. Clearly, the family that she refers to is racial, not personal, and the “Speech to the Young. Speech to the Progress-Toward” is addressed to this larger family that also includes her own children.

2. Explain, in the context of the poem, the epithets in lines 2–5. The “down-keepers” are obviously those determined to keep others down—in other words, oppressors; given Brooks’s larger concerns and the context of Family Pictures, it seems not inappropriate to apply this phrase in racial terms. The “sun-slappers,” understood with reference to lines 6–7, are those determined to deny or block the light and to live in their own darkness and spread it to others. The “self-soilers” might be those who degrade their own human nature, which should be clean and pure, through their cruelty, aggression, and meanness of spirit. The “harmony-hushers” can be seen as those who subvert the natural oneness of humanity by their bigotry and divisiveness.

3. Why is the attitude affirmed in the poem described as “hard” (line 9)? Several meanings of the term might be invoked here, all of them relevant to a greater or lesser degree. In the baseball metaphor that the poet employs, a “hard home-run” could be a hard-hit ball, solidly and squarely connected with, hit with power and assurance. Thematically speaking, “hard” most directly connotes “difficult to accomplish or maintain”: the secure optimism urged by the speaker is likely to be hard in this sense, given the tremendous hostility and hatred that must be overcome. But, if successful, such freedom of spirit will prove hard in yet another sense: solid, durable, built to last.

4. How would you paraphrase the theme of this poem? Perhaps the best way to arrive at a summation of the poem’s intent is to consider its separate parts. In lines 1–9, the speaker urges optimism and affirmation, advising the young and “progress-toward” to respond to the naysayers that the darkness is neither constant nor permanent. In lines 10–12, she stresses living in—and reaping the joys and pleasures of—the here and now. So, putting the pieces together, we might restate the theme as follows: Live in a spirit of well-founded hope, and remember that true and lasting progress is achieved by carrying that spirit through each day, rather than by aiming for some distant and obscure goal.

—Michael Palma

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Brooks.

Weldon Kees, For My Daughter, page 692

Weldon Kees, who was born in Beatrice, Nebraska, in 1914, was one of the most talented artists of his generation. In his short life he managed to do distinguished work in poetry, fiction, painting, film, criticism, and music. In 1955, shortly after the breakup of his marriage, Kees disappeared. Most evidence suggests that he killed himself by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, but some of his friends believed that Kees faked a suicide so that he could go off to Mexico and start a new life. In either event, Kees was never seen again.
“For My Daughter” usually creates a lively classroom discussion, but the conversation often veers in two different directions—one literary, the other ethical. On the literary side, students are often divided on the question of whether the poet should mislead the reader for thirteen lines and then reveal the truth (that he has no daughter) only in the final line. Some beginning students may feel that the author isn’t playing fair with his readers, that he is exploiting their emotions. This discussion can be important for students because it dramatizes the fact that literature isn’t necessarily considerate of our emotions—it has more important goals than leaving us at ease.

Kees was a particularly savage poet in respect to pointing out the cruel and unjust parts of life that most people want to overlook. The important point is that the speaker comes clean in the last line, and that admission changes the meaning of everything said before. The first thirteen lines, therefore, can be read in two different ways—once coming up to the end (a father’s worst fears for his daughter) and again retrospectively from the end (a man’s reasons for not wanting children, especially on the brink of a world war).

The other discussion of “For My Daughter” concerns the ethical responsibilities faced by any parent bringing children into the world. (It may be worth noting here that Kees is not striking a hollow pose in this poem. He and his wife decided not to have children.)

One small technical note is worth mentioning: “For My Daughter” is a Shakespearean sonnet.

THE PERSON IN THE POEM

Natasha Trethewey, White Lies, page 693

This poem is discussed at some length in the prose paragraph following the text. Once given the biographical information contained in the paragraph, some students may complain that the poem cannot be properly understood—or, worse, cannot be understood at all—without a knowledge of the author’s background. It might be better to have the class read and interpret the poem on its own before introducing the biographical material. In this way, you may be better able to emphasize the distinction between a satisfactory engagement with the text itself and a deeper reading based on outside facts, a reading that enhances, but is not necessary to, a full understanding of the poem.


Teaching this poem consistently produces some of the most interesting classes that I (DG) have ever conducted. I read the poem aloud in class, then I ask students to answer three questions:

1. Who is the speaker of the poem?
2. What does the speaker ask Luke Havergal to do?
3. Should Luke Havergal follow the speaker’s advice?
Students immediately agree that these are sensible questions to ask. In order to answer them, however, they have to learn how to interpret the poem. Have them list on the blackboard everything they know about the speaker (there isn’t much to know) in one column. Then have them list in another column essential information they wish they knew but are not told. They will soon discover that the voice speaking claims to be from beyond the grave.

It helps to ask students how many characters are in the poem. There are only three, and each of them—this discovery will show students how much grammar reinforces meaning—is associated with a specific personal pronoun. There is the I (the speaker), the you (Luke Havergal), and the she (Havergal’s lost love). Have students collectively put on the blackboard what they can find out about each character.

To figure out what the speaker asks Luke Havergal to do, students must interpret “the western gate.” It will help to notice all the imagery of time and seasons in the poem. The West in most poetry is often associated with death because the sun sets in the west. (For an illuminating comparison, notice how the aged Ulysses in Tennyson’s poem sails west “beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars until I die.”) Let students spend the time necessary to figure “the western gate” out by themselves. At that point, it will be easy for them to discuss whether Havergal should follow this questionable advisor and his deadly suggestion.

Ted Hughes, Hawk Roosting, page 696

Hughes’s beautifully unnerving “Hawk Roosting” provides an excellent basis for any classroom discussion of poetic voice and persona. The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by a non-human voice—a powerful antidote to any student who believes all poems are direct autobiographical statements from the author’s life. A lesser poet might have settled merely for the basic situation of the poem—the world seen from the hawk’s perspective. Hughes explores the deeper implications of his subject. Using human language, he tries to articulate how alien the hawk’s worldview is to our own. The effect is quietly astonishing.

When writers treat animals as their subjects, they often become sentimental. They project human emotions and values—often childish ones—on the animals and overly dramatize these situations, especially the vulnerability of creatures in nature. The resulting stories—from Bambi and The Wind in the Willows to Watership Down—are often compelling stories, but they tell us more about the author than the animals because they completely humanize their subjects. Hughes instead emphasizes how differently a hawk might view existence. “Hawk Roosting” reveals a predator’s perspective—merciless, efficient, and utterly self-assured. The hawk sits “in the top of the wood” both literally and metaphorically. It rests on the top of the food chain. (“I kill where I please because it is all mine.”) Perfectly adapted to its ecological niche, it also sees the world finely suited to its own needs. (“The convenience of the high trees!”)

The poem disturbs us not only for its celebration of predation but also because it suggests how many of our own assumptions about the world depend upon our being members of our own species, homo sapiens.
Anonymous, "Dog Haiku," page 696

You will find a discussion of the haiku tradition and a number of examples of the form, from classical Japanese (in English translation) to contemporary American, in the section “About Haiku” in Chapter 17 of the anthology. Our comments on that section later in this manual say that the “skillful and illuminating combination of two images or ideas . . . remains central to the haiku’s identity in English.” Though humorous (and perhaps even a bit silly), “Dog Haiku” exemplifies this notion.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Dog Haiku.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. **Who is the “I” in the poem? Who is the “you”?** The title might lead us to assume that the poem is spoken about a dog by its owner, but by the time we’ve read the first six words it should be clear that the dog is the speaker and it is the owner who is being addressed.

2. **Do you recognize the allusion in lines 7–9?** You do if you’ve ever read Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s famous sonnet “How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Ways,” which appears in “Poems for Further Reading.”

3. **What elements create the humorous effects of the poem?** One significant element of the poem’s humor is its use of familiar habits of dogs—sniffing, licking, barking, etc.—and its “skillful and illuminating combination of two images or ideas,” in both the first and last stanzas. Another is the allusion to the Browning sonnet in the context of a dog’s devotion and its shedding. And, not to overanalyze a charming *jeu d’esprit*, but line 6 is especially interesting: it amuses us in the way it fills the five-syllable requirement by using the same word five times, a word whose meaning fits the context and which even sounds like a dog barking, especially when repeated this way. (Also, as with the Browning reference, it may remind readers of two famous—and very serious—lines of poetry that are similarly constructed: Lear’s cry of “Never! Never! Never! Never! Never!” at the end of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Walt Whitman’s “Death! Death! Death! Death! Death!” in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.”)

William Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," page 697

Dorothy Wordsworth, JOURNAL ENTRY, page 698

To point out the distance between art and reporting, it may be helpful to read Wordsworth’s poem aloud—at least part of it. In their rhythm, lines such as “Fluttering and dancing in the breeze” and “Tossing their heads in sprightly dance” make the motion of the daffodils come alive. By comparison, Dorothy Wordsworth’s record of the incident (“the rest tossed and reeled and danced”) seems merely excellent prose.

Wordsworth’s sister was a distinguished poet in her own right, as Hyman Eigerman demonstrates in *The Poetry of Dorothy Wordsworth* (New York: Columbia UP, 1940), an anthology of passages from her journals arranged into formally open verse.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, eAnthology, and links for William Wordsworth.

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James Stephens, A GLASS OF BEER, page 699

The high regard of the Irish for the magical powers of speech has given them a long and glorious tradition of poetic cursing. In the ancient tales of the Ulster saga, we read of kings who wouldn't go to battle without an accompanying druid: a poet-priest charged with pronouncing magnificent metrical curses upon the enemy. Who knows?—in the pubs of Stephens's native Dublin, curses like the one in “A Glass of Beer” may well have seemed ordinary, even mild.

Although the speaker—some frustrated drinker hard up for cash—is in a towering rage at the barmaid who denied him, the tone of the poem is not anger but high amusement. There is irony, too, in the obvious contrast between the speaker's stupendous hyperboles and the puny occasion for them. Save this poem, if you like, for teaching figures of speech.

There is hardly a better modern poem, however, for reminding students that the feelings expressed in poetry aren't always positive. A poem may be written in rage or chagrin, as well as in love or joy. This seems an essential truth and one that XJK has tried to demonstrate at some length in Tygers of Wrath: Poems of Hate, Anger, and Invective (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1981), an annotated anthology showing the tradition of dark emotion in British, Irish, and American poetry from the Middle Ages to the present. Naturally, in this tradition, “A Glass of Beer” holds an honored place.


Anne Sexton, HER KIND, page 699

This poem was one of Sexton's favorites, and she usually recited it as the opening of her public readings. (She even named a rock performance group with which she was briefly involved “Anne Sexton and Her Kind.”) Published in her first collection, To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960), it became her signature poem.

Who is the speaker? It may help to know that, according to Diane Middlebrook's fascinating Anne Sexton: A Biography (Boston: Houghton, 1991), the first draft was titled “Night Voice on a Broomstick” and a later draft labeled “Witch.” But there really do seem to be two voices in the poem—one a witch, the other a housewife (see lines 9–11 with their “skillets, carvings, shelves, / closets, silks, innumerable goods; / fixed suppers for worms and elves”). Middlebrook calls this technique “the double ‘I,’” and she points out how at the end of each stanza, the speaker “steps through the frame of ‘like that’ to witness, interpret, and affirm her alter ego . . . .”

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information and links for Sexton.

William Carlos Williams, THE RED WHEELBARROW, page 700

Evidently many readers have found it easy to admire this poem without feeling a need to know the circumstances in which it was written. For an interesting appreci-
Chapter 14: Listening to a Voice

Robert Creeley, *Oh No*, page 701

“What interests me about ‘Oh No’ is its tone,” Cynthia Edelberg remarks in an interview with the poet. “How would you describe it?” Creeley replies that he sees it as wry irony, the poem being “self-parody,” a comment on his feelings at the time. “As Joel Oppenheimer said, that would qualify me to be a Jew. He really liked that poem. It’s that kind of humor” (Edelberg’s *Robert Creeley’s Poetry: A Critical Introduction* [Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1978] 168).

“Oh No” seems to be another poem about where you arrive when you die. Creeley, we suspect, kids a conventional notion of heaven: he makes it a smug, artificial place where the saved sit around smirking at one another.

W. H. Auden, *The Unknown Citizen*, page 702

For making students better aware of irony, Auden’s familiar satire remains as dependable as any poem we know. Little seems to have dated in it, other than the praise of the citizen for adding five children to the population. Students are usually good at seeing that, unlike the unknown soldier, the citizen is all too thoroughly identified; and that, nevertheless, his true nature and inmost wants remain unknown. Meaty questions for discussion naturally arise: What are the premises of such a society? It seems dedicated to the proposition that to conform to a norm is the highest virtue—any individual traits, of course, being an annoyance to statisticians. What is a “Modern Man”? One with animal needs, but no aspirations. The epitaph, often over-
looked, is worth dwelling on: it tells us at once that the unknown citizen is only a number, and that bureaucrats keep track of him—and, incidentally, like the rest of the poem, the epitaph is in rime.

Sharon Olds, *Rite of Passage*, page 703

This poem will not require much explanation. Anyone familiar with six- and seven-year-old boys will understand the situation. The interesting exercise in class is to search out the ironic metaphors and language in the poem (“short men,” “small bankers,” “celebrating my son’s life”) and then discuss their effect on our reading of the poem. If some students complain that the poem overstates its case and makes too much of the boys’ penchant for mock violence, it will provide a good opportunity to ask if a poem (and one might even classify this short descriptive work as “lyric,” since it explores a moment’s perception) needs to provide a balanced view of life or if it is acceptable to create the sudden, overwhelming, and perhaps unbalanced emotions we feel in a particular moment or situation.

Julie Sheehan, *Hate Poem*, page 704

Clearly, Julie Sheehan’s “Hate Poem” strikes a responsive chord with a great many readers. In the several years since its original publication, it has become a great favorite, frequently reprinted and especially popular as a choice for student recitations. The author herself can be heard reading it on the website Poemsoutloud.com, where she also offers a brief commentary on the poem: “Hate Poem: The Story Behind the Hate”.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Hate Poem.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. What is the relationship between the speaker of this poem and the object of her hatred? What details in the text support this assumption? Lines 15–17—especially line 17—suggest a relationship that is close and familiar and, in all likelihood, intimate. Line 21 suggests that it is also a volatile relationship. “Row” is a key word, and it should be given some attention, because it may very possibly be misread by students, with the result that an important clue to the poem’s meaning might be overlooked. As used here, it rhymes not with go but with now, and it denotes a loud argument, a noisy quarrel, the kind of interaction brilliantly described by Lorenz Hart in the 1930s song “I Wish I Were in Love Again”: “The broken dates, / The endless waits, / The lovely loving and the hateful hates, / The conversations with the flying plates. . . .”

2. Does this poem exemplify the old saying that “There is a thin line between love and hate”? The concept is that some people are capable of triggering a strong emotional response in us, and others are not; if someone is capable of disordering our emotions in a positive way, then that same person can disorder them negatively as
well. Sheehan would appear to agree with this notion, according to the commentary cited above, which reads in large part as follows:

Okay, false advertising. This is not the story behind the hate—there is no story behind the hate, or if there is, I’m not telling. Instead, I have an observation, one that has probably occurred to many: hate and love can be described in the same, outlandish, hyperbolic and indistinguishable terms, probably because hate and love require the same degree of passionate intensity. Don’t say Yeats didn’t warn us, but it may be that hate and love are the same thing. Surely both are equally capable of mass destruction.

3. Is the poem more effective, or less so, for never providing any reasons for the hatred it expresses? In our view, more so. As is suggested by the word “latest” in line 21, such flare-ups are not an uncommon occurrence in this relationship. Leaving the cause of the quarrel unspecified carries the implication, which is probably accurate, that it could be anything that sets it off.

4. What do you understand the poem’s last two lines to mean? The density and complexity of the image and the simile that conclude the poem are strong indications of the complexity of the speaker’s feelings toward the person who is being addressed. Perhaps the speaker’s lungs are “duplicitous twins because,” in reminding her that her hate “can never have enough of you,” they also remind her how deeply her feelings for that person are bound up with her breathing—i.e., with life itself. In this connection, consider the rest of the author’s comment on the poem: “Weirdly enough, when we’re talking about language, not people, hate redeems love. Hate poetry, I mean, redeems love poetry. Take those sagging lyrics from ‘I Love You Truly’ and substitute the word hate for love. That’s what I did for the first lines of this poem.” The final simile may suggest that her lungs—and thus, she herself, as well—hope for and expect a happy outcome to the situation, despite the obvious evidence to the contrary.

5. In what ways is the poem ironic? In certain individual passages of the poem the irony is palpable, perhaps never more so than in lines 15–16. To speak these lines with simple, straightforward literalism, one would require a sensibility as deranged as that of the narrator of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” And, if we take our cue from the author’s words quoted in the previous answer, we can assert that the entire poem is ironic on one level, since all the exaggerated emotions and hyperbolic attitudes being described are those we usually associate not with hatred, but with its opposite.

6. Does the speaker really hate the person she addresses? Support your assertions. At the moment, blinded by the all-consuming anger and hostility released by “our latest row,” possibly she does. But even at this moment, as the ending implies, she knows, from both past experiences and the depth of her feelings, that the real answer is no.

—Michael Palma

Sarah N. Cleghorn, THE GOLF LINKS, page 705

What a great epigram!—no verbal irony in it, just matter-of-fact notation of a social condition that seems ironic in the extreme. As Robert Frost said in his introduction to Cleghorn’s autobiography, Threescore (1936), “There is more high explosive for right-
eousness in the least little line of Sarah Cleghorn’s poem about the children working in the mill . . . than in all the prose of our radical-bound-boys pressed together under a weight of several atmospheres of revolution.” (The conservative Frost didn’t like Marxists, but he called Cleghorn “a saint and a reformer” anyway.) For a later tribute, see Irving Dilliard, “Four Short Lines,” The Nation 222 (10 Apr. 1976): 444–45.

Stanley Kunitz and Howard Hayward’s Twentieth Century Authors (New York: Wilson, 1942), in an article on Cleghorn that she apparently helped write, explains the twenty-year hiatus between her early books and her later ones: “This was caused by the fact that her socialism and pacifism made editors and publishers reluctant to use her later writing, and partly by the fact that in middle age she became a teacher.” Among her other works is a novel, The Spinster (1916), and a last collection, Poems of Peace and Freedom (1945).

Edna St. Vincent Millay, SECOND FIG, page 705

This couplet is the second poem in Millay’s volume A Few Figs from Thistles, whose title may remind you of A. E. Housman’s lines “Out of a stem that scored the hand / I wrung it in a weary land.” Like the “First Fig,” the universally known quatrain that begins “My candle burns at both ends,” this poem celebrates the brief and beautiful in contrast to the substantial and dull. It is of course ironic that the speaker should disdain what is “safe” and “solid” in favor of that which is built upon the sand, but “ugly” in the first line and “shining” in the second should leave us in no doubt regarding the author’s intentions.

Thomas Hardy, THE WORKBOX, page 705

Dramatic irony is present in the discrepancy between the carpenter’s limited knowledge and the reader’s growing conviction that the wife knew John much better than she cares to admit. Her phrase “mere accidental things” contains verbal irony, and in general the whole speech in lines 25–28 is a verbal irony. Cosmic irony may be operating too (and one is sure that it is, knowing Hardy) in the Fate or chance that caused the carpenter to select a piece of poor John’s coffin out of all pieces of wood in the world.

To us, the situation in the poem had seemed like that in James Joyce’s “The Dead”; the wife, by remembering a young man who died of love for her, has a bleak realization that she might have known a joyous life had she married him instead. However, Albert Furtwangler and his students at Mount Allison University found other possible levels of irony, as he kindly wrote to report. For Professor Furtwangler, “The Workbox” is marred by an excess of irony that runs too deep: “it remains fascinating in the long run more as a puzzle than as a clear disclosure of character.” Among other readings he considered the two following, which he thinks overingenious and yet consistent with the poem.

The husband, aware of his wife’s past, has contrived his present as a cunning torture for her. “He seems to offer it in love, but takes pleasure in drawing out his wife’s confused replies . . . thus trapping her in her own hypocrisy.”

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The husband knows his wife's history; and she knows that he knows it. "But they coexist uneasily with each other by exercising an elaborate fiction of ignorance."

What will you and your students decide?

J. O. Bailey sees in this poem the "ballad-like theme of the lover who died of grief when his beloved married another." Like traditional English and Scottish ballads, the poem has a question-and-answer structure and ends in a surprise. (See *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* [Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1970].) Compare “The Workbox” in these respects with “Bonny Barbara Allan.”

**FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY**

*William Blake*, *The Chimney Sweeper*, page 706

Set next to Cleghorn’s “Golf Links,” Blake’s song will seem larger and more strange; yet the two poets seem comparable in their hatred of adults who enslave children. Though Blake is not a child, he obviously shares Tom Dacre’s wish that the chimney sweepers be freed from their coffinlike chimneys, washed clean, and restored to childhood joys. The punning cry “weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!” is the street cry of the sweepers, sent through London to advertise their services. Compare the tone of this poem to that of Blake’s “London”; the anger is similar, but in “The Chimney Sweeper,” a poem also touching and compassionate, anger is not stated outright, but only implied.

Tom Dacre’s dream has a basis in reality: in Blake’s time, sweeps were often sent up chimneys naked, the better to climb through narrow spaces (and thus saving the expense of protective clothing). Martin K. Nurmi points out this fact in his essay “Fact and Symbol in ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*” (*Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 68 [April 1964] 249–56). “Naked immersion in soot, therefore, is Tom’s normal state now, and naked white cleanliness is its natural opposite.”

Refer your students to the interesting commentary on “The Chimney Sweeper” by Camille Paglia in the chapter “Critical Approaches to Literature.”

Music to “The Chimney Sweeper” has been supplied by Allen Ginsberg, who sings on *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (MGM recording FTS 3083), assisted by Peter Orlovsky.

*William Jay Smith*, *American Primitive*, page 707

We might expect a painting called an “American primitive” to be naïve, unsophisticated, and childlike in its view—so is the speaker who draws this verbal scene. Not only do the references to Daddy seem juvenile, but so does the line “the screen door bangs, and it sounds so funny.” (Smith, incidentally, has written much fine verse for children in addition to his more serious poetry, and he understands the way a child
thinks and speaks.) There is, of course, an ironic distance between the speaker's point of view and the poet's. Irony is enforced, too, by contrast between the grim event and the bouncy rhythm and use of feminine rimes.

Another possible way of looking at the poem is that Daddy himself is the primitive: the primal dollar-worshipping American. The capitalization of Dollar (as in the familiar phrase “the Almighty Dollar”) may support this view. We are not told why Daddy died an apparent suicide, but it is evident that money did not buy him happiness. Besides inviting comparison with Sylvia Plath's ironic poem about the death of a terrible “Daddy,” Smith's mock-elegy may be set beside Wallace Stevens's “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” with students asked to compare the two in tone and in subject matter.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “American Primitive.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker of this poem? What does the speaker's language tell us about his or her age? The speaker is someone whose father has hanged himself. The speaker's use of the word “Daddy” and lines like “it sounds so funny” suggest that he or she is quite young.

2. Where does the poem seem to take place? Given that the child has witnessed the suicide, and that there is a screen door (more common in residences than in places of business), one assumes that the setting is the family home.

3. Paraphrase the action of the poem. The child sees the father, who is dressed in an elegant hat, shoes, and collar. In the second stanza we discover that he is dead, with blue lips and cold hands. In the third stanza we learn that he is a suicide, hanging in the hall.

4. How does hearing this story from the perspective of a child affect the tone and impact of the poem? The child's naive perspective makes the poem even more chilling than it would otherwise be: the reader understands what the child is telling us better than the child understands it.

David Lehman, REJECTION SLIP, page 708

The humor here is obvious, as the first four stanzas carry their speaker through increasingly absurd exaggerations on the theme of sour grapes. The final stanza enlarges the frame of reference, and with it enlarges our perspective on what is happening in the poem. For those who know the statement, it is almost impossible to read “Rejection Slip” without being reminded of John Berryman's notorious comment in his Paris Review interview, published in 1972 (the year of his suicide, provoked largely by the chaos his alcoholism had made of his life): “The artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him. At that point, he's in business. . . . I hope to nearly be crucified.” Lehman deftly skewers the image, nurtured by the so-called Confessional poets, of the poet as a wounded and self-destructive soul who fashions great art out of extreme
states of misery and self-pity; the final stanza indicts as well the audience whose responsiveness encourages such themes and such behavior. Lehman's own attitude would seem to be much more in line with the corrective offered by Lewis Hyde: “In the future it would be nice if it were a little harder for the poet to come to town drunk and have everyone think that it's great fun.”

William Stafford, At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border, page 708

This is a wonderful poem that celebrates an even more wonderful event—that two neighboring countries have lived in peace for nearly two hundred years. (It may be worthwhile in class to ask the obvious factual question about what this poem celebrates.)

Stafford’s poem uses language memorably in at least two unusual ways. First, the poem characterizes the scene mainly by what did not happen there—no battles, no deaths, no monument, no memorable historical events of any kind. Second, Stafford consciously invokes the central non-event by borrowing the diction of patriotic oratory: heroic, soldier, battle, monument, ground, hallowed, people, celebrate. (One wonders if Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” was in the back of Stafford’s mind.) But Stafford uses these words in exactly the opposite way from an old-fashioned commemorative oration.

Richard Lovelace, To Lucasta, page 709

“To Lucasta” may refer to an actual parting. During the Puritan Revolution of 1642–1645, Lovelace fought in the service of Charles I. Students will readily see the poet’s theme that Honor (duty to God and King) takes priority over duty to Lucasta; the tone of the poem may give them greater difficulty. The closing line makes a serious affirmation: Honor for Lovelace is not an “old Lie,” but a creed. Neither grim nor smug, the poem has wit and loving tenderness. The witty second stanza seems almost comic in its figures of speech: having renounced Lucasta’s nunlike chastity and calm, the speaker will now go and whet his sword upon the body of someone wilder.

Wilfred Owen, Dulce et Decorum Est, page 709

Owen’s theme is apparent: death in battle is hideous, no matter what certain ignorant poets say about it. For us, there seems irony in the fact that Owen himself was to be killed in action in France. Although in a wartime letter he called himself “a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience,” Owen in this poem does not question that to die for one’s country may be necessary. His attitude is overpowering disgust—with the butchery of war, with those who idealize it.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information and links for Owen. Longman Lecture, interactive reading, critical essay, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “Dulce et Decorum Est.”

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WRITERS ON WRITING

Wilfred Owen, War Poetry, pages 710–711

Owen’s fragmentary notes toward a preface to his still unpublished book are tremendously eloquent. It is interesting to find that Owen’s heightened prose often reads like poetry.

A good classroom question is what Owen sees as the purpose of poetry. He does not see the contemporary poet as having direct political power, although there was a strong political element in the poems he wrote during the Great War. Instead, Owen sees the poet’s role as telling the truth. By speaking the truth about difficult and, in this case, tragic events, the poet warns. Owen’s sense of truth-telling predicts the current concept of poetry as witnessing.
Why a whole section on literal meaning? The need first occurred to XJK in a conversation with Robert Reiter and David Anderson of Boston College. Professor Reiter, who had been using the book in a previous edition, pointed out that, while it was well to encourage students to read poetry for its suggestions, his students tended to go too far in that direction and sometimes needed to have their attention bolted down to the denotations of words on a page. Early in a poetry course, the problem seemed especially large—"I try not to let them look for any symbols until after Thanksgiving!" Mr. Anderson had felt the same difficulty. In teaching Donne’s "Batter my heart" sonnet, he had had to argue with students who couldn't see how, in a poem of spiritual aspiration, Donne could possibly be referring to anything so grossly physical as rape. They needed to see the plain, literal basis of Donne's tremendous metaphor, that they might then go on to understand the poet's conception of sanctifying grace.

With these comments in mind, the publishers sent a questionnaire to more than one hundred instructors who had used the book, asking them (among other questions) whether they felt the need for more emphasis on denotation. All who replied said that they would welcome such an emphasis (in addition to the emphasis on connotation)—all, that is, except for one instructor (God help him) who reported that he couldn't persuade his students to rise above the level of the literal, if indeed he could get them to rise that far.

Most instructors like to discuss imagery fairly early. They will find nothing to hinder them from taking the chapter on imagery ahead of this one. Another procedure would be to defer “Imagery” until after having discussed both denotation and connotation—taking in sequence the present chapter, “Words,” and the following chapter, “Saying and Suggesting.”

William Carlos Williams, This Is Just to Say, page 716

Williams once recalled that this poem was an actual note he had written to his wife—"and she replied very beautifully. Unfortunately, I've lost it. I think what she wrote was quite as good as this" (conversation with John W. Gerber and Emily M. Wallace in Interviews with William Carlos Williams, ed. Linda Welshimer Wagner [New York: New Directions, 1976]).
For parodies of this famous poem, see Kenneth Koch’s “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams” in *Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. A. Poulin (Boston: Houghton, 1980), and other anthologies.

For biographical information and links for Williams, visit MyLiteratureLab Resources.

**DICTION**

**Marianne Moore, silence, page 718**

This poem appears autobiographical on the surface, but the notes that Marianne Moore scrupulously appended to her poems make it clear that it is a composite, imaginary portrait of a father. (Moore barely knew her father, who had suffered a nervous breakdown shortly after her birth; perhaps, for that reason, imaginary fathers were all the more important to her.) The first five lines were adapted from a “Miss A. M. Homans,” according to Moore. “Make my house your inn” is a quotation from Edmund Burke, to which Moore added her telling last line. The father in the poem presumably lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts (from references to Longfellow’s grave and Harvard), a town in which Moore never resided. We belabor these facts and sources only to demonstrate that poems are often not so autobiographical as they might seem.

A central theme of “Silence” is the eloquence of understatement and restraint. The poet Donald Hall praises this poem in his study *Marianne Moore: The Cage and the Animal* (New York: Pegasus, 1970), saying that by “eschewing the easy words for the ambiguous emotion,” Moore displays “a species of honesty and not evidence of lack of depth.” Precision is another key term. Notice how important the speaker considers distinctions between related words and situations (silence/restraint, inn/residence).

**Robert Graves, down, wanton, down!, page 718**

This poem can be an astonisher, especially if students haven’t read it in advance. One freshman group XJK sprang it on provided a beautiful gamut of reactions from stunned surprise to hilarity. At first, most didn’t know quite what to make of the poem, but they soon saw that its puns and metaphors point to details of male and female anatomy; in catching these, they found themselves looking to literal meanings. After further discussion, they decided that the poem, however witty, makes a serious point about the blindness of lust. To get at this point, students may be asked to sum up the contrast Graves is drawing between Love and Beauty and the wanton’s approach to them.

The title (and opening line) echo a phrase from Shakespeare in a passage about eels being rolled into a pie (*King Lear*, II, iv, 118–123):

LEAR: O me, my heart, my rising heart! But down!

FOOL: Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when she put ’em in’ th’ paste alive. She knapped ’em o’ th’ coxcombs with a stick and cried, “Down, wantons, down!” ’Twas her brother that, in pure kindness to his horse, buttered his hay.
One instructor at a community college in New Jersey has reported an embarrassing experience. One morning, not having had time to prepare for class, he introduced this poem without having read it first. "What's it about?" he queried, and someone in the class replied, "An erection." "WHAT?" he exploded. "Come on, now, let's look at it closely . . . " But as he stared at the poem before him, a chill stole over him. Luckily, he was saved by the bell.

**John Donne**, *Batter my Heart, Three-Personed God, for You*, page 719

On Donne's last line: the literature of mysticism is full of accounts of spiritual experience seen in physical terms; any students who wish to pursue the matter might be directed, for instance, to the poems of St. John of the Cross (which have been splendidly translated by John Frederick Nims).

John E. Parish has shown that Donne's poem incorporates two metaphors, both worn and familiar: the traditional Christian comparison of the soul to a maiden and Christ to a bridegroom, and the Petrarchan conceit of the reluctant woman as a castle and her lover as an invading army. Donne brilliantly combines the two into a new whole. In lines 1 to 4, the sinner's heart is like a walled town fallen to Satan, the enemy. Now God the rightful King approaches and knocks for entrance. But merely to knock won't do—the King must break open the gates with a battering ram. The verbs in these lines all suggest the act of storming a citadel, "and even blowe may be intended to suggest the use of gunpowder to blow up the fortress" ("No. 14 of Donne's Holy Sonnets," *College English* 24 [January 1963]: 299–302).

"The paradox of death and rebirth, the central paradox of Christianity" is (according to A. L. Clements in another commentary) the organizing principle of the poem. To illustrate the paradox of destroying in order to revive, Donne employs two sorts of figurative language: one, military and destructive; the other, marital and uniting ("Donne's 'Holy Sonnet XIV,'" *Modern Language Notes* 76 [June 1961]: 484–89).

Both the Clements and the Parish articles are reprinted, together with four other discussions of the poem, in *John Donne's Poetry*, edited by Clements (New York: Norton, 1966).

It is hard to talk for long about rhythm in poetry without citing the opening lines of "Batter my heart." Both in meter and in meaning, they must be among the most powerful lines in English poetry.

**The Value of a Dictionary**

**Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**, *Aftermath*, page 721

Like many seemingly abstract words, *aftermath* was originally a concrete descriptive term that referred to the usually meager second growth of crop in a field that had already been mowed that season: after + math (an obsolete word for mowing). Once
you read Longfellow’s quietly moving poem, you’ll never forget the etymology. “Aftermath” shows how poets usually employ words with careful consideration of their histories.

“Aftermath” provides a literal description of mowing the second growth in a winter field, but the treatment suggests a hidden symbolic meaning. Longfellow is careful not to specify exactly what the subtext is and leaves every reader free to project his or her own private meaning into the poem. The structure of Longfellow’s insight, however, is painfully clear: to revisit a scene of the past can be devastating.

_Fledged_ means “having feathers” and refers to young birds who are now old enough to have grown feathers and flown from their nests. _Rowen_ is a synonym for _aftermath_, a season’s second crop, usually of hay.

Kay Ryan, _Mockingbird_, page 721

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Mockingbird.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the origin of the mockingbird’s name? What does it tell us about the bird’s song? The mockingbird was named after its ability to mimic the songs of other birds.

2. Look up _pastiche_, _capriccio_, and _brio_ in the dictionary. What do those musical terms add to the poem? In musical terms, a _pastiche_ is a piece of music that overtly imitates another work (just as the mockingbird imitates the songs of other birds). _Capriccio_ (which means “caprice” in Italian) is a fanciful musical work that has an improvisatory style and free form (just as the bird will shift from song to song). _Brio_ means “vivacity” in Italian, and it is used in music to suggest a strong and lively manner. By using these foreign musical terms, Ryan suggests that the mockingbird is a vigorous virtuoso of borrowed styles.

3. What aspects of the mockingbird’s song does the verb “hashes” (line 12) describe? “Hashes” suggests that the mockingbird idly mixes the meaningful calls of other birds, mixing their styles but not conveying the emotions of the originals.

4. What does Ryan imply when she wonders if “brio / really does beat feeling”? What is the distinction the author draws between “brio” and “feeling”? This short statement contains the hard lesson of Ryan’s poem. Outward style and strength, she suggests, will win over genuine feeling in life. Style trumps substance.

5. In poker, two aces obviously beat three hearts. Why do you think that Ryan reminds the reader that hearts can’t win a game? Three hearts are worthless in poker. (It takes five to make a flush.) The lowest pair will beat them. The hearts suggest emotion, love, and authenticity, which, Ryan implies, will not prevail over power.

6. What seems to be Ryan’s attitude toward the mockingbird? She seems ambivalent. She admires his style and self-assurance, but she understands the unfairness of a world in which authentic feeling counts for very little.
J. V. Cunningham, FRIEND, ON THIS SCAFFOLD THOMAS MORE LIES DEAD, page 723

Cunningham’s epigram states a metaphor: it likens two famous separations decreed by Henry VIII. Separation of the Body (the Church of England) from the Head (the Pope) is like the decapitation of More, who had opposed it. A possible original for Cunningham’s epigram, a Latin epigram by John Owen (1606), has been discovered by Charles Clay Doyle:

Abscind passus caput est a corpore Morus;
Abscindi corpus noluit a capite.

In 1659 Thomas Pecke rendered it into English:

What though Head was from Body severed!
More would not let Body be cut from Head.

Doyle remarks that in fact More played down the role of the Pope as “head” of the Church, preferring the allegorical view (derived from Paul) of Christ as head upon the Church’s body (“The Hair and Beard of Thomas More,” Moreana 18, 71–72 [Nov. 1981]: 5–14).

Samuel Menashe, BREAD, page 723

Samuel Menashe’s short poem demonstrates the power of allusion to endow a few phrases with meaningful resonance. Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Bread.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Can you identify the two allusions Menashe uses in this poem? The first line of the poem is a direct quotation from the Lord’s Prayer (“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”) found in Matthew 6:10. The second allusion is from Ecclesiastes 11:1 “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.” Menashe, who is Jewish, significantly draws from both the Old and New Testaments—stressing the universality of his poem. The use of the obsolete “Thy” opening the poem announces that the language is borrowed from an older text.

2. Paraphrase the content of the poem in a few sentences. “Bread” is an elusive poem to paraphrase successfully since it relies on the associations of the two allusions, but one might suggest the following:

God’s will is followed even by the meager resources of crust and crumb and old bread I have at my disposal. I have followed the sacred advice to cast my gifts of love and charity into the world, but I have found little love and charity in return.

3. How do you think these references add meaning to this very short poem? By using biblical language, Menashe fills the poem with religious and moral significance. Without these allusions, the poem might seem merely a personal complaint about the world’s failure to repay him for his gifts.
Carl Sandburg, GRASS, page 723

Carl Sandburg’s poem, which was written while World War I was still raging, incorporates five place names into its brief length. All five proper nouns are the names of famously bloody battlegrounds. Austerlitz and Waterloo were scenes of major battles in the Napoleonic Wars. Gettysburg refers, of course, to the decisive Civil War battle in Pennsylvania. Ypres and Verdun were the sites of the battles in World War I that still rank among the deadliest military engagements in human history. Since the allusions are all used in parallel ways, a reader should be able to understand the role of any battle he or she does not know from the context as long as he or she recognizes some of the names.

It might be worth asking the class who is speaking in the poem. The speaker is the grass itself, a symbol of the natural world’s enduring ability to reassert its power over human history. This aspect of Nature is often viewed in harsh terms, but Sandburg’s poem displays it in a gentle, consolatory way. In historical terms, one might consider Sandburg’s poem a vision of peace in the final days of World War I.

WORD CHOICE AND WORD ORDER

An exercise to make a class more aware of le mot juste is suggested by W. Jackson Bate and David Perkins in British and American Poets (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986). Print out several lines of a poem, with an admirably chosen word or words left out. Let students suggest ways to fill in the blank and debate their choices. Then the instructor whips out a trump card: the way the poet filled in the blank—if you’re lucky, to “a collective sigh of appreciation.”

Robert Herrick, UPON JULIA’S CLOTHES, page 725

This short classic is included in the book by popular demand. The poem deserves inclusion for beauty’s sake alone, but it is also mighty useful in the classroom to illustrate the power of diction. Liquefaction is an unforgettable word in Herrick’s poem—a strong metaphor clothed in suave music. Note that the poem contains only two Latinate words (one in each stanza)—liquefaction and vibration. Both of them are employed and positioned for their special resonance. Students will also learn something about the history of English by looking up brave in a dictionary. Herrick uses it here in a now slightly archaic sense to mean “finely dressed” or “splendidly turned out,” though by Shakespeare’s time the adjective was also employed, according to the OED, as “a general epithet of admiration.” Remember Miranda’s famous exclamation in The Tempest: “O brave new world / That has such people in’t.”

Kay Ryan, BLANDEUR, page 726

Kay Ryan’s witty poem demonstrates that on certain occasions writers can invent the words they need. (Ryan actually coins two related words in her poem—the noun blandeur and the verb blanden.) Although the poem is in one sense a joke, it also seemingly reflects a sincere desire for the comfortable average rather than the sub-
lime extremes of human experience. The poem states its preference for the undramatic “mean” and not for grand and terrible excess.

Ryan’s poem is written in short free verse lines wonderfully interwoven with many irregular rimes. Many rimes occur at the ends of lines—happen/flatten, flanden/Canyon, fissures/you, and hearts/parts—but others appear elsewhere in the line like rondure/fissures, hand/remand, calving/halving. The effect of this intricate and unexpected riming is to slow down our reading and hear the many interconnections of sound and sense.

*Thomas Hardy*, *The Ruined Maid*, page 727

In a London street, an innocent girl from Dorset encounters a friend who has run away from life on the farm. Now a well-paid prostitute, ’Melia calls herself ruined with cheerful irony. That this maid has been made, it would seem, has been the making of her. Hardy, of course, is probably less stricken with awe before ’Melia’s glamorous clothes than is the first speaker. As the ain’t in the last line indicates, ’Melia’s citified polish doesn’t go deep.

For a sequel to “The Ruined Maid,” see “A Daughter Returns” in Hardy’s last collection of poetry, *Winter Words*. With “Dainty-cut raiment” and “earrings of pearl,” a runaway daughter returns to her country home only to be spurned by her father for having lost her innocence.

*Richard Eberhart*, *The Fury of Aerial Bombardment*, page 728

Dr. Johnson said that technical language is inadmissible to poetry, but in the case of Eberhart’s poem it is hard to agree. We do not need to know the referents of “belt feed lever” and “belt holding pawl” in order to catch the poet’s meaning. Indeed, he evidently chooses these terms as specimens of a jargon barely comprehensible to the unlucky gunnery students who failed to master it. At a reading of his poems in public, Eberhart once remarked that he had added the last stanza as an afterthought. The tone (it seems to us) remains troubled and sorrowful but shifts from loftiness and grandeur to matter-of-fact. This shift takes place in diction as well: from the generality of “infinite spaces,” “multitudinous will,” “eternal truth,” and “the Beast” in man’s soul down to “Names on a list,” “lever,” and “pawl.” The poem is a wonderful instance of a poet’s writing himself into a fix—getting snarled in unanswerable questions—and then triumphantly saving the day (and his poem) by suddenly returning with a bump to the ordinary, particular world.

*Wendy Cope*, *Lonely Hearts*, page 728

Wendy Cope’s bittersweet villanelle demonstrates that old forms can easily accommodate new content, as long as the poet has enough imagination and skill.
Students never seem to have trouble understanding this poem. It is a fun exercise to have students write an additional personal ad in the same rime scheme, but, if you use this idea, be prepared for some odd results.

You might suggest that students read some biographical information on Cope online. Her late-blooming career and personal problems may add a personal dimension to this poem. If she is making gentle fun of the authors of personal ads, she also understands their emotional needs.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY

E. E. Cummings, ANYONE LIVED IN A PRETTY HOW TOWN, page 729

Trained in the classical languages, Cummings borrows from Latin the freedom to place a word in practically any location within a sentence. The first two lines are easy to unscramble: “How pretty a town anyone lived in, with so many bells floating up [and] down.” The scrambling is artful, and pedestrian words call attention to themselves by being seen in an unusual order.

The hero and heroine of the poem are anyone and noone, whose names recall the pronoun-designated principals in Cummings’s play “Him”—hero Him and heroine Me. Are they Everyman and Everywoman? Not at all: they’re different; they’re strong, loving individuals whom the poet contrasts with those drab women and men of line 5, “both little and small,” who dully sow isn’t (negation) and reap same (conformity). Unlike the wise noone and anyone, the everyones of line 17 apparently think they’re really somebody.

In tracing the history of anyone and noone from childhood through their mature love to their death and burial, Cummings, we think, gives a brief tour through life in much the way that Thornton Wilder does in Our Town. But not all readers will agree. R. C. Walsh thinks that, in the last two stanzas, anyone and noone do not literally die but grow into loveless and lifeless adults, whose only hope of rejuvenation is to have children (Explicator 22 [May 1964]: item 72). But it seems unlike Cummings to make turncoats of his individualists.  Bounded by the passage of the seasons, the rain, and the heavens, the mortal lives of anyone and noone seem concluded in their burial. But in the next-to-last stanza they go on sleeping in love and faith, dreaming of their resurrection.

Billy Collins, THE NAMES, page 730

As Robert Francis observed in The Satirical Rogue on Poetry (1968): “Now the chief trouble with writing for and about an occasion is that you become so impressed with the importance of the occasion that you are likely to become impressed with the importance of your writing about it. Something big, obviously, is called for.” By contrast, in “The Names” Billy Collins never directly mentions the horrific events of September 11, 2001, or the World Trade Center, or even the name of “this city” (line 22), nor does the speaker call attention to (and implicitly expect to be admired for) his own sensitivity. Instead, Collins achieves a great emotional effect through the
quiet presentation of an alphabet of representative names of victims, embedding them in the details of the natural world both to show that our awareness of this event, with its immense human loss, has become permanently intertwined with our perceptions of the world about us, and to remind us that human life, like the natural world, is both fleeting and enduring. The effect is underscored by the simplicity and dignity of the poem's style, which is wholly appropriate to the subject and so restrained that, although every line is heavy with the emotions of pain and loss, there is no overt emotional reference at all until the very last line, which is made all the more powerful by the very modesty of its statement.

**Christian Wiman, When the Time’s Toxins, page 732**

Wiman’s poem contemplates the strength and resilience of faith in the face of time (which is a poison) and life (which can seem meaningless). This is not new faith, not a matter of being “born again,” but an old faith, perhaps abandoned or lost sight of, but magically renewed “the instant / I acknowledge it” (lines 9–10).

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “When the Time’s Toxins.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. **What does the author imply about Time by using toxins as a metaphor of its impact?** That it is poisonous—Time slowly robs everyone of life.

2. **What does salt do to soil? What does this similarity imply about Time’s impact on the cell?** Salt makes soil more acidic, seriously weakening the soil’s ability to transfer nutrients to plants. The salted soul ultimately becomes barren. The implication is that Time has a similar effect on the cell.

3. **What is the only thing that grows on the salted plot? What images are used to describe “belief”?** The only thing that grows on the salted plot is belief. Belief is a plant drawn upward by light. Its roots are compared to talons—an eagle’s claws—suggesting that while it may seem fragile as a young plant, it has a hidden strength like that of an eagle.

**EXERCISE: Different Kinds of English, page 732**

**Anonymous, Carnation Milk, page 733**

**Gina Valdés, English con Salsa, page 733**

Students won’t need much help to see that “Carnation Milk” is unschooled speech and that Valdés flavors her English with a strong seasoning of Spanish expressions, just as her title suggests.
Like Rhina P. Espaillat’s “Bilingual/Bilingüe,” Gina Valdés’s “English con Salsa” mixes—or, better, flavors—English diction with Spanish to reinforce its thematic preoccupation with the interaction between cultures. This larger point is quite clearly stated and illustrated throughout the text, but a careful reading will reveal some underlying subtleties: the allusion to the Mixtec language and civilization in the last line is a reminder that other cultures long predate both the English and the Spanish on this continent; the place names in line 27 underscore the fact that the interplay between English and Spanish has existed for centuries; and, despite these facts, lines 6–9 ironically point up the limits of the opportunities that await the new Americans in this ESL class.

*Lewis Carroll*, **JABBERWOCKY**, page 734

**Writers on Writing**

*Lewis Carroll*, **HUMPTY DUMPTY EXPLICATES “JABBERWOCKY,”** page 735

“Jabberwocky” has to be heard aloud: you might ask a student to read it, alerting him or her in advance to prepare it, and offering tips on pronunciation. (“The *i* in *slithy* is like the *i* in *slime;* the *a* in *wabe,* like the *a* in *wave.*”)

Although Carroll added *chortled* to the dictionary, not all his odd words are invented. *Gyre* of course means “to spin or twist about”—it is used as a noun in Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium” and “The Second Coming.” *Slithy* (sleazy or slovenly), *rath* (an earthen wall), *whiffling* (blowing or puffing), and *callooh* (an arctic duck that winters in Scotland, so named for its call) are legitimate words, too, but Carroll uses them in different senses. *Frabjous* probably owes something to *frab,* a dialect word meaning “to scold, harass, or nag,” as Myra Cohn Livingston points out in her anthology *O Frabjous Day!* (New York: Atheneum, 1977).

Writing in 1877 to a child who had inquired what the strange words meant, Carroll replied:

> I am afraid I can’t explain “vorpal blade” for you—nor yet “tulgey wood”; but I did make an explanation once for “uffish thought”—it seems to suggest a state of mind when the voice is gruffish, the manner roughish, and the temper huffish. Then again, as to “babble” if you take the three verbs “bleat,” “murmur” and “warble,” and select the bits I have underlined, it certainly makes “babble”: though I am afraid I can’t distinctly remember having made it that way.

Students can have fun unpacking other portmanteau words: *gimble* (*nimble, gambol*); *frumious* (which Carroll said is *fuming* plus *furious*); *vorpal* (*voracious, purple*), *galumphing* (*galloping in triumph*), and so on. (*Uffish* suggests *oafish* too.) Some of these suggestions come from Martin Gardner, who supplies copious notes on the poem (as well as translations of it into French and German) in *The Annotated Alice* (New York: Bramhall, 1960).

All other critics, however, must yield precedence to the estimable Humpty Dumpty, whose definitive comments appear in “Writers on Writing” following the poem.

[MyLiteratureLab Resources] Biographical information and links for Carroll. Longman Lecture, interactive reading, critical essay, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “Jabberwocky.”

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SAYING AND SUGGESTING

DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION

*John Masefield*, CARGOES, page 740

Much of the effect of Masefield’s contrast depends on rhythms and word-sounds, not just on connotations. In stanza 2, the poet strews his lines with dactyls, producing ripples in his rhythm: *diamonds, emeralds, amethysts, cinnamon*. In the third stanza, paired monosyllables (*salt-caked, smoke stack, Tyne coal, roadrails, pig-lead, firewood*) make for a hard-hitting series of spondees. Internal alliteration helps the contrast, too: all those *m*-sounds in the dactyls; and in the harsher lines “*Dirty British coast with a salt-caked smoke stack, / Butting,*” all the sounds of the *r*, the *t*, and the stac-cato *k*.

“Cargoes” abounds with lively, meaningful music, yet Masefield is generally dismissed nowadays as a mere balladeer—a jog-trot chronicler of the lives of the poor and unfortunate. In naming him poet laureate, George V (it is said) mistakenly thought him a hero of the working class; unluckily for his later fame, Masefield, like Wordsworth, enjoyed a long senility.

*William Blake*, LONDON, page 741

Blake’s “London” broadens the themes explored in his “The Chimney Sweeper.” The personal pathos of “The Chimney Sweeper” becomes a general indictment of a society in which such exploitation is possible. In “London,” we see Blake as a prophetic poet—not prophesying the future like a tabloid seer, but speaking as a prophet who declares the moral necessity of just change in a time of evil.

In his essay “On Blake and His Critics” (1934), G. K. Chesterton singled out the third stanza of “London” for special praise. He called the images “two lightning-flashes revealing two separate Visions of Judgment.” It is important to remember that Blake was a Londoner born and bred who spent most of his life within the city limits. He is not a country poet describing urban squalor; he is a native morally dissecting his own home town. He knows every image from the inside out.

If Blake were to walk the streets of an American city today, would he find any conditions similar to those he finds in “London”? Is this poem merely an occasional poem, with a protest valid only for its time, or does it have enduring applications?

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information and links for Blake.
Wallace Stevens, *Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock*, page 742

Stevens slings colors with the verve of a Matisse. In this early poem, he paints a suggestive contrast between the pale and colorless homeowners, ghostlike and punctually going to bed at ten, and, on the other hand, the dreams they wouldn’t dream of dreaming; and the bizarre and exotic scene inside the drunken head of our disreputable hero, the old seafarer. Who in the world would wear a beaded sash or *ceinture*? (A Barbary pirate? An Arabian harem dancer?) Ronald Sukenick has made a terse statement of the poem’s theme: “the vividness of the imagination in the dullness of a pallid reality” (*Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure* [New York: New York UP, 1967]). Another critic, Edward Kessler, has offered a good paraphrase: “Only the drunkard, the irrational man (‘Poetry must be irrational’ [Opus Posthumous 162]), who is in touch with the unconscious—represented here, and often elsewhere, by the sea—can awake his own passionate nature until his blood is mirrored in the very weather” (*Images of Wallace Stevens* [New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1972]).

While they will need to see the contrast between pallor and color, students might be cautioned against lending every color a particular meaning, as if the poem were an allegory.

Stevens expressed further disappointment with monotonous neighbors in a later poem, “Loneliness in Jersey City,” which seems a companion piece to this. In Jersey City, “the steeples are empty and so are the people,” who can’t tell a dachshund from a deer. Both poems probably owe some of their imagery to Stevens’s days as a struggling young lawyer living in rooming houses in East Orange, New Jersey, and Fordham Heights, in New York City.

Gwendolyn Brooks, *The Bean Eaters*, page 743

This spare, understated poem seems one of the poet’s finest portraits of poor blacks in Chicago. While “We Real Cool” depicts the young, “The Bean Eaters” depicts the old, whose lives are mainly devoted to memories—some happy (*tinklings*, like the sound of their beads) and some painful (*twinges*).

Details are clearly suggestive. The old people are barely eking out a living, eating beans to save money, from *chipware* (chipped tableware, or tableware that chips easily?) set on a creaky old table, using cheap cutlery that doesn’t shine.

The long last line, with its extended list, sounds like one of those interminable Ogden Nash lines that Lewis Turco has dubbed “Nashers.” Why is its effect touching, rather than humorous? Brooks lists the poor couple’s cherished, worthless possessions in detail, and each detail matters. Besides, *twinges / fringes*, a fresh rime, achieves a beautiful closure. We end up sharing the poet’s respect and affection for this old pair—no mockery.

A number of wonderful audio and video resources by and about Brooks are available online from the Library of Congress website. Brooks served two terms as the poet...
laureate, then titled the Consultant in Poetry to the Library. To hear Brooks, go to <www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/brooks/#audiorecordings>.

Two excellent CDs of Gwendolyn Brooks reading her poems and discussing her work and life as a writer are available from the archives of New Letters on the Air, at www.newletters.org/onTheAir.asp.

**E. E. Cummings, NEXT TO OF COURSE GOD AMERICA i**, page 744

Even if the last line and the quotation marks around the rest of the text were omitted, it would be hard to miss the satiric intent of this sonnet. From the bland, empty affirmation of religious belief in the first line, through the piling up of stock patriotic phrases rendered meaningless by being pulled out of context (and syntactical wholeness), culminating in the string of idiotic interjections in lines 7 and 8, Cummings's sense of the ridiculousness of the rhetoric and the meritriciousness of the orator is all but palpable. In lines 9–12, the speechmaker plays a particularly nasty kind of moral trump card, manipulating the sacrifices of the war dead to close off debate, followed by the reflexive and hypocritical lip service to liberty in line 13. He is saying, in effect: We honor our heroes for their defense of our freedoms, but anyone who exercises those freedoms to dissent from my views is unpatriotic or worse. And then the entire speech is neatly deflated by the poem's final line.

You can hear Cummings read “next to of course god america i” and three others of his poems online at Salon (search “E. E. Cummings” at <www.salon.com>).

**Robert Frost, FIRE AND ICE**, page 744

In his first line, Frost probably refers to those who accept the biblical prophecy of a final holocaust; and in his second line, to those who accept scientists’ forecasts of the cooling of the earth. We admire that final suffice; a magnificent understatement, it further shows the power of a rime to close a poem (as Yeats said) with a click like a closing box.

When we polled students about their favorite poems in the anthology, their number one choice was Frost’s “Fire and Ice.” This unforgottably incisive lyric clearly illustrates how the poet’s mind works with contradiction. Point out how the poem wonderfully argues its way to an inconclusive but nonetheless apocalyptic finale. And note the darkness of the poet’s vision: both of the alternatives he offers are terrifying. No wonder college students love it. How many nine-line poems manage to destroy the world not once but twice?

**MyLiteratureLab™ Resources.** Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Brooks.

**MyLiteratureLab™ Resources.** Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Cummings.

**MyLiteratureLab™ Resources.** Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Frost.
"Silence is golden"—but Sir Tact is obviously a coward, afraid to speak his mind.

This epigram is included in Steele’s first collection of poems, Uncertainties and Rest (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1979).

"The Minefield" was chosen for the 1999 volume of The Best American Poetry series and has since become the most widely reprinted of Diane Thiel’s poems. It combines a vivid description of a shocking experience with an insight into the shaping of personality to create a memorable statement with universal implications.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Minefield.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

1. In the opening lines of the poem, a seemingly small decision—to take a shortcut and find something to eat—leads to a horrifying result. What does this suggest about the poem’s larger view of what life is like? It would be easy to dismiss the incident as a hazard of war and deny any relevance to ordinary peacetime existence, but the poet doesn’t take that view: the speaker says of her father and the minefields that “He brought them with him . . . / He carried them underneath his good intentions. / He gave them to us . . .” Despite the placid manner in which he tells the story, the incident has deeply scarred the father, sabotaging his finer nature, and communicating to his children a similar sense of life’s uncertainty and its capacity to erupt into violence at any moment, as is stated explicitly in the last five lines of the poem.

2. The speaker tells the story of the minefield before letting us know that the other boy was her father. What is the effect of this narrative strategy? Beginning the poem with the family at dinner and the father narrating his boyhood experience would have placed the story in the distant past and muted its effect. Starting with the minefield gives the incident an immediacy of its own, which is then intensified by the shock of lines 10–11—a shock that is even further intensified by the calm of the father’s demeanor and of the writing itself.

3. How does the image of the melon reinforce the poem’s intentions? Despite a melon’s being so much softer and more vulnerable than a head, by likening the two the poet reminds us of the minefield story and underscores the poem’s larger theme—the sense of helplessness (which is communicated even more by the father’s personality and behavior than by the incident itself) at the prospect of unpredictable and unpreventable violence.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. “Writers on Writing” video interview with Thiel.
H.D., Storm, page 745

Questions

1. What effect is achieved by the speaker's addressing the storm directly? It personifies the storm, which in turn implies that it may have some motive for its actions. And also the other way around: the speaker could be addressing a person, whose effect on the speaker's emotions is being compared to a storm's effect on the landscape.

2. It could be maintained that the poem communicates principally through its verbs. After listing all the verbs, discuss whether you agree with this claim. The verbs do indeed do the heavy work of this poem; they are mostly strong verbs, describing a great destructive force. But there is a subtle variation in the verbs over the course of the poem. At first the storm is described as "crash[ing]" over trees, "crack[ing]" branches, and so on. The force of the words crash and crack and crush is enhanced by the alliteration, as well as by the repetition, in the second stanza, of the word crash. But at the end of the first stanza the blunt, single-syllable, present-tense action verbs give way, as if to suggest a lull in a storm, to less forceful formulations: the plainest verb in the language (is), a couple of present perfect verbs ("[is] crushed," "is rent") that describe what is happening in the passive rather than active voice, and a perhaps momentarily puzzling image, involving an almost abstract-sounding verb (burden), that may cause the reader to pause in wonder. After this, the violent, active verbs (swirl, crash) resume, only to be succeeded again, as if to mimic some cyclical natural rhythm, by a weaker present perfect verb ("have broken") and another passive construction ("is hurled"). In the closing lines, the verbs are referring not to the violent action of the storm but the reactive behavior of the leaf: it "whirls" and "sinks." And the last word, after all this action, describes the very opposite of action: a mere leaf has been so weighted down that it has sunk to the ground and now seems less like a leaf, something that we are used to seeing in action, whipped around by the wind, than like a stone.

3. The poet addresses the storm as "you." What does this word choice imply? It implies a feeling of personal intimacy with the storm, or at least a strong personal emotion toward it, and a tendency to see it not as an impersonal climatic phenomenon but as a creature, a being, something that may be driven by a motive and have consciousness.

4. The poem literally describes a violent storm. Does it suggest anything else to you? Modern warfare. And, metaphorically, the impact of a lover on the speaker's emotions.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Tears, Idle Tears, page 746

Tennyson's brooding lyric is a classic example of poetic suggestion. The poem opens with a paradox. The speaker unexpectedly finds himself weeping when "looking on the happy autumn-fields." The tears are declared idle, which is to say
they seemingly lack any real basis. But are they really mysterious in their origin? The “Writing Assignment” at the end of the chapter asks students to explain why the speaker is weeping.

Tennyson loads the poem with suggestive imagery and situations to answer this question. It might help students to begin by noticing when the poem takes place. It is autumn—the time of harvest and completion. The speaker seemingly cannot help but reflect in this season on “the days that are no more.” Where the poem takes place also reinforces the sense that the speaker is painfully cut off from the past. The speaker weeps while “looking on the happy autumn-fields.” Seeing them and remembering the past triggers a series of revealing reveries about “the days that are no more.”

The first image associated with the past is light on a sail. First, the sail seems “fresh” and dawn-like—bringing “our friends up from the underworld.” The last word of that line, underworld, explicitly brings death into the poem. Any reassuring image of the dead returning to us, however, is quickly reversed as the ship sinks “with all we love below the verge.” The death imagery becomes more explicit in stanza 3 when the dawn song of the birds falls on “dying ears,” and the sun rises to “dying eyes.” In the final stanza, the intensity of the speaker’s mood heightens appreciably. He speaks explicitly of love—lost love—and the pain of remembering the beloved. By the end of the poem the reader recognizes (at least intuitively) that the speaker weeps from the memory of a dead or lost beloved (both circumstances are stated) and the pain of being unable to recapture the past.

Cleanth Brooks wrote a penetrating analysis of Tennyson’s poem, “The Motivation of Tennyson’s Weeper,” which is found in his influential critical collection The Well Wrought Urn (New York: Harcourt, 1947). Brooks’s analysis perfectly illustrates the power of close textual reading. Dean of the New Critics, however, Brooks does not discuss the biographical background of Tennyson’s lyric. Although not necessary to understand the poem, the facts of its origin are interesting in themselves. Tennyson wrote the poem in the autumn of 1834 after the death of his closest friend, Arthur Hallam. It was composed—an interesting bit of literary trivia—in the ruins of Tintern Abbey, nearly within sight of Hallam’s grave and on the same spot that William Wordsworth had conceived his great ode in 1798.

MyLiteratureLab® Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Tennyson.

Richard Wilbur, Love Calls Us to the Things of This World, page 746

Writers on Writing

Richard Wilbur, Concerning “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World,” page 748

Wilbur suavely explains this richly detailed poem in the “Writers on Writing” that follows “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World” in the book. The poem may seem a bit difficult to students until they catch the extended metaphor in the first
twenty lines (laundry on the line as angels). The poem depends on a series of opposi-
tions (laundry and angels, earth and heaven, soul and body, sleep and waking). Even the poetic language mixes the vulgar and the exalted ("the punctual rape of
every blessèd day"). Have students find as many oppositions as possible, and you will
watch them grasp the larger themes of the poem in the process. (You won't believe
how many elegant oppositions blissfully coexist in this quietly visionary poem.)

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information and links for Wilbur.
Critical essay on "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World."
Ezra Pound, In a Station of the Metro, page 751

Pound recalled that at first this poem had come to him “not in speech, but in little splotches of color.” His account is reprinted by K. K. Ruthven in A Guide to Ezra Pound’s Personae, 1926 (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969). Students might like to compare this “hokku-like sentence” (as Pound called the poem) with the more suggestive Japanese haiku freely translated later in this chapter.

For a computer-assisted tribute to this famous poem, see the curious work of James Laughlin and Hugh Kenner, reported in “The Mixpoem Program,” Paris Review 94 (Winter 1984): 193–98. Following Laughlin’s suggestion that the five nouns of “In a Station of the Metro” might interestingly be shuffled, Kenner wrote “A Little Program in Basic” that enabled a computer to grind out 120 scrambled versions of the poem, including these:

The apparitions of these boughs in the face;
Crowds on a wet, black petal

The crowd of these apparitions in the petal;
Faces on a wet, black bough.

Kenner then wrote a program in Pascal that would shuffle eight words and produce 40,320 different versions. We don’t know what it all demonstrates, except that Pound’s original version still seems the best possible.

Taniguchi Buson, The Piercing Chill I Feel, page 751

Harold G. Henderson, who translated this haiku, wrote a good terse primer in An Introduction to Haiku (Garden City: Anchor, 1958). Most of Henderson’s English versions of haiku rime like this one; still, the sense of the originals (as far as the reader ignorant of Japanese can tell from Henderson’s glosses) does not seem greatly distorted.

T. S. Eliot, The Winter Evening Settles Down, page 753

This is the first of the series of four poems called “Preludes,” originally published in the July 1915 issue of Wyndham Lewis’s Blast. It was written during Eliot’s days at

The first “Prelude” begins with winter nightfall in an urban back street; from indoor gloom and the confined odor of cooking it moves outside into the smoky twilight where gusts of wind whip up leaves and soiled papers, and a shower spatters the housetops. Such adjectives as “burnt out,” “smoky,” “grimy,” “withered,” “vacant,” “broken,” and “lonely” carry the tone.

Some students may point out, though, that the lighting of the lamps seems to end the poem on a note of tranquility.

*MyLiteratureLab™ Resources.* Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Eliot.

**Theodore Roethke,** *ROOT CELLAR,* page 753

Probably there is little point in spending much time dividing imagery into touches and tastes and smells; perhaps it will be enough to point out that Roethke’s knowledgeable poem isn’t all picture-imagery. There’s that wonderful “congress of stinks,” and the “slippery planks” are both tactile and visual. Most of the language in the poem is figurative, most of the vegetation is rendered animal: bulbs like small rodents, shoots like penises, roots like a forgotten can of fishing worms. Roethke doesn’t call the roots lovely, but obviously he admires their tough, persistent life.

*MyLiteratureLab™ Resources.* Biographical information and links for Roethke.

**Elizabeth Bishop,** *THE FISH,* page 754

This poem is made almost entirely of concrete imagery. Except for *wisdom* (line 63) and *victory* (66), there is no very abstract diction in it.

Obviously the speaker admires this stout old fighter. The image “medals with their ribbons” (line 61) suggests that he is an old soldier, and the “five-haired beard of wisdom” (line 63) suggests that he is a venerable patriarch, of whom one might seek advice.

The poor, battered boat has become magnificent for having the fish in it. The feeling in these lines is joy: bilge, rust, and cracked thwarts are suddenly revealed to be beautiful. In a way, the attitude seems close to that in Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” in which the triumphant soul is one that claps its hands and louder sings for every tatter in its mortal dress. The note of final triumph is sounded in “rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!” (line 75). The connotations of *rainbow* in this poem are not very different from the connotations often given the word by misty-eyed romantic poets such as Rod McKuen, but we believe Bishop because of her absolutely hard-eyed and specific view of the physical world. (She even sees the fish with X-ray imagination in lines 27–33.)
Anne Stevenson says in *Elizabeth Bishop* (New York: Twayne, 1966):

It is a testimony to Miss Bishop's strength and sensitivity that the end, the revelation or "moment of truth," is described with the same attention to detail as the rest of the poem. The temptation might have been to float off into an airy apotheosis, but Miss Bishop stays right in the boat with the engine and the bailer. Because she does so, she is able to use words like "victory" and "rainbow" without fear of triteness.

Because the fish has provided her with an enormous understanding, the speaker's letting it go at the end seems an act of homage and gratitude.

Compare "The Fish" with the same poet's richly imaged "Filling Station."

The poet reads this poem on a recording, *The Spoken Arts Treasury of 100 Modern American Poets*, vol. 10, SA 1049.

MyLiteratureLab® Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Bishop. Critical essay on "The Fish."

**Charles Simic, Fork, page 756**

Simic's surreal, short poem introduces an object familiar to us, a fork, and presents it as strange and threatening. The central image is plainly stated: the fork "resembles a bird's foot." An evil, indeed violent, world begins to take shape as one looks more closely at Simic's word choice. The fork, we are told at the start of the poem, is evidently visiting from hell. An eerie turn comes in the second stanza when the speaker addresses a "you" who may be the reader, another person in the poem, or the speaker himself. In any case, we are pulled into a dark landscape of cannibals, hell, stabblings, and naked bird heads—a scene right out of Hieronymus Bosch. We are perhaps pulled in against our will, through our familiarity with the object. Each of us has held a fork, so it is impossible to avoid identifying with the images. That is the real achievement of "Fork"—its surefire inclusion of the reader.

You might begin class discussion by having students point out the words that equip the fork with evil characteristics. A possible writing exercise is to have students come up with their own poems in which a familiar object is treated as foreign and unknown.

**Emily Dickinson, A Route of Evanescence, page 756**

"A Route of Evanescence" will probably inspire a heated guessing contest. Contestants will need to pay attention to Dickinson's exact words.

Enclosing this poem in a letter to Thomas W. Higginson, Dickinson gave it the title "A Humming-Bird."

The poet's report of the hummingbird's arrival from Tunis is fanciful: the creature could hardly fly 4,000 miles nonstop in one morning. And New England hummingbirds don't need to cross the Atlantic; to find a warmer climate, they migrate south. If it was a ruby-throated hummingbird that the poet saw, though, it might indeed have come a long distance from a winter in Mexico or Central America.
The poet's ornithology may be slightly cockeyed, but her imagery is accurate. Hummingbird wings appear to rotate, but they aren't seated in ball joints; they merely flap fast.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Dickinson.

Jean Toomer, REAPERS, page 756

This ominous poem, with its contrasts between sound and silence, possibly contains a metaphor. The black field hands are being destroyed by something indifferent and relentless, much as the trapped rat is slain under the blade. (Or, as in “Scottsboro,” as a cat stalks a “nohole mouse”?)

A grandson of P. B. S. Pinchback, the black who served for a short time during Reconstruction as acting governor of Louisiana, Toomer had only a brief public career as a writer. His one book, Cane (1923), which experimentally combined passages of fiction with poetry, helped to spearhead the Harlem Renaissance. “Reapers” is taken from it.

That Toomer was a man divided between his profound understanding of blacks and his own desire to pass for white emerges in a contemporary biography, The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness, by Cynthia Earl Kerman and Richard Eldridge (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987). The Collected Poems of Jean Toomer (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988) is a slim volume of 55 poems, the best of them from Cane.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information and links for Toomer. Comprehension quiz and essay questions on “Reapers.”

Gerard Manley Hopkins, PIED BEAUTY, page 757

Sumptuously rich in music (rime, alliteration, assonance), this brief poem demands to be read aloud.

Some students might agree with Robert Frost’s objection that the poem “disappoints . . . by not keeping, short as it is, wholly to pied things” (1934 letter to his daughter Lesley, in Family Letters of Robert and Elinor Frost [Albany: State U of New York P, 1972] 162). But, as question 4 tries to get at, Hopkins had more in mind than dappled surfaces. Rough paraphrase of the poem: God is to be praised not only for having created variegation, but for creating and sustaining contrasts and opposites. In lines 5–6, tradesmen’s tools and gear, like the plow that pierces and cuts the soil, strike through the surfaces of raw materials to reveal inner beauty and order that had lain concealed.

The point of question 5 is that if the images of the poem were subtracted, its statement of theme would also disappear.

Hopkins discovered the form of “Pied Beauty” and called it the curtal sonnet (curtal, rimes with turtle: “crop-tailed”). But, remarks MacKenzie, such sonnets are like a small breed of horse: “compressed, not merely cut short.” Instead of two quatrains, the form calls for two tercets; then, instead of a sestet, four lines and one brief line more. (Other curtal sonnets by Hopkins: “Peace” and, even more closely cropped, “Ashboughs.”)

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information on Hopkins. Audio essay and critical essay on “Pied Beauty.”

ABOUT HAiku

HAiku FROM JAPANESE INTERNMENT CAMPS

CONTEMPORARY HAiku

We expanded the haiku section in an earlier edition, refreshing the contemporary section with a couple of new selections and adding a group of haiku by Japanese Americans who were confined to internment camps during World War II, in one of the more shameful episodes of modern American history. These poems provide a quietly devastating commentary on the ironies and the injustice of the situation in which these innocent people were placed.

Hopefully the section now allows instructors enough material to make a separate unit on the subject.

Basho’s frogjump poem, “In the old stone pool,” may well be the most highly prized gem in Japanese literature: in Japanese there exists a three-volume commentary on it.

For an excellent discussion of the problems of teaching haiku, and of trying to write English ones, see Myra Cohn Livingston’s When You Are Alone / It Keeps You Capone: An Approach to Creative Writing with Children (New York: Atheneum, 1973) 152–62. Livingston finds it useful to tell students a famous anecdote. Kikaku, a pupil of Basho, once presented his master with this specimen:

Red dragonflies—
Tear off their wings
And you have pepper pods.

As a haiku, said Basho, that’s no good. Make it instead:

Red pepper pods—
Add wings
And you have dragonflies.

A moment of triumph, such as all teachers of poetry hope for but seldom realize, has been reported in a letter to XJK from Maurice F. Brown of Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan:

Last year, teaching W. C. Williams in an “invitational” course for a week, I began with “Red Wheelbarrow” . . . and a student hand went up (class of 100):

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“That’s not a poem! That’s junk. What if I say, ‘Here I sit looking at a blackboard while the sun is shining outside.’ Is that a poem?” It was one of those great teaching moments . . . and I did a quick count and wrote it on the board:

Here I sit looking
At a blackboard while the sun
is shining outside.

Not only a poem . . . a perfect haiku.


Several small journals focus on haiku and tanka. If you or your students want to pursue studying (and perhaps even publishing) haiku, you will want to look at some of these magazines. *Modern Haiku* has been in existence for over thirty years. And the Haiku Society of America publishes *Frogpond*. For information, go to <www.modernhaiku.org> and <www.hsa-haiku.org>.

Those interested in the “Three Masters” of the Japanese haiku tradition will want to consult Robert Hass’s *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1994). Hass provides both generous selections from the poets and an informed introductory essay for each writer.

Looking over the contemporary haiku, the reader will see that not every poet adheres to the traditional seventeen-syllable pattern. The skillful and illuminating combination of two images or ideas, however, remains central to the haiku’s identity in English.

**FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY**

*John Keats*, *Bright Star! Would I Were Steadfast* as thou art, page 760

Unlike Petrarchan poets, Keats isn’t making the star into an abstraction (Love); he takes it for a visible celestial body, even though he sees it in terms of other things. His comparisons are so richly laden with suggestions (star as staring eye, waters as priestlike), that sometimes students don’t notice his insistent negations. The hermit’s all-night vigil is not what Keats desires. He wants the comfort of that ripening pillow, and (perhaps aware of his impending death) envies the cold star only its imperishability—oh, for unendurable ecstasy, indefinitely prolonged! Compare this to Keats’s “To Autumn” in which the poet finds virtue in change.

Many readers find the last five words of the poem bothersome. Students might be asked, Does Keats lose your sympathy by this ending? If so, why? If not, how would you defend it? We can’t defend it; it seems bathetic, almost as self-indulgent as Shelley’s lines in “Indian Serenade”:

Oh, lift me from the grass!
I die! I faint! I fail!
Let thy love in kisses rain
On my lips and eyelids pale.
Thomas Mauch, of Colorado College, intelligently disagrees and suggests how “or else swoon to death” may be defended. The or, he thinks, is what grammarians call an inclusive or, not an exclusive.

I believe that the speaker is saying, not that if he can’t be forever in the close company of the beloved he would rather be dead—sort of like what Patrick Henry said about liberty—but rather that, given the closeness to the woman, dying in that condition would be just as good as experiencing it forever, since in either case he would not undergo a separation from her (and still retain his consciousness of it). I think it is the same point he makes in the “Ode to a Nightingale”:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
   To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
   While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
   In such an ecstasy!

The poem, Mr. Mauch concludes, illustrates the kind of closure that Keats admired when he affirmed that a poem should “die grandly.”

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Keats. Longman Lecture on “Bright star!”

EXPERIMENT: Writing with Images, page 761

To write a poem full of images, in any form, is probably easier for most students than to write a decent haiku. (On the difficulties of teaching haiku writing, see Myra Cohn Livingston, cited under “About Haiku.”) Surprisingly, there is usually at least one student in every class who can’t seem to criticize a poem to save his neck, yet who, if invited to be a poet, will bloom or at least bud.

Walt Whitman, THE RUNNER, page 761

Try reading “The Runner” without the adverbs lightly and partially. Does the poem even exist without those two delicate modifiers?

H.D., OREAD, page 761

One of Ezra Pound’s many literary projects was the movement he called Imagism. In reaction to the lush late Romantic poetry of the Victorian Age, much of which he considered vague, sentimental, and moralistic, Pound argued that poetry should be hard and exact, focusing not on abstract, emotion-laden rhetoric but on concrete images captured in clear, precise language. Pound defined an image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” In March
1913 the credo of Imagism (which was attributed to F. S. Flint but actually written by Pound) was published in *Poetry* magazine:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.

Though the Imagist movement was short-lived, its precepts had an enduring influence on twentieth-century poetry in English.

Pound promoted the American poet Hilda Doolittle, who wrote under the name H.D., as the prime practitioner of Imagism. In "Oread" she employs a rather startling image, comparing waves bursting on a rocky shore to pine and fir trees, the idea being that the water, in such circumstances, seems less like a fluid and more like a forest full of powerful and dangerous "pointed" trees—trees, to be sure, that are not rooted to the ground but, bizarrely, hailed like projectiles at the shore.

*William Carlos Williams*, *El Hombre*, page 761

This famous little poem engages one of Williams's principal themes, the primacy of the image, and the consequent need to look clearly at things in terms of themselves rather than obscure them with irrelevant comparisons. This concept is also treated in other Williams poems written in the same period, such as "Tract" and "To a Solitary Disciple," and it surfaces again twenty years later in "The Term." Nonetheless, it is almost impossible not to derive from these early poems some sense of Williams's feelings of isolation in the literary landscape of his time. As the critic Steven Gould Axelrod has observed, "Williams tryped on his situation in 'El Hombre.'"

In 1918, the year after "El Hombre" appeared in book form, Wallace Stevens published in the *Little Review* a poem called "Nuances of a Theme by Williams," in which he quotes Williams's text in its entirety and improvises on the phrases "shine alone" and "lend no part." Recalling this tribute many years later, Williams said, "I was deeply touched."

*R. Bly*, *Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter*, page 762

No doubt the situation in this poem is real: Bly, who lives in frequently snowbound Minnesota, emits hundreds of letters. Compare this simple poem to Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which also has a speaker who, instead of going home, prefers to ogle snowscapes.

Note that this poem is examined in the "Writing Effectively" section at the end of this chapter in the main book.
Billy Collins, Embrace, page 762

Billy Collins has an extraordinary gift for ingenious imagery, and “Embrace” is no exception. Here Collins creates an image and then invites the reader to examine it from two sides. The extended image, which begins so playfully and even romantically, soon proves not only devastatingly lonely but foreboding. This poem contains a lesson every cinematographer knows—the same physical image can elicit a radically different effect depending on the angle from which it is depicted.

A CD of Billy Collins reading his poems, The Best Cigarette, has been released by Eric Antonow’s small good productions (800-829-7552).

Chana Bloch, Tired Sex, page 762

Chana Bloch’s brief poem tells its entire story through images (a very discreet thing to do considering the subject). The first image—the damp matchbook—is particularly clever since the poet develops it to represent both male (the match) and female (the matchbook) sexuality. Bloch also carefully avoids depicting the speaker’s inner thoughts and focuses instead on the external images (watching “that sparrow the cat / keeps batting around”) that suggest a great deal about what is happening both in bed and in the speaker’s mind. The final image of joylessly paging through a supposedly great book provides a touch of wit to this ingenious poem.

Gary Snyder, Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout, page 762

In brief compass, Snyder’s poem appeals to the mind’s eye (with smoke haze, pitch glows on fir-cones, rocks, meadows, and the imagined vista at the end), the sense of moisture (after five days rain), of hot (three days heat) and of cold (snow-water from a tin cup). The swarm of new flies are probably both seen and heard.

For any budding literary historians within your class, a fictional portrait of Snyder appears in Jack Kerouac’s novel The Dharma Bums (New York: Viking, 1958).

Kevin Prufer, Pause, Pause, page 763

On its surface, “Pause, Pause” celebrates the sixteen-hour interval between the end of one school day and the beginning of the next one, with “the plaid skirts ticking into the distance” and the “bookbags swaying to the footfalls.” On a deeper level, Prufer’s poem—like Richard Wilbur’s “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World”—is a paean to the beauty and variety of the most ordinary objects of our daily life. Its world comes to life when dull pedagogy ceases, animated through the personifications of sighing desktops, complaining chairlegs, and dreaming chairs. The poem is livened also by the poet’s keen eye and vivid phrasing, which is itself a form of praise.
“ice salting into the bootprints,” “[s]now clots fall,” the sun “sets like a clocktower face,” and “lightbulbs shudder to a close.”

Stevie Smith, NOT WAVING BUT DROWNING, page 763

Stevie Smith reportedly got the initial inspiration for this poem from a newspaper item that described a man who drowned in full view of his friends; they mistook his signals for help as playful waving. Smith pursued the fatal irony of this freak accident and found a chilling universal message in it. Students have no trouble understanding how a person’s desperate signals for help can be misunderstood or ignored by others.

If you share the story of the poem’s genesis with students, you might also point out how the poem’s title reads like a tabloid headline.

It never hurts to belabor the obvious with students. You might suggest they read the short biographical note on Smith and discover that the poet is a woman. Any student particularly interested in Smith should be directed to the superb 1978 film Stevie starring Glenda Jackson, which contains an especially powerful rendition of this poem.

WRITERS ON WRITING

Ezra Pound, THE IMAGE, page 764

Pound’s brief paragraphs on the image may be the most influential critical passage about modern poetry. This excerpt from his 1913 essay “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” (later retitled and incorporated into “A Retrospect”) provided a list of issues and opinions that have helped shape the poetic practice of the last nine decades.

Pound’s criticism itself unfolds most effectively in short imagistic bursts. Ask students to share the sentence or pair of sentences that most interest them. Are there any ideas with which they fervently agree or disagree?

One word in Pound’s passage may need explanation: as its capitalization indicates, Mosaic refers to Moses (and his Ten Commandments).
FIGURES OF SPEECH

WHY SPEAK FIGURATIVELY?

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, THE EAGLE, page 771

For a hostile criticism of this poem, see Robert Graves, “Technique in Poetry,” On Poetry: Collected Talks and Essays (New York: Doubleday, 1969) 402–405. Graves finds Tennyson’s fragment unable to meet the minimal requirement that a poem should make good prose sense. He complains that if the eagle stands on its hands then its wings must be feet, and he ends up by rewriting the poem the way he thinks it ought to be. Though his remarks are fascinating, Graves reads the poem too literally.

Another critic has suggested that this poem is a product of Tennyson’s hopeless nearsightedness. Celebrating the eagle’s 20–20 zoom-lens vision and ability to see a fish from high up, Tennyson yearns for a goal he could not attain: “optical inclusiveness.” (See Gerhard Joseph, “Tennyson’s Optics: The Eagle’s Gaze,” PMLA 92 [May 1977]: 420–27.)

William Shakespeare, SONNET 18: SHALL I COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER’S DAY?, page 771

Howard Moss, SHALL I COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER’S DAY?, page 772

Shakespeare’s original—rich in metaphor, personification, and hyperbole—means more, of course, than Moss’s tongue-in-cheek desecration. The only figure of speech in Moss’s rewrite is the simile in line 1, and even that is denigrated (“Who says?”). Moss manages to condense 115 great words to 78, a sonnet to a mere thirteen lines. It took a poet skilled in handling rimes to find such dull ones.

Shakespeare’s nautical metaphor in line 8 may need explaining: a beautiful young person is a ship in full sail; accident or age can untrim the vessel. Compare this metaphor to “bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang” (“That time of year”).

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METAPHOR AND SIMILE

Emily Dickinson, My Life Had Stood – A Loaded Gun, page 774

This astonishing metaphysical poem (another hymnlike work in common meter) can be an excellent provoker of class debate. Before trying to fathom it, students might well examine its diction. Sovereign Woods ("sovereign" would be the more usual spelling) suggests an estate owned by a king. How do the Mountains reply? By echoing the gun’s report. Apparently the smile is the flash from the gun’s muzzle; and the Vesuvian face, a glimpse of the flaming crater of the volcano. The Eider-Duck, a sea duck, has particularly soft and silky down, which is used in pillows and quilts. The gun’s Yellow Eye seems, again, its flash, and the emphatic Thumb is presumably the impact of the bullet that flattens its victim. (Some will say the thumb is a trigger finger, but you don’t pull a trigger with your thumb.)

Argument over the meaning of the poem will probably divide the class into two camps. One will see the poem, like “Because I could not stop for Death,” as an account of resurrection, with the Owner being God or Christ, who carries away the speaker, life and all, to the Happy Hunting Grounds of Paradise. We incline toward the other camp, the view that the Owner seems a mere mortal, perhaps a lover. The last stanza reveals that he can die. So taken, the last two lines make more sense. Not having the power to die, the speaker feels something lacking in herself. She doesn’t wish to outlive her huntsman and be a lonely killer.

Philip Larkin admits the possibility of both views: “This is a romantic love in a nutshell, but who is its object? A religious poet—and Emily was this sometimes—might even have meant God” (Required Writing [New York: Farrar, 1984] 193).

A third camp holds a feminist interpretation. The poem, as summed up by Adalaide Morris, “tells about a life packed with a potential that the self was not empowered to activate.” From this point of view, the poem is overtly political and exhilarating to teach because it recognizes long suppressed animosities (“Dick, Jane, and American Literature Fighting with Canons,” College English 47 [1985]: 477).

But the poem remains tantalizingly ambiguous. You won’t know until you go into class what a discussion may reveal.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Dickinson.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Flower in the Crannied Wall, page 775

Why does Tennyson say “what God and man is” instead of “what God and man are”? Apparently, this isn’t faulty grammar but higher pantheism. God and man are one.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Tennyson.
William Blake, *TO SEE A WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND*, page 775

This famous short poem begins Blake's "Auguries of Innocence." Written around 1803 in a notebook and then carefully transcribed by Blake into another notebook made from discarded sheets from his engraving business, this poem was not published until 1863—35 years after the poet's death.

Sylvia Plath, *METAPHORS*, page 775

Students usually are prompt to see that the central fact of the poem is the speaker's pregnancy. The speaker feels herself to be a walking riddle, posing a question that awaits solution: What person is she carrying? The "nine syllables" are like the nine months of gestation. All the metaphors refer to herself or to her pregnancy, except those in lines 4–5, which refer to the unborn baby: growing round and full like an apple or plum, seeming precious as ivory (and with ivory skin!), fine-timbered in sinew and bone like a well-built house.

The tone of the poem is clear, if complicated. Humor and self-mockery are evident in the images of elephant and strolling melon. In the last line, there is a note of wonder at the inexorability of gestation and birth: "The train there's no getting off."

A lively class might be asked to point out any possible connection between what the poem is saying about the arbitrary, fixed cycle of pregnancy and its own form—the nine nine-syllable lines.

As Plath records in her Boston journal for 20 March 1959, the pregnancy she had hoped for ended in a miscarriage. Grieving and depressed, she went ahead and finished this poem, then explicitly called "Metaphors for a Pregnant Woman" (*Journals*, New York: Ballantine, 1983) 298–99.

N. Scott Momaday, *SIMILE*, page 776

Momaday is best known as a novelist and prose writer; his *House Made of Dawn* won the 1969 Pulitzer Prize in fiction. But Momaday is also an accomplished poet whose work often combines a compressed formal style with the natural imagery of his native Southwest. The Oklahoma-born author of Kiowa ancestry also often incorporates tribal legends into his verse.

"Simile," true to its title, gives us a single, extended simile, but it withholds the emotional motivation for the choice of this particular image. The reader is forced to interpret the behavior of the metaphorical deer in order to answer the what of the opening line. Those familiar with T. S. Eliot's concept of "an objective correlative" ("a set of objects; a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula" that
unleashes a particular emotion in a reader) will recognize Momaday’s “Simile” as a classic example of that technique. Momaday lets his image work on the reader’s unconscious rather than specify its emotional meaning.

**Emily Dickinson**, *IT DROPPED SO LOW – IN MY REGARD*, page 776

The whole poem sets forth the metaphor that someone or something the speaker had valued too highly proved to be like a silver-plated item (a chafing dish? a cream pitcher?) that she had mistaken for solid silver. Its smash revealed that it was made of cheap stuff.

In another version, lines 5–6 read: “Yet blamed the Fate that fractured—less / Than I reviled myself.” Students may be asked which version they prefer, and why they prefer it. (We much prefer reviled to denounced because of its resonance—the sound of the i—and its alliteration, the l in reviled and self. Besides, fractured seems a more valuable word than flung: it gets across the notion of something cracked or shattered, and its r sets up an alliterative echo with the words entertaining, Wares, and Silver.)

**Jill Alexander Essbaum**, *THE HEART*, page 776

Tiny as this poem is, it is worth pausing over to appreciate its artistry. Notice that there are three rimes in it, not two: its opening word, rounded off by the initial “s” of “simple,” rimes with “doors” and “yours.” And the literal first line is tied to the metaphorical second one not only by parallel phrasing but by the assonance that links “chambers” to the last two syllables of “complicated.”

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Heart.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Which line contains a figure of speech? The second, obviously. The heart does not literally contain any doors, let alone a thousand of them. (Interestingly, even though the first line makes a biologically literal statement, “doors” in line 2 turns “chambers” into a play on words.)

2. Is that figure a metaphor or a simile? Explain. The statement is made as if it were fact; it is an implied comparison rather than an expressed one, and thus a metaphor.

**Craig Raine**, *A MARTIAN SENDS A POSTCARD HOME*, page 777

When this poem won a 1978 magazine award in England, the judge James Fenton hailed the new “Martian School” of poetry. The name stuck because it referred to a
tendency among several young British poets to use strange metaphors and outrageous similes to describe everyday objects.

In Raine’s poem a Martian visitor tries to describe objects and activities on Earth. Seen from this alien perspective, everything appears quite strange. Half of what the Martian says is bizarrely wrong, but the other half is often weirdly insightful.

In a 1990 interview on BBC Radio, the poet Clive Wilmer elicited an interesting comment from Raine about the form of the poem:

[T]he form of “A Martian Sends a Postcard Home” is the form of a postcard. We’re all familiar with sonnets and couplets and odes and irregular odes, but it’s possible to write a poem in a form that hasn’t been used before, in this case the form of a postcard. Everybody writes a postcard saying: “Uncle Willy fell in the sea. Weather’s been terrible for days. Lodgings not bad. See you next week. Wish you were here.” In other words, it’s an excuse for very, very heterogeneous subject-matter.

OTHER FIGURES OF SPEECH

On the subject of puns, students familiar with Hamlet and other classics of the Bard may be asked to recall other puns of Shakespeare (besides the celebrated lines about golden lads and girls). If such a discussion prospers, Dr. Johnson’s well-known observation in his preface to Shakespeare’s works may provide an assertion to argue with:

A quibble is to Shakespeare what luminous vapors are to the traveler: he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire…. A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight that he was content to purchase it by the sacrifice of reason, propriety, and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it.

James Stephens, THE WIND, page 779

As a birthday present to Stephens, James Joyce once translated this poem into five other languages (French, German, Italian, Latin, and Norwegian). These versions are reprinted in Letters of James Joyce, ed. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Viking, 1957) 318–19.

Robinson Jeffers, HANDS, page 780

This poem can be profitably read with Jeffers’s “To the Stone-Cutters.” Both poems show his belief in humanity’s tenuous position versus nature, and both reveal his interesting view of art—that it is impermanent compared to nature’s eternity but that nonetheless it outlives its makers to provide comfort and wisdom to future generations. “Hands,” however, is a gentler poem than “To the Stone-Cutters,” and it shows Jeffers’s deep, lifelong respect for the cultures of Native Americans, whom he admired for living more closely to nature than modern man.

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Margaret Atwood, YOU FIT INTO ME, page 782

The first two lines state a simile. In the second couplet, hook and eye turn out (to our surprise) to be puns.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information and links for Atwood. Critical essay on “You fit into me.”

George Herbert, THE PULLEY, page 782

The title may need clarification. Man’s need for rest is the pulley by which eventually he is drawn to rest everlasting. The pulley Herbert has in mind is probably not horizontal (like the one with a clothesline) but the vertical kind rigged to hoist a heavy weight. Despite the puns, the tone of the poem is of course devoutly serious, Herbert’s concern in it being (in the view of Douglas Bush) “to subdue the wilful or kindle the apathetic self.”

Lines 2–10, on the “glass of blessings” and its contents, set forth a different metaphor. As Herbert’s editor, F. E. Hutchinson (Works [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1941]), and others have remarked, “The Pulley” seems a Christian version of the story of Pandora. At her creation Pandora received gifts from all the gods, mostly virtues and graces—though Hermes gave her perfidy. In some tellings of the myth, Pandora’s gift (or vase) held not plagues but further blessings. When she became curious and opened it, they slipped away, all except the one that lay at the bottom—hope.

Herbert’s poem, in its fondness for the extended metaphysical conceit, invites comparison with Donne’s simile of the compasses in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning.” If the instructor cares to discuss metaphysical poetry, “The Pulley” may be taken together with Herbert’s “Love.” (“Easter Wings” raises distracting contradictions and may be left for a discussion of concrete or graphic poetry.) Other poems of Donne and of Dickinson can also be mentioned.

Students might be encouraged to see that poets of the seventeenth century had certain habits of thought strikingly different from our own, but that some of these habits—like the fondness for startling comparisons of physical and spiritual things—haven’t become extinct. Perhaps the closest modern equivalent to the conceits of Herbert and Donne may be found in fundamentalist hymns. Two earlier twentieth-century illustrations:

If you want to watch old Satan run
Just fire off that Gospel gun!

and

My soul is like a rusty lock.
Oh, oil it with thy grace!
And rub it, rub it, rub it, Lord,
Until I see thy face!

(The first example is attributed to a black Baptist hymn writer; the second, to the Salvation Army, according to Max Eastman in Enjoyment of Laughter [New York:
Simon, 1936]. Another illustration, probably influenced by fundamentalist hymns, is a country and western song recorded in 1976 by Bobby Bare, “Dropkick Me, Jesus” (“through the goalposts of life”).

Dana Gioia, Money, page 783

With a little effort, you should be able to find examples of the following figures of speech in this compendium of common references to our common currency: metaphor, epithet, personification, hyperbole, metonymy, synecdoche, and pun. Note: you will find no occurrences of simile or apostrophe.

Carl Sandburg, Fog, page 784

Once regarded as the equal of Robert Frost and others in the Modernist movement of a century ago, Carl Sandburg now casts a much smaller shadow over the poetic landscape. But he maintains his hold on our imaginations through several brief descriptive poems, of which “Fog” is the best-known, and the most frequently reprinted (and parodied).

QUESTIONS

1. **What figure of speech does this poem use?** By giving the fog cat feet and haunches, the poem turns on a metaphor: i.e., “The fog is a cat.”

2. **Which specific feline qualities does the speaker impute to the fog?** Principally, delicacy, stealth, repose, and an observant gaze. (And, perhaps, a short attention span.)

Charles Simic, My Shoes, page 784

While the descriptions in the poem seem fanciful or surrealistic throughout, many are expressed in straightforward language that does not employ figures of speech. Among those that do, we would cite metaphors in lines 1 and 2 (and by extension in line 10 and lines 15–16) and personification in line 14 and lines 17–19. In addition, the entire poem is an instance of apostrophe.
FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY

Robert Frost, The Silken Tent, page 785

Although the word *as* in the opening line might lead us to expect a simile, “The Silken Tent” is clearly an immense metaphor, comparing woman and tent in a multitude of ways. What are the ropes or cords? Not merely commitments (or promises to keep) to friends and family, but generous sympathies, “ties of love and thought,” on the part of a woman who cares about everything in the world.

While paying loving tribute to a remarkable woman, the poem is also a shameless bit of showing off by a poet cocksure of his technical mastery. Managing syntax with such grace that the poem hardly seems contrived, Frost has sustained a single sentence into an entire sonnet. “The whole poem is a performance,” says Richard Poirier, “a display for the beloved while also being an exemplification of what it is like for a poem, as well as a tent or a person, to exist within the constrictions of space (‘a field’) and time (‘at midday’) wherein the greatest possible freedom is consistent with the intricacies of form and inseparable from them” (Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing [New York: Oxford UP, 1977] xiv–xv). Poirier points out, too, that the diction of the poem seems biblical, perhaps echoing “The Song of Songs” (in which the bride is comely “as the tents of Kedar”) and Psalm 92 (in which the godly “grow like a cedar in Lebanon”). Not only does the “central cedar pole” signify the woman’s spiritual rectitude, it points toward heaven.

In teaching this poem, one can quote Frost’s remark to Louis Untermeyer, “I prefer the synecdoche in poetry, that figure of speech in which we use a part for a whole.” In 1931 Frost recalled that he had called himself a Synecdochist back when other poets were calling themselves Imagists: “Always, always a larger significance. A little thing touches a larger thing” (qtd. in Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence [New York: Holt, 1960] 325).

Jane Kenyon, The Suitor, page 785

This economical poem moves from simile to simile: (1) “like the chest of someone sleeping” (steadily rising and falling); (2) “like a school of fish” (flashing their pale bellies), and (3) “like a timid suitor” (hesitant, drawing back, reluctant to arrive).

Until her untimely death from leukemia in 1995, Kenyon lived in Danbury, New Hampshire, with her husband, the poet Donald Hall. Otherwise: New and Selected Poems (Graywolf Press) was published posthumously in 1996.

Robert Frost, The Secret Sits, page 786

Besides its personification of the sitting Secret, Frost’s poem contains an implied metaphor. To dance round in a ring is to make futile efforts to penetrate a secret—merely going around in circles.
A. R. Ammons, COWARD, page 786

Ammons's figure of speech is, of course, a pun, but it is also a pun that underlines the original metaphor of run in the expression "runs in my family."

Kay Ryan, TURTLE, page 786

Kay Ryan is one of the most interesting poets of recent years. Born in California in 1945, she was raised in the San Joaquin Valley and the Mojave Desert, but those dry landscapes do not suggest the densely written and lushly detailed imaginative terrain of her poetry. Ryan has a particular gift for evocative compression. Her characteristic poem is short but not small—full of wry observation, weirdly original images, interwoven figures of speech, and magically unpredictable musicality. The first time one reads a Ryan poem is almost always a pleasure, and one soon discovers that her poems not only allow and reward rereading, they insist on it.

Ryan's "Turtle" is so densely packed with image and metaphor that each rereading uncovers interesting details and correspondences. And yet the tone of the poem is wonderfully matter-of-fact as the speaker produces one extravagant metaphor after another. This strange combination of tone and figurative language gives the poem an arresting quality rather reminiscent of certain poems by Marianne Moore or Elizabeth Bishop, though Ryan's style is distinctly her own. Notice how many rimes the poem contains. Few are end-rimes. Many are off-rimes. Most occur mid-line: graceless/case/places; slope/hopes; skirts/convert; ditch/which; and so forth. The effect of the intricate wordplay and hidden rimes is to slow readers down and invite them to savor every detail.

Kay Ryan has published eight volumes of poetry: Dragon Acts to Dragon Friends (Taylor Street, 1983), Strangely Marked Metal (Copper Beech, 1985), Flamingo Watching (Copper Beech, 1994), Elephant Rocks (Grove, 1996), Say Uncle (Grove, 2000), The Niagara River (Grove, 2005), The Jam Jar Lifeboat and Other Novelties Exposed (Red Berry Editions, 2008), and The Best of It: New and Selected Poems (Grove, 2010). In July 2008 she was named Poet Laureate of the United States.

Kay Ryan has provided these comments on "Turtle":

"Turtle" came out of an extended time of the most terrible and absolute frustration. That's why it's so giddy. Everything in it is compressed, image and rhymes jammed too tight, threatening to explode. But it can't explode, because all the pieces are twisted together, and twisted again.

"Turtle" was written in a single morning, as almost all of my poems are. I began with the first line, "Who would be a turtle who could help it?" It's mysterious how a poem develops out of its beginnings; right now I am thinking that it is like lighting a fuse that came into existence by its own burning, creating the dynamite that it explodes. But now I'm thinking, maybe the dynamite doesn't explode; maybe it just forever threatens. That's even better.

Rhyme tells me where to go in a poem. It is a big bully, really, and hard to control. A sound listens for companions out in the distance beyond what has been said; it strains the poem forward, calling it into existence. Rhyme is an engine of yearning. It makes me write what I couldn't imagine.

The internal rhymes in this poem have a range of ridiculousness that I love. I doubt I'll ever do better than rhyming "a four-ore" with "afford." Or on a
grander scale, may I point out the achievement of “Her track is graceless . . . / a packing-case places”? I love these dismantled and remanbled rhymes, but I also love every other sort of rhyme. I see rhyme as a binding energy in the finished poem, something that generates integrity, making the poem loyal to itself. I could compare rhyme to the glueyness that holds molecules together.

It was the most exquisite pleasure to write this poem. And it did nothing whatsoever to dissipate my frustration. The truth of that strikes me as funny.

April Lindner, *Low Tide*, page 786

There is personification in the opening sentence (lines 1–4), with its suggestion that as the tide goes out, the ocean performs a sort of mild striptease; the figure is extended with “What's left veiled” in line 11. The simile occurs in the explicit comparison in lines 6–7. The descriptions are never overtly sensual, but throughout the poem the surf is invested with a sensuousness that stimulates and finds its response in the poem’s human characters: “Our hands itch / for all they might gather.” The very end of the poem, with its reference to silk, likewise intertwines the sensuousness of the natural world with the human.

EXERCISE ON FIGURES OF SPEECH: COMPARING ROSES

Emily Brontë, *Love and Friendship*, page 787

Robert Burns, *Oh, My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose*, page 787

The key to the lyric “Love and Friendship” is, of course, the similes in the poem's first two lines, in which love is explicitly likened to the rose briar and friendship to the holly tree. Although neither love nor friendship is mentioned again, we understand the speaker's views on their relative merits through her comments on the two plants: while the rose may be more intense and superficially more attractive, the plain and unexciting holly is constant and durable; thus, friendship is constant and durable, and therefore dependable, and will comfort and sustain the spirit long after love has withered and faded away.

In addition to simile, Brontë’s poem features a considerable amount of alliteration (“sweet in spring”; “wait till winter”; “blights thy brow”; “garland green”) and closes with a pair of metaphors (“when December blights thy brow”; “leave thy garland green”) to match its opening pair of similes.

Figures of speech abound in Robert Burns's famous lyric, similes (lines 1–2, 3–4), a metaphor (sands o' life, line 12), overstatement (lines 8 and 9, 10), and possibly another overstatement in the last line.

See other professions of love couched in hyperbole, among them Marvell's “To His Coy Mistress” and Auden’s “As I Walked Out One Evening.” Are the speakers in these poems mere throwers of blarney, whom no beloved ought to trust? For a discussion of Burns's poem that finds more in it than figures of speech, see Richard Wilbur, “Explaining the Obvious,” in *Responses* (New York: Harcourt, 1976). The poem, says Wilbur, “forsakes the lady to glory in Love itself, and does not
really return. We are dealing, in other words, with romantic love, in which the
beloved is a means to high emotion, and physical separation can serve as a stimulant
to ideal passion.” The emotion of the poem is “self-enchanted,” the presence or
absence of the lady isn’t important, and the very idea of parting is mainly an oppor-
tunity for the poet to turn his feelings loose. Absurd as this posture may be, however,
we ought to forgive a great songwriter almost anything.

DISCUSSION TOPIC

Comparing Roses: These two celebrated poems each present roses as a sym-
bol of love. What is similar in the meaning each poet attaches to roses and what
is different? Emily Brontë’s speaker talks of all love, Robert Burns’s speaker only of
his own. Brontë’s poem says: choose friendship over love; it lasts longer. Burns’s poem
asserts: my love for you will last forever. Brontë’s speaker makes her point by asking
rhetorical questions; Burns’s makes his through urgent hyperbolic assertion. Brontë’s
speaker is clear-eyed and grounded, even slightly cynical; Burns’s speaker is lost in
the raptures of romance. Brontë’s narrator sticks to the rose comparison and follows
it through with icy logic: the “silly” rose only blooms briefly, in spring. Burns’s
speaker is too caught up in the rapture of love to reflect on the fact that his choice
of a rose as a symbol of his love is not perfectly consistent with his insistence that it
will last forever.

WRITERS ON WRITING

Robert Frost, THE IMPORTANCE OF POETIC METAPHOR, page 788

Frost made so many insightful and memorable observations about poetry that it is dif-
ficult to select just one passage. Rather than reprint one of his more famous com-
ments, we have selected this fascinating but little-known passage from an address he
gave at Amherst College in 1930.

In this brief excerpt Frost speculates on the general value of a literary education.
He observes how studying poetry trains us to understand metaphors and other figures
of speech. Metaphors pervade all types of discourse, Frost says, and they are used in
all walks of life. An education in poetry helps us judge metaphors critically—to see
how far they apply to a situation truthfully and where they “break down.”

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bib-
liography, and links for Frost.
“Song” is an unusual chapter. It approaches poetry in ways different from most other textbooks. We urge new instructors to try this chapter. Most students who write comments about this book say this chapter is the most appealing. “It shows that poetry isn’t all found in books,” is a typical comment; and many students are glad to see song lyrics they recognize. Most important, the chapter talks to them about poetry by using songs—a context they know a great deal about. It also encourages them to hear poems in a way that they might never have done before if their entire experience was seeing poems on the printed page.

Even if there is not time for a whole unit on song, the instructor who wishes to build upon this interest can use at least some of this chapter to introduce the more demanding matters of sound, rhythm, and form (treated in the chapters that follow). Some instructors take the tack that lyric poetry begins with song, and they begin their courses with this chapter, supplemented by folk ballads elsewhere in the text.

Besides Ben Jonson’s classic nondrinking song, many other famous poems will go to melodies. The tradition of poems set to music by fine composers is old and honorable. For lists of such poems with musical settings (and recordings), see College English for February 1985 and December 1985.

**Ben Jonson, To Celia, page 792**

Students may not know that in line 2 *I will pledge* means “I will drink a toast.” Also, *I would not change for thine* (line 8) in modern English becomes “I would not take it in exchange for yours.”

To demonstrate that “To Celia” is a living song, why not ask the class to sing it? Unfortunately, you can no longer assume that the tune is one that everyone knows, so you may need to start them off.

**James Weldon Johnson, Sence You Went Away, page 793**

Even though his writings are in print, the name of James Weldon Johnson might—and ought to—be better known to the reading public. A lawyer, diplomat, professor, and civil-rights activist (he was the executive director of the NAACP throughout
the 1920s), Johnson wrote several important prose works: *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), a novel; *Black Manhattan* (1930), a history of Harlem with emphasis on the literary and cultural renaissance of the 1920s; and *Along This Way* (1933), a memoir.

Much of his poetry has musical associations of one sort or another. His best-known collection is *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927). With his brother, the composer J. Rosamund Johnson, he wrote several successful Broadway musicals as well as an opera, *Tolosa*; their collaborations included such popular songs as “Under the Bamboo Tree” and “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” widely known as “The Negro National Anthem.”

With its blues-like structure and refrain, its simple and plaintive words, and its emotional impact, “Sence You Went Away” works well as either an independent poem or a song lyric. At <www.youtube.com/watch?v=9itAnOEVbgw&feature=related> you will find a lovely performance of the song. You should, however, review it privately before deciding whether to show it to your class: the lyric is misattributed to Paul Laurence Dunbar, and your students may be more amused than enchanted by Darryl Taylor’s countertenor voice.

**William Shakespeare, Fear No More the Heat O’ the Sun, page 794**

This three-stanza song from Shakespeare’s play *Cymbeline* has clear song-like properties: the lines are relatively regular and relatively free of enjambment—in short, easy to remember and to sing; the rimes are exact; also, each stanza, the first four lines of which have an *a b b a* rime scheme, concludes with a couplet in which the same rime (*must / dust*) is repeated.

This song is reminiscent of madrigals, but is not itself a conventional madrigal. For one thing it consists of more than one stanza; for another it is sung in *Cymbeline* by only two singers—namely Cymbeline’s two sons, who sing it over the body of their sister Imogen, whom they believe to be dead.

**Edwin Arlington Robinson, Richard Cory, page 795**

**Paul Simon, Richard Cory, page 796**

This pair sometimes provokes lively class discussion, especially if someone in the class maintains that Simon converts Robinson into fresh, modern terms. Further discussion may be necessary to show that Robinson’s poem has a starkly different theme.

Robinson’s truth, of course, is that we envy others their wealth and prestige and polished manners, but if we could see into their hearts we might not envy them at all. Simon’s glib song does not begin to deal with this. The singer wishes that he too could have orgies on a yacht, but even after he learns that Cory died a suicide, his refrain goes right on, “I wish that I could be Richard Cory.” (Live rich, die young, and make a handsome corpse!)
Some questions to prompt discussion might include:

1. In making his song, Simon admittedly took liberties with Robinson's poem. Which of these changes seem necessary to make the story singable? What suggestions in the original has Simon picked up and amplified?

2. How has Simon altered the character of Richard Cory? Is his Cory a “gentleman” in Robinson's sense of the word? What is the tone of Simon's line, “He had the common touch”? Compare this with Robinson: “he was always human when he talked.” Does Robinson’s Cory have anything more than “Power, grace and style”?

3. In the song, what further meaning does the refrain take on with its third hearing, in the end, after the news of Cory’s suicide?

4. What truth about life does Robinson's poem help us see? Is it merely “Money can’t make you happy” or “If you're poor you're really better off than rich people”? Does Simon’s narrator affirm this truth, deny it, or ignore it?

Frank J. D’Angelo has noticed that the name Richard Cory is rich in connotations. It suggests Richard Coeur de Lion, and other words in Robinson's poem also point to royalty: crown, imperially, arrayed, glittered, richer than a king.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, links, and eAnthology for Robinson. Longman Lecture, reading and interpreting questions, writing prompts, and comprehension quiz on “Richard Cory.”

BALLADS

Anonymous, Bonny Barbara Allan, page 797

Despite the numerous versions of this, the most widespread of all traditional ballads in English, most keep the main elements of the story with remarkable consistency. American versions tend to be longer, with much attention to the lovers’ eventual side-by-side burial, and sometimes have Barbara’s mother die of remorse, too! Commentators since the coming of Freud have sometimes seen Barbara as sexually frigid, and Robert Graves once suggested that Barbara, a witch, is killing Sir John by sorcery. An Irish version makes Barbara laugh hideously on beholding her lover’s corpse.

To show how traditional ballads change and vary in being sung, a useful recording is The Child Ballads, vol. 1, Caedmon TC 1145, containing performances collected in the field by Alan Lomax and Peter Kennedy. Six nonprofessional singers are heard in sharply different versions of “Barbara Allan,” in dialects of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales.
Dudley Randall, BALLAD OF BIRMINGHAM, page 800

Randall's poem is an authentic broadside ballad: it not only deals with a news event, it was once printed and distributed on a single page. "I had noticed how people would carry tattered clippings of their favorite poems in their billfolds," the poet has explained, "and I thought it would be a good idea to publish them in an attractive form as broadsides" (Interview in Black World, Dec. 1971). "Ballad of Birmingham" so became the first publication of Randall's Broadside Press, of Detroit, which later expanded to publish books and issue recordings by many leading black poets, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Don L. Lee, and Nikki Giovanni.

The poem seems remarkably fresh and moving, though it shows the traits of many English and Scottish popular ballads (such as the questions and answers, as in "Edward," and the conventional-sounding epithets in stanza 5). Randall presents without comment the horror of the bombing—in the mother's response and in the terrible evidence—but we are clearly left to draw the lesson that if the daughter had been allowed to join the open protest, she would have been spared.

Four black girls were killed in 1963 when a dynamite blast exploded in Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. In September 1977, a Birmingham grand jury finally indicted a former Ku Klux Klansman, aged 73, on four counts of first degree murder.

BLUES

Bessie Smith with Clarence Williams, JAILHOUSE BLUES, page 802

No one knows exactly who wrote this blues song. Authorship is assigned to Smith and Williams because they recorded it in 1923, but their version owes much to a traditional folk blues piece that survives in several versions. The concept of authorship in a conventional sense has little meaning in an oral tradition like early blues. Singers took songs they heard and transformed them into material for their own performance. One interesting feature of "Jailhouse Blues" is that the singer addresses the blues itself and converses with it.

W. H. Auden, FUNERAL BLUES, page 802

Auden's poem not only uses many blues elements (especially hyperbolic figures of speech to depict sadness); these lines were also originally written for music. The first two stanzas (followed by different third and fourth stanzas) appeared in The Ascent of F6, a play that Auden wrote with Christopher Isherwood in 1936. Set to music by the young Benjamin Britten, the words lamented the death of the play's visionary hero. A few years later Auden and Britten rewrote both the words and the music as a cabaret song. (The poem was later set to music again by the American composer Ned Rorem.)

In the process of revision, the song changed from a dirge for a lost political savior to a personal lament for a dead lover. A careful reader will note how the imagery becomes less public and civic in the final two stanzas.

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Auden keeps the exaggerated imagery of traditional blues and the flamboyant emotionalism. He also rimes in couplets, as blues songs conventionally do, but he drops the standard repetition of the first line. “Funeral Blues” therefore employs the mood and style of traditional blues but varies the metrical form.

“Funeral Blues” has long been one of Auden's more popular “songs” (a category the author used in his Collected Poems), but thanks to its inclusion in the film Four Weddings and a Funeral, it has become one of the most widely known modern love poems.

You may want to direct your students to the chapter “Critical Approaches to Literature” to read critic Richard R. Bozorth’s discussion of “Funeral Blues” with reference to the film Four Weddings and a Funeral and Auden's homosexuality.

Kevin Young, LATE BLUES, page 803

See the entry on “Doo Wop” in this manual for a brief discussion of Kevin Young and the collection Jelly Roll: A Blues.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Late Blues.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What is there about this poem that might explain why its author calls it a “blues”? The contemplation of death, especially one’s own, could be considered sufficient basis for a blue mood. The poem’s colloquial phrasing is also reminiscent of the blues tradition. (You might find it useful to compare “Late Blues” with Langston Hughes’s “As Befits a Man,” found in the Hughes casebook in the anthology; like Young’s, Hughes's poetry was heavily influenced by jazz and the blues.)

2. What play on words do you find in the word “lied”? Is there also a play on the word “late” in the poem’s title? Obviously, Young is playing on “lying” in its senses of reclining and telling untruths. “Late” calls to mind the customary use of the term to refer to people who have died. There’s further wordplay at the end, when the speaker says that he “wouldn’t want / to start up” lying down.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY

Bob Dylan, THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’, page 804

Bob Dylan’s folk song became one of the definitive political anthems of the 1960s, and decades later it holds up extraordinarily well, even on the page. Seen from such a distance, “The Times They Are a-Changin’” is remarkable for its lack of specific topical issues. None of the key political issues of the era is mentioned by name—not even civil rights or pacifism. There are a few topical allusions embedded in the text. The lines “Don’t stand in the doorway / Don’t block up that hall,” for example, refer to Governor George Wallace’s defiant action to stop school integration in Alabama. But no listener needs to catch that now oblique allusion to get the broader sense of the lines because Dylan has so thoroughly universalized his images. In fact, except
for the first line of stanza three with its references to senators and congressmen, there are no specifically American references in the song, which otherwise could apply equally to England, Italy, India, or China.

The song’s imagery seems more informed by the Bible than the newspaper. The rising waters, the raging battle, the falling old order have an openly prophetic ring to them. (The lines “And the first one now / will later be last” directly allude to the Gospels—Matthew 19:30, Mark 10:31, Luke 13:30.) The poet/songwriter announces himself as the prophet of a new generation that intends to refashion society in direct confrontation with its elders, but no program of reform is offered by the speaker. The nature of this new order is left almost entirely up to our imagination. Perhaps one reason this song proved so powerful and popular was that each listener could project whatever vision of a new society he or she preferred.

Aimee Mann, DEATHLY, page 805

In the film Magnolia, the song “Deathly” is related to Claudia, the adult, drug-addicted daughter of a television quiz-show host, who maintains that she was sexually abused by her father. The song’s lyrics describe her reaction—an instinctive defensiveness and unwillingness to be drawn out emotionally—to meeting a lonely, kindhearted police officer who is immediately and protectively attracted to her. The text works fairly successfully on the page (although when separated from its musical setting and forced to stand alone, it is metrically a bit wobbly in places), and lines 30–33 are particularly striking; but the loveliness of the melody—enhanced by the purity of Mann’s voice—mitigates the harshness of the statement and adds dimensions of complexity and ambiguity that not only enrich the experience of “Deathly” but are quite appropriate to the character of Claudia and to the film’s larger themes.

WRITERS ON WRITING

Bob Dylan, THE TERM “PROTEST SINGER” DIDN’T EXIST, page 807

Dylan was and is generally viewed as being one of the few artists who shaped the message of Sixties protesters, articulating their social and political grievances in music and poetry. Yet in this selection he challenges the characterization of him as a “protest singer.” In his view, he is a performer, a folksinger; while others created “rebellion songs” or “rebel ballads,” that appealed to him, in his view his own songs were not about rebellion but about mortality. Among other things, this passage illustrates how an artist can disagree with his critics about the very nature of his own work. Dylan’s remarks also demonstrate how innovative artists create new styles and types of expression for which the culture itself does not yet have a category or a name. Clearly Dylan feels that the name by which he was eventually categorized proved misleading and reductive.
SOUND AS MEANING

Alexander Pope, *True Ease in Writing Comes from Art, Not Chance*, page 811

Nowadays, looking at the pages of an eighteenth-century book of poetry, we might think the liberal capitalization and use of italics merely decorative. But perhaps Pope wished to leave his readers little choice in how to sound his lines. Most of his typographical indications seem to us to make sense—like a modern stage or television script with elements underlined or capitalized, lest the actors ignore a nuance.

Line 12 is deliberately long: an alexandrine, or twelve-syllable line, that must be spoken quickly in order to get it said within the time interval established by the other shorter, pentameter lines.

William Butler Yeats, *Who Goes with Fergus?,* page 813

Originally a song in Yeats’s play *The Countess Cathleen*, this famous lyric overflows with euphony. Take just the opening question (lines 1–3): the assonance of the various o-sounds; the initial alliteration of w, d, and sh; the internal alliteration of the r in Fergus, pierce, and shore—musical devices that seem especially meaningful for an invitation to a dance. The harsh phrase brazen cars seems introduced to jar the brooding lovers out of their reveries. Unless you come right out and ask what brazen cars are, not all students will realize that they are brass chariots. In ancient Ulster, such chariots were sometimes used for hunting deer—though how you would drive one of them through the deep woods beats us.

If you discuss meter, what better illustration of the power of spondees than “And the WHITE BREAST of the DIM SEA?”

The last line of the poem, while pleasingly mysterious, is also exact. The personification “dishevelled wandering stars” makes us think of beautiful, insane, or distracted women with their hair down: Ophelia in Olivier’s film *Hamlet*. That they are wandering recalls the derivation of the word planet: Greek for “wanderer.” In what literal sense might stars look disheveled? Perhaps in that their light, coming through the atmosphere (and being seen through ocean spray) appears to spread out like wild
long hair. For comparable figures of speech, see Blake’s “Tyger,” in which the personified stars weep and throw spears.

EXERCISE: Listening to Meaning, page 813
John Updike, Recital, page 814
William Wordsworth, A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal, page 814
Aphra Behn, When Maidens Are Young, page 814

“Recital” shows off Updike as one of America’s virtuosos of light verse. The whole poem seems written in imitation of the trochaic “oom-pah” of a tuba, and every line ends in a thumping celebration of the near rime between Mr. Bobo’s surname and his chosen instrument. Onomatopoeia is heard even more obviously in Behn’s hum-drum.

In Wordsworth’s Lucy poem, sound effects are particularly noticeable in the first line (the soporific s’s) and in the last two lines (the droning r’s and n’s). If students go beyond the sound effects and read the poem more closely, they might find problems in the first stanza. Is the poet’s slumber a literal sleep or a figurative one? That is, is Wordsworth recalling some pleasant dream of Lucy (whether the living Lucy he used to know, or the dead Lucy in Eternity), or is he saying that when she was alive he was like a dreamer in his view of her? If so, he was deluded in thinking that she would always remain a child; he had none of the usual human fears of death or of growing old. However we read the poem, there is evidently an ironic contrast between the poet’s seeing Lucy (in stanza 1) as invulnerable to earthly years and his later view that she is affected, being helplessly rolled around the sun once a year with the other inanimate objects. And simple though it looks, the poem contains a paradox. The speaker’s earlier dream or vision of Lucy has proved to be no illusion but an accurate foreshadowing. Now she is a “thing,” like rocks and stones and trees, and she cannot feel and cannot suffer any more from time’s ravages.

Aphra Behn was the first English woman to earn a living by her pen. Oroonoko (1688), a tale of slavery in Surinam, is sometimes called the first true English novel. Her colorful life, mostly spent in London’s literary bohemia, included a hitch in Holland as a spy for the Crown. In her destitute late years she was pilloried in lampoons (“a lewd harlot”), perhaps because she remained faithful to the Stuarts. She was buried in Westminster Abbey under her poetic pen name, Astrea Behn. Nowadays she seems to be enjoying a respectful dusting-off. See the extensive treatment given her in Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of 17th Century Women’s Verse, ed. Germaine Greer and others (London: Virago, 1988) 240–60.
ALLITERATION AND ASSONANCE

A. E. Housman, Eight O’Clock, page 816

The final struck is a serious pun, to which patterns of alliteration, begun in the opening line (st...st, r) and continued through the poem, have led up. The ticking effect of the clock is, of course, most evident in the clock collected.

James Joyce, All Day I Hear, page 816

This poem is the first of two “tailpieces” added to the sequence of love lyrics called Chamber Music, Joyce’s first book publication. In these early, admittedly minor (but still highly accomplished) verses, Joyce already shows the excellent ear that would produce such stunning aural effects in Ulysses and Finnegans Wake. The alliterations in the second, third, and fifth lines are all on relatively soft consonants, in keeping with the melancholy and generally muted tone of the poem. All nine of the poem’s rime words (at the ends of lines 2, 4, and 6; 3, 7, and 11; and 8, 10, and 12), along with cold (line 7), stress the long o sound, knitting the entire text together into an echo of the moan of the waters and the mood they evoke in the speaker.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, The Splendor Falls on Castle Walls, page 817

If read aloud rapidly, this famous lyric from Tennyson’s The Princess will become gibberish; and the phrase Blow, bugle, blow, a tongue twister. But if it is read with any attention to its meaning, its long vowels and frequent pauses will compel the reader to slow down. Students may want to regard the poem as mellifluous nonsense, but they may be assured that the poem means something, that it is based on a personal experience of the poet’s. Visiting the lakes of Killarney in 1848, Tennyson heard the bugle of a boatman sound across the still water, and he counted eight distinct echoes. “The splendor falls” is the poet’s attempt to convey his experience in accurate words.

RIME

William Cole, On My Boat on Lake Cayuga, page 818

This is one of a series of comic quatrains, “River Rhymes,” first printed in Light Year ’85 (Case Western Reserve U: Bits Press, 1984).
Hilaire Belloc, *The Hippopotamus*, page 820

This amusing short poem requires no commentary. Instructors and students alike might enjoy exploring more of Belloc's light verse, to be found in anthologies such as Kingsley Amis's *The New Oxford Book of English Light Verse* (New York: Oxford UP, 1978).

Bob Kaufman, *No More Jazz at Alcatraz*, page 820

Short-lined couplets are good for creating a comic effect, especially when the rimes are feminine (piano / Luciano; cello / Costello). In this whimsical Beat-era poem, Kaufman rimes the names of famous gangsters with the names of musical instruments. During this period many California prisons (especially San Quentin) were famous for their jazz groups, often manned by noted musicians convicted for drug use.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “No More Jazz at Alcatraz.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. **What is unusual about Kaufman’s rimes?** He rimes the names of musical instruments with the names of gangsters. He also usually pairs proper nouns with common names. The rimes are bluntly emphasized, as in a jingle or slogan.

2. **The poem describes one of the harshest prisons in American history. What is surprising about the poem’s mood? How does the poet achieve that effect?**

   The mood is surprisingly light, thanks to the comic effect of the rimes and the short, blunt lines. This is not a grim meditation on organized crime or the penal system, but a snappy, indeed jazzy, comment about a development that the poet seems only mildly to lament.

William Butler Yeats, *Leda and the Swan*, page 821

The deliberately awful off-rime up / drop ends the sonnet with an appropriately jarring plop as the God-swan discards the used Leda and sinks into his post-ejaculatory stupor.

Other questions that can be raised:

1. **What knowledge and power does Yeats refer to in line 14?**

2. **Do the words staggering (line 2) and loosening (line 6) keep to the basic meter of the poem or depart from it? How does rhythm express meaning in these lines?** (It staggers on staggering and loosens on loosening.)

3. **Compare this poem to Donne’s sonnet “Batter my heart.” Is the tone of Yeats’s sonnet—the poet’s attitude toward this ravishing—similar or dissimilar?**


MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Yeats. Critical essay, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “Leda and the Swan.”
Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God’s Grandeur*, page 822

Students who think Hopkins goes too far in his insistence on rimes and other similar sounds will have good company, including Robert Bridges, William Butler Yeats, and Yvor Winters. Still, it is hard not to admire the euphony of the famous closing lines—that ingenious alternation of *br* and *w*, with a pause for breath at that magical *ah!*—and the cacophony of lines 6–8, with their jangling internal rimes and the alliteration that adds more weight to *smeared, smudge, and smell.* For Hopkins, of course, sound is one with meaning, and the cacophonous lines just mentioned are also, as John Pick has pointed out, “a summary of the particular sins of the nineteenth century.” For a brilliant demonstration that sound effects in Hopkins’s poetry have theological meaning, see J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1963) 276–317. Miller finds the poet’s theory revealed in his sermons and journals: “Any two things however unlike are in something like”; therefore, “all beauty may by a metaphor be called rhyme.”

In the text, it seemed best not to bury the poem under glosses but to let the instructor decide how thoroughly to explicate it. Here are a few more glosses in case they seem necessary:

Line 7, *man’s smudge*: the blight of smoke and ugliness cast over the countryside by factories and mines. As a student for the priesthood in North Wales and as a parish priest in London and Liverpool, Hopkins had known the blight intimately. Another suggestion in the phrase: nature is fallen and needs to be redeemed, like man, who wears the smudge of original sin. Line 12, *morning . . . springs*: The risen Christ is like the sun at dawn. Eastward is the direction of Jerusalem, also of Rome. (Hopkins cherished the hope that the Church of England and the Pope would one day be reconciled.) Lines 13–14, *bent / World*: Perhaps because of its curvature the earth looks bent at the horizon; or perhaps the phrase is a transferred epithet, attributing to the earth the dove’s bent-over solicitude. (And as the world seems to break off at the horizon, line 13 breaks at the word *bent.*) Line 14, *broods*: like a dove, traditional representation of the Holy Ghost.


A sonnet by Wordsworth also begins “The world is,” and Hopkins no doubt knew of it. In their parallel (though different) complaints against trade and commerce, the two deserve to be compared. Both poets find humanity artificially removed from nature: this seems the point of Hopkins’s observation in lines 7–8 that once soil was covered (with grass and trees) and feet were bare, and now soil is bare and feet are covered. Clearly we have lost the barefoot bliss of Eden, but in answer to Wordsworth, one almost expects Hopkins to cry, “Great God! I’d rather be a Christian.” (Wordsworth by *world* means “worldliness.”)
Robert Frost, DESERT PLACES, page 822

Possible answers to the questions following the poem:

1. What are these desert places that the speaker finds in himself? (More than one theory is possible. What is yours?) Terrible pockets of loneliness.

2. Notice how many times, within the short space of lines 8–10, Frost says “lonely” (or “loneliness”). What other words in the poem contain similar sounds that reinforce these words? The word snow, occurring three times. Other o-sounds occur in oh, going, showing, no, so, and home. The l of lonely is echoed by alliteration in looked, last, and lairs.

3. In the closing stanza, the feminine rimes “spaces,” “race is,” and “places” might well occur in light or comic verse. Does “Desert Places” leave you laughing? If not, what does it make you feel? It makes us feel a psychic chill! Yet the feminine rime lightens the grim effect of what is said and gives it a kind of ironic smirk.

For an intriguing if far-out appreciation of this poem that makes much of the sibilant s-sounds, see Marie Boroff, “Sound Symbolism as Drama in the Poetry of Robert Frost,” PMLA 107 (1992): 131–144.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Frost.

READING AND HEARING POEMS ALOUD

Many poets spend their energies in writing poems and are not effective public speakers. Here is a comment by William Stafford on why certain poets read their poems with apparent carelessness. Unlike the Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky, a great performer, Stafford says,

Most of the poets I know would feel a little guilty about doing an effective job of reading their poems. They throw them away. And I speak as one who does that. It feels fakey enough to be up there reading something as though you were reading it for the first time. And to say it well is just too fakey. So you throw it away. (Interview in The Literary Monitor 3.3–4 [1980])

This comment raises provocative questions for discussion. What is the nature of a poetry reading? Should it be regarded as a performance or as a friendly get-together?

For a symposium on poetry readings, with comments by Allen Ginsberg, James Dickey, Denise Levertov, and twenty-nine other poets, see Poets on Stage (New York: Some/Release, 1978).

A catalogue of more than 800 radio broadcasts on cassette and CD, including a rich variety of programs featuring contemporary poets such as John Ashbery, Gwendolyn Brooks, John Ciardi, Rita Dove, Allen Ginsberg, Anthony Hecht, Colette Inez, Philip Levine, and many others reading and talking about their work, is available from New Letters on the Air, at <www.newletters.org/onTheAir.asp>.
EXERCISE: Reading for Sound and Meaning, page 824
Michael Stillman, In Memoriam John Coltrane, page 824
William Shakespeare, Hark, Hark, the Lark, page 825
Kevin Young, Doo Wop, page 825
T. S. Eliot, Virginia, page 826

In Michael Stillman’s tribute to the great jazz saxophonist, coal train is not only a rich pun on Coltrane’s name, it also becomes the poem’s central image. The poet has supplied this comment:

One thing about that poem which has always pleased me beyond its elegiac strain—is the way the technique of the lines and phrases corresponds to a musical effect in Coltrane’s playing. He was known for his ability to begin with a certain configuration of notes, then play pattern after pattern of variations. The repetition of “Listen to the coal...listen to the...listen to...listen” was one way to capture a feature of his playing. The image of the coal train disappearing into the night comes, particularly, from a place on the James River, west of Richmond, where I happened to be when I heard of Coltrane’s death. Like all jazz musicians, I felt the loss very deeply.

Shakespeare’s song effectively uses many sound devices, including repetition (hark; arise), rime (sings / springs; arise / lies / eyes), slant rime (arise / is), internal rime (sings / winking / everything), alliteration (hark / heaven; [mary](buds / begin), onomatopoeia (hark), assonance (ope / golden; pretty / is). These sonic effects appear in such profusion that the poem seems inherently musical, even if it is recited rather than sung.

Kevin Young is an extraordinarily prolific poet who has published five substantial collections (and edited several poetry anthologies) in less than ten years. His 2003 volume Jelly Roll: A Blues, from which “Doo Wop” is taken, is a 200-page sequence in which the ups and downs of a love affair are traced through poems themed to the history and the varied styles of American popular music. In an appearance on PBS’s NewsHour in March 2007, Young said:

I think that sometimes there’s this war between the page and the stage as it were, and I think for me, a poem does both. It really has a vocal out loud component, and hopefully my poems have that life, but I also think there’s something visual about a poem, something about the icon carved into stone.

I can’t play any music, so I’m sure that’s why I write about music, because I think it’s a beautiful solace-producing thing. I think poetry, though, approaches music, and for me, the best poetry has its music in it. It’s not behind it like a song where the lyrics are up front and the band is behind, but it’s all mixed together.

There are many instances of plays on words and playing with the sounds of words in “Doo Wop,” including “Milk shake” as a predicate in line 3, “Sudden fried” (for “Southern fried”) in line 8, “Femme postale” (for “Femme fatale”) in line 14, and “Penned pal” (for “Pen pal”) in line 15. The sound reversal in lines 12–13—“Fast pace” turning into “Past face” serves as a kind of pivot in the poem’s transition to a darker mood.
You may ask students if “Doo Wop” is about more than the poet’s exuberant delight in language. It’s hard to be certain with so elliptical a text, but there seems to be a suggestion in the second half that the speaker’s “Honey baby” has gone away; whether or not she has left him permanently, or for another man, is not entirely clear.

Eliot’s “Virginia” is an experiment in quantitative verse, according to George Williamson (A Reader’s Guide to T. S. Eliot [New York: Noonday, 1957]). You might read aloud “Virginia” and Campion’s quantitative “Rose-cheeked Laura” and ask the class to detect any similarity. Ted Hughes has written of “Virginia” with admiration. How is it, he wonders, that Eliot can create so vivid a landscape without specific images? “What the poem does describe is a feeling of slowness, with a prevailing stillness, of suspended time, of heat and dryness, and fatigue, with an undertone of oppressive danger, like a hot afternoon that will turn to thunder and lightning” (Poetry Is [New York: Doubleday, 1967]).

Writers on Writing

T. S. Eliot, The Music of Poetry, page 826

Eliot’s remarks on poetic music are full of significant distinctions—most notably his observation that poetic music does not exist apart from poetic meaning. He also bases poetry firmly in speech (“one person talking to another”) and assumes that all poetic music will emerge in some way from the sound and rhythms of conversation.
RHYTHM

STRESSES AND PAUSES

In the first section of this chapter, rhythm is discussed with as few technicalities as possible. For the instructor wishing to go on to the technicalities, the second part of the chapter, “Meter,” gives the principles of scansion and the names of the metrical feet.

Except for one teacher at the University of Michigan, James Downer, who would illustrate the rhythms of Old English poetry by banging on his desk for a drum, we have never known anyone able to spend entire classes on meter without etherizing patients. Meter, it would seem, is best dealt with in discussing particular poems.

EXERCISE: Get with the Beat, page 831

Browning’s four-beat anapestic lines vigorously capture the speed of the scene they describe.

Keeler’s loose ballad meter seems suitably rollicking for his down-home subject and tone.

Eisler’s lines describing a newspaper photo of Marilyn Monroe have three strong stresses per line, but Eisler creates a different rhythm in each line by varying the number of unstressed syllables. The effect is a jazz-like syncopation. (The first line also has strong secondary stresses on the compound words newsprint and moonprint that make this especially evocative line read slowly.)

Finch’s rhythm is itself an homage to her subject. She has borrowed the hymn stanza that Dickinson used so frequently. Likewise, Finch has deliberately imitated the clear syntax and sonorous cadences of the church hymns to present her images. Although Finch arranges her poem in couplets, the rime scheme and syntax fall into Dickinsonian quatrains.

Shakespeare’s songs were sung in the theater. Among other things, they provided a break from the iambic pentameter of most characters’ speech. This song from The Tempest has a loosely iambic rhythm, but the line lengths differ. They follow a lost melody rather than a strict metrical scheme. The rollicking, unpredictable rhythm seems very appropriate to the mood and setting of the song.
Gwendolyn Brooks, *We Real Cool*, page 833

The poet might have ended every line with a rime, as poets who rime usually do:

> We real cool.
> We left school.

The effect, then, would have been like a series of hammer blows because there are so many short end-stopped lines and so many rimes in quick succession. But evidently Brooks is after a different rhythm. What is it? How to read the poem aloud? Let members of the class take turns trying, and compare their various oral interpretations. If you stress each final *We*, then every syllable in the poem takes a stress; and if, besides, you make even a split-second pause at every line break, then you give those final *We*’s still more emphasis. What if you don’t stress the *We*’s but read them lightly? Then the result is a skipping rhythm, rather like that of some cool cat slapping his thighs.

After the class has mulled this problem, read them Brooks’s own note on the poem (from her autobiography, *Report from Part One* [Detroit: Broadside, 1972] 185). Brooks remarked on her poem suggesting she consciously uses rhythm as an instrument of meaning. By placing *we* at the end of each of the first seven lines—in contrast to a more conventional placement at the beginning of each line—she forces the reader to stop and think more probingly about what the lines mean. In the interview, she also stresses that her lineation was not trying to copy a colloquial rhythm but to express her attitude toward the protagonists in her poem—a significant and provocative distinction.

As a student remarked about the tone and theme of this poem, “She doesn’t think they’re real cool, she thinks they’re real fool—to die so young like that.”

Students can hear Brooks reading and talking about this poem at the Poetry Foundation’s website, [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org). A number of wonderful audio and video resources by and about Brooks are also available online from the Library of Congress website. Brooks served two terms as the poet laureate, then titled the Consultant in Poetry to the Library. To hear Brooks, go to [www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/brooks/#audiorecordings](http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/brooks/#audiorecordings).

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Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Break, Break, Break*, page 834

Tennyson’s plangent poem displays an interesting rhythmic design. It is written in accentual meter in which the author counts the number of strong stresses per line (rather than in the more conventional accentual-syllabic measure in which one counts both syllables and stresses). The normative line of Tennyson’s poem has three strong stresses (though later in the poem, it occasionally broadens to four stresses). By varying the syllable count, Tennyson is able to create all sorts of interesting effects. (It may be worth pointing out to students that Tennyson employs exactly the same technique as rap in this regard.)
Chapter 21: Rhythm

The opening stanza should be scanned as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
/ & / & / \\
\text{Break, break, break,} \\
/ & / & / & / \\
\text{On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!} \\
/ & / & / & / & / \\
\text{And I would that my tongue could utter} \\
/ & / & / & / & / \\
\text{The thoughts that arise in me.}
\end{array}
\]

Note how Tennyson’s accentual meter can stretch the line from 3 to 9 syllables.

**Ben Jonson**, *SLOW, SLOW, FRESH FOUNT, KEEP TIME WITH MY SALT TEARS*, page 834

O sounds slow the opening line, whose every word is a monosyllable. Further slowing the line, eight of the ten monosyllables take heavy beats. “Drop, drop, drop, drop” obviously racks up still more stresses, as do the spondees that begin lines 4, 5, and 6. The entire effect is that we are practically obliged to read or sing the poem slowly and deliberately—as befits a lamentation.

**Dorothy Parker**, *RÉSUMÉ*, page 835

A question on meaning: Must light verse necessarily be trivial in its theme? State Parker’s theme in “Résumé.” Surely it isn’t trivial. At least in theme, the poem seems comparable to Hamlet’s soliloquy “To be or not to be . . . .”

After *Not So Deep as a Well*, her collected poems of 1936, Parker brought out no more poetry collections. “My verses,” she insisted to an interviewer. “I cannot say poems. Like everybody was then, I was following in the exquisite footsteps of Miss Millay, unhappily in my own horrible sneakers” (*Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, 1st ser. [New York: Viking, 1959]). Parker’s wit, acerbic and sometimes macabre, is as clear from “Résumé” as it is from her celebrated remark on being informed that Calvin Coolidge had just died: “How could they tell?”

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Tennyson.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information and links for Parker. Video essay on “Résumé.”
XJK used to think of meter as a platonic ideal norm from which actual lines diverge, but J. V. Cunningham's essay “How Shall the Poem Be Written?” changed his mind. Metrical patterns (in the abstract) do not exist; there are only lines that poets have written, in which meters may be recognized. “Meter,” declares Cunningham, “is perceived in the actual stress-contour, or the line is perceived as unmetrical, or the perceiver doesn’t perceive meter at all” (The Collected Essays of J. V. Cunningham [Chicago: Swallow, 1976] 262).

EXERCISE: Meaningful Variation, page 841

Aside from minor variations from a metrical norm (such as the substitution of a trochee for an iamb), the most meaningful departures in these passages seem to occur in these words or phrases:

1. **Dryden**: deviates. (Now there’s a meaningful deviation!)

2. **Pope**: the spondees snakes, drags, and slow length.

3. **Byron**: the last line of Byron’s stanza is two syllables (or one iambic foot) longer than the earlier lines. These extra syllables give the stanza a strong sense of closure.

4. **Stevens**: spontaneous, casual, ambiguous.

EXERCISE: Recognizing Rhythms, pages 841–845

*Edna St. Vincent Millay, Counting-Out Rhyme, page 841*

*Edith Sitwell, Mariner Man, page 842*

*A. E. Housman, When I Was One-And-Twenty, page 842*

*William Carlos Williams, Smell!, page 843*

*Walt Whitman, Beat! Beat! Drums!, page 843*

*David Mason, Song of the Powers, page 844*

*Langston Hughes, Dream Boogie, page 844*

Probably it is more important that students be able to recognize a metrical poem than that they name its meter. The Millay and Housman poems are thoroughly metrical. The Whitman and Williams are not, but they include metrical lines in places: in Whitman’s poem, besides the refrain (lines 1, 8, and 15) there are primarily iambic lines that end each stanza; the Williams poem grows rhythmically insistent in places where the speaker berates his nose for its omnivorous and indecorous curiosity. Sitwell’s poem is also thoroughly metrical. It has four strong stresses per line, like rap. The pattern is basically dactylic. The strong rhythm suggests the sound of a fast-moving train, as described in the poem. The poem also contains alliteration (sea-sand /
sea; trains / tails, etc.) as well as internal rime (Snorting and sporting). Hughes’s “Dream Boogie” starts out with a metrical beat, then (deliberately) departs from it in the italicized interruptions.

David Mason’s work is another powerful poem written in accentual meters: there are two strong stresses in each line. Since nursery rhymes are usually written in accentual meters, and Mason’s poem uses the children’s game of Scissors, Paper, Stone as its unifying metaphor, the meter is especially appropriate to the subject. But Mason also uses the rough-edged quality of accentual meter to convey the raw, uncompromising nature of his protagonists. Each character (Stone, Paper, Scissors) speaks in turn, announcing its power, pride, and position. As the poem progresses, these symbolic speakers reveal how unrestrained ambition and desire destroy human relations and community.

WRITERS ON WRITING

Gwendolyn Brooks, Hearing “We Real Cool,” page 845

Brooks’s remarks on her poem suggest how she consciously uses rhythm as an instrument of meaning. By placing we at the end of each of the first seven lines—in contrast to a more conventional placement at the beginning of each line—she forces the reader to stop and think more profoundly about what the lines mean. In the interview, she also stresses that her lineation was not trying to copy a colloquial rhythm but to express her attitude toward the protagonists in her poem—a significant and provocative distinction.

Kilroy, as students may need to know, was a fictitious—even mythical—character commemorated in graffiti chalked or penciled by U.S. soldiers wherever they traveled in World War II. KILROY WAS HERE was even scrawled in the sands of Anzio, a small testimonial that the graffitist is a person.
Beginning students of poetry have often had a hard time appreciating either a sonnet or a poem in open verse because they have yet to distinguish one variety of poetry from the other. On first meeting an unfamiliar poem, the experienced reader probably recognizes it as metrical or nonmetrical from its opening lines—and perhaps can tell at a glance from its look on the page (compact sonnet or spaced-out open verse). Such a reader then settles down to read with appropriate expectations, aware of the rules of the poem, looking forward to seeing how well the poet can play by them. But the inexperienced reader reads mainly for plain prose sense, unaware of the rhythms of a Whitmanic long line or the rewards of a sonnet artfully fulfilling its fourteenth line. Asked to write about poetry, the novice reader may even blame the sonnet for being “too rigid,” or blame William Carlos Williams for “lacking music” (that is, lacking a rime scheme) or for “running wild.” Such readers may have their preferences, but they say nothing about a poem or the poet’s accomplishments.

That is why this chapter and the following one seem to us essential. To put across to students the differences between the two formal varieties, it isn’t necessary to deal with every last fixed form, either. One can do much by comparing two poems (closed and open) on the theme of sorrow: Edna St. Vincent Millay’s fine sonnet “What lips my lips have kissed” and Stephen Crane’s astonishing “In the desert.”

Before taking up closed form, you might care to teach some song lyrics or a couple of traditional folk ballads. That way, the student isn’t likely to regard fixed forms as arbitrary constructions invented by English teachers. A stanza, you can point out, is the form that words naturally take when sung to a tune; that is how stanzas began. Sing a second round of a song, and you will find yourself repeating the pattern of it.

*John Keats, This Living Hand, Now Warm and Capable*, page 850

After Keats’s death, these grim lines were discovered in the margin of one of his manuscripts. Robert Gittings has pointed out that the burden of the poem is much like that of two letters Keats wrote late in life to Fanny Brawne, charging her conscience with his approaching death and blaming her for enjoying good health. “This,” says Gittings, “marks the lowest depths of his disease-ridden repudiation of both love and poetry” (*John Keats* [Boston: Atlantic-Little, 1968] 403). To discuss: can a repudiation of poetry nevertheless be a good poem?
Robert Graves, Counting the Beats, page 852

At mid-century, Robert Graves was generally considered one of the major English poets of the Modern era. Then shortly before his death he fell out of critical favor. His work almost vanished from the anthologies. Now his reputation is slowly but surely on the rise. Poet, novelist, critic, autobiographer, Graves stands as a diverse and original (if also often eccentric) literary talent—the one surviving British poet of the First World War to achieve a major literary career.

“Counting the Beats” has received almost no critical attention, but it has been a favorite among poets since its first appearance. The poem has an almost hypnotic rhythm. The stanza pattern of the poem is original. The meter is accentual. Each four-line stanza begins with a short two-beat line. The next line has three beats. The long third line of each stanza has five stresses. The stanza then ends with another short two-beat line.

The rime scheme is equally noteworthy and original. Each stanza ends with an l-sound, but the first three lines of each stanza repeat a single word as an end-rime. This gives each stanza the effect of the two speakers repeating, refining, and qualifying their ideas as they converse.

Readers interested in learning more about Graves might want to consult the scholarly journal Focus on Robert Graves and His Contemporaries, edited by Richard Schuemaker and published by the Department of English at the University of Maryland.

John Donne, Song (“Go and Catch a Falling Star”), page 854

Maybe it is worth pointing out that, in bringing together short stanzas to make one longer one, Donne hasn’t simply joined quatrain, couplet, and tercet like a man making up a freight train by coupling boxcars. In sense and syntax, each long stanza is all one: its units would be incomplete if they were separated.

Phillis Levin, Brief Bio, page 855

Levin’s poem is, of course, an acrostic. The first letter of each line spells out the hidden subject of the poem—BUTTERFLY. The title also contains a double pun. First, the poem contains a brief biography of the butterfly’s life (bio means life in Greek); second, the butterfly’s life is brief. Levin provides this note about her poem:

“Brief Bio” is also, of course, my elliptical, elided biographical note—a brief life, or a brief summation of one, an ars poetica in miniature. To be what one is, pure movement inseparable from one’s form, the unity of rhythm and design—that is what I want my poems to embody, and that is what a butterfly seems to say of itself in its act of being itself. Its being is transitive, subject and object cannot be distinguished.
The profile of the butterfly is inscribed in the poem’s shape (whose contours can be traced on the right side), just as the letters spelling its identity are traced on the vertical axis of the left-hand margin. If there is nothing less “concrete” than a butterfly, still we relish its brief moments of stillness, voyeurs to its constant sequence of change, the freedom of its detachment, to suddenly rise and then dip down, sipping nectar from a flower—as if in the same gesture it were eating and praying before passing on.

THE SONNET

William Shakespeare, SONNET 116: LET ME NOT TO THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS, page 856

Shakespeare’s enormously popular sonnet is a meditation on ideal love and romantic fidelity. As one would expect of any famous work by Shakespeare, the meaning of every line in the poem has been debated. Most modern critical discussions have centered on whether the speaker really believes that perfect human constancy is possible or whether the poem is subtly skeptical about its own romantic idealism.

A crucial notion to point out in a classroom discussion is that Shakespeare’s poem discusses a spiritual union (“the marriage of true minds,” not of bodies). He acknowledges that physical youth and beauty are victim to the ravages of Time. Spiritual love even endures bodily death, the poem asserts, and lasts until Doomsday.

Michael Drayton, SINCE THERE’S NO HELP, COME LET US KISS AND PART, page 857

Nay, yea, wouldst, and mightst are the only words that couldn’t equally well come out of the mouth of a lover in the twenty-first century.

There seems to be an allegorical drama taking place, as Laurence Perrine has pointed out in “A Drayton Sonnet,” CEA Critic 25 (June 1963): 8. Love is also called Passion, and apparently his death is being urged along by the woman’s infernal Innocence.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, WHAT LIPS MY LIPS HAVE KISSED . . . page 857

Millay’s originality has been insufficiently appreciated by critics. Too often she has been portrayed as a sentimental traditionalist removed from the mainstream of Modernist innovation. Millay’s diction was very traditional, and her devotion to metrical
forms such as the sonnet seemed conservative when compared to the experimentalism of Pound and Williams. And yet Millay's tone and subject matter were revolutionary in their time, and her strong feminist voice remains powerful. The sexual candor and moral freedom of this 1923 sonnet hardly seem reactionary or conservative.

The female speaker of the sonnet recalls her many lovers but—significantly—only in a general sense. They are too numerous for her to individualize. She displays no traditional guilt for her amours. Her only specific remorse concerns her own aging. (By implication, she longs to be young and in love again.)

The sestet of Millay's sonnet explicitly recalls Shakespeare's sonnet "That time of year thou mayst in me behold"—another poem in which an aging lover regrets the passing of youth and the approach of old age. Millay boldly appropriates Shakespeare's metaphor of the winter tree and develops it for her own ends. In her excellent essay "Love's 'Little Day': Time and the Sexual Body in Millay's Sonnets" (in Millay at 100: A Critical Appraisal, edited by Diane P. Freedman, Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995), Stacy Carson Hubbard comments:

The aging speaker as songless tree is an abject figure, one that we might be tempted to read as a prototype of abandoned womanhood, pathetic and powerless, if it were not for the powerful alliance that such abjectness establishes between Millay's speaker and Shakespeare's. The speaker of Shakespeare's sonnet makes a spectacle of his abjection by way of persuasion; so, too, does Millay's, but with the further motive of authorizing herself through poetic echo. To read such self-abjection without a view to literary history would be to mistake it for mere self-pity, a sentimental attachment to the figure of woman as victim, rather than the bold poetic affiliation that Millay surely intends it to be.

**MyLiteratureLab® Resources.** Biographical information and links for Millay. Video essay, student essay, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “What lips my lips have kissed...”

**Robert Frost, Acquainted with the Night, page 858**

This poem first appeared in West-Running Brook (1928), Frost's fifth volume, which some critics felt marked a turning in his work toward dark, personal themes. One might argue whether Frost's turn to dark themes began here, but it is true that many of his grimmer early poems were cast in a seemingly impersonal narrative form.

“Acquainted with the Night” shows many of the features we associate with Frost's darkly introspective side. Not only is the speaker solitary and alienated from the human community surrounding him, he fatalistically accepts this isolation. The poem begins and ends with the same line, which emphasizes the inescapable quality of the speaker's destiny, though by now night has acquired a metaphorical as well as a literal meaning.

Although the poem is written in a direct first-person voice, it confides very little to the reader. We know the speaker's desperate isolation but, as William Pritchard observes in his superb study Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered (New York: Oxford UP, 1984), the poem provides “no clues or provocation to significant action.” We know what is happening in the poem but not why. Noting that the poem was written in
terza rima, Randall Jarrell commented that it possessed “Dante’s own form . . . with some of Dante’s own qualities.” We might elaborate on Jarrell’s passing remark by saying that one reading of the poem would describe it as the speech of a lost soul wandering in his own private hell.

It is worth noting that the moody Frost was a compulsive walker whose late night rambles were legendary, though he liked them best with friends.

Kim Addonizio, First Poem for You, page 859

Anyone who thinks the sonnet form forces a writer into old-fashioned themes should look at this sexy and surprising poem. Addonizio creates a totally contemporary situation and language, and yet she also touches subtly on ancient, indeed primal poetic themes—the impermanence of flesh, the unpredictability of sexual passion, and the mysterious relationship between body and soul.

An interesting question to ask in class: what do the images the speaker’s lover has tattooed onto his (or possibly her) body suggest about the person’s character? The tattoos depict lightning and blue swirls of water out of which a serpent faces a dragon. These are the only specific images we have of the otherwise unseen lover.

Mark Jarman, Unholy Sonnet: After the Praying, page 859

Mark Jarman has provided the following note.

John Donne’s Holy Sonnets are the models for my Unholy Sonnets. His poems are urgent declarations of faith and appeals for mercy, despite the obvious realities of sin and death. Donne applies terrific pressure to form and metaphor, and both at times come close to collapse. Still, he works from Anglo-Catholic, Christian assumptions widely disseminated and shared in his time. It is almost impossible to work from such assumptions today. My aim in the Unholy Sonnets has been to work against any assumption or shared expression of faith, to write a devotional poetry against the grain. At the same time I have tried to write traditional sonnets without sticking to any one traditional form. So far (the project is ongoing) the Unholy Sonnets includes English, Italian, Spenserian, composite, and nonce forms. Calling them Unholy is a way of warding off piety but not, I hope, ultimately, belief.

“After the praying, after the hymn-singing” is an Italian sonnet with an abbaabba cdecde rhyme scheme and a volta or turn coming at the beginning of the last six lines or sestet and after the first eight lines or octave. In this poem there isn’t really a turn in the argument at the volta, but rather an end to the sentence’s suspension; at last, we reach the subject—only to have it delayed until the last line. The poem charts a fairly typical order of worship during a Sunday church service. I wrote it when I felt a terrible burden of hatred toward another human
being and found, as the poem indicates, that despite my best effort to atone through worship, my anger still dogged me. Incidentally, the comment about doctors equating pain with discomfort is based on experience. Once I had to have a medical test that was so painful, I passed out. The results were inconclusive, so my doctor recommended yet another test, but he warned me that the new test would involve “some discomfort.”


A. E. Stallings, SINE QUA NON, page 860

Note the ways in which Stallings combines the traditional features of the sonnet form with unusual variations of her own in order to achieve the subtle and moving effects of “Sine Qua Non.” The rime scheme presents a variation on the Shakespearean sonnet: there are three quatrains riming abba, followed by a concluding couplet, but there are no full stops at the ends of lines 4 and 12; the text presents a linked, flowing set of separate ways of making the same central point, rather than approaching the subject from a different perspective in each four-line unit. In its appearance on the page, “Sine Qua Non” more closely resembles a Petrarchan sonnet, yet the turn, such as it is, at line 9 is actually more of a return to the poem’s opening, with its repetition of the poem’s first five words. The movement from octave to sestet is perhaps best perceived as a movement from an implicit statement in the first eight lines to a more explicit approach in the last six, especially in line 12.

Amit Majmudar, RITES TO ALLAY THE DEAD, page 860

Amit Majmudar did not publish a book of poetry until he was in his mid-fifties. He is a diagnostic nuclear radiologist by profession, but, as is shown by “Rites to Allay the Dead,” his poetic interest in the living and the dead is haunting and evocative, not clinical in nature. If you are interested in poems suggesting that the dead continue to take an absorbed interest in the affairs of the living, you might enjoy a couple of well-known pieces by classic British poets, Thomas Hardy’s “Ah, are you digging on my grave?” and A. E. Housman’s “Is my team plowing.”

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Rites to Allay the Dead.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. To whom does the “they” in this poem refer? One would probably assume from the title that the “they” of the poem are the dead, an assumption that the first line might perhaps reinforce. Further reinforcement is provided by line 3, with its reference to “where they last slept.” By the time one comes to lines 3–4 and reads “where they stepped / Out of the world,” that assumption is likely to have become a certainty.

2. Is there a change in this sonnet from the octave to the sestet? The octave essentially bears out the poem’s title, describing the things that need to be done in
order “to allay the dead”—that is, to keep them away. In the sestet, the emphasis is on why they need to be held at bay, on what is likely to happen if they are not. As the poem moves from octave to sestet—from a precise particularization of the rituals to be performed, to the zeal that consumes the restless spirits of the departed—there is also a noticeable heightening of intensity.

3. What do the dead seem to want from the living? Like emotional vampires, they seem to want to keep alive whatever bonds of affection may have existed between them and their loved ones. As the last two lines suggest, this hunger of theirs is so intense and all-consuming that, unless you practice the rites described in the octave, they will sniff out any lingering feelings that you have for them and lure you to them as the sirens lured Ulysses.

**R. S. Gwynn, SHAKESPEAREAN SONNET, page 861**

This is a Shakespearean sonnet in both form and content, inspired by newspaper TV-show plot summaries that had, for purposes of satiric inspiration, the double felicity of being laughably insipid and in perfect iambic pentameter. With that line as his donnée, Gwynn proceeds to perform similarly banal reductions of *Romeo and Juliet*; *Macbeth*; *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; *Richard III*; *Julius Caesar*; *Henry IV*, Part 1; *Othello*; *Henry V*; *Twelfth Night*; *As You Like It*; *King Lear*; *Coriolanus*; and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Of the prominent formalist poets writing today, Gwynn may be the keenest satirist. He has written a wonderful extended satire on contemporary poets and poetry in the great tradition of Pope’s *Dunciad*: *The Narcissiad* (New Braunfels, TX: Cedar Rock P, 1981). He frequently reviews poetry for *Texas Review*, *Sewanee Review*, and other literary journals, and he is currently a professor of English at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas.

**THE EPIGRAM**

*Sir John Harrington, William Blake, Langston Hughes, Dorothy Parker, John Frederick Nims, Hilaire Belloc, Wendy Cope, A SELECTION OF EPIGRAMS, pages 861–862*

Highly various, these examples illustrate the persistence of the epigram. Whether the form of an epigram is closed or open, its essence consists of brevity and a final dash of wit.

Besides writing “Of Treason,” called the best epigram in English, *Harrington* has another claim to immortality: he invented the water closet.

Nowadays you might hear someone say: “With friends like that, who needs enemies?” This is *Blake’s* pithy, epigrammatic statement of the same sentiment.

*Dorothy Parker* was an expert on skewering vanity and pretensions. The idea here is that even in death, a vain actress’s refusal to admit her real age lives on.

*Nims* collected his epigrams, including “Contemplation,” in *Of Flesh and Bone* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1967). When first printed, in the *New Yorker,* this
poem was called “A Thought for Tristram”—suggesting that you means Isolde, betrothed of King Mark, with whom Tristan/Tristram shares a love potion.

If the haiku-like brevity of epigrams tempts you to ask your class to write a few, resist the temptation. Even from a bright class the results are likely to depress you. A successful epigrammatist needs, besides the ability to condense, the ability to deliver that final rapier thrust of nastiness. A talented creative writing class, after tackling poems in a few of the less demanding forms (ballads, villanelles, sestinas), might try epigrams, either rimed or rimeless.

If you do decide to challenge your class with writing an epigram, you might suggest they try the Wendy Cope approach and either update or revise an existing epigram. You’ll be surprised how personal some revisions can become.

POETWEETS

Lawrence Bridges, TWO POETWEETS, page 863
Robert Pinsky, LOW PAY PIECEWORK, page 863

Like a haiku or rimed couplet, a “tweet,” reconceived as a poetic form, imposes a rigid limitation on the writer, a limitation that in masterly hands can, like all such limitations, be liberating—and result in an arresting (or at least snappy) piece of short verse.

OTHER FORMS

Dylan Thomas, DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT, page 864

No mere trivial exercise (as a villanelle tends to be), Thomas’s poem voices his distress at the decline and approaching death of his father. At the time, the elder Thomas was a semi-invalid, going blind, and suffering from the effects of tongue cancer. As a teacher of English at Swansea Grammar School, the poet’s father had ruled his class with authority; but those who knew him only in his last years knew a different, humbled man. (See Constantine FitzGibbon, The Life of Dylan Thomas [Boston: Atlantic-Little, 1965] 294–95.)

Like many other Thomas poems, this one contains serious puns: good night, grave. “Another assumption in this poem,” says Amy Mulvahill (in a student paper written at Tufts), “may be Thomas’s own self-destructive drive that led him to drink himself to death. It’s possible that he preferred to taunt death with his boisterous life—to go down unrepentant and brawling.”

Repetitious as a villanelle is, the form suits this poem, making its refrains sound like prayers said over and over. If you have any student poets, you might challenge them to write villanelles of their own. The hard part is to make the repeated lines occur naturally, to make them happen in places where there is something to be said. But the repetitious form is helpful; write the two refrain lines and already your labors are eight-nineteenths over.
For another instance of Thomas’s fondness for arbitrary, demanding forms, see the poem “Prologue” at the beginning of Daniel Jones’s edition of The Poems of Dylan Thomas (New York: New Directions, 1971). A poem of 102 lines, its first and last lines rime with each other, as do lines 2 and 101, 3 and 100, 4 and 99, and so on, until two rimming lines collide at the poem’s exact center. Except for that inmost pair of lines, however, no reader is likely to notice the elaborate rime scheme—rimes so far apart they can’t be heard; but apparently it supplied the poet with obstacles to overcome and a gamelike pleasure.

**Robert Bridges, Triplet, page 865**

The triolet is a form usually associated with light verse, but Bridges’s poem demonstrates that it can convey heavier emotional loads if used with sufficient skill. Bridges’s triolet could be offered as an example of a short lyric—compressed, evocative, musical, and personal. He also manages to make the opening lines acquire considerable aditional force by the end of the poem. We now know both that the couple fell into their passion unawares (they “did not guess”) and that their love was not only difficult but irretrievably disastrous. Is there a more moving triolet in English?

**Elizabeth Bishop, Sestina, page 865**

We have no authority to read this poem as autobiography, but the figure of the grandmother—the most important person in Bishop’s early life—and the stormy setting (such as we might find in a village on the Nova Scotia coast) invite us to do so. The source of grief may have been the death of the poet’s father (hence, an irony that the child draws a man with tear-shaped buttons) or it may have been the illness of her mother, hospitalized several times for a mental disorder. When Bishop was eight months old her father died, and according to Robert Giroux, “The first real home Elizabeth knew was in the coastal town of Great Village, Nova Scotia, where her widowed mother returned in order to be with her parents” (Introduction to Bishop’s Collected Prose [New York: Farrar, 1984]). When the poet was five, her mother had a final breakdown, leaving the girl in the care of her grandmother. Apparently Bishop looked back to her days in Nova Scotia with affectionate yearning. When she was six, her father’s wealthy parents moved her to Worcester, Massachusetts, for a less happy stay.

**QUESTIONS**

1. A perceptive comment from a student: “Something seems to be going on here that the child doesn’t understand. Maybe some terrible loss has happened.” Test this guess by reading the poem closely. That some terrible loss—a death in the
family?—causes the grandmother to weep seems a guess that fits the poem. The old woman tries to hide her grief from the child (lines 6, 10, 31–32); she thinks it was somehow foretold (line 9).

2. In the “little moons” that fall from the almanac (line 33), does the poem introduce dream or fantasy, or do you take these to be small round pieces of paper? The “little moons” are probably small round pieces of paper. Almanacs (such as *The Old Farmer’s*) come with punched holes to make them easy to string and hang on a hook or a nail.

3. What is the tone of this poem—the speaker’s apparent attitude toward the scene described?

The playful ingenuity of the sestina, like that of the villanelle, tempts a poet to wax clever; yet Bishop is writing a deeply felt, moving poem in it. The tone is lightly serious, compassionate—yet with touches of gentle humor: the Little Marvel Stove, the child’s drawings. Irony, too, informs the poem: a contrast between the grandmother’s sorrow and the child’s innocent ignorance.

4. Consider John Frederick Nims’s comments below on the sestina form. How well does his description of a good sestina fit Bishop’s poem?

A shallow view of the sestina might suggest that the poet writes a stanza, and then is stuck with six words which he has to juggle into the required positions through five more stanzas and an envoy—to the great detriment of what passion and sincerity would have him say. But in a good sestina the poet has six words, six images, six ideas so urgently in his mind that he cannot get away from them; he wants to test them in all possible combinations and come to a conclusion about their relationship (“The Sestina,” *A Local Habitation* [U of Michigan P, 1985]).

Nims’s comment seems an apt description of “Sestina.” In the six repeated words, we are given the setting (*house*), the characters (*grandmother, child*), and key symbols (*Stove, almanac, tears*). “Sestina” weaves all six into a subtle relationship. This poem is full of things that suggest magic: the prophetic almanac, the teacup (with which fortune-tellers divine), the “marvellous stove.” It also is full of secret-keepers: the grandmother, the almanac with its powers of prophecy, the concluding reference to the “inscrutable house.” The repetitions are worth tracing: tears, in particular, accumulates an effect. In stanza 2 the tears arrive like an equinoctial storm; in 3, the kettle also weeps; in 4, tea is tears; in 5, the man in the child’s drawing wears tears; in 6, the almanac weeps paper tears; and finally, in the envoy, tears are flowers. “Time to plant tears” may be a literal quotation from the almanac, tears being (if memory serves) the name of a small white flower favored by rock gardeners.

Bishop’s *Complete Poems* contains another intriguing sestina, “A Miracle for Breakfast.” At the time it was written Bishop remarked (in a 1937 letter to Marianne Moore):

It seems to me that there are two ways possible for a sestina—one is to use unusual words as terminations, in which case they would have to be used differently as often as possible—as you say, “change, of scale.” That would make a very highly seasoned kind of poem. And the other way is to use as colorless words as
possible—like Sidney, so that it becomes less of a trick and more of a natural theme and variations. I guess I have tried to do both at once. (Quoted by Nims in his essay cited in question 4.)

In the later “Sestina,” the terminal words seem to be deliberately usual ones.

EXPERIMENT: Urgent Repetition, page 866

This experiment just might leave you surprised at the quality of some of its results. Whoever writes a sestina has a powerful ally—the form—on his or her side.

In a tour de force, a student in a poetry workshop at Tufts once wrote a fairly successful sestina taking one, two, three, four, five, and six for its repeated words. The result seemed only mildly boring and mechanical!

WRITERS ON WRITING

A. E. Stallings, On Form and Artifice, page 867

Stallings makes the important observation that artificial is not a dirty word; art, artifice, and artificial, after all, are all linguistically related. A true artist works—with insight, discipline, and skill—to create the desired effect, which is far from the same thing as spontaneously setting down one’s thoughts and feelings. A writer wishing, for example, to communicate the thrill and ache of first love could hardly do worse than transcribe an actual phone conversation, in all of its tedium and banality, between two smitten teenagers. “It seems an obvious point for art,” as she says, but these days it also seems to be a point that needs to be made.
23 OPEN FORM

Denise Levertov, ANCIENT STAIRWAY, page 870

This poem is discussed fairly extensively in the text. It may be a useful piece to use to generate a discussion about the nature of poetry. Particularly if you have just spent class time emphasizing the conventions of closed forms as they are discussed and illustrated in the previous chapter, you might begin by asking something like, “Given the absence of rime and meter, and of all the conventions of traditional poetical form, what is particularly poetic about this piece? What makes it a poem?”

E. E. Cummings, BUFFALO BILL’S, page 874

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren have taken this poem to be an admiring tribute to William Cody (Understanding Poetry, 3rd ed. [New York: Holt, 1960]). But Louis J. Budd, in an interesting dissent, thinks Cummings is satirizing the theatricality of the old sideshow straight-shooter and finds Mister Death “a cosmic corporal gathering up defunct tin-gods and stuffed effigies” (The Explicator 11 [June 1953]: item 55).

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Cummings. Audio clip, audio essay, and critical essay on “Buffalo Bill’s.”

W. S. Merwin, FOR THE ANNIVERSARY OF MY DEATH, page 874

W. S. Merwin’s poem is written in unpunctuated free verse. The lines tend to end on natural speech pauses, but without conventional punctuation the reader cannot know if a phrase or sentence ends until he or she says the line aloud (or reads it carefully) and proceeds to the next line. The effect is one of discovering the full meaning of the lines only as they unfold. The phrase “Tireless traveler,” for example, is initially ambiguous in syntactical terms. Does it refer to the speaker or the silence of death? Only by going on to the next line (“Like the beam of a lightless star”) does the reader understand that the phrase stands in apposition to silence. Merwin’s lack of punctuation, therefore, both slows down one’s reading of the poem and endows its language with an appropriate sense of mystery.

The central idea of the poem is itself a mystery—the exact date of the speaker’s death. This question is a universal one because it is a mystery that every human faces.
Merwin uses the occasion of his quandary to meditate on his mortality and to praise the beauty of the world in religious terms, though his spiritual impulse reflects the mystery of existence. The speaker bows "not knowing to what." Ultimately, Merwin’s "For the Anniversary of My Death" is a contemporary version of the Roman poet Horace’s "carpe diem" ode, in which the speaker acknowledges the impossibility of knowing the exact time of one's inevitable death and so resolves to seize the day by living fully.

William Carlos Williams, THE DANCE, page 875

Scanned, the poem is seen to abound in pairs of unstressed syllables. The result is a bouncing rhythm—anapestic or dactylic, depending on where one wishes to slice the lines into feet. This rhythm seems appropriate to a description of frolicking dancers and helps establish the tone of the poem, which is light, however serious. Williams severs his units of sense again and again in midphrase, placing his line breaks after and, the, about, thick, those, such. In this poem run-on lines predominate, and this is not only a technical device but a way of underlining the poem’s meaning. Williams conveys a sense of continuous movement in a syntax that keeps overflowing line units.

By repeating its opening line, the poem, like Brueghel's dancers, comes round in a circle to where it began. Another metaphor is possible: like a painting enclosed in a frame, the poem encloses its central scene in a frame of words.

Williams first saw Brueghel's painting in Vienna in 1924, but he wrote this poem in 1942, some eighteen years later. A French critic, Jacqueline Saunier-Ollier, has speculated on the curious fact that the poem, in describing a vividly colorful tableau, omits all color images. Her work on Williams's Brueghel poems is summed up in William Carlos Williams: Man and Poet, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1983) 528–29.

Stephen Crane, THE WAYFARER, page 876

Walt Whitman, CAVALRY CROSSING A FORD, page 876

These two nineteenth-century American poems seem comparable mainly in their brevity and use of narration. The assonance and internal alliteration in Whitman's phrase silvery river are echoed in the poem's opening line: the assonance of the i-sound in line, wind, islands; the internal alliteration of the r in array, where, green. But any line of this short poem will repay such inspection. Crane's “The Wayfarer” is obviously less heavy on verbal music, although there is alliteration: Perceiving the pathway; and the poem favors the letter w, especially toward the end. There are also instances of rime (passed/last), assonance (time/knife), and consonance (weeds/roads).

Whitman seems to lambaste his poem with sound effects in his enthusiasm for his grand military spectacle. Crane cares for music, too, and yet his is a subtler, harsher one. Although much longer in words, Whitman's "Cavalry" contains only slightly more pauses than "The Wayfarer" (fifteen compared to Crane’s thirteen, if
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every comma and line-end counts as a pause). The result is, in Crane’s poem, a much
more hesitant, start-and-stop movement—appropriate to a description of hesitation,
indecision, and second thoughts.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibli-
ography, and links for Whitman. Interactive reading and critical essay on
“Cavalry Crossing a Ford.”

Ezra Pound, THE GARDEN, page 877

In this early poem Ezra Pound employs some imagistic techniques to create a piece of
social satire. He uses energetic, straightforward, direct sentences to present an image
and then to provide analysis and commentary. Pound begins by painting a picture, in
a single striking stroke, of a woman observed in passing: she is like “a skein of loose silk
blown against a wall”—a startling comparison. Not shying from drawing conclusions
at a glance, he then performs an audacious analysis of the woman (“she is dying piece-
meal / of a sort of emotional anemia”; she “would like some one to speak to her,” etc.)
and unhesitatingly makes the kind of direct authorial commentary from which some
poets might shrink (“round about there is a rabble . . . They shall inherit the earth”).

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “The
Garden.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What is a skein of silk? What does this image imply about the woman being
described? A skein of silk is a length of silk wound in a long, loose coil. The refer-
ce to silk, a luxurious fabric, implies that the woman is from the upper classes; but
she has, in some sense, come undone. (He does not compare her, for example, to a
silk gown.)

2. All classes of people mix in Kensington Gardens. What seems to be the
social position of this lady? She appears to be from the upper classes, not only
because of the silk image but because Pound says that “In her is the end of breeding”
(line 8). She is from well-bred stock; her restricted upper-class background has left
her emotionally weak and listless.

3. The first and third stanzas end with an indented last line. How does Pound
use this line differently from the other more descriptive lines? The indented lines
offer commentary and observation—not strictly visual observation, but analysis
based on what the speaker intuits about the woman.

Wallace Stevens, THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD,
page 878

Suggestive as blackbirds may be, the theme of the poem is “Pay attention to physical
reality.” Stevens chides the thin ascetic men of Haddam who would ignore good
blackbirds and actual women for golden phantasms. He also chides that asinine aris-
tocrat who rides about Connecticut (of all places) in a glass coach as if thinking himself Prince Charming. The poem ends in a section whose tone is matter-of-fact flatness, rather as though Stevens were saying, “Well, here’s the way the world is; if you don’t like it, go read newspapers.” Taken as a series of notes for an argument for literalism, this much-discussed poem seems to have unity and to lead to a definite conclusion. For another (and more complicated) view of it, see Helen Vendler, On Extended Wings (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969).

Way-of-looking number 5 recalls Keats’s “Grecian Urn”: “Heard melodies are sweet. . . .”

Way number 10 eludes final paraphrase. Are the “bawds of euphony” supposed to be, perhaps, crass ex-poets who have sold out their Muses, who utter music to please the box office instead of truth? But blackbirds flying in a green light are so strikingly beautiful that even those dull bawds would be moved to exclaim at the sight of them.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Stevens.

PROSE POETRY

Charles Simic, THE MAGIC STUDY OF HAPPINESS, page 881

This piece takes its title from a poem by the great nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891), who was himself a pioneer in the art of the prose poem, and whose work—unsurprisingly, given the fact that all his poetry was written while he was still in his teens—deals frequently with themes of childhood and youth. Rimbaud’s lines (from “Ô saisons, ô châteaux!”) are: “J’ai fait la magique étude / Du bonheur, qu’aucun n’élude” (“I have made the magic study / Of happiness, which no one escapes”). Rimbaud biographer Graham Robb says of this and other, related poems: “Rimbaud attaches his songs to a concept which had fascinated him in the works of nineteenth-century illuminists: that behind the stage-set of sensory impressions lies a pure, absolute reality. . . . This ultimate truth can be glimpsed only in fleeting moments when the senses are no longer separate from the objects of perception, when the personality evaporates. . . .”

“The Magic Study of Happiness” appears in Simic’s Dime-Store Alchemy (1992), a book about the reclusive American collage artist Joseph Cornell (1903–1972) that is itself a collage of sorts, combining biography, analysis, and Simic’s own imaginative responses to Cornell’s work. Cornell’s miniature boxes often contain startling juxtapositions of objects and photographs through which he seeks, not unlike Rimbaud, to transcend rational perception and evoke a childlike sense of wonder. In an interview with the journal Artful Dodge shortly after the publication of Dime-Store Alchemy, Simic said:

I really think that language cannot say or produce or convey the complexity, the depth of an experience, of heightened consciousness. When you feel exceptionally lucid, when you feel truly present to yourself and you see the world and you see yourself watching the world, there’s a kind of plenitude of consciousness. So
you step away from yourself and say “My God, I exist!” But, saying I exist is an
impoverishment. There is so much more there; the experience itself is much
larger than whatever words you have uttered. So I always feel that language does
not quite equal the intensity of experience—that words are approximations. But
this is a very complicated subject. The paradox that occurs is that attempts
through words, through language, cannot instantly, simultaneously convey expe-
rience. One attempts by manipulating words in some fashion to find a way in a
poem to re-create what the experience felt like originally. But it’s no longer the
same thing. It’s coming to it in a very different way.

In that same interview, Simic rejects the interviewer’s description of the pieces in
Dime-Store Alchemy as prose poems; nonetheless, he allowed “The Magic Study of
Happiness” to be included in David Lehman’s anthology Great American Prose
Poems: From Poe to the Present (2003). It is also worth noting that Simic is far from
dissemissive of the concept of the prose poem, either in general or in his own work: in
1989 he published The World Doesn’t End: Prose Poems, which was awarded the 1990
Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

Joy Harjo, MOURNING SONG, page 881

How does a prose poem differ from an ordinary poem—or, for that matter, from ordi-
nary prose? Well, ordinary poems—even if they don’t rime or scan—are, at the very
least, broken into lines; this formal feature alone forces the reader to see (and under-
stand) them differently than if they weren't lineated. A prose poem is not lineated, and
this makes a significant difference. As for ordinary prose, readers tend to expect of it a
certain degree of clarity and coherence; the prose poem form allows the author to pro-
duce a kind of writing that is freed from the obligation of conventional prose clarity.

The prose poem, then, is free of the restrictions imposed by both ordinary poetry
and ordinary prose—which makes it a special kind of writing.

What kind of writing? Well, usually it is rich, complex, highly concentrated, and
heavy in association. Instead of making use of rime and meter and other poetic
devices, it tends to draw its linguistic power largely from dense combinations of lux-
uriant sounds and intense images. It can also be highly elliptical.

Harjo’s poem is no exception to these generalizations; in many ways, indeed, it
is an archetypal example of the prose poem. To read the first couple of sentences is
to realize that this is not ordinary prose. Why “small world”? What does it mean to
say that “gods gamble for good weather”? Ordinary prose may well make use of
imagery, but “grief rattling around in the bowl of my skeleton” is intense stuff—
hardly your everyday prose metaphor. The point is clear: that this piece of writing
needs to read in a somewhat different way than, say, the average novel or short story.

One key to Harjo’s poetry is that she is an American Indian, more specifically a
member of the Creek tribe, whose poetry draws on Native American beliefs.
Although the people in her poems sometimes seem terribly isolated from their sur-
roundings, their identities are charged with meaning derived from Native American
mythology. Harjo herself has written the following about this poem: “Sacred space—
I call it a place of grace, or the place in which we’re most human—the place in which
there’s a unity of human-ness with wolf-ness, with hummingbird-ness, with Sandia
Mountain-ness with rain cloud-ness? . . . It’s that place in which we understand there
is no separation between worlds. It has everything to do with the way we live. The land is responsible for the clothes you have on, for my saxophone, for the paper that I write these things on, for our bodies. It’s responsible for everything."

QUESTIONS

1. The poem is written as prose; yet its title declares it a “song.” What is song-like about this prose paragraph? Its language is intense, lyrical, and image-heavy.

2. What personal emotions does the speaker specifically announce? What do those emotions reveal about the speaker’s state of mind? She announces her grief and loneliness, and reveals that she is in an agitated, unsettled state of mind.

3. What metaphor does the speaker use for loneliness? Loneliness is a “house guest who eats everything and refuses to leave.”

4. If the poem is “a song for death,” what things does the speaker tell death? The speaker tells death of her grief (and her wish to be rid of that grief, that is, to “spit [that grief] out”); she tells death of her confusion in a time when life and joy have given way to death and misery (“a harvest turned to ashes”), and of her “need to mourn with the night.” And she tells death that since too much mourning is destructive (“If we cry more tears we will ruin the land with salt”), she prefers to do something counterintuitive—namely, to eulogize that which has caused her misery (“praise that which would distract us with despair”). In short, she will “Make a song for death”—although instead of being a pretty melody it will be “a song with yellow teeth and bad breath”—a song originating not in the joys of youth but in the sad wisdom of age.

VISUAL POETRY


George Herbert, Easter Wings, page 882
John Hollander, Swan and Shadow, page 883

The tradition of the shaped poem, or Carmen figuratum, seems to have begun in Renaissance Italy, and the form flourished throughout Western Europe in the seventeenth century. English practitioners of the form, besides Herbert, included Robert Herrick (in “The Pillar of Fame”) and George Puttenham.

Of “Easter Wings,” Joan Bennett has remarked, “The shape of the wings on the page may have nothing but ingenuity to recommend it, but the diminuendo and crescendo that bring it about are expressive both of the rise and fall of the lark’s song.
and flight (Herbert's image) and also the fall of man and his resurrection in Christ (the subject that the image represents)” (qtd. by F. E. Hutchinson in his edition of Herbert's Works [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1941]). Visual shape and verbal meaning coincide strikingly when the second stanza dwindles to Most thin.

Like Herbert, Hollander clearly assumes that a word-shape has to have a meaningful relation to what is said in it. His reflected swan is one of twenty-five shaped poems collected in Types of Shape (New York: Atheneum, 1969). Other graphic poems in the book include a car key, a goblet, a beach umbrella, an Eskimo Pie, and the outline of New York State. Paul Fussell, Jr., discussing “Easter Wings” and Hollander’s shaped poems, expresses reservations about this kind of poetry. Most shaped poems, he finds, are directed more to eyes than ears—or better, we feel that the two dimensions are not married: one is simply in command of the other.” But the greatest limitation in the genre is that there are few objects that shaped poems can effectively represent: “their shapes can reflect the silhouettes of wings, bottles, hourglasses, and altars, but where do we go from there?” (Poetic Meter and Poetic Form [New York: Random, 1965] 185–87). Students might be told of Fussell’s view and asked to comment. A further disadvantage of most shaped poetry is that it cannot be heard aloud without loss.

Richard Kostelanetz, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATIONS, page 884

Ramón Gómez de la Serna was noted for pioneering the greguería, which roughly translates as “aphorism” or “one-liner.” Richard Kostelanetz has been in the forefront of the poetic avant-garde for many years. In his versions of three of Gómez de la Serna’s greguertas, he takes one of the world’s oldest literary arts—the faithful translation of a text from one language to another—and combines it with visual effects to create something new. Kostelanetz himself describes his practice of simultaneous translation as follows:

Visually I realize this principle by having short texts of equal length printed directly under/atop each other and thus in closer visual proximity even than “en face” (with the source language on one page and the translation on the page across from it). Separately, I realized simultaneous translationaurally by having the French of Arthur Rimbaud’s “The Drunken Boat” heard in one ear while an English translation is heard simultaneously in the other ear, the listener able to adjust the stereo balance to his or her own taste.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Simultaneous Translations.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. The term “simultaneous translation” customarily has nothing to do with poetry. What is its usual application? What relevance might it have in this con-
text? A simultaneous translation is customarily provided for a speech while it is actually being delivered, often at the United Nations or another international forum. Here the term might allude to the translator’s simultaneously providing the literal content of the original texts and providing a visual enhancement of or commentary upon them.

2. How does the appearance of the English versions contribute to the communication of their meanings? In the first two instances, the white characters against a black background simulate the appearance of the stars and moon in the night sky. In the third, the black box serves to clothe the “truth” of the poem’s statement.

3. Does the contrast between the appearance of the Spanish originals and the English versions make any larger statement about the nature of poetic translation? It serves as a reminder that even the most faithfully rendered translation is necessarily something distinctly different from its original.

Dorthi Charles, Concrete Cat, page 885

This trifle first appeared in the second edition of An Introduction to Poetry and has been retained out of loyalty to the past. While hunting for an illustration of the sillier kind of concrete poem that simply and unfeelingly arranges words like so many Lincoln Logs, XJK found the very thing in one of William Cole’s anthologies of humorous poetry: “Concrete Poem” by the British wit Anthony Mundy. Mundy’s work repeats miniskirt several times in the form of a miniskirt and tacks on a couple of leglegleglegs. No doubt he was parodying concrete poetry, too. But the cheap-skate in XJK rebelled at the thought of paying for permission to reprint such a simple doodad, so he decided to cut and paste together a homemade specimen. While constructing the cat, he had some fun with it, making the tongue a U, and so on. As far as we know, however, the pun in the cat’s middle stripe (tripes) is the only place where language aspires toward poetry and becomes figurative.

For Review and Further Study

E. E. Cummings, In Just-, page 886

Cummings’s poem is one of his “Chansons Innocentes,” little songs for children. In it, however, we meet a poet who is familiar with the classics and who naturally associates spring with goat-footed Pan. In Greek mythology, the god’s pipes heralded the return of Persephone and caused birds and beasts to start up at his call. In Cummings’s view, he seems a kind of Pied Piper who brings children running.

Line breaks and capital letters in the poem seem designed to emphasize particulars. Just-spring, capitalized, is the name of a holiday: the moment when spring begins. Dividing its name with a line break gives it more importance, perhaps; and mud / luscious similarly takes emphasis. Why are the children’s names telescoped (eddieandbill, bettyandisbel)? So that these names will be spoken rapidly, pell-mell, the way their owners run and the way children speak about their friends. And when the
lame balloonman completes his transformation into Pan, the word goat-footed is framed with white space on a line by itself. Except by putting it in capitals, the poet could hardly have thrown more weight on it.

Francisco X. Alarcón, FRONTERA / BORDER, page 887

The author of this very short bilingual poem, Francisco X. Alarcón, has lived in both the United States and Mexico: born in California, he moved to the Mexican city of Guadalajara as a child, and later returned to the U.S., where he attended California State University at Long Beach and Stanford University. (He now teaches at the University of California at Davis.) Because of this background, and because of his parallel use of Spanish and English, it is reasonable to assume that Alarcón is thinking about the border between the U.S. and Mexico. But of course there are other kinds of borders that separate people, including the language boundary; indeed, it is interesting that while the poem insists on the fact of inseparability, the separation of the Spanish and English texts, which mean roughly the same thing (“will be able to” would be a more literal translation of the third line), into two separate columns might be seen as pointing to the reality of some kind of separation between the unnamed parties referenced in the poem—a separation grounded, perhaps, in the language barrier.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

How would the meaning of this short poem change if you dropped one of the languages? The poem is greater than the sum of its two side-by-side parts. Each of the columns, one in Spanish and one in English, makes a simple statement that might be fairly described as a greeting-card sentiment or bumper sticker slogan. Bringing these two texts together, however, suggests the possibility of levels of meaning having to do with language, history, politics, and international relations. Is the “us” of the poem two lovers, two friends, two nations? Is Alarcón making a political statement about the relationship between the United States and Mexico, or should the poem be read, rather, as an intimate communication by the speaker to his or her beloved?

Carole Satyamurti, I SHALL PAINT MY NAILS RED, page 887

Satyamurti’s poem demonstrates that there are other means than meter for organizing poetic language. In this case, syntax gives the poem a linguistic structure as formal as that of a sonnet. One might also say the poem has another structure—that of a list, a common genre but not one we usually associate with poetry (though we can upgrade it to the venerable literary device of the catalogue, as in Homer’s catalogue of Greek ships in The Iliad). Notice that Satyamurti’s lines are grammatically incomplete, unless we read them in conjunction with the title.
All this formal discussion shouldn’t blind us to Satyamurti’s provocative content. “I Shall Paint My Nails Red” does something that poetry should: it makes us think deeply about a part of our everyday world. It asks questions about something we might otherwise take for granted.

David St. John, HUSH, page 888

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “Hush.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker of the poem? Whom does he address? The speaker is a man who has lost a child—perhaps through divorce or some other form of separation—and it is that lost child to whom the poem is addressed.

2. What seems to be the situation of the poem? The speaker is in deep grief after losing his child. He cannot address the child directly. He can only speak to its absence. He sees the Chippewa ritual for a dead child as parallel to his own private imaginary conversation with his absent son.

3. Are there any regular patterns in these lines? Do they appear consistently throughout the poem? There are longer lines with five or six beats (and ten to fifteen syllables) per line, and shorter lines with three beats (and four to six syllables) per line. There does not seem to be a regular pattern to the poem, but the alternation of the long and short lines gives it a gentle sense of rhythmic surprise.

Alice Fulton, What I Like, page 889

As Fulton observes, the word friend contains an end, but this poem does not have an ending—at least in the traditional sense. Fulton’s poem, however, belongs to a newer tradition of modern art that denies closure. By refusing to answer her own leading statement (“What I like about you,” which is also, in part, the poem’s title), Fulton forces us to answer the question. We have only two alternatives; we can either fill in the blank with our own notions or we can—and this alternative has more critical forces—say that Fulton has already answered the question in the lines that lead up to the final sentence fragment. Fulton forces us then, in a manner of speaking, to reread the poem backwards.

Notice that the poem has fourteen lines—surely no accident—and that it is chock full of rimes. Fulton intends “What I Like” to be a post-modern sonnet.

A comment from Fulton in an interview in the Spring 2005 issue of the journal Folio provides an interesting perspective on an earlier section of this chapter: “Poets are so lucky to have the line as a way of making meaning. I think it’s why I’ve never been interested in writing ‘prose poetry.’ I don’t want to give up the possibilities of the line.”
Walt Whitman, The Poetry of the Future, page 889

Although Whitman created one of the main traditions of American free verse, he had surprisingly little to say about the verse technique he fostered. In this interesting passage from the 1876 preface to the reissue of Leaves of Grass, Whitman focuses on two different sorts of innovation—free expression of emotion and direct presentation of character. He sees these features of attitude, tone, and subject leading American poetry into the future.
T. S. Eliot, The Boston Evening Transcript, page 893

To help a class see the humor of Eliot’s poem, try reading it aloud and pronouncing the name of the newspaper slowly and deliberately, in the dullest tones you can muster. This small gem can serve effectively to introduce an early, longer Eliot poem of spiritual desolation, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

Emily Dickinson, The Lightning Is a Yellow Fork, page 894

Perhaps the poet would have added more punctuation to this poem had she worked longer on it; a rough penciled draft is its only surviving manuscript. Students may ask, Isn’t the fork a symbol? No, it is the other half of a metaphor: what the lightning is like. The lightning (like most literary symbols) is a physical thing or event, reportedly seen. The Apparatus of the Dark (neither fork nor lightning) is whatever dimly glimpsed furniture this cosmic house may hold. The fork seems too simple an instrument to deserve the name of Apparatus. The lightning is doing the revealing, not itself being revealed.

Thomas Hardy, Neutral Tones, page 895

Students usually like to sort out the poem’s white, gray, washed-out, and ashy things. Can anyone think of a more awful description of a smile than that in lines 9–10? The God in line 2 seems angry and awe-inspiring. He has chided or reproved the sun and caused it to turn pale in fear (like a schoolboy before a stern headmaster).

Line 8 is a stickler. In Hardy’s first draft it read, “On which was more wrecked by our love.” Both versions of the line seem awkward, and the present version is obscure, but probably the sense of this and the previous line goes: we exchanged a few words about the question, Which one of us had lost (suffered) the more by our love affair? (That is, after which we should mentally insert “of the two of us.”)

For speculation about the facts behind “Neutral Tones,” see Robert Gittings’s fine biography Young Thomas Hardy (Boston: Little, 1975) 86–93. Much has been guessed.
about the possible love affair between young Hardy and his cousin Tryphena Sparks; but if the woman in “Neutral Tones” was indeed real, no one has identified her for sure. Similar in imagery to “Neutral Tones” is this horrific line from Hardy’s novel The Woodlanders, chapter 4, when a poverty-stricken woman, Marty South, sees her last hopes expire: “The bleared white visage of a sunless winter day emerged like a dead-born child” (cited by F. B. Pinion in A Commentary on the Poems of Thomas Hardy [New York: Barnes, 1977]).

**ALLEGORY**

**Matthew, THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SEED, page 896**

“The Parable of the Good Seed” is one of three parables that Jesus tells to the crowd describing the “kingdom of heaven” in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. After Jesus and the disciples leave the crowd and go into a house, the disciples ask him to explain this particular parable. Jesus oblige them with an explication. (We paraphrase the reply in the book following the text of the parable.) Here is his answer from Matthew:

He answered and said unto them, “He that soweth the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world; the good seeds are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:37–43)

The special importance of this parable is that Jesus clearly states his own interpretation of the tale. He intends it, therefore, as an allegory with one consistent equivalent meaning assigned to each narrative element. Not all Gospel parables can be so easily allegorized. Some, such as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” are so subtly complex as to allow multiple interpretations. Jesus himself told the disciples that his parables allowed two interpretations—one purely narrative reading open to the general public and another, deeper allegorical interpretation available to those who have been initiated in “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 13:10–23).

**George Herbert, REDEMPTION, page 897**

George Herbert was an Anglican clergyman in a rural parish, who was held in high esteem because of his care and solicitude for his congregation. His poems were collected in the year of his death in The Temple, a highly structured volume of religious verse. Like John Donne, he employed wit, wordplay, and metaphysical conceits
(extended and often extravagant comparisons) to express profound religious convictions. The sonnet “Redemption” turns on two senses of the title word, the financial (the redeeming of a bond by paying it in full) and the Christian (the redeeming of the soul through Christ’s suffering and death).

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “Redemption.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. In this allegory, what equivalents does Herbert give each of these terms: tenant, Lord, not thriving, suit, new lease, old lease, manor, land, dearly bought, take possession, his great birth? The tenant is the soul; the Lord is the Lord God—or more specifically in this context, Jesus Christ; not thriving signifies that the soul is not saved; the suit is the soul’s acceptance of Christ as Savior, through baptism; the new lease is the New Testament, which replaces the old lease, the Old Testament; the manor is God’s throne in heaven, and the land is the earth, which has been dearly bought by the sacrifice of Christ’s passion and death; Christ has gone to take possession of the land—that is, redeem it from the original sin of Adam and Eve—through his great birth in the form of his incarnation.

2. What scene is depicted in the last three lines? The crucifixion of Christ between the two thieves, while mocked by a jeering crowd: it is through Christ’s suffering and death that the suit is granted—that is, the soul is redeemed.

Edwin Markham, OUTWITTED, page 898

Broadly speaking, the circle in this poem symbolizes a fence or a barrier that draws a distinction between what it encloses and what it excludes. The symbol functions the same way both times; the difference lies in what is enclosed or excluded in each instance. So precise and traditional is Markham’s use of the circle that we can describe it as a conventional symbol, perhaps even as an allegory—except, of course, for the poem’s extreme brevity and lack of narrative.

The Wagner College Library has a large Edwin Markham Archive, some of which is available online. You can access the archive and hear a recording of Markham reading this poem by starting a search at <www.wagner.edu/library/embio>.

Suji Kwock Kim, OCCUPATION, page 898

“Occupation” can mean “profession” or “job”; it can also refer to the military control of one country by another, as in “the Nazi occupation of France.” In this poem, perhaps inspired by the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1905 to 1945, Suji Kwock Kim uses the word in both senses.

The former poet laureate Robert Pinsky has observed of this poem that:

The two senses of the word “occupy” dramatize a psychological conflict between the need to resist authority and the conflicting demand to give in, an inner
struggle forced by the outer, violent conflict. . . . In this language—like the language of dreams—the house and the foreign occupation are one. The violence of the invaders and their invitation to move into a durable new dwelling blend into one feeling.

Indeed, the house Kim describes is surrealistic, as in M. C. Escher's famous "House of Stairs." Kim imagines a house in which (for example) all the flights of staircases go down but not up. Pinsky asks: " . . . do phrases such as 'This house will last forever' reflect the inner, defeated rationalization of the oppressed? Either way, the poem exposes the fearsome sort of language that works to justify brutality."

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of "Occupation." Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. **What materials do the soldiers use to build the house?** The soldiers use human bodies, which they "hammer . . . into the earth / like nails." This detail gives the poem an unreal, dreamlike aspect. It also suggests that the poem has a symbolic or even allegorical level of meaning.

2. **What is unusual about the interior of the house?** The interior is surreal, dreamlike: the doors don't open, the stairs are slippery and only go down, and there is no floor.

3. **How is the ash unusual?** The ash falls from the sky like snow, and appears to consist of human remains.

4. **The title contains a pun. Find and explain it.** The title is a pun on the two meanings of occupation, which can mean either "profession" or "job" and the military control of one country by another.

5. **What does the soldiers' house seem to symbolize?** Read from a political perspective, the house may symbolize the brutality of the Japanese occupation of Korea. But the poem also suggests a broader symbolic reading in which the house being built is death.

*Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken, page 899*

Stanley Burnshaw writes, in *Robert Frost Himself* (New York: Braziller, 1986), that Frost often said "The Road Not Taken" was about himself combined with Edward Thomas, a Welsh poet and good friend. Knowing this, Burnshaw confessed, didn’t contribute much to his understanding of the poem. Still, the story is tantalizing. In *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph* (New York: Holt, 1970), biographer Lawrance Thompson tells about the "excruciations through which this dour Welshman [Thomas] went each time he was required to make a choice." This amused Frost, who once said to Thomas, "No matter which road you take, you’ll always sigh, and wish you’d taken another." “The Road Not Taken” (originally called "Two Roads") was apparently written to poke quiet fun at this failing. When Frost sent the poem in a letter to Thomas, the Welshman apparently missed the joke. He assumed, as have many readers since, that the speaker in the poem was Frost himself. Disappointed,
Frost (according to Thompson) “could never bear to tell the truth about the failure of this lyric to perform as he intended it.”

Despite the ambiguity that surrounds the poet’s intent, the poem succeeds. The two roads are aptly symbolic of the choices we have to make almost every day of our lives. Still, perhaps the poem’s essential playfulness is evident in the dramatic “sigh” with which the speaker expects some day to talk about his choice, and in the portentousness of the last line, which seems a bit exaggerated considering that the two roads were “really about the same.”

A hardworking introduction to symbolism in poetry is that of Paul Hawkes of East Stroudsburg University. In a published article, he describes his classroom version of the TV game show “Family Feud,” in which teams of students try to guess which meanings of certain symbols have occurred to most of the class. His aim is to show that a symbol, which may have widely familiar and traditional associations, can mean more or less the same to everyone; its meanings aren’t the property of one reader alone. Then, to put this insight to use, he takes up “The Road Not Taken.”

“I use this poem,” he explains, “because it is simple and straightforward, offering little resistance to any student I may ask to summarize the paraphrasable content of the poem.” He asks, “What statements in the poem, what choices of diction, suggest that the two roads are to be understood as something more than literal paths in the woods?” And students tend to reply, “A person wouldn’t ‘sigh’ about a choice made years ago unless it was important,” or, “The speaker wouldn’t regret it ‘ages hence’ if it were only a path,” or, “Why else would he say the decision ‘has made all the difference’ unless that decision were life-changing?” (We’re paraphrasing and condensing Mr. Hawkes’s examples.)

Someone will usually guess that the choice of roads suggests Frost’s personal choice of careers: Should he or should he not become a poet? Hawkes then encourages the class to speculate on other possible life choices: marriage, children, a job, relocation. Perhaps this poem is about decision-making; perhaps the nature of the roads need not be specified. As in Pilgrim’s Progress, a road or a journey on it is a traditional and conventional symbol for life; a fork or crossroads, a decision or turning-point. “The poem,” he concludes, “suggests regret not for the way life has turned out but for the severe limitations life imposes on our desire to explore its possibilities.” (See “Fire, Flag, Feud, and Frost: Teaching the Interpretation of Symbols,” Exercise Exchange [Spring 1991] 6–11.)

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Frost. Interpreting “The Road Not Taken.” Video clip, evaluation questions, critical essay, writing prompts on “The Road Not Taken.”

Antonio Machado, CAMINANTE / TRAVELER, page 900

Machado, one of the major Spanish poets of the twentieth century, lived a life touched by public and private tragedy; he died in France while fleeing Francisco Franco’s army. Like Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” this is a poem in which the road is the road of life.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Compare Machado’s poem with Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.” In what way does Machado’s use of the road as a symbol resemble Frost’s use? Frost’s
roads and Machado’s road are the road(s) of life. But Frost imagines two roads, Machado only one. In Frost’s poem, the two roads are already there, and the traveler decides which one to take, and this choice will determine—to a certain degree, at least—the course his or her life takes. In Machado’s poem, the road does not exist until the traveler begins to walk, and it is in fact the traveler who creates the road by the very act of walking. In Frost’s poem, others have been on these very realistic roads before, and others will presumably travel on them in the future. In Machado’s poem, the road is unique to this single traveler—no one has ever traveled the same road before and no one will ever travel it again. For while in Frost’s poem the roads have been and will be there for a long time, in Machado’s poem, the road is not really a road at all, but “a track of foam upon the sea,” something that is created only to disappear after an instant. Frost’s speaker doubts he will ever return to the other road and follow it to where it leads. Machado, by contrast, makes it clear that there is no turning back, no trying any other road.

Christina Rossetti, UPHILL, page 900

This allegorical poem develops a conventional simile: life is like a journey (shades of Pilgrim’s Progress!). The road is the path of life; the day, a lifespan; the inn at the end of the road, the grave; other wayfarers, the dead; the door, the mouth of the grave (or perhaps the gate of Heaven); the beds, cold clay (or perhaps Heavenly rest). The title suggests another familiar notion: that life is a struggle all the way.

One possible way to paraphrase line 14: “You’ll find the end result of your life-long strivings: namely, death and the comfort of extinction.” A more happily Christian paraphrase is possible, for Rossetti professed herself a believer: “Your labor shall bring you to your goal, the sight of the Lord.” Without admitting the possibility of such a faith, the poem will seem grimmer and more cynical than it is.

Do these two characters seem individual persons? Not in the least. This is a straight question-and-answer poem, a dialogue between two stick figures.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY

EXERCISE: Symbol Hunting—Literal or Symbolic?, page 901
William Carlos Williams, THE YOUNG HOUSEWIFE, page 901
Ted Kooser, CARRIE, page 901
Mary Oliver, WILD GEESE, page 901
Tami Haaland, LIPSTICK, page 902
Lorine Niedecker, POPCORN-CAN COVER, page 903
Wallace Stevens, THE SNOW MAN, page 903
Wallace Stevens, ANECDOTE OF THE JAR, page 903

“The Young Housewife” is a poem that focuses on images, and Williams does not push the situation into a symbolic context. The poem has an unstated erotic element, but that in itself does not constitute symbolism. “Carrie” presents dust in its
traditional role as a symbol for human mortality (although Kooser uses the symbol in a charmingly original way). "Popcorn-can cover" uses literal language in a manner reminiscent of Williams, but the title image of the popcorn-can cover screwed to the wall can be taken as a symbol of the house dweller's poverty and pragmatism. Niedecker does not force the symbolism of the image, yet it is there for our notice. "Lipstick," "Wild Geese," "The Snow Man," and "Anecdote of the Jar" contain central symbols.

* * *

Williams's "The Young Housewife," which Cary Nelson has called "a celebration and critique of voyeurism," may at first seem relatively straightforward, with its touches of sensual imagery and its solitary speaker who is obviously drawn to the solitary housewife of the title (note that her husband never appears), but who keeps his proper distance, bowing and smiling as he passes in his car (even though her lack of a corset, her "stray ends of hair," and the speaker's comparison of her to "a fallen leaf" hint at the possibility of past or present sexual indiscretions on her part).

An examination of the poem, however, soon raises questions. Take, for example, the speaker's reference to "her husband's house"—why call it her husband's house and not hers? Because this is 1916 (when it would have been rather unusual to refer to a married woman's home as her house and not her husband's)? Or because Williams is trying to tell us something about this woman's status in her own home? Note the contrast between her being in her husband's house and the speaker being in his own (not his wife's) car: this is the difference between male and female roles in 1916. Another difference: he is mobile, active in the world, presumably going from place to place doing his work (we may identify the speaker with Williams, an obstetrician who drove around Paterson, New Jersey, making house calls), while she is moored to the house, waiting for the ice-man and fish-man to come to her, and presumably also waiting for her husband to come home.

The poem raises a couple of questions. How does the speaker know what the housewife is doing in the house if she is "behind . . . wooden walls"? Also, why, instead of simply saying that she reminds him of a fallen leaf, does he say: "I compare her / to a fallen leaf"—a statement that invites one to contemplate not only the woman but also the speaker's state of mind, his self-awareness as he observes her? Is he here self-consciously exercising his power as a male to label her? (Nelson, identifying the poet with the speaker, speaks of "Williams's willingness to acknowledge and mock his presence as an observer.") What does it mean that Williams, immediately after making this comparison, mentions driving "over / dried leaves" as he smiles at the woman. Is he suggesting that she is, in some sense, dried-out, crushed? Is she barren? Is she a "fallen woman"? Has she, in some way, been damaged by her husband? Or is she simply one more victim of the passage of time, who may not be "young" for much longer?

Note that Williams ends one line with "tucking in," which may lead the reader to expect something rather more titillating in the next line than "stray ends of hair." And what about the other men, the "ice-man" and the "fish-man"—what are they doing here, with their names suggestive, respectively, of asexuality and sexuality? Are these men, too, sizing up the young housewife? And what can be said about the symbolic meaning of the car itself, as it conveys the speaker to his destination and crushes leaves? Is it a symbol of Time crushing Youth? Or an
image of sensuality, perhaps even of imagined sexual violence? Is Williams suggesting that the speaker, behind the wheel of his powerful car, feels a desire to ravish this young woman? Are we to understand that the speaker is relishing the crushing of the leaves as a symbolic crushing of the woman, a punishment for her having aroused him?

* * *

In Mary Oliver’s “Wild Geese,” the birds of the title function as the poem’s central symbol, embodying the potential for the replenishment of the suffering soul. Following are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of the poem.

QUESTIONS

1. Is this poem addressed to a specific person? Apparently not, to judge by the first three words of line 13. “Whoever you are” can connote “Whatever sort of person you are,” but in context it appears to be a phrase of general reference. The “you” of the poem would seem to be the reader; line 5, obviously, is not to be understood literally.

2. What is meant by “good” in the first line? On a first reading, it could be taken to mean either “capable” or “moral”; “repenting” in line 3 tilts the balance to the latter possibility, but does not completely eradicate the former implication.

3. What do the wild geese symbolize? What is the significance of the use of the term “wild”? “Wild” locates the geese in the natural world, unconstrained by the soul-deadening conventions of human societies and belief systems. And no matter how widely they may range in the wild, at last they are always “heading home again,” to their “place / in the family of things,” just as the human spirit can learn to do.

4. What other adjectives are used to describe the phenomena of nature? What thematic purpose is served by this characterization of the natural world? Nature and its various components are described as “clear,” “deep,” “clean,” “harsh,” and “exciting”—all admirable and desirable traits, even “harsh,” which here may have the connotation of being rough and stimulating, capable of shaking the torpid spirit awake. Thus, nature is characterized as inviting, accepting, and refreshing to the spirit.

* * *

In Tami Haaland’s “Lipstick,” a whimsical yet not unserious poem, the speaker’s concern about her professed lack of facility with lipstick seems to reflect a larger perplexity about certain traditional female skills—not just the application of lipstick but, for example, the ability “to put / their hair in a knot with a single pin.” Lipstick becomes a symbol of female sensuality, sexual facility, and confidence. In her list of (apparently) lipstick colors, the word Satin brings to mind satin sheets and gowns, while the other words summon images of wine, fruit, plants, nuts, which are suggestive variously of sex, courtship, and fertility. The speaker’s reference to staying or not staying “inside the lines” suggests that she doesn’t have a smooth, easy competence in certain female-identified skills, and therefore as not fitting “inside the lines” of certain people’s notion of womanhood. Here are some possible brief answers to the questions at the end of the poem.
QUESTIONS

1. How does the speaker use lipstick differently from the way "those women" do? She has to look in the mirror to keep from going outside the lines—and even with a mirror she sometimes makes a mess of it.

2. Why do the other women know how to apply lipstick more accurately? What does this knowledge suggest about the difference between them and the speaker? They started doing such things at an earlier age—which suggests that perhaps the speaker was a "late bloomer," or perhaps chose not to use lipstick at one time in her life for political or other reasons. Her use of the words "those women" and "these / women" suggests that she feels alienated not just from expert appliers of lipstick but, perhaps, from more sexually attractive or confident women generally.

3. What does lipstick seem to suggest in the poem? Lipstick suggests a whole array of female-identified skills and activities (such as being able to put one's hair in a knot with a single pin), and also suggests female sensuality (as conjured up by the list of lipstick colors), the ability to woo and please a man.

*  *  *

The title figure of Wallace Stevens’s "The Snow Man" embodies the poem’s theme: it is only by becoming a man of snow that a human being can regard the winter landscape and not “think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind”; only by fully divesting ourselves of our humanity can we behold the natural world as it really is and not coat it with our own perceptions and emotions—a manifest impossibility.

Students familiar with Stevens sometimes reason about “Anecdote of the Jar”: “The jar is a thing of the imagination, that’s why it’s superior to the wilderness—it makes order out of formless nature, the way Stevens thinks art is supposed to do.” But Stevens is constantly warning us of the dangers of the mind divorced from the physical world, and we think he means this gray, bare, dominion-taking jar to be ominous. Who could think a wilderness slovenly before it came along? Some critics take the phrase of a port in air to mean a portal, “an evanescent entry . . . to order in a scene of disorder” (Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure [New York: New York UP, 1967]). We read it differently: portly, imposing, pompous. Although it is true that Stevens frequently raises the same philosophic or aesthetic questions, from poem to poem he keeps supplying very different answers. See the brilliant essay on Stevens by J. Hills Miller in Poets of Reality (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965).

Jerald Bullis has written an intriguing poem in response to “Anecdote of the Jar.” Thanks to Peter A. Fritzell of Lawrence University for discovering it.

Buck It

Take a shot-up bucket in a swale of woods—
For years ”things” have been adjusting to it:
The deer have had to warp their whylom way
Through the fern to honor the order in their blood
That says not to kick it; the visiting woodcock

Probably take it for some kind of newfangled stump,
And doubtless welcome any addition that offers

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Additional cover—especially if its imposition
Provides a shelving stay for worm-rich mulch;
A rivulet of breeze low-eddying the swale
Breaks around it much the way a stress’s
Flow gets an increment of curvature
From encounter with an old Singer
Sewing machine; the ferns thereabout have turned
A bit more plagiotropic; if it’s upright
And the lid’s off it’s an urn for leaves, bark-bits,
Bird droppings; but in the scope of the whole
Forty-acre woodpatch is it likely
To take dominion everywhere? no more
Than a barbed-wire tangle of words or a good jar.

WRITERS ON WRITING

W. B. Yeats, Poetic Symbols, page 904

Symbols are central to Yeats’s poetics. They are not arbitrary creations of the writer
but primal forms of human communications—arising like Carl Jung’s universal
archetypes from the unconscious. For Yeats, therefore, the symbol is in some sense
independent of the poet and carries “numberless meanings” beyond the often narrow
intentions of the author.
Robert Frost, **Nothing Gold Can Stay**, page 909

Many of your students may already be familiar with this popular poem. The relevant detail of the poem in this context is how much narrower its meaning would be if the reference to Eden were dropped. This single mythic allusion expands the resonance of the poem from the transience of spring’s beauty to the transience of all perfection.

In his excellent study *Robert Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (reissued with a new preface in 1993 by the University Press of New England), William Pritchard savors the poem’s remarkable compression in the following way:

> The poem is striking for the way it combines the easy delicacy of “Her early leaf’s a flower” with monumentalities about Eden and the transient fading of all such golden things, all stated in a manner that feels inevitable. It is as if in writing “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” Frost had in mind his later definition of poetry as a momentary stay against confusion. The poem’s last word proclaims the momentariness of the “gold” that things like flowers and Eden, dawn and poems share. So the shortness of the poem is also expressive of its sense. (Quoted by permission of the author)

Direct your students to the chapter “Writing About Literature” where there are many sample student writing exercises based upon “Nothing Gold Can Stay.”

*MyLiteratureLab* Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Frost.

William Wordsworth, **The World Is Too Much with Us**, page 909

As its sense and its iambic meter indicate, the opening line calls for a full stress on the *with*.

Wordsworth isn’t arguing for a return to pagan nature worship. Rather, like Gerard Manley Hopkins’s blasting tirade in “God’s Grandeur,” he is dismayed that Christians, given to business and banking, have lost sight of sea and vernal woods. They should pay less heed to the world, more to the earth. What “powers” have they laid waste? The ability to open themselves to nature’s benevolent inspirations. Modestly, the poet includes himself in the us who deserve reproof. The impatient outburst
("Great God!") is startlingly unbookish and locates the break in sense between octave and sestet in an unconventional place.

Compare Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" for a somewhat similar theme.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Wordsworth.

H.D. [Hilda Doolittle], HELEN, page 910

H.D.’s celebrated Imagist poem describes Helen of Troy and her fatal beauty in provocatively ambiguous terms. In the full edition of Literature, there is a superb student essay on "Helen" by Heather Burke of Wesleyan University. Here is an excerpt.

In her poem "Helen," H.D. examines the close connection between the emotions of love and hatred as embodied in the figure of Helen of Troy. Helen was the cause of the long and bloody Trojan War, and her homecoming is tainted by the memory of the suffering this war caused. As in many Imagist poems, the title is essential to the poem's meaning; it gives the reader both a specific mythic context and a particular subject. Without the title, it would be virtually impossible to understand the poem fully since Helen's name appears nowhere else in the text. The reader familiar with Greek myth knows that Helen was the wife of Menelaus who ran away with Paris. Their adultery provoked the Trojan War, which lasted for ten years and resulted in the destruction of Troy.

What is unusual about the poem is H.D.’s perspective on Helen of Troy. The poem refuses to romanticize Helen's story, but its stark new version is easy for a reader to accept. After suffering so much for the sake of one adulterous woman, how could the Greeks not resent her? Rather than idealizing the situation, H.D. describes the enmity which defiles Helen's homecoming and explores the irony of the hatred which "All Greece" feels for her.

The central irony of "Helen" is found in the contrast between tone and content. Even as the speaker addresses hate, lines such as "God's daughter, born of love, / the beauty of cool feet / and slenderest knees," reveal an underlying conflict of emotions.

Edgar Allan Poe, TO HELEN, page 910

The first version of this poem appeared in Poe's third volume Poems (1831), which was published while the author was a cadet at West Point. (At twenty-two he had already published two earlier books!) Poe circulated a subscription among his fellow cadets to underwrite a volume of his verse. Many of them subscribed in the expectation that Poe would publish the satirical squibs he had written about their teachers and officers. Imagine their surprise on opening the volume to discover delicate lyrics such as "To Helen" and "Israfel." Poe revised "To Helen" slightly in 1841, polishing its most famous lines to read: "To the glory that was Greece / And the grandeur that was Rome." (It is a worthwhile exercise to ask students to differentiate between the implications of glory and grandeur.)
Poe (whose comments on his own poems are famously unreliable) claimed that “To Helen” was written in youth “to the first, purely ideal love of my soul.” That statement seems uncharacteristically accurate. The woman in “To Helen” seems less a flesh and blood beauty than an object of aesthetic contemplation. Notice how, in the final stanza, Helen becomes transformed in the speaker's mind into a statue, as she stands in the window niche.

Poe's idealized notion of love seems more maternal than sexual—not a surprising thing for a sensitive boy who lost his mother before his third birthday.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “To Helen.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Why does Poe invoke the name of Helen to address his beloved? Poe calls his beloved by the name of the legendary beauty because he wants to indicate that she, like the original Helen, is supremely beautiful—so beautiful that one can imagine men fighting wars over her.

2. Compare Poe's Helen with H.D.'s in her poem “Helen.” How do the two versions of the mythic woman differ? Both Helens are cool and still—Poe calls his Helen “statue-like,” H.D. speaks of her Helen's “still eyes,” “wan face,” and “cool feet.” But while Poe's poem is a hymn of loving praise to Helen's beauty, H.D.'s Helen is an object of hatred because her beauty sparked a long and terrible war. Ultimately, Poe's Helen seems to be an abstract symbol of female beauty whereas H.D. imagines a real woman who has caused the death and destruction.

**ARCHETYPE**

*Louise Bogan, Medusa, page 912*

Bogan's chilling poem is a perfect example of how modern poets have used classical myths to new ends. Bogan presents Medusa quite faithfully to the Greek legend, but she employs the myth for distinctively modern psychological purposes—to portray a state of spiritual and emotional paralysis. The speaker is literally petrified in an eternal moment. Nothing will ever change. One curious feature of “Medusa” is that the speaker shows no surprise, no bitterness, no anger at the paralyzing Gorgon—only total resignation.

Bogan's biographer, Elizabeth Frank, believes the poem portrays the poet's mother as the paralyzing female monster. While there is no specific textual evidence for this interpretation, it is not inconsistent with the facts of Bogan's troubled past. This psychoanalytical/biographical interpretation, however, is not especially useful in reading “Medusa” as poetry. In fact, to reduce the poem to any single allegorical interpretation limits the powerful symbolic resonance of the central situation. The speaker's paralysis can be read with equal validity as emotional, spiritual, imaginative, or artistic. The poem invites us to interpret the speaker's dilemma beyond its literal narrative meaning, but the text does not demand any single construction.
John Keats, La Belle Dame sans Merci, page 912

This poem, unpublished in Keats’s lifetime, was written in 1819, and some of its phrasing was later revised by Keats. While it is customary to accept an author’s final version of a work as definitive, it is generally agreed that the original text of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” is fresher and more effective, and it is that text which we have printed here. The poem’s title and basic situation are derived from a long French poem by Alain Chartier (c.1385–c.1433), translated into English by Sir Richard Ros around 1640.

Predilections for the ballad form, for medieval settings, and for supernatural themes were all characteristic of one strain of English Romanticism, as exemplified earlier (at about the time of Keats’s birth) in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, most notably in “Christabel” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” and Robert Southey. Notice how many of the attributes of the medieval folk ballad Keats imitates here: lack of rime in the first and third lines of each quatrain; occasional metrical irregularities; pointless specificity (“kisses four”—compare “Nine bean-rows will I have there” in Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”); shifting (and unidentified) speakers; and elliptical narration.

The season is clearly autumn, a time traditionally depicted as one of melancholy and decline, as is made clear through the descriptions provided by the unidentified speaker of the first three stanzas. Some have seen an autobiographical dimension in this melancholy and decline, speculating that Keats used the myth of the succubus-like fairy creature who enchants and seduces men, only to abandon them, as a way of expressing his complex feelings toward his fiancée, Fanny Brawne. The historical record, however, shows her to have been an intelligent young woman who reciprocated the depth and tenderness of his love—a far cry from the shallow and heartless flirt of legend toying with the affections of the tormented, dying poet.

 PERSONAL MYTH

William Butler Yeats, The Second Coming, page 915

The brief discussion in the book leaves several points untouched. Students may be asked to explain Yeats’s opening image of the falcon and the falconer; to discuss the meaning of the Blood-dimmed tide and the ceremony of innocence; to explain how the rocking cradle at Bethlehem can be said to “vex” twenty centuries to nightmare; and to recall what they know about the sphinx.

In A Vision, Yeats sets forth his notion of the two eras of history (old and new) as two intertwined conelike gyres, revolving inside each other in opposing directions. He puts it succinctly in a note for a limited edition of his poem Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921):

The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expan-
sion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction. At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion. The revelation which approaches will however take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre.

Students can be asked to apply this explanation to “The Second Coming.” (In fact, this might be a writing assignment.)


MyLiteratureLab® Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Yeats.

**Gregory Orr, Two Lines from the Brothers Grimm**, page 916

When he was twelve years old, Gregory Orr shot and killed his younger brother in a hunting accident. As he recounts in his memoir The Blessing, this event left him emotionally devastated and near-suicidal, and it had a severely damaging effect on the surviving members of his family, whose customary method of dealing with tragedy was silence and emotional detachment. Once one knows this history, it is almost impossible not to interpret the poem in light of it, and to see the “Hansel and Gretel”-like opening of the poem (and the horror-movie-like image in line 4) as Orr’s response to the accident and its traumatic effect on his family and their relationships with one another. The poem also exemplifies—not through its content, but by virtue of its very existence—a central theme of Orr’s memoir, the healing and transformative power of art.

If you choose to incorporate this information in your presentation of the poem, you might wish first to determine the most effective way of doing so; in this connection, you may find it helpful to reread Natasha Trethewey’s poem “White Lies” and the discussion of it in both the anthology itself and this manual.

**Myth and Popular Culture**

**Charles Martin, Taken Up**, page 917

“Taken Up” illustrates how a good poet can borrow potentially hackneyed material from popular culture and, by linking it to the underlying myth, transform it into genuine poetry.

Martin links the popular myth of flying saucers with the eternal human need for the divine. His golden aliens (whose bodies are so fine as to seem incorporeal) are almost godlike. What they offer the humans who waited for them is a version of heaven. (Notice that the aliens mention angels in factual terms; the spiritual and divine are real to them.) The situation of the poem on a hill deliberately recalls the
Transfiguration and Ascension episodes of the Gospels. The aliens are science fiction versions of angels—perhaps even gods.

One way to start a classroom discussion on the poem is to ask if anyone has seen Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and encourage someone to describe the film's ending. Then compare it to the poem and discuss from what mythic sources they both draw their inspiration.

A. E. Stallings, *First Love: A Quiz*, page 918

A. E. Stallings has been praised for her expert use of traditional poetic forms in both her poetry and translations (as an example, see her sonnet “Sine Qua Non” in the “Closed Form” chapter of the anthology). Her practice in “First Love: A Quiz” gives new proof of the often-made observation that one has to know how to keep the rules in order to be able to break them effectively. An American poet and resident of Greece, she is in much closer contact with the world of ancient mythology than most English-speaking writers.

Stallings's poem alludes to the classical myth of Persephone, a beautiful young goddess who was abducted by Hades, the ruler of the Underworld. Her mother Demeter, goddess of agriculture, became so despondent that plants stopped growing. Eventually, Persephone was permitted to spend six months on the earth each year, which allows spring and summer to return, before descending again into Hades, which brings back winter. Stallings’s poem combines elements of this myth with details suggestive of contemporary dating rituals and clichés. Tonally, the classical and contemporary elements seem to jar against one another; but thematically, as the concluding line suggests (“all of the above”), they are of a piece.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “First Love: A Quiz.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. How does Stallings adapt a classical myth of abduction and rape into a contemporary story? Give specific examples. At first, there seems to be a jarring contrast between the mythical and the modern, between a “souped-up Camaro” and a “chariot drawn by a team of stallions.” But as the poem proceeds, we see that these distinctions are not so distinct as they first appeared, and that the tawdry present and “glamorous” antiquity are not contrasted with one another; instead, they are one and the same: the “uncle . . . who lived in the half-finished basement” is both a creepy modern relative and Hades himself, who was a brother of Persephone's father, Zeus. Amid the contemporary references, details of the original myth crop up: the narcissus of line 10 alludes to the fact that Persephone was picking flowers when she was abducted by Hades; the “bitter seed” of line 18 reminds us that, because she had eaten pomegranate seeds, Persephone could not permanently return to earth. In fact, rather than the classical references giving way to “souped-up” modern ones, the drift of the poem is largely in the other direction, as a character who resembles Arnold Friend in Joyce Carol Oates's “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” gradually morphs into the Greek god Hades.

2. In each option, does the speaker see the man as dangerous? If so, why does she go with him? There does seem to be an element of danger at every turn; even in
line 8, the phrase “with a wink at the cliché” implies that the speaker knows his true intent. But, as lines 12–14 show, that whiff of the forbidden is a large part of his charm and her excitement. Also, he provides an escape from tedious everyday reality: he gives her “an excuse not to go back alone to the apartment with its sink of dirty knives” (line 9).

3. What is your interpretation of the last line? After the techniques previously employed in the poem—lines of increasing length and rhythmic freedom, and one set of widely spaced rimes in each “stanza” (Camaro / arrow, cliché / decay, beware / hair)—the rhetorical elegance of the next-to-last line (which is a perfect iambic pentameter), the brief last line and the quick rime combine to create a sudden shift in sound and movement giving the poem a sharp and decisive ending. This tonal shift reinforces the content of the last line, which also signals a shift, one that makes us re-evaluate all that has come before. The title (as well as the text) is ironic in applying a quiz like those in trashy contemporary magazines to an austere classical myth, and also ironic in using the term “First Love,” with its connotations of innocence and adolescence, in connection with such disturbing details. But the title and the text also seem quite serious in delineating the wide range of emotions, urges, impulses, and experiences that go into the making of a relationship. Indeed, “all of the above” appears to be the correct answer, and also suggests that the tawdry present and “glamorous” antiquity are not contrasted with one another; instead, they are one and the same.

Anne Sexton, Cinderella, page 919

Writers on Writing

Anne Sexton, Transforming Fairy Tales, page 922

“Cinderella” was part of Sexton’s fifth collection, Transformations (Boston: Houghton, 1971). This volume consisted of seventeen long poems that retold fairy tales in idiosyncratic versions. Although earlier poets such as Auden and Jarrell had published revisionist fairy tale poems, Sexton’s book proved extremely influential by claiming the fairy tale as the special territory of feminist poets. Some critics (as well as Sexton’s editor, Paul Brooks) felt these poems represented a falling off from her more compressed earlier poetry, and there is some truth in that criticism. But the poems have remarkable narrative energy and originality.

“Cinderella” begins like a lyric poem with a series of four rags-to-riches stories that seem gleaned from the tabloids. But just when it might seem that Sexton would wrap up her short poem, she leaps into an extended narrative. Her version of Cinderella is very close to the Perrault original, although she spices it up with contemporary images and large doses of irony. Then, as the story comes to its conclusion, Sexton emphasizes the violent aspects of the original so that it overwhelms the romance. In the last stanza, Sexton resumes the original structure of the poem with a bitterly ironic version of “happily ever after.”

To use an overworked term, Sexton “deconstructs” the happy ending of a fairy tale; marriage, in her view, is no solution to Cinderella’s problems but the beginning of new ones.
The two letters included in “Writers on Writing”—one to her publisher, the other to a fellow writer—describe Sexton’s intentions in turning popular fairy tales to her own ends. She wants to make the stories “as wholly personal as my most intimate poems.” This attitude may surprise students who don’t yet understand how an artist’s treatment can transform borrowed material (like myth or legend) into something unique and idiosyncratic.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information and links for Sexton. Comprehension quiz and essay questions on “Cinderella.”
“Poetry and Personal Identity” provides students with an introduction to the ways in which a poet’s race, gender, cultural background, age, and other factors influence his or her writing. The chapter explores the different ways that poets have defined their personal, social, sexual, and ethnic identities. It also examines the problematic relationship between the author and the poem.

The first section focuses on autobiography and explores the idea of “confessional” poetry. Having drilled students earlier in this book that poems cannot be read as direct autobiography, we now relax a bit and let them think about the tricky relationship between life and art through Sylvia Plath’s brilliant but harrowing “Lady Lazarus.” This issue usually generates lively classroom discussion. The challenge will be to keep the discussion on track by focusing on the specific text under examination.

We then broaden the discussion by showing how autobiography includes issues of culture, race, age, and gender. Two compelling poems on minority identity—by Rhina Espaillat and Claude McKay—show different approaches toward ethnic writing. With Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Francisco X. Alarcón we see poems about Asian and Mexican American identity. The coming-of-age poem by Judith Ortiz Cofer draws on her Hispanic background. Sherman Alexie’s “The Powwow at the End of the World” is a quiet but forceful denunciation of the wrongs done to Native Americans and their homelands.

Anne Stevenson’s short poem “Sous-entendu” focuses on gender in terms that students should understand from their everyday life, while Adrienne Rich’s poem explores it in more general, archetypal terms. Rafael Campo explores the complexities of gay love while Carolyn Kizer’s pointedly titled “Bitch” uses the metaphor of a canine bitch to present the painful contradictions of female love and attachment. Yusef Komunyaka’s powerful Vietnam poem raises questions of identity that transcend racial categories; he is a black veteran, but he seems to speak for all Vietnam vets without losing his personal identity (reflected in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial’s black stone). With Donald Justice’s striking “Men at Forty,” we begin looking at issues of age; these questions are explored—with merciless honesty—in Philip Larkin’s “Aubade,” a poem that will disturb everyone.

Sylvia Plath, Lady Lazarus, page 929

This poem was written over seven days in late October 1962 about two weeks after the composition of “Daddy” (in the “Poems for Further Reading” chapter). On February 11, 1963, Plath committed suicide by putting her head in a gas oven.
In her 1989 biography of Plath, *Bitter Fame*, Anne Stevenson describes “Lady Lazarus” as a “merciless” self-projection of the author, who cast herself as “the central figure of her mythic world.” Considering several of the poems written that final October, Stevenson continues:

The poems are extraordinary performances—not only in their consummate poetic skill, but in that their central figure is giving a performance as though before a single quelled spectator or in a fairground . . .

Stevenson concludes:

These poems, penetrating the furthest reaches of disdain and rage, are bereft of all normal “human” feeling. Hurt has hardened to hate, and death is omnipresent.

Surely the dark anger and aching death-wish are tangible in “Lady Lazarus.” This poem is spoken by a voice beyond hope. If Plath is a performer, she performs only a script of her own merciless invention.

One stylistic note: “Lady Lazarus” (like “Daddy”) is full of German tags. You might ask students why she uses German so much in these late poems. The Nazi connection will be easy for them to see, but it may be worthwhile to mention that Plath’s father, Doctor Otto Plath (Ph.D. in entomology), was a German immigrant who spoke with a heavy accent. In other words, there is something to interest both formalist and biographical critics in this chilling late poem.

**IDENTITY POETICS**

*Rhina Espaillat*, *BILINGUAL / BILINGÜE*, page 932

Espaillat’s poem is an excellent demonstration of the famous dictum of William Carlos Williams, “No ideas but in things.” How better to demonstrate the challenges and frustrations of shuttling between two languages (and two cultures) than to employ both languages in the statement itself? The use of both English and Spanish also vividly underscores the daughter’s inability to maintain the divisions that her father insists on, divisions that he hopes will prevent his daughter from becoming Americanized to the point where she will be alienated from their heritage and even from him. Removing the Spanish phrases would indeed change the poem, and significantly for the worse. The speaker’s heart is one in its ability to cherish both parts of her identity, but the strain of doing so is evident throughout the text.

**CULTURE, RACE, AND ETHNICITY**

*Claude McKay*, *AMERICA*, page 933

McKay was one of the first of many black American writers who emigrated from the West Indies. (Students might write an interesting comparison between McKay’s sonnet...
and the later Caribbean poet Derek Walcott’s “Sea Grapes,” to be found in the “Poems for Further Reading” chapter.) McKay was born in Jamaica in 1891 and immigrated to the United States in 1912. Although shaped by black experience, “America” reaches for—and indeed achieves—universalism of expression; it articulates the frustrated dreams and overpowering desires of any young immigrant. The speaker in this poem defines himself not by his ethnic identity but by his existential identity—as an outsider—in a heartless, if vital society.

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, *Riding Into California*, page 934

In this colloquial, gently humorous poem, written in the second person, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim emphasizes the isolation and alienation of California, especially for many immigrants who came there in search of a new life. It is a state where, in her description, the landscape (of oil rigs) is bizarre and unreal. Here, as her line about “The veterans in the mobile home” shows, even the natives feel alienated. But alienation is painfully acute among immigrants such as the speaker. As a newcomer from a very different culture, she feels a pervasive sense of dislocation, which leads her to embrace as a hero someone (martial arts film star Bruce Lee) who, back home, might not interest her, but who in California represents a connection to her native culture. It should be pointed out that the speaker’s alienation does not move her to rage but to a gentle sense of worry, tempered with wit.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “Riding into California.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. **What does the speaker find familiar in California?** The Chinese American / Hong Kong action star Bruce Lee. She finds him familiar, one gathers, solely because he is a Chinese person who has become a prominent part of California’s popular culture; there is no indication that the woman is at all interested in action films.

2. **Why does the speaker long for ancestors and ghosts in California? What does this wish tell us about the speaker’s identity?** Because to her, such things make a place feel real and welcoming. This tells us that she comes from a traditional culture in which ancestors matter and their ghosts are a real and comforting presence.

Francisco X. Alarcón, *The X in My Name*, page 935

Alarcón’s poem is about the relation between one’s name and one’s identity. On a literal level, the X in Alarcón’s name stands presumably as an abbreviation for Xavier (a name that almost always identifies one as being of Catholic background and most commonly Hispanic descent, though many an Irishman bears it, too). But Alarcón sees the letter as a symbol for the X an illiterate peasant must sign on the legal documents that control his or her life. Ultimately, Alarcón also implicitly uses the X (in a way perhaps influenced by Malcolm X) as an algebraic symbol for the elements of his identity lost or repressed in America.

Francisco X. Alarcón teaches at the University of California at Davis. He publishes poetry in both Spanish and English.
Judith Ortiz Cofer, QUINCEÀÑERA, page 935

Cofer creates a wonderfully detailed speaker for this coming-of-age poem—a young woman on the brink of adulthood only half cognizant of the mysteries of her new identities. Still partly a child, the speaker embraces her new self with a mixture of awe, fear, and pride. Her childhood is symbolized by the dolls put in the chest “like dead / children.” The fifteen-year-old now stands in a middle ground between childhood and marriage. Her new status is represented most clearly by the menstrual blood that privately confirms her new status as an adult woman at least partially independent from her mother (who will no longer wash her clothes and sheets). Although on one level the poem presents a universal female situation, the title, images, and mythology are distinctly Latin Catholic. Cofer’s poem demonstrates that a poem does not necessarily lose universality by being embodied in a specific cultural framework. As William Stafford observed, “All events and experiences are local, somewhere.”

Sherman Alexie, THE Powwow at the End of the World, page 936

You will find a biographical note on Sherman Alexie preceding his story “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” in “Stories for Further Reading” in the anthology. Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “The Powwow at the End of the World.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Who, in your opinion, is the “you” of the poem’s refrain? What should be clear enough just from the descriptions within the text (as well as the larger historical context in which it was written) is made inescapable by the references to “we Indians” in line 21 and “my tribe” in the last line: the poem is addressed to those who are not Indians, to the larger American population, the descendants of those who came here and imposed themselves, their ways, and their rules on the ones who were already here.

2. What is it that the speaker is told he “must forgive”? Broadly speaking, the entire history of America’s mistreatment of its native people; more specifically, as shown by the references to dams and reactors, the environmental depredations that have followed the forcible removal of these people from their ancestral homelands and the disruption of their respectful, even reverential treatment of the natural world.

3. The tone of the poem is not overtly angry or bitter. Does that make its statement more effective or less so, in your judgment? Explain. The phrase “and so I shall” at the end of the first line raises the expectation of an accommodating response to the demand for forgiveness, but that assumption is immediately dispelled. By the impossibility of the conditions that follow each repetition of “so I shall after,” the speaker signifies that the transgressions he is told to accept are irreversible and, in fact, ongoing, and therefore unacceptable. His attitude is equivalent to a cry of “When hell freezes over!” or a response of “His victim is still dead” to a convicted killer’s parole application; but, in our view, the quiet fury and controlled rage of Alexie’s poem make for a more effective indictment than would a more obviously angry approach. Clearly, we are not alone in that view. Here is a passage from an
article on the website of the North Carolina Arts Council, posted by state poet laureate Kathryn Stripling Byer; she is describing the state finals of the Poetry Out Loud National Recitation Contest sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, held in Raleigh on February 23, 2008 (the Hart Crane poem, by the way, can also be found in "Poems for Further Reading"): 

Special moments still make my head spin. Cherokee High School student Sara Tramper, second-place winner, offered a stunning reminder of how poetry can enable us to express our deepest selves in ways nothing else can. She dedicated her recitation of “My Grandmother’s Love Letters,” by Hart Crane, to the memory of her own grandmother. Through her pacing, her inflection, and her controlled emotion, she brought this lyrically moving poem to life. From that poem she moved to Sherman Alexie’s mesmerizing chant-poem, “The Powwow at the End of the World.” When she finished, the person behind me whispered, “Wow!” (www.ncarts.org/freeform_scrn_template.cfm?ffscrn_id=281)

You can find a recitation of “The Powwow at the End of the World” by Will Horwath, with an accompanying slideshow presentation by Janet Knell, at <video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1399244527539736240>.

Yusef Komunyakaa, Facing It, page 937

This powerful poem requires little commentary. One feature of the poem wants special mention because students may overlook it: the entire poem describes what the speaker sees on the polished black granite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. What he witnesses there is the combination of the memorial itself and what the mirror-like stone reflects. Reflection (line 6) is therefore the key word in the poem, a word the author uses in both senses, for, as the speaker studies the name on the stone, he reflects on his wartime experience and flashes back to the death of a fellow soldier. The way the stone both mirrors and transforms the reality around it is the external symbol for the speaker’s internal experience.

Gender

Anne Stevenson, Sous-Entendu, page 938

Students will have no trouble understanding the situation of this poem, but you may need to push them to explore the role of language between the two people. Not only does everything the people say (and don’t say) have two meanings—one literal, the other sexual—but the words they speak metaphorically become part of the clothes they remove.

Carolyn Kizer, Bitch, page 939

The speaker imagines the part of her that harbors hostility for an ex as an angry but emotionally needy dog. It is something of an id and ego situation—while she is
polite, the dog within barks, growls, whimpers, slobbers, and even grovels. What seems a humorous conceit at the start becomes touching as the poem fills in the picture of her former life with this man.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “Bitch.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the pun in the title? What does the title tell us about the poem to follow? “Bitch” can mean a female dog and can also be used, uncharitably, to describe a difficult woman. The title suggests we are in for a poem in the voice of a woman who may have been viewed as difficult by her former partner. But Kizer uses the root meaning of “bitch” to create a symbol for her internal emotional turmoil at seeing her former lover.

2. What is the “bitch’s” first reaction to the appearance of the speaker’s old lover? She reacts with anger, barking “hysterically.”

3. How does the speaker outwardly deal with her own lover? How does the reader know she feels differently inside? She is polite, reserved, asking civilized questions about his life. We know she feels differently inside because of what she tells us about the “dog’s” behavior.

4. How does the metaphor of a bitch-hound enhance the emotional meaning of the poem? Would the meaning of the poem be drastically different if it were titled “Dog” instead? The word bitch ties the idea of a “difficult” woman together with the idea of a demonstrative dog. It is important that it’s a female dog: the poem is about the battle of the sexes; a non-gendered dog would not carry the same symbolic weight.

Rafael Campo, For J. W., page 940

The speaker begins with an assertion of certainty and precision—he knows “exactly” what he wants to say; yet the medium of poetry, paradoxically, is too precise to allow him to say it. By the end of the poem he is less certain, and the problem is not the precision of the medium itself but the imprecision of his own poetic efforts. The certain knowledge asserted at the beginning (“I know . . . I know”) falters (“I know, or thought I knew”). He is able to tell us that the “ordinary” became “magnificent” when he met J. W. But beyond that, he has difficulty saying everything he wants to say, and it has something to do with the fact that he and his beloved are both men. Is he saying he suffers from a stereotypically male inability (“frozen hard as ice”) to fully express romantic feelings? Or that in the year 1994 some poetry editors and/or readers might blanch at a too explicit poem about gay male love? Or that, compared to the libraries full of poems and songs about heterosexual love, there is relatively little in the way of same-sex love lyrics for gay men to draw on when they wish to describe how they feel about each other?

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “For J. W.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.
QUESTIONS

1. One rhetorical strategy employed by Campo is the repetition of certain key terms in different contexts. Discuss the poem's use of the words “knew,” “magnificent,” and “ordinary.” He uses the word know or versions thereof several times, describing a movement from knowing to not knowing. He uses magnificent twice, describing how “ordinary” birds became magnificent and how J. W.'s voice was “comforting, magnificent.” And he uses ordinary three times, to describe the birds and sky. Yet beyond pointing to this magical alchemy—the transformation of the ordinary into the magnificent—the speaker is for some reason unable to explain exactly what happened when he met J. W.

2. What does Campo tell us about his sexual identity in line 2? He's gay. Or to be more comprehensive, he is a gay male poet who is trying to develop suitable language to express his love in verse.

3. At the beginning, middle, and end of the poem, there are statements involving poetry and precision. How do the changes that occur in these statements help to communicate the poem's thematic intentions? The changes help convey the idea that it is hard, for some men, or some gay men, to find the words to articulate their love. This difficulty is compounded by a literary tradition that does not afford many useful models.

EXERCISE: Donald Justice, MEN AT FORTY, page 941
Adrienne Rich, WOMEN, page 941

As anyone who tries to translate the images and metaphors of either poem into the voice of the opposite gender discovers, both of these poems are embedded in the sexual identity of the speaker. But the experiences they describe still speak to the opposite sex. The poems' structures do survive the translation, which demonstrates that good art can be both specific and universal.

For an example of how a skilled poet translated one set of these images across genders, here is a poem by Andrea Hollander Budy from her award-winning House Without a Dreamer (Brownsville: Story Line, 1993):

Women at Fifty
after Donald Justice

All of their doors
Have closed and their daughters'
Rooms betray a familiar faint perfume
That says I’ll not be back.

They pause sometimes
At the top of the stairs
To stroke the bannister,
Its perfect knots.

They invite other women now
Only to clean. And like queens in fairy tales
They turn their heads from mirrors
That hold secrets they’ve kept
Even from themselves,
As they look into their husbands' faces
When their husbands say
They only look.

Women at fifty
Corner a cricket with a broom
And do not kill it, but shoo it out of the house
Into the abundant silence.

(Poem reprinted by permission of the author and Story Line Press.)

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY

Brian Turner, THE HURT LOCKER, page 942

The poem draws on the grim knowledge of a soldier who has served in the front lines of a modern war and who knows that, in the words of William Tecumseh Sherman, the Civil War general, “war is hell.” Turner’s speaker has experienced the twenty-first-century version of what Wilfred Owen called “The Pity of War.” He knows that unthinkable and unimaginable things can become terrifyingly real in the combat zone.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “The Hurt Locker.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. Who seems to be the speaker of the poem? What clues does the speaker give about his or her background? The speaker appears to be a soldier. Certainly he reveals himself to be someone who knows what it is like to be on a battlefield; he knows, apparently firsthand, about the horror of snipers, terrorists, and child soldiers. (Brian Turner served in the U.S. Army in Iraq, and the speaker of this poem does seem to be a version of himself.)

2. Where do the memories surfacing in the poem take place? The reference to Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, suggests that the memories draw on experiences in that country.

3. How would you explain the title metaphor? What is a “hurt locker”? A “hurt locker” is an imaginary container in which soldiers place memories that are too unbearable to live with.

4. Based on this poem, how would you say the experience of combat seems to affect personal identity? It is soul shattering, emptying the individual out and leaving them only with pain. (“Nothing left here but the hurt.”)

Katha Pollitt, MIND-BODY PROBLEM, page 943

Pollitt’s poem depicts touch, and the longing for it, as a natural thing. The speaker contrasts her youthful body’s longing with her mind’s “romantic notions,” in the
name of which her younger self denied her body what it wanted. And she explains how today the power balance has shifted—now it’s her aging body calling the shots.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “Mind-Body Problem.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

 QUESTIONS

1. Who is speaking the poem? A “high-minded” woman who regrets having denied her body the pleasures it sought in her youth.

2. What metaphors and similes does Pollitt use to describe the body? She compares the body, with its primal and natural physical urges, to an otter loving water and a giraffe wanting to nuzzle “the tender leaves at the tops of the trees.”

3. What metaphors and similes does Pollitt use to describe the mind? She compares the mind to “a cruel medieval baron” and “an ambitious / English-professor husband ashamed of his wife.” Body and mind together are compared to runaway prisoners handcuffed to each other; and the body is described as dragging the mind like a “swift and powerful dog.” Her mind dominated her body and did not take its needs and impulses seriously.

4. Katha Pollitt is a well-known feminist columnist. In what ways is this poem specifically about female experience? In what ways does it seem to apply to both men and women? Women are traditionally taught to control their urges more than men. But there are many men who also regret that they didn’t gather their rosebuds, and they, too, can relate to Pollitt’s lament. She examines a universal conflict in human existence—the disparity between what the body wants and what the mind intends.

Andrew Hudgins, ELEGY FOR MY FATHER, WHO IS NOT DEAD, page 944

Hudgins’s poem explores religious identity—and, by extension, a generation gap. He and his father see death differently. The father has a devout Christian’s faith in an afterlife; the speaker, by contrast, is not sure. The son is not against his father’s religion; he simply doesn’t share its consolations.

Students can compare the father’s vision of death in this poem with the bleak view of the speaker in Philip Larkin’s “Aubade,” which follows.

Philip Larkin, AUBADE, page 944

“Aubade” was the last substantial poem that Philip Larkin wrote. Except for a few minor short poems and occasional verses, he produced no more poetry in his remaining eight years. “I didn’t abandon poetry,” he later remarked, “it abandoned me.” In this context, it’s hard not to see “Aubade” as a kind of summing up—and if so, what a chilling summation!

“Aubade” is a confessional poem about old age and the fear of death. Larkin’s poems often begin in observation and only midway move into a personal tone. “Aubade” begins with a surprising personal confession (“I work all day and get half
drunk at night”). Waking alone in bed in the middle of the night, the speaker confronts his own mortality and discovers he has no defenses—neither philosophical (“No rational being / Can fear a thing it will not feel” he notes ironically) nor religious (“That vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die”). Larkin sees death without any illusions and can barely survive the vision. Ultimately, he can only resolve to meet it when he must (“Death is no different whined at than withstood”).

The British critic John Bayley sees Larkin’s ability to confront this frightening subject so candidly in poetry as a kind of moral victory. Larkin, Bayley claims, “goes on to descant with an almost joyful eloquence on the fear of death and the terror of extinction. The fear is all too genuine but the fact of the poetry overcomes it.”

WRITERS ON WRITING

Rhina Espaillat, BEING A BILINGUAL WRITER, page 946

This passage from the Afterword to Where Horizons Go (1998), Rhina Espaillat’s second book of poems, is not only an excellent gloss on her poem “Bilingual / Bilingüe” but also an intriguing and enlightening discussion of the dilemma of the bilingual writer. Espaillat shows us how the choice of a language involves so many other, larger choices between cultures and even loved ones, leading to difficulties that are made even more complex by the fact that pure choice—the father’s insistence on an absolute division between the world inside the family’s apartment and the larger alien world that surrounds it—is impossible when one lives in a foreign culture. Instead, one must endlessly negotiate between the two worlds, in a process that brings inevitable stress, confusion, and pain. But in this excerpt, as in the poem, Espaillat stresses her ultimate reconciliation of her two cultures, along with deeper discoveries that this reconciliation provides. As she says elsewhere in the Afterword, “There is a sense in which every poet is bilingual, and those of us who are more overtly so are only living metaphors for the condition that applies to us all.”
Is Poetic Translation Possible?

World Poetry

Li Po, Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon, page 950
Li Po, Yue Xia Du Zhuo/Moon-beneath Alone Drink (Phonetic Transcription of Chinese/Literal Translation, page 951
Li Po, translated by Arthur Waley, Drinking Alone by Moonlight, page 951

The small unit on Li Po (pronounced Lee-Bo) offers a brief introduction to the pleasures and challenges of Chinese poetry, perhaps humanity's longest thriving poetic tradition. The T'ang Dynasty writer Li Po is traditionally considered, with his contemporary Tu Fu, one of China's two greatest poets. We have presented one of his most famous poems in four versions—Chinese characters, phonetic transcription, literal translation, and literary translation. (Note how the original Chinese rhymes, with a regular number of syllables and characters per line.) The central image of the lonely drinker and the moon has a special poignancy in the Chinese literary tradition since the hard-drinking Li Po legendarily died trying to embrace the reflection of the moon in a river.

There are a great many English translations of Li Po. Having read through many alternatives, we chose Arthur Waley's famous version, "Drinking Alone by Moonlight." Quietly lyrical and deftly modulated, Waley's translation reads beautifully as a poem in English. No other translation seems equally faithful to the original or so expressively realized in English. This translation also has a substantial claim to historical importance because Waley (1889–1966), who worked in the Oriental Prints and Drawings department of the British Museum, was perhaps the most influential translator of Chinese poetry in the twentieth century. More even than Ezra Pound, Waley created the English-language conventions by which most subsequent work has been translated.
Comparing Translations

Horace, “CARPE DIEM” Ode (Latin), page 952
Horace, “CARPE DIEM” Ode (Literal Translation), page 952

Quintus Horatius Flaccus, whom we remember as Horace, was the son of a freed slave. Although Horace's father was a poor man, he sacrificed a great deal to give his talented son an excellent education in Rome and Athens. Having served as a soldier on the losing side of the Roman civil wars, Horace returned to find his father dead and their small farm confiscated. He managed to find work as a minor financial clerk and gradually established his reputation as a poet. By the end of his life in 8 B.C., he was one of the most honored authors in the Roman empire. He has never lacked readers since.

This famous short ode created a tradition of lyrics we call carpe diem poems. Although later poets often use the carpe diem line to woo their reluctant lovers, Horace's original is more strictly philosophical. We do not know how long our lives will last, and death is inevitable, so let us enjoy the time we have. (Horace's clear-eyed stoic acceptance of death contrasts interestingly with Larkin's nihilistic terror in “Aubade” in the preceding chapter.) Horace finds joy and meaning in life's uncertainty. No wonder it became the framework for later playful poems such as Marvell's “To His Coy Mistress” and Herrick's “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.”

Horace translated by Edwin Arlington Robinson, HORACE TO LEUCONOE, page 952
Horace translated by A. E. Stallings, A NEW YEAR'S TOAST, page 953

Both translations are excellent—but in different ways. The Robinson (done when he was barely out of school) is straightforward and classical in its approach. A. E. Stallings's recent version of Horace updates the ancient Roman images into au courant equivalents with Psychic Friends, the millennium, and the purported Y2K computer crash all making appearances in her wittily rhymed lines.

Some of the best student poems ever seen by one of the editors of this anthology came from an assignment to “translate this poem into a contemporary American setting, preferably somewhere where you yourself have lived.” (None of the students knew Latin, so they worked with a literal translation plus two poetic versions.) The results were outstanding, and the students were astounded at how many settings appeared to work equally well.
TRANSLATING FORM

Omar Khayyam, RUBAI XII (Persian), page 954
Omar Khayyam, RUBAI XII (Literal Translation), page 954
Omar Khayyam translated by Edward FitzGerald, A BOOK OF VERSES UNDERNEATH THE BOUGH, page 954
Omar Khayyam translated by Dick Davis, I NEED A BARE SUFFICIENCY, page 954
Omar Khayyam translated by Edward FitzGerald, RUBAIYAT, pages 954–955

COME, FILL THE CUP, AND IN THE FIRE OF SPRING
SOME FOR THE GLORIES OF THIS WORLD
THE MOVING FINGER WRITES
AH LOVE! COULD YOU AND I WITH HIM CONSPIRE

It seems worthwhile to let students study the original of the best-known rubai in English (and almost equally famous in Persian). You might point out to the class the poem’s final word in Persian—soltani, a word that exists virtually unaltered in English as sultan.

FitzGerald’s rubaiyat are so intoxicating that we couldn’t resist including a handful of the more celebrated ones; virtually every one of our selections contains a phrase or two that has since passed into the common currency of our language. The music of FitzGerald’s translation should not distract you entirely from Dick Davis’s ingeniously faithful version, which even duplicates the original’s quadruple rime. (Davis teaches Persian literature at Ohio State University and is a considerable poet in his own right.)

PARODY

Ezra Pound, in his ABC of Reading, urges students of poetry to write parodies of any poems they find ridiculous, then submit their parodies to other students to be judged. “The gauging pupil should be asked to recognize what author is parodied. And whether the joke is on the parodied or the parodist. Whether the parody exposes a real defect, or merely makes use of an author’s mechanism to expose a more trivial content.”

Anonymous, WE FOUR LADS FROM LIVERPOOL ARE, page 956

The origin of this jingle among children who sang it (to the familiar tune of “We Three Kings of Orient Are”) on the streets of Edinburgh, about 1963 when the Beatles became popular, is attested to by the folklorist James T. R. Ritchie in The Singing Street (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1964). Clearly, even Christmas carols are fair game to jejune British parodists. Another classic, current at the time of the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936, goes, “Hark, the herald angels sing: / Missus Simpson’s pinched our king!”
Hugh Kingsmill, *What, Still Alive at Twenty-Two?*, page 956

Kingsmill's insistence on dying young suggests "To an Athlete Dying Young," but the parodist grossly exaggerates Housman's hint of nihilism. Like bacon, Kingsmill's lad will be "cured"—of the disease of life. (And how often Housman himself says *lad* by the way.) His metaphysical conceit of ink and blotting pad coarsens Housman's usual view of night and day. (Some comparable Housman lines, from "Reveille": "Wake: the silver dusk returning / Up the beach of darkness brims, / And the ship of sunrise burning / Strands upon the eastern rims."

Andrea Paterson, *Because I Could Not Dump*, page 957

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of "Because I could not Dump." Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. What poet and poem is being parodied? (Hint: Look in the Index under *Dickinson*.) Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death."

2. What elements does Paterson keep from the original? What new elements does she add? Paterson retains the four-line stanza form as well as Dickinson's distinctive punctuation (that is, her generous use of dashes) and idiosyncratic capitalization. But she introduces contemporary, comic details that jar humorously against the original. The speaker is chauffeured not by Death but by a garbage collector—and the smells of rubbish, references to dumpsters, and the like draw an earthy picture that is very far removed indeed from the lofty cosmic thoughts of the original. Yet for all the low humor, the theme here, too, is mortality, the cycle of life, the inevitability of spoilage and decay and, yes, death, as represented by the dead cats and "maggot-lined cans": this poem is a contemplation of the detritus of everyday existence in which the journey's destination—a dump—is depicted as a sort of grave.

3. What tricks does Paterson use to turn an originally dark poem into a funny one? She replaces Death, personified as a carriage driver, with a garbage collector. All the details of the original, which have grim symbolic meaning, are replaced with realistic contemporary details that have a comic effect.

Harryette Mullen, *Dim Lady*, page 957

Brief answers to the questions given at the end of "Dim Lady":

**QUESTIONS**

1. Compare "Dim Lady" with William Shakespeare's sonnet "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." What characteristics of Shakespeare's sonnet does Mullen convey? In Shakespeare's sonnet, the speaker uses elevated language and traditionally poetic details (the sun, coral, snow) to describe his beloved;
Mullen chooses vulgar terms (peepers, kisser, racks) for body parts, which she likens to highly unpoetic everyday items and phenomena (neon, Red Lobster, Liquid Paper). Still, the basic argument of Mullen’s poem is the same as Shakespeare’s: body part by body part, my beloved may not measure up to the objects to which beautiful women are conventionally compared, but she is nonetheless extraordinary in her very own way, and brings me happiness, and I do not need to make ridiculous claims for her.

2. Compare Mullen’s update of Shakespeare’s love language with Howard Moss’s version of Shakespeare’s sonnet “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Which do you prefer? Mullen’s language is aggressively vulgar; Moss’s is just colloquial. Which one to prefer? That’s a matter of individual taste. One reader might prefer Mullen’s poem for the humor (although it might be considered heavy-handed and static: once you’ve gotten the joke, it’s the same thing over and over to the end); another might prefer Moss’s because it’s a poem that has the virtues of rime and rhythm and that, while not laugh-out-loud funny, exhibits a light, easy wit.

Gene Fehler, IF RICHARD LOVELACE BECAME A FREE AGENT, page 958

The target of Fehler’s satire has only become more vulnerable since 1984. Professional baseball has lost its innocence. Although there is no less joy in Mudville, a baseball-addicted poetry lover will find much pleasure in the work of Gene Fehler, the poet laureate of American baseball, whose work often appears in baseball journals and anthologies. His collection Center Field Grasses: Poems from Baseball (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991) is especially delightful for its parodies of sixty classic poems, including “A Certain Slant of Curve,” “On First Looking at a Mantle Homer,” “A Noiseless Patient Owner,” “The Lead Rises, the League Falls,” and “Song of the Open Base.”

Aaron Abeyta, THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A TORTILLA, page 958

Abeyta’s Latino parody of Wallace Stevens’s Modernist classic may invite your students to try their hand at a similar revision—perhaps even as an in-class writing assignment. One thing Abeyta’s parody demonstrates is the strength of great syntax and form. Even rewritten with entirely new images, Stevens’s original form carries the new meanings strongly along.
Writers on Writing

Arthur Waley, The Method of Translation, page 960

Waley’s comments, like those of many another translator, provide for the rest of us—who might otherwise tend to assume that translation is a simple matter of word-by-word substitution—an interesting glimpse into the actual complexities of translation, especially of poetry. After reading the translations in this chapter, would you agree with Waley that “the restrictions of rhyme necessarily injure either the vigor of one’s language or the literalness of one’s version”? 
POETRY IN SPANISH:
LITERATURE OF
LATIN AMERICA

Sor Juana, PRESENTE EN QUE EL CARIÑO HACE REGALO LA LLANEZA
(A SIMPLE GIFT MADE RICH BY AFFECTION)
translated by Diane Thiel, page 965

One might find it surprising that Sor Juana, a Catholic sister, wrote such a great volume of love poetry. The intensity of the passion in her poems is extraordinarily memorable.

Sor Juana's characteristic wordplay is quite evident in this text. The husk in the poem seems to be the thorny self, the exterior that contains the chestnut. Perhaps the chestnut is the love the speaker has to give, or the speaker's spirit, while the husk represents the difficult aspects of the speaker's nature, of which she is well aware. The Sor Juana poem included here feels like a correspondence, either a missive actually sent or a love poem with a specific recipient.

Note that the translator has chosen to re-create the wordplay in English and has also re-created the tight rhyme schemes characteristic of Sor Juana's work and her era. One might ask students about different translators' choices throughout the chapter.

Pablo Neruda, MUCHOS SOMOS (WE ARE MANY)
translated by Alastair Reid, page 966

"Muchos Somos" is not merely one of Neruda's most famous poems, it is also among his most deeply characteristic. It reveals his open, exuberant, and personable poetic voice. One can see the influence of Walt Whitman in this poem. Compare Neruda's multiple personalities to Whitman's famous confession in Song of Myself: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"

Alastair Reid's translation wonderfully captures the verve of the Spanish, but it remains important that we hear the poem in the original language. For classroom discussion, ask a student to read the Spanish aloud. (If you have native Spanish speakers in class, don't miss the chance to let them recite it.) The sonorous resonance of Neruda's language will be obvious even to students who have no Spanish.

It might also be worthwhile to ask if students have seen the Italian film Il Postino (The Postman), an Academy Award nominee for best film in 1995. Although fictionalized, the film presents Neruda's political exile in Italy. Il Postino did a marvelous job of portraying Neruda's life-affirming, imaginative exuberance.
Jorge Luis Borges, *On His Blindness (English and Spanish)*
translated by Robert Mezey, page 968

Jorge Luis Borges was deeply influenced by English language poetry. He learned English as a child and had a life-long relationship with the classics of English and American literature. Although most people think of Borges primarily as a fiction writer, the author considered himself primarily as a poet. As Borges lost his sight, it was natural for him to look to the example of John Milton. In this late sonnet published one year before his death, Borges invokes Milton’s great sonnet on blindness to describe the contraction of his daily world.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “On His Blindness.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Borges’s Spanish original has an English title. Why would he use English? (Hint: Look under John Milton in the Index.) He uses English as a way of indicating that his poem is an answer to, or was influenced by, Milton’s poem “When I consider how my light is spent.” In his blindness Borges remembers and honors Milton, a poet who wrote his greatest work while blind.

2. What is the form of the poem? It is a sonnet (though the Spanish original is more regular in its rime scheme than is the English translation).

3. What images and metaphors does Borges use to describe his blindness? He compares his blindness to a fog or mist—a fog “of constant, tentative light”—that is at once unchanging and uncertain. He also offers provocative images—a closed encyclopedia, unseen birds, an invisible moon—to suggest the impact of his disability.

Octavio Paz, *Con Los Ojos Cerrados (With Eyes Closed)*
translated by Eliot Weinberger, page 969

This short poem by the Nobel laureate Octavio Paz is simple enough that anyone with basic Spanish can follow it in the original. (The original text will also give any native Spanish speakers in your class a chance to show off their bilingual abilities.) The poem explores a paradoxical conceit: in shutting oneself off from physical light, one can experience an inner light. Becoming a “blind stone” to the outside, “you light up within.” The second stanza turns the metaphor erotic, although Paz is deliberately ambiguous about whether the lovers are together or apart. “Night after night” the speaker re-creates his love with his eyes shut—perhaps carving her features from memory or perhaps touching her with his hands. The final stanza celebrates how the lovers enlarge their existence by knowing one another "with eyes closed."
SURREALISM IN LATIN AMERICAN POETRY

César Vallejo, LA CÓLERA QUE QUIEBRA AL HOMBRE EN NIÑOS (ANGER) translated by Thomas Merton, page 971

Vallejo’s poem is an extraordinary example of surrealism, where sense is made by that which doesn’t make sense. The progression of anger breaking a man into children, which break into birds and then eggs, sets up the reader’s expectations in the poem. One feels the intensity of “anger,” the manifestation of which often has precisely such a surreal quality; it breaks a person down into pieces.

Students might be asked what kind of meaning they glean from such bizarre, surreal images and assertions. Do they “feel” the poem even as they struggle to make sense of it?

CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN POETRY

José Emilio Pacheco, ALTA TRAICIÓN (HIGH TREASON) translated by Alastair Reid, page 972

Pacheco is a Mexican poet who has chosen to work in the United States, and he currently teaches at the University of Maryland. He writes in Spanish, but he collaborated with the noted poet-translator Alastair Reid (himself an immigrant from Scotland) on the English versions of his poems. Pacheco’s presence in the anthology (along with the inclusion of writers such as Octavio Paz, Rhina Espaillat, Derek Walcott, and Claude McKay—not to mention Alastair Reid) highlights the importance of immigrants and foreign expatriates in our literary culture.

Pacheco’s poem should require little gloss, but the effective and subtle irony of the opening probably deserves a moment’s consideration in class to show how irony can be used rhetorically. By saying “I do not love my country” in a poem that celebrates his love for his homeland, Pacheco effectively qualifies the nature of his affection. It is not conventional patriotism but love for its particulars.

It is worth noting that although the poem presumably celebrates Mexico, its images are deliberately universal. It could be describing Finland or China. The title of this poem is also ironic: Pacheco’s treason is a personal love for his country.

Pedro Serrano, GOLONDRINAS (SWALLOWS) translated by Anna Crowe, page 972

Serrano is a prominent Mexican poet, critic, translator, and anthologist. He has published several collections of poetry in Spanish, written an opera libretto, translated Shakespeare’s King John into Spanish, authored critical studies of T. S. Eliot and Octavio Paz, and edited anthologies, including a bilingual anthology of contemporary British poetry. Educated at the universities of London and Mexico, he teaches at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City and edits the uni-
versity’s online poetry journal Periodico de Posia. In 2007 Serrano won the Guggenheim Fellowship for poetry. “Swallows” is one of many poems by Serrano that have been translated into English.

Brief answer to the question given at the end of “Golondrinas”: What is the simile Serrano uses initially to describe the swallows? What is his simile for their final absence? He describes them at first as clothes-peg. When they disappear, he compares their absence to the quiet following a Sunday wedding in a Mexican village.

_Tedi López Mills, CONVALECENCIA (CONVALESCENCE)_
translated by Cheryl Clark, page 973

“Convalescence” comes closer than most of the poems in the anthology to the condition of “pure poetry”—that is, poetry which essentially uses imagery to create a mood or convey a sensation with little, if anything, in the way of larger thematic intent, thus fulfilling Archibald MacLeish’s famous dictum that begins his “Ars Poetica”: “A poem should not mean / But be.” With a series of auditory images intended to produce an effect equivalent to that of chalk screeching on a blackboard, López Mills conveys the heightened sensitivity and irritability of someone recovering from an illness, for whom the common noises of the daily round—as hinted at by the epigraph from the great Spanish poet Antonio Machado—become almost unendurable assaults. The insistently repeated first is intended, of course, to communicate the raw newness of each offense to the nerves, before the senses have an opportunity to accommodate and adjust to the intrusion.

_WRITERS ON WRITING_

_Alastair Reid, TRANSLATING NERUDA_, page 974

Reid’s illuminating memoir of translating Neruda gives us an intimate glimpse of how one poet translates another. Reid’s entire memoir, which also discusses his long working relationship as a translator of Jorge Luis Borges, is well worth reading. It originally appeared in the June 24, 1996, issue of the _New Yorker_.

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Ezra Pound long argued for the value of bad poetry in pedagogy. In his ABC of Reading, Pound declared that literary education needs to concentrate on revealing what is sham so that the student may be led to discover what is valid. It is a healthy gesture to let the student see that we don’t believe everything contained in a textbook to be admirable. Begin with a poem or two so outrageously awful that the least sophisticated student hardly can take it seriously—some sentimental claptrap such as Cook’s “The Old Arm-Chair.” From these, you can proceed to subtler examples. It is a mistake to be too snide or too self-righteous toward bad poems, and it is well to turn quickly to some excellent poetry if the classroom starts smelling like a mortuary. There is a certain sadness inherent in much bad poetry; one can readily choke on it. As Allen Tate has said, the best attack upon the bad is the loving understanding of the good. The aim in teaching bad poetry has to be the admiration of good poetry, not the diffusion of mockery.


Anonymous, O MOON, WHEN I GAZE ON THY BEAUTIFUL FACE, page 976
Glorious behind seems inexact, and so does boundaries for “boundlessness.”

Emily Dickinson, A DYING TIGER – MOANED FOR DRINK, page 977
This is not, by any stretch of the critical imagination, a good poem. Besides the poet’s innocent lack of perception that His Mighty Balls suggests not eyeballs but testicles, the concluding statement (that the fact that the tiger was dead is to blame) seems an
un-Dickinsonian failure of invention. Perhaps the poet intended a religious allegory (Christ the Tiger). Her capitalization of He in the last line doesn’t seem sufficient proof of such intent, for her habits of capitalization cannot be trusted for consistency.

The failures of splendid poets are fascinating. As in this case, they often seem to result from some tremendous leap that sails over and beyond its object, with the poet crashing to earth on the other side.

**EXERCISE: Ten Terrible Moments in Poetry, pages 977**

J. Gordon Coogler, a printer by trade, was said to have displayed a sign in the window of his print shop in Columbia, South Carolina: “POEMS WRITTEN WHILE YOU WAIT.”

For Byron’s rousing lines, we have to thank Walter H. Bishop of Atlanta, for whom this discovery won first prize in a contest to find the worst lame verse by a well-known poet, conducted by John Shelton Reed in Chronicles. (The results were reported in the magazine’s issue of November 1986.)

Mattie J. Peterson has attracted fierce partisans, some of whom see her battling Julia A. Moore for the crown of Queen of American Bad Verse. Richard Walser has brought out a modern facsimile of her 1890 book, Little Pansy, A Novel, and Miscellaneous Poetry (Charlotte: McNally & Loftin, 1967).

Francis Saltus Saltus is the rediscovery of Nicholas T. Parsons in The Joy of Bad Verse (London: Collins, 1988). We lifted the two excerpts from Parsons’s splendid anthology, and it was a temptation to lift a third:

> Oh! such a past can not be mute,
> Such bliss can not be crushed in sorrow,
> Although thou art a prostitute
> And I am to be hanged tomorrow.

Saltus regarded himself as a rakehell. As C. T. Kindilien has observed, “Although he idealized cigarette-smoking women, looked for pornography in the Bible, and honored Baudelaire, Gerard de Nerval, and Le Marquis de Sade, he never escaped the tone of the boy who expected any moment to be caught smoking behind the barn” (American Poetry in the Eighteen-Nineties [Brown UP, 1956] 188–89).

**SENTIMENTALITY**

**Rod McKuen, THOUGHTS ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT, page 979**

**William Stafford, TRAVELING THROUGH THE DARK, page 980**

McKuen is popular with some students, and any dogmatic attempt to blast him may be held against you. There may be value in such a confrontation, of course; or you can leave evaluation of these two works up to the class. Just work through McKuen’s effusion and Stafford’s fine poem, detail by detail, in a noncommittal way, and chances are good that Stafford will win the contest.

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It may not be apparent that Stafford's poem is ordered by a rime scheme from beginning to end: \textit{abcb} stanzas and a final couplet. Stafford avoids obvious rimes in favor of the off-rimes \textit{road/dead} and \textit{engine/listen} and the cutoff rimes \textit{killing/belly}, \textit{waiting/hesitated}, and \textit{swerving/river}—this last a device found in some folk ballads. McKuen's poem announces an obvious rime scheme but fails to complete it. Unlike Stafford, he throws rime out the window in the end, with the effect that his poem stops with a painful inconclusiveness.

Stafford contributed a long comment on his poem to Reading Modern Poetry: A Critical Introduction, Paul Engle and Warren Carrier, eds. (Glenview: Scott, 1968):

Two other considerations deserve emphasis in accounting for this poem. The first is that telling it consisted from the first in simply delivering how it was to stand there in the dark with the deer; not till the account took shape did I become aware of patterns which could be identified as symbolic. My first impulse was toward narrative: once I saw the parallels looming along that narrative thread, I did not deny nor try to avoid them, but my only guide in the telling was to \textit{grop}e for \textit{how it was}. The other consideration is about form, and in a sense about wording—about intensifying the verbal voltage of the poem: much of the syllable-help, the sound-reinforcement, arrives with the thought in the telling; but any regularizing of the pattern (second and fourth lines with near rhyme, for instance) comes from a kind of non-desperate, even confident juggling. All such decisions offer themselves to the writer, and he can welcome gains and give up certain sacrifices with an almost relaxed feeling of consideration—a process different from the more adventurous and hazardous feel of the first telling, the discovery of the main narrative.

RECOGNIZING EXCELLENCE

\textbf{William Butler Yeats, SAILING TO BYZANTIUM, page 981}

Has XJK implied that this poem is a masterpiece so far beyond reproach that no one in his right mind can find fault with it? That is, of course, not the truth. If the instructor wishes to provoke students to argument, he or she might read them the withering attack on Yeats's poem by Yvor Winters (\textit{Forms of Discovery} [Chicago: Swallow, 1967] 215–16).

This attack really needs to be read in its entirety. Winters is wrong, we believe, but no one can begin to answer his headstrong objections to the poem without being challenged and illuminated.

A deconstructionist reading of “Sailing to Byzantium,” subjecting the poem to relentless questioning, showing where it fails to make sense and how it doesn’t work, is offered by Lawrence I. Lipking in “The Practice of Theory” (in Profession 83: Selected Articles from the Bulletins of the Association of Departments of English and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages, MLA, 1983). But in his role as a poststructuralist, Lipking confesses himself “a sheep commissioned to say something sympathetic about wolves.” He finds that deconstructionist tactics offend his students, especially the bright, idealistic ones who expect their teachers to show them why certain works are great, and who wish poems to “make sense” and to relate to their own lives.

Jean Bauso has used a writing assignment to introduce this challenging poem. “I want you to pretend that you’re an old person—someone in his or her eighties,” she tells a class. “You’ve got arthritis, so buttoning or zipping your clothes is slow. Now you will write for ten minutes nonstop in the voice of this old person that you’ve made yourself into. You want to follow your person’s stream of consciousness as he or she sits there thinking about the human condition, about the fact that we human beings have to die.” After the students freewrite for ten minutes, they read a few of the results, and she picks up on any comments about wishing for immortality. Then she asks for responses to the name “Byzantium,” perhaps holding up pictures of the Santa Sophia mosaics. She then reads “Sailing to Byzantium” aloud, gives out reading sheets with points for reading it alone, and dismisses the class. For Bauso’s detailed account of this lesson plan and her reading sheets, see “The Use of Free-Writing and Guided Writing to Make Students Amenable to Poems,” Exercise Exchange (Spring 1988).
has seen better days, and soon (we infer) the sands will finish covering it. Obviously, the king's proud boast has been deflated, and yet, in another sense, Ozymandias is right. The Mighty (or any traveler) may well despair for themselves and their own works, as they gaze on the wreckage of his one surviving project and realize that, cruel as Ozymandias may have been, time is even more remorseless.

What are the facts behind Shelley's poem? According to the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, Ozymandias was apparently a grand, poeticized name claimed for himself by the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II. Diodorus Siculus saw the king's ninety-foot-tall statue of himself, carved by the sculptor Memnon, in the first century B.C. when it was still standing at the Ramesseum in Thebes, a mortuary temple. Shelley and his friend Horatio Smith had read a description of the shattered statue in Richard Pococke's Description of the East (1742). Smith and Shelley wrote sonnets expressing their imagined views of the wreckage, both of which Leigh Hunt printed in his periodical the Examiner in 1818. This is Smith's effort, and students might care to compare it with Shelley's:

**On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt**

In Egypt's sandy silence, all alone,
Stands a gigantic leg, which far off throws
The only shadow that the desert knows.
'I am great Ozymandias,' saith the stone,
'The king of kings: this mighty city shows
The wonders of my hand.' The city's gone!—
Nought but the leg remaining to disclose
The site of that forgotten Babylon.

We wonder, and some hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when through the wilderness,
Where London stood, holding the wolf in chase,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What powerful but unrecorded race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.


**MyLiteratureLab** Resources. Biographical information and links for Shelley. Audio clip, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “Ozymandias.”

**Robert Hayden, FREDERICK DOUGLASS, page 985**

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was born into slavery in Tuckahoe, Maryland. The son of a slave woman and a white man, probably a slave owner, he was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. Separated in infancy from his mother, he was moved at about age six to a plantation whose owner may have been his father. After his owner's death, he passed into the hands of relatives of his owner, Hugh and
Sophia Auld, the latter of whom taught him the alphabet. He then passed through the hands of several other masters, including one who beat him regularly.

At twenty, Frederick made a bold, life-changing decision: dressed in a sailor’s uniform and carrying false identification papers, he escaped to safety in New York. There he took the name “Douglass” (from the hero of Sir Walter Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake*), married a free black woman, and moved to Massachusetts, where he began to give lectures promoting the abolitionist cause. His powerful oratory persuaded many Northerners of the evils of slavery.

Douglass’s first and best-known book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), profoundly influenced public debates about slavery. After its publication he fled to England—as an escaped slave, he was at risk of being captured by slave traders—but returned to the U.S. after wealthy friends purchased his freedom. During the Civil War he was consulted by President Lincoln; after the war he was named U.S. Marshal for the District of Columbia. In his later years Douglass continued to advocate for the rights of African Americans and of women; in 1881 he published *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. He died in 1895.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “Frederick Douglass.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. **What is unusual about the sentence structure of this poem?** The poem, despite its length, consists of only two long and intricate sentences. And the second sentence is not, grammatically speaking, a sentence, but a sentence fragment; if it were punctuated correctly, it would be a subordinate clause and thus an integral part of the previous sentence. So the entire poem is really, grammatically, a single sentence, the main statement being “This man / shall be remembered.”

2. **What is the “it” repeatedly invoked in the poem?** Freedom—a liberty acquired at terrible cost.

3. **When will this “it” be realized?** Only when all are free to lead lives of genuine self-realization and liberty.

*Elizabeth Bishop, One Art, page 985*

Like Thomas’s “Do not go gentle,” this villanelle manages to say something that matters while observing the rules of a tricky French courtly form. (For remarks on the villanelle and on writing it, see the entry on Thomas’s poem in this manual.) A similar feat is performed in Bishop’s ingenious recollection of childhood, “Sestina.”

Question: What varieties of loss does the poet mention? (She goes from trivial loss—lost door keys—to lost time, to losing beloved places and homes, to loss of love.)

In recalling that she has lost a continent, the poet may be speaking personally: she lived in Brazil for many years, and wrote this poem after returning to America. Early in life, Bishop knew severe losses. Her father died when she was eight months old; when she was five, her mother was confined to an institution.

Perceptively, the Irish poet and critic Eavan Boland has likened “One Art” to Bishop’s “Sestina,” remarking that “it is obvious that [the poet] entrusted some of her
deepest implications of loss to two of the most intricate game forms in poetry.” However, she finds differences between the two works: “‘Sestina’ is packed with desolate halftones, dropped hints, and the incantatory shadows of nursery rhymes. It manages to convey, at one and the same time, that there is sorrow, yes, and loss, yes, but that they are imperfectly understood. Therefore the poem operates at two different levels. Within it a terrible sorrow is happening. But the teakettle keeps boiling, the cup is full of tea, the stove is warm. Only we, outside the poem, get the full meaning of it all. ‘One Art’ is quite different. . . . The tone, which is both casual and direct, is deliberately worked against the form, as it is not in ‘Sestina.’ Once again, Bishop shows that she is best able to display feeling when she can constrain it most.” (We quote from her fine essay on Bishop’s work, “Time, Memory, and Obsession,” PN Review [Nov.–Dec. 1991] 18–24.)

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Bishop. Longman Lecture and critical essay on “One Art.”

John Keats, Ode to a Nightingale, page 986

In the single year of 1819, John Keats wrote almost all of the great poems on which his reputation rests, including “The Eve of St. Agnes,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode to a Nightingale,” “To Autumn,” and the sonnet “Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art.” These poems would have been amazing achievements from the hand of any writer at any age, but they are all the more astonishing when we consider that, when he wrote them, Keats was only twenty-three years old.

Several of his finest works are concerned in large part with the theme of death. When students have been acquainted with the facts of Keats’s life, they often assume that this preoccupation was based entirely on his awareness that he himself was living in the shadow of an inevitable early demise, but this is not the case. It is true that Keats had begun to show early symptoms of the disease that had harrowed his family when, in December 1818, tuberculosis took the life of his brother Tom—whom the poet may very well have had in mind when he wrote the third stanza of the “Ode to a Nightingale,” with its references to “The weariness, the fever, and the fret . . . / Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” (lines 23 and 26). But at the time of writing the poem, Keats did not regard himself as mortally ill. It was not until February 3, 1820—just over a year before his death—that a coughing fit led him to hemorrhage some dark arterial blood; with his medical training, he recognized the gravity of the situation, and he told his friend Charles Armitage Brown, “That drop of blood is my death-warrant; I must die.”

Keats’s biographer Andrew Motion, who has thoroughly researched every aspect of his subject’s life, goes even further along these lines:

Keats only accepted at the end of his life that he was doomed to die of tuberculosis. Without stethoscopes and X-rays he could not be certain of his condition; without the knowledge that tuberculosis was infectious, he could not even be sure that his nursing of Tom had been dangerous. (Keats, London: Faber, 1997. 361).
Thus, you should suggest to your students that—again, as the third stanza makes clear—Keats is writing not about the prospect of his own approaching death, but about human mortality in general. It did not require his grim self-diagnosis to convince Keats that he would someday die. And remember that he was writing at a time when early death was a much more frequent visitor than it is today, and thus much more of a presence in people’s consciousness.

In the seventh stanza, when the speaker famously addresses the nightingale with “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird! / No hungry generations tread thee down” (lines 61–62), he is performing a kind of poetic and imaginative sleight of hand. Clearly, the individual bird whose song has so deeply stirred him is no more immortal than he is; if anything, the bird will have a much shorter and more dangerous existence than the man listening to it sing. What the speaker is contrasting with his own death-haunted state is the immortality of the nightingale’s song, which has presumably remained unchanged throughout the ages (as the rest of the stanza suggests), and which is part of the larger deathless continuum of nature itself.

As the poem begins, the speaker plunges us immediately into his emotional condition: heartsore and pained by “a drowsy numbness,” he feels drugged and listless. In the second stanza, he toys with the idea of wine—as both a stimulant to his dulled senses and a means of escape from his burdensome reality into the freedom from consciousness that the bird’s song represents for him. In the fourth stanza, he rejects alcohol and determines to make his leap from reality “on the viewless wings of Poesy, / Though the dull brain perplexes and retards” (lines 33–34). In the very next line, through a supreme act of imagination, he is “Already with thee,” commencing a passage of nearly forty lines that is one of the most superbly sustained flights of sensuous description in all of Keats—and, indeed, in all of poetry. As the reverie builds to its paean to the immortality of the nightingale’s song, “The same that oft-times hath / Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn” (lines 68–70), in a stunning moment, the mood is suddenly shattered by the word forlorn itself. Its mournful syllables and plaintive meanings leave the speaker—and the reader—to once more confront poetry’s inability to take us out of ourselves and away from our concerns for more than the briefest of moments.

—Michael Palma

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of “Ode to a Nightingale.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. In the opening stanza to what things does the speaker compare the effect of the nightingale’s song? He compares the effect of the song—which, he says, makes his heart ache and fills him with a “drowsy numbness”—to drinking hemlock or some other opiate. The speaker describes the song as taking him “Lethe-wards,” which is to suggest that the song helps him forget life’s sorrows. The seemingly magical nature of this process is underscored by his comparison of the bird to a Dryad—a wood nymph out of Greek mythology.

2. Why does the speaker desire wine in stanza two? Because it would help him to withdraw mentally from the world and get lost in the song of the nightingale.
Note that he doesn’t just want any wine, moreover: he wants one whose taste would bring to mind the colorful flowers of the countryside—specifically the countryside of the warm Mediterranean countries (“the warm south”), which he imagines as being full of dance and song and joy. As he has compared the bird to a mythical wood nymph, so he compares the wine he desires to the waters of the Hippocrene, the sacred fountain of mythology, which, the Greeks believed, inspired the writing of poetry.

3. What are the worldly troubles and sorrows the speaker wishes to escape?
The world is a place of “weariness,” “fever,” and “fret” (line 23), where people become sick—“palsy shakes a few” (line 25), grow old—“youth grows pale, and spectre-thin” (line 26), and have too many sad thoughts on their minds—“but to think is to be full of sorrow” (line 27). As youth fades, moreover, so do beauty (“Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes”) and love.

4. Why can’t the speaker (in stanza V) see the flowers at his feet or in the branches above him? Because “there is no light”; he is in what he calls “embalmed darkness.”

5. What specifically is the attraction the speaker feels for death? Death brings an end to pain: “seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain” (lines 55–56). Keats’s ode is a classic expression of the death wish in which one sees death as a rest from the exhaustion and pain of existence. This is not a suicidal impulse, but rather a more generalized fantasy of escape from life’s turmoil.

6. How could the nightingale singing in the poem be the same voice heard in the ancient world? What point is Keats making about the permanence of nature? All music, all beauty, are part of undying nature. Nature, for Keats, is eternal; the bird is not a mortal creature who will die just as he will die, but is part of a natural world that knows no death.

7. By the time Keats wrote this poem, he knew he might die young from tuberculosis. Do you see any evidence of this knowledge in the text of the poem? The line about how “youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,” reads like a vision of his own fate. It is also a vivid recollection of the death of Keats’s brother Tom (see introductory note above). The speaker is clearly haunted by the image of suffering and death. Otherwise, it seems strange for a young man to say that even “to think is to be full of sorrow.”

8. What is your favorite line or lines from the ode? The choice is, of course, personal, but give your reasons, if possible, for your choice. There is no single answer to this open question, but here are two of our favorites. The line “I have been half in love with easeful Death” (line 52) is famous; it is a perfect pentameter line, and a striking one, thanks largely to the surprising word “easeful.” “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!” (line 61) is also a famous line, which quite neatly sums up the Romantic poets’ sensibility, viewing a bird not as a mortal being but as a part of undying nature. Also note the words “tender is the night,” which F. Scott Fitzgerald borrowed for the title for his famous novel.

MyLiteratureLab® Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Keats.
Walt Whitman, O CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!, page 989

This formerly overrated poem is uncharacteristic of Whitman in its neatly shaped rимing stanzas and in its monotonously swinging observation of iambic meter, so inappropriate to a somber elegy. The one indication that an excellent poet wrote it is the sudden shift of rhythm in the short lines that end each stanza—particularly in line 5, with the unexpected turning-on of heavy stresses: “Oh heart! heart! heart!”

Dylan Thomas, IN MY CRAFT OR SULLEN ART, page 990

William Butler Yeats’s involvement in the day-to-day business affairs of Dublin’s Abbey Theatre is often cited as a factor in his poetry’s transition from a sort of dreamy mysticism to a more sinewy style and more realistically grounded content. Analogously, Andrew Sinclair, one of Dylan Thomas’s more recent biographers—after stating that “in 1945, Dylan wrote his two masterpieces, ‘Fern Hill’ and ‘In My Craft or Sullen Art’”—offers the following comment as a lead-in to his quotation of the first eleven lines of the latter poem:

A reading of the poems in Deaths and Entrances, which was printed in 1946 and set the seal of critical approval on Dylan’s reputation, showed how Dylan’s hack-work on film-scripts and reviews and occasional prose pieces for broadcasting had wonderfully improved the clarity of his verse. The balance and ease and sensuousness of “Poem in October” and “Fern Hill” were the true labours of a man who had grown out of the willful obscurities of youth into the careful simplicities of age. The young Dylan would not have dared to be as direct and romantic as the mature poet in his contemplation of his work.

(Dylan the Bard, New York: St. Martin’s, 1999. 144–45)

You can see and hear numerous clips of Dylan Thomas reading “In My Craft or Sullen Art” online at YouTube.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of “In My Craft or Sullen Art.” Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What plays on words do you find in craft (line 1), trade (line 8), and charms (line 8)? Craft can denote both artistry (craftsmanship) and guile (craftiness). Trade suggests both a swap or exchange and one’s line of work. Charms brings to mind both trinkets and magical spells. All of these meanings have some relevance in the context of the poem.

2. Why does the speaker describe his art as sullen? In contemporary usage, the word means “sulky, ill-humored”; taken in that sense, it might connect the poet-speaker with the raging moon and the lovers “[w]ith all their griefs in their arms.” But the derivation of the word, as given in the American Heritage Dictionary of the
English Language, Fourth Edition (2009), offers another angle of interpretation: “Middle English solein, from Anglo-Norman solein, alone, from sol, single, from Latin solus, by oneself alone.”

3. How would you interpret lines 15–16? Almost inevitably, the word nightingales calls to mind John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” and perhaps even William Butler Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” with its mechanical golden singing bird; both of these great poems pursue an end of suffering through things that transcend the human—not unlike the heaven that is exalted by psalms. Thus, the speaker might be seen here as standing apart from these “towering dead” poets and mystics who turned toward a peace beyond our human woes, and instead making common cause with the lovers who are helplessly enmeshed in life’s “griefs.”

4. In light of the assumption made in the last two lines, why do you think the speaker goes on writing? For the true artist, the creation of the work—no matter who its intended audience may be—is ultimately an end in itself and its own reward. And even if the lovers he seeks to console pay him no heed, it seems that it is only through the practice of his art that the speaker is able to find any consolation for his own griefs.

EXERCISE: Reevaluating Popular Classics, pages 991

Paul Laurence Dunbar, We Wear the Mask, page 992

Nowadays, Paul Laurence Dunbar is perhaps most frequently perceived as the author of a great deal of conventional and undistinguished verse in standard English and of ballads in African American dialect that are sometimes labored, often mawkish, and, to some, cringe-inducing. According to this view, his popularity in his own time was inflated by shallow standards and by allowances made for him because of his race, and contemporary interest in him is based more on historical and ethnic considerations than on aesthetic ones.

While there may be some truth to this (admittedly exaggerated) characterization, it is ultimately unfair to Dunbar. His 1902 novel, The Sport of the Gods, is a strong, well-written book which, though it has been reprinted several times, is still underappreciated. And amid the mass of his verse are some genuinely solid achievements—including, most notably, the poem at hand. There may be a couple of small blemishes in “We Wear the Mask”: “torn and bleeding hearts” in line 4 is a bit of a cliché, and “guile” might not have been used in the preceding line if not for the necessity of the rime. But these slight weaknesses are far outweighed by the poem’s strengths: Dunbar adheres strictly to a very demanding form—the rondeau—with almost no visible strain, and in doing so he displays a great deal of organization, control, and, for the most part, restraint. The artistry shown here is satisfying in itself, and it persuades the reader that the treatment has done justice to the theme.

Emma Lazarus, The New Colossus, page 992

Most Americans know at least a line or two of this famous sonnet carved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, but surprisingly few can name the author of the poem. The poem and its author have vanished from most anthologies and textbooks. Yet
Lazarus's sonnet seems that rare thing—a truly successful public poem. The images are clear and powerful, the language is memorable, and the sonnet avoids the chief danger of public poetry—prolixity. The contrast between the original colossus of the ancient world, which represented might, and the new colossus, which represents freedom, is both an original and effective means of dramatizing the difference between the Old World of European despotism and the New World of American democracy, a popular theme of nineteenth-century patriotic poetry, but one rarely so well expressed.

**Edgar Allan Poe, ANNABEL LEE, page 993**

Students usually adore this poem. Most modern critics hate it. There is some truth in both camps.

Let's catalogue the faults of the poem first. The poem is sentimental: it asks the reader to be sad while reveling in the beauty of the sadness. The poem is also heavy-handed. When Poe gets a nice line or image going, he can’t resist repeating it—more often for the sake of sound than sense. (These repetitions make most of the stanza patterns go awry.) The language is abstract and literary (angels, kingdom, highborn kinsmen, sepulcher, maiden, etc.). It may be unfair to say that these are not authentic American images, but, more to the point, the words seem borrowed from a book rather than observed from life.

And yet, with all its faults neatly noted, the poem remains weirdly beautiful. The very irregularity of the stanzas keeps the form of the poem subtly surprising, despite the bouncy anapestic meter. The abstract quality of the language used in this hypnotic meter—all drenched in emotion—eventually gives the poem a dreamlike reality. That placeless “kingdom by the sea” now begins to resemble the world of memory, and the poem lures us back into our own emotion-drenched childhood memories. (“I was a child and she was a child,” as more than one psychological critic has noted, places the poem in a presexual stage; Annabel Lee is a bride only in the future tense.) The childlike innocence of the language and emotions somehow carry the poem into a sphere where adult critical concerns seem less relevant. “Annabel Lee” somehow marries the style and meter of light verse to the themes of elegiac, if not quite tragic, poetry. Whatever its faults, American poetry would be poorer without it.

When told we were including this poem in a new edition, one instructor (a highly regarded critic adept in literary theory) said, “Be gentle. I love that poem. Critics keep showing me why it’s awful, but I love it anyway.” We hope she feels we’ve been gentle enough.

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**WRITERS ON WRITING**

**Edgar Allan Poe on Writing, A LONG POEM DOES NOT EXIST, page 994**

Do you agree or disagree? If Poe is right, should we discard *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy*, and “Lycidas”? If he is wrong, then how do you account for the fact that certain long poems contain patches of deadly dullness?

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WHAT IS POETRY?

This chapter is not designed to answer the question of its title in any definitive sense. Instead, we have attempted to create an occasion for reflection and discussion after all the material covered earlier in the book. We have compiled a small anthology of quotations by writers on the nature of poetry. You may want to supplement our list with others you have discovered.

Terry Ehret of Santa Rosa Junior College developed the following assignment for this chapter:

Compose your own answer to the question “What is poetry?” You may want to devise original metaphor(s) to define poetry and then develop your essay with examples and explanations. Select at least one poem from the anthology to illustrate your definition.

Archibald MacLeish, ARS POETICA, page 996

This compressed and vividly drawn Modernist manifesto rewards careful reading couplet by couplet. Many people remember the famous closing lines—probably the most widely quoted formulation of modern poetry in English—but forget how finely realized the rest of the poem is. MacLeish manages a difficult trick in “Ars Poetica”—he creates a didactic poem in lyric form. Each rimed vers libre couplet contains an idea that is expressed in evocative lyric terms.

MacLeish plays upon a number of verbal paradoxes, which students sometimes like to point out. He says a poem ought to be “mute,” “dumb,” and “wordless”; yet he is obviously writing a poem in speakable, audible words. As in some of the definitions of poetry quoted elsewhere in this chapter, MacLeish’s poem understands that some truths can be expressed only as dynamic tensions between opposing forces or ideas. (Note, for example, Auden’s definition of poetry—“the clear expression of mixed feelings.”)

The poem contains a larger paradox, a potential topic for class argument. “A poem should not mean / But be,” declares the poet. But is his poem pure being? Is it not heavy on meaning?—a tendency that an ars poetica, a poem that tells us how poetry should be written, can hardly be expected to avoid.
This chapter offers a representative cross-section of two major American poets, Emily Dickinson and Langston Hughes—one author drawn from the nineteenth century, the other from the twentieth. The selections found in this chapter can be supplemented by additional poems from these two writers elsewhere in the text. There are now 20 Dickinson poems and 15 Hughes poems in the volume as well as substantial prose passages from each author. We have also incorporated visual information into the book, with author and documentary photographs relevant to the poems and the historical periods. Finally, a critical casebook on each poet’s work provides a variety of analytical approaches for the student.

This chapter gives instructors the additional flexibility of using the material for in-depth classroom examinations of the individual poets. The casebooks provide students with some background—including author biographies and criticism—to prepare essays and term papers, though many instructors may want students to supplement their reading and research in the library or on our textbook website.

**EMILY DICKINSON’S POETRY**

This selection of Dickinson’s poems spans her entire career. We have presented many of her most famous poems because students should know these classic works, but we have also included a few lesser-known ones to add variety and, we hope, surprise.

**Emily Dickinson,** *SUCCESS IS COUNTED SWEETEST*, page 1001

When the first collection of Dickinson’s *Poems* (1890) was published—four years after her death—by Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson, they placed this poem on the first page. The editors implicitly saw that it represents an important theme in the poet’s work. They may also have used the poem to symbolize Dickinson’s lifelong obscurity. Ironically, this was one of only seven poems Dickinson actually published in her lifetime. It appeared anonymously in 1878 (two decades after its inception) in Helen Hunt Jackson’s anthology, *A Masque of Poets.*

The poem articulates one of Dickinson’s central themes—how suffering heightens perception and understanding. The nature of success, the poem argues, is best
“comprehended” by someone who has tried to secure it but failed. The central image of the poem is the defeated, dying soldier who hears the distant sounds of a victory he will never share. (Some critics—even the learned Judith Farr—comment that the military image is borrowed from the Civil War, which inspired so many poems from Dickinson, but the dating of the poem’s first appearance in two manuscripts from 1859 makes such a connection impossible.)

In a lecture on Dickinson delivered in 1959 at the bicentennial celebration of the town of Amherst, Richard Wilbur made a cogent case that the poem goes beyond the conventional ideas of compensation (“the idea that every evil confers some balancing good, that through bitterness we learn to appreciate the sweet”). Wilbur speculated that Dickinson’s poem

is arguing for the superiority of defeat to victory, of frustration to satisfaction, and of anguished comprehension to mere possession. What do victors have but victory, a victory which they cannot fully savor or clearly define? They have paid for their triumph by a sacrifice of awareness; a material gain has cost them a spiritual loss. (“Sumptuous Destitution,” reprinted in Responses: Prose Pieces 1953–1976 [New York: Harcourt, 1976])

Emily Dickinson, I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED, page 1002

This joyful lyric is a most unusual nature poem—a hymn to the world’s beauty in a form reminiscent of a drinking song. The first stanza celebrates a liquor that doesn’t exist in the literal sense—it is never brewed but definitely intoxicating. An "Inebriate of Air" (what a gorgeous phrase!) and "Debauchee of Dew," the speaker draws her ecstasy from the everyday world around her rather than from the distant and seemingly romantic "Vats upon the Rhine." As in a good drinking song, the speaker brags about her great capacity to drink in the third and fourth stanzas. She cannot stop imbibing this “liquor never brewed.”

In his superb essay on Dickinson, “Sorting Out,” J. V. Cunningham quarrels with the traditional efforts to read the poet’s work biographically. So much Dickinson criticism and textual scholarship, he observes, tries to create “a reconstructed history of the poet’s emotional life.” Such an approach obscures the actual surface meaning of the poem—"History would destroy the text to attain the fact." Cunningham then remarks:

And so it is amusing that one of the best known poems of these [supposedly autobiographical works], “I taste a liquor never brewed” (214), has been until quite recently read as a self-portrait of Legendary Emily, that “Debauchee of Dew," that “little Tippler / Leaning against the – Sun.” But it seems more likely that the speaker is not Emily at all, but a hummingbird; that the poem is, as many similar nature poems are, a riddle; and we have long missed the answer, not knowing “Guess Who?” was being asked. (The Collected Essays of J. V. Cunningham [Chicago: Swallow, 1976])

Questions the class might ask include whether the poem is indeed a riddle and whether Cunningham’s interpretation is entirely inconsistent with traditional read-
ings. Could the speaker not be both a hummingbird and the poet herself—or, more precisely, be the hummingbird as an allegory for the poet?

“I taste a liquor never brewed,” one of the very few of her nearly 1800 poems to be published in her lifetime, appeared in a newspaper, the Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, on Saturday, May 4, 1861. Here is the text of the poem as first printed, which is of interest for its demonstration of the ways in which Dickinson’s earliest editors “normalized” her work to make it acceptable to the taste of the times. The poem is supplied with a (somewhat misleading) title; the first stanza is rewritten to provide an exact rhyme (though “Frankfort berries” is Dickinson’s own phrase, from an alternative draft); and, most damaging of all, the extraordinary concluding image is flattened out to something quite conventional.

The May-Wine

I taste a liquor never brewed,
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not Frankfort berries yield the sense—
Such a delirious whirl.

Inebriate of air am I,
And debauchee of dew;—
Reeling through endless summer days,
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee
Out of the Fox-glove’s door,
When butterflies renounce their drams,
I shall but drink the more;

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,
And saints to windows run,
To see the little tippler
Come staggering toward the sun.

*Emily Dickinson, Wild Nights – Wild Nights!, page 1002*

It is worth noting that this famous love poem contains almost nothing explicitly about romantic love. And yet the text radiates erotic passions—mostly through suggestive word choice and imagery.

The first stanza begins with a fantasy of the “wild nights” the speaker would enjoy if she were with her beloved. (We know she speaks to her beloved because of the “Heart” metaphor in the second stanza.) The sexual element of the fantasy is also suggested by the associations of luxury, which originally meant lust or lasciviousness. (Remember the ghost of Hamlet’s father admonishing his son: “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest.”) Although the word had also acquired its modern meaning by Dickinson’s time, the echo of the original sense
still remained. Finally, the nocturnal setting of the poem also suggests the obvious setting for the consummation of sexual love.

The second stanza introduces a metaphorical situation that continues through the rest of the poem—a boat in port. The speaker, however, realizes that this metaphor is still fantasy. She both imagines herself a boat in harbor (lines 6–9) and sees herself in her real situation (lines 11–12) as merely longing to “moor” herself to her beloved.

One more interesting word in this poem is Eden. The image of “Rowing in Eden” suggests that fulfillment of the speaker’s romantic longings is paradisiacal. The metaphor of Eden further suggests that the speaker’s longings—however erotic—are innocent of sin. Eden, the lost paradise, permitted a sexual freedom unknown to the post-lapsarian world. (Dickinson knew her Milton.) The speaker, therefore, longs for erotic fulfillment in a way that harmonizes body and soul in an idealistic, Edenic fashion.

Emily Dickinson, I FELT A FUNERAL, IN MY BRAIN, page 1002

There are at least two ways of approaching this stark and powerful poem. We can read it either as a poem about death—the speaker’s mental vision of her own extinction—or as a poem that uses death as the central metaphor in an allegory of an unstated psychological anguish.

The poem has an explicit narrative structure. It describes a funeral service and burial. The speaker describes the event simultaneously from two different but related perspectives (a characteristic Dickinsonian device). She places the funeral inside her brain, but she also experiences the ceremony as if she were inside the coffin at the service. Trapped in the coffin, she cannot see the events, only hear them. To borrow a phrase from Judith Farr (whose 1992 study, The Passions of Emily Dickinson, places the poet in the context of mid-nineteenth-century American sensibility), the poem is “staged to describe the sensations of lost perception.”

Emily Dickinson, I'M NOBODY! WHO ARE YOU?, page 1003

Small and simple, this poem is nonetheless memorable. It illustrates some classic Dickinsonian verbal devices—especially her gift of using everyday words (like nobody and somebody) in unusual but revelatory ways. Students might enjoy comparing this poem to E. E. Cummings’s “anyone lived in a pretty how town,” which uses the same verbal device in a more elaborately sustained manner.

Emily Dickinson, THE SOUL SELECTS HER OWN SOCIETY, page 1003

“The Soul selects her own Society” is about both solitude and companionship. It is ultimately a love poem, though it does not initially seem so. The first two stanzas are
written in the third person. The speaker views the “Soul” from a distance, though it will eventually seem it is her own soul she describes. The “Soul” chooses her “Society,” which proves in the final stanza (now spoken in the first person) to be a single other person. This “divine Majority” of two suffices for the speaker, who then cares little for the rest of the world. She becomes “Like Stone.” Even an Emperor kneeling at her doorstep leaves her unmoved.

**Emily Dickinson, Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church,**
page 1003

This celebration of natural religion was one of the seven poems Dickinson actually published during her lifetime. It appeared in the March 12, 1864, issue of The Round Table, a New York weekly published by a relation. (It appeared there under the title “My Sabbath,” which may have been Dickinson’s own suggestion.)

In the original Massachusetts colony, Sunday church attendance was legally mandatory. By Dickinson’s time it was merely a social obligation—but a serious one. Although Dickinson was deeply (if also unconventionally) religious, she stopped attending church by her thirtieth birthday. This poem was published a few years thereafter. The poem makes a clear and cogent case for worshipping God not by attending a church service but by being attentive to God’s creation. The poem has a simple rhetorical structure: the speaker contrasts her own practices (what the I does) with the customs of some. A useful question for class discussion is to ask how each of Dickinson’s natural images suitably matches (or exceeds) the ecclesiastic person or object it replaces—chorister, dome, surplice, bell, sexton, and clergyman.

**Emily Dickinson, After Great Pain, a Formal Feeling Comes,**
page 1004

The meaning of the poem depends heavily on the first three words, “After great pain.” All of the subsequent description and rationale originate as consequences of this suffering. If “outlived,” the poem suggests, great pain transforms one.

Like many other Dickinson poems, “After great pain” contains images and suggestions of death—tombs, the “hour of Lead,” the “Freezing persons” losing consciousness in the snow. In this poem, however, the implied protagonist has survived the possible brush with death. (It is, in fact, possible to interpret the poem as describing a sort of spiritual resurrection—in contrast to the metaphorical reading of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” as describing a spiritual or emotional death and disintegration.)

The style and form of the poem are worth noting. Although it feels intimately personal, the poem is spoken in the third person. The speaker seemingly distances herself from the intensity of emotion she has painfully lived through. The middle stanza is arranged as irregular (5 lines versus the two 4-line stanzas that surround it). Heard aloud, however, the two irregular lines (7 and 8) combine into a metrically standard tetrameter line. Dickinson probably arranged the written text in an irregular fashion to slow the reader down and to emphasize the ideas presented in the lines.
**Emily Dickinson, MUCH MADNESS IS DIVINEST SENSE, page 1004**

This poem is a delightful protest against the tyranny of the majority and defense of the eccentric soul who marches to the beat of a different drummer. The key word may be “divinest,” in the first line, which is no doubt more than a mere superlative. Dickinson’s religious views may have been highly individual and even heretical, but her religious feelings were very real. Is she telling us that the great majority of people are not merely smug and oppressive in their zeal to impose conformity, but in being so are also profoundly out of touch with what their creator expects of them?

**Emily Dickinson, THIS IS MY LETTER TO THE WORLD, page 1004**

This memorable short poem begins with a characteristic Dickinsonian twist, “This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me.” As Richard B. Sewall remarks in his detailed volume *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980), this poem “too often regarded as a tearful complaint about being neglected is actually a statement . . . of the difficulty of conveying what she calls the ‘Message’ of Nature.” The “Her” in line 5 is clearly nature, but to whom do the “Hands” belong in line 6? It is possible to interpret these hands as belonging to posterity—probably the “countrymen” of line 7 whose tender judgment she implores.

If this poem is not specifically a complaint about being neglected, it is nonetheless a call to posterity. Whatever else it might mean, the poem is also an address to her posthumous audience. She may humbly position herself merely as Nature’s messenger, but she does claim authorship as the transcriber of that message. She also implicitly confides an uncertainty about her own achievement and hopes that her audience will be tender in its judgment.

**Emily Dickinson, I HEARD A FLY BUZZ – WHEN I DIED, page 1005**

Plump with suggestions, this celebrated fly well demonstrates a symbol’s indefiniteness. The fly appears in the room—on time, like the Angel of Death—and yet it is decidedly ordinary. A final visitor from the natural world, it brings to mind an assortment of suggestions, some of them offensive (filth, stench, rotting meat, offal, and so forth). But a natural fly is a minor annoyance, and so is death, if one is certain of Eternity. Unsure and hesitant in its flight, the fly buzzes as though faltering. It is another failing thing, like the light that comes through the windows and through the eyes (which are, as a trite phrase calls them, “the windows of the soul”).

Most students will easily identify “Eyes around” as those of surrounding friends or relatives, and “that last Onset” as death throes. Is “the King” Death or Jesus? It seems more likely that the friends and relatives will behold Death. What is the speaker’s assignable portion? Physical things: keepsakes bequeathed to friends and relatives; body, to the earth.

Discussion will probably focus on the final line. It may help students to remember that the speaker is, at the present moment of the poem, in Eternity. The scene she describes is therefore a vision within a vision. Perhaps all the last line means is
(as John Ciardi has argued), “And then there was no more of me, and nothing to see with.” But the last line suddenly thrusts the speaker to Heaven. For one terrible moment she finds herself, with immortal eyes, looking back through her mortal eyes at a blackness where there used to be light.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. What qualities does Dickinson attribute to death? Why is Immortality going along on this carriage ride? For the poet, death and immortality go together. Besides, Dickinson is amplifying her metaphor of Death as a gentleman taking a woman for a drive: Immortality, as would have been proper in Amherst, is their chaperone.

2. What is interesting in the phrase *Gazing Grain*? How can grain “gaze”? Grain has kernels like eyes at the tips of its stalks. As the speaker dies, the natural world—like the fly in “I heard a Fly buzz”—is watching.

3. What is memorable in the rhythm and meaning of the line “The Dews drew quivering and chill”? At quivering, the rhythm quivers loose from its iambic tetrameter. The image of cold dampness foreshadows the next stanza, with its images of the grave.

4. What is the Carriage? What is the House?

5. Where is the speaker at the present moment of the poem? Why is time said to pass more quickly where she is now? Eternity is timeless.

6. What is the tone of the poem? Complicated!—seriousness enlivened with delicate macabre humor? Surely she kids her own worldly busyness in the opening line.

William Galperin reads the poem as a feminist affirmation. Not death, he finds, but immortality is Dickinson’s subject. In the end the poet asserts a triumph possible only because she has renounced the proposal of Death, that threatening gentleman caller who might have married her (“Emily Dickinson’s Marriage Hearse,” Denver Quarterly, Winter 1984: 62–73).
Delight, which Dickinson wonderfully qualifies with infirm to describe the human capacity for truth, contains a possible play on the word light.) Likewise, the inability to grasp the truth—to see the light, in the metaphoric world of this poem—is characterized as blindness.

**Emily Dickinson, There is No Frigate Like a Book, page 1006**

Dickinson compares works of literature to conveyances. A book is like a frigate (a warship); poetry is like a courser (a strong, fast horse). The difference is that it costs nothing to read a book (there are no toll stations), even though what is being conveyed in its pages is that most precious of cargoes, the human soul.

The poem is notable for its action verbs, used to describe an activity that we usually think of as sedentary. Dickinson clearly wants us to see reading as full of action: it moves, it prances, it transports us to distant lands.

**Emily Dickinson on Emily Dickinson**

**Emily Dickinson, Recognizing Poetry, page 1006**

It may be worth pointing out to students that this famous passage from Dickinson does not exist in any of her writing. It comes from a letter that T. W. Higginson, a critic and novelist who befriended Dickinson after she wrote him, mailed to his wife during a visit to Amherst. Higginson took notes on his conversation with the poet to share with his wife; these brief notes provide a vivid description of both her genius and her eccentricity. (We have reprinted the statement in its full original context in the “Critics on Emily Dickinson” section which follows.)

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Is Dickinson right about recognizing poetry? Is there any other way to recognize it than by experiencing physical sensation?

2. What poem in the anthology affects you in the way that Dickinson describes? Can you relate the sensations you experience to any particular words or images in the poem?

**Emily Dickinson, Self-Description, page 1007**

Few letters in literature have generated more commentary—and wild speculation—than Dickinson’s April 25, 1862, response to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Virtually every sentence has been offered several interpretations. The letter is often excerpted, but we have included the whole text to give an accurate impression of Dickinson’s unique epistolary style.

Here Dickinson lists her poetic influences—Keats and the two Brownings. For prose she lists Ruskin and Browne, two notably gorgeous and ornate stylists, as well as Revelation, a revealing choice among the books of the Bible. It is worth noting.
that all of these choices remain respectable a century and a half later. Dickinson recognized truly good writing in both verse and prose. And amusingly she admits she has never read Whitman because she has been “told that he was disgraceful.”

CRITICS ON EMILY DICKINSON, pages 1008–1016

We have offered six interesting and diverse critical views of Emily Dickinson. The first is Thomas Wentworth Higginson's extensive account of meeting her in 1870. He not only provides a number of superb observations, he also quotes her remarks extensively. Students will note that Dickinson's famous statement on recognizing poetry (“I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off”) came not from the poet's own letters but from Higginson's account. “I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much,” Higginson remarks at the end of his letter.

Thomas H. Johnson provides an account of discovering Dickinson's manuscripts—one of which we have reproduced. This background will help students understand the unusual nature of the texts of her poems—not an unimportant aspect of interpreting her work. Richard Wilbur offers a compelling psychological and biographical portrait of the poet. Cynthia Griffin Wolff discusses Dickinson's obsessive central theme, death, and provides a reading of “Because I could not stop for Death,” while Judith Farr gives a reading of “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” that addresses issues of power, gender, and love. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the personal choices Dickinson made as a woman to gain creative freedom in nineteenth-century Amherst.

LANGSTON HUGHES'S POETRY

Our selection of Hughes's poetry tries to represent the considerable range of his work—in mood, form, and genre. His special gift of combining traditional and innovative impulses is especially apparent. The juxtaposition with Dickinson's work in this chapter also opens up some interesting comparisons in style and approach that might be used for student essays.

Langston Hughes, THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS, page 1017

This remarkable poem was written by Hughes while still in his teens. The influence of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, two early models, is evident, but the poem already demonstrates Hughes's characteristic voice. A good discussion question to ask is why Hughes chooses each of the four specific rivers to tell his story of the Negro race. The Euphrates is traditionally seen as the original center of human civilization. By invoking it, Hughes places the Negro at the dawn of humanity. The Congo is the center of black African culture. The Nile represents the source of the most celebrated African culture, and Hughes claims for the Negro a role in building this great civi-
lization. Finally, the Mississippi becomes a symbol of the Negro in America, though Hughes selects a joyous moment to represent the race’s turbulent place in our history.

**Langston Hughes, *My People*, page 1018**

This poem was originally published in 1922, when Hughes was only twenty years old, in *The Crisis*, the journal of the NAACP, which was founded by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1910 and continues to publish to the present day. *The Crisis* had published Hughes’s first poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the previous year, and over the course of his career it would publish more of his poems than any other periodical.

In the early 1920s, most mainstream American writing was “respectable” in nature, appealing to the tastes and values of the upper and middle classes. Many African American writers were especially concerned to work within the bounds of propriety, in a self-conscious effort to demonstrate that members of their race could be as genteel and sophisticated as anyone else. It is a remarkable testimony to Hughes’s self-confidence and strength of character that in such a cultural climate, at such an early age, he could so forthrightly align himself with those who were exuberant and extroverted and unabashed, with poor people and manual workers, and with gamblers, vaudevillians, and others on the fringes of society.

**Langston Hughes, *Mother to Son*, page 1018**

This stark, naturalistic poem contains (and half conceals) a transcendent central symbol—a stairway. While the mother has not spent her life climbing a “crystal stair,” she has nonetheless felt confident she was ascending a stairwell. This more mundane stairway is badly maintained, poorly lit, and slightly dangerous, but the mother has had the drive and courage to climb it. And she insists that her son show the determination to do so, too.

The spare, conversational free verse of “Mother to Son” provides an interesting contrast to the extravagantly syncopated jazz rhythm of “The Weary Blues” or the rich formal measures of “Song for a Dark Girl.” Hughes’s poems show a wonderful prosodic range.

**Langston Hughes, *Dream Variations*, page 1019**

This poem, according to Hughes’s biographer Arnold Rampersad, was written in response to the poet’s 1923 trip to Africa. Presenting a vision of racial harmony, the poem contrasts the “white day” and the gentle dark night in a dream of joyous and unproblematic co-existence. The poem’s now famous last line served as the title of John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* (1961), an exposé of American racial prejudice and discrimination.

**Langston Hughes, *I, Too*, page 1019**

This poem represents Hughes’s admirable ability to critique American race relations and yet maintain a hopeful tone. The speaker’s identity is crucial to the symbolic structure of the poem. He is a brother, a spurned darker brother but nonetheless a member of the family who knows he has an unquestioned right to live in the home. The symbolic segregation of being forced to eat in the kitchen obviously reflects the
social realities of Southern segregation in that era. The speaker, however, knows his
day will come soon—“tomorrow” in line 8—when he will claim his rightful place at
the table, confident of his strength and beauty. But, as the last stanza reminds us, it
isn’t only the threat of the speaker’s strength that will intimidate the others but the
justice of his cause. They will “be ashamed” of their previous oppression.

The title and opening line is probably an allusion to Walt Whitman’s famous
passage in part 52 of “Song of Myself”:

I too am not a bit tamed . . . I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

Langston Hughes, THE WEARY BLUES, page 1020

“The Weary Blues” is a poem of rhythmic bravado. Hughes starts with a basic four-beat
line (“Droning a drowsy syncopated tune”). He then flamboyantly varies it with jazz-
like syncopations and contrasts it with interpolated short lines. As in “Song for a Dark
Girl,” he also incorporates allusive quotations from a traditional song—in this case the
blues song of the poem’s title. (“The Weary Blues” was published, after all, in the twen-
ties—the same decade as T. S. Eliot’s allusive The Waste Land and Ezra Pound’s A Draft
of XVI Cantos. Hughes was a populist Modernist but a Modernist nonetheless.)

There are two key characters in “The Weary Blues”—the speaker and the piano-
playing blues singer. The poem is a recollection by the speaker of the performance he
recently heard in Harlem. (Lenox Avenue was one of the main streets of Harlem
nightlife in the twenties. It has since been renamed Malcolm X Boulevard, so
Hughes’s once famous setting has become a historical footnote.) The speaker is of
unstated race, but the blues singer is repeatedly identified as a Negro. The singer and
his song ultimately become a symbol for the sorrows of the modern African Ameri-
can. (“Sweet Blues! / Coming from a black man’s soul. / O Blues!”) The expression
of the blues seems not only cathartic to the singer but almost annihilating. After
singing all night, he goes home to sleep “like a rock or a man that’s dead.”

Hughes’s biographer, Arnold Rampersad, has called “The Weary Blues” a work
“virtually unprecedented in American poetry in its blending of black and white
rhythms and forms.” In his autobiographical book The Big Sea (1940), Hughes com-
mented, “It was a poem about a working man who sang the blues all night and then
went to bed and slept like a rock. That was all.” Most readers will find much more in
the poem than that summary suggests.

MyLiteratureLab® Resources. Longman Lecture, reading and interpretation
questions, writing prompts on “The Weary Blues.”

Langston Hughes, SONG FOR A DARK GIRL, page 1021

One of the most impressive things about Hughes’s massive Collected Poems is the styl-
istic diversity of his work. Written in regular rimed quatrains, “Song for a Dark Girl”
shows the tight formal but evocatively modernist side of Hughes’s style. The poem uses
an ironic, allusive refrain borrowed from Daniel Decatur Emmet’s famous minstrel song
“Dixie’s Land,” which during the Civil War became a marching song for Confederate
troops and then a nostalgic rallying cry for the lost Southern cause. Hughes quotes the
song lyric, which is spoken in the faux-black voice of the minstrel, to underscore the reality that the black experience in “de land ob cotton” is not so joyful. The Christ-like imagery associated with the lynched young man is important to note.

*Langston Hughes*, **Prayer (“Gather Up”),** page 1021

This lovely little poem shimmers with the compassion for the downtrodden that is so large a component of Hughes’s work. Notice the movement in the second stanza from “pity” (which inherently suggests a distance between those who pity and the objects of their pity) to the much more intimate “love.” Notice too the nice ambiguity of the poem’s last word: it is not only God’s mercy that “All the scum / Of our weary city” have despared of, but also the mercy of those who foolishly regard themselves as superior.

*Langston Hughes*, **Ballad of the Landlord,** page 1021

This ingenious ballad begins to tell its story in the traditional way but then presents an innovative turn midway. The ballad starts in the voice of a black tenant who complains about his negligent landlord. As the poem progresses, the reader realizes that the speaker is arguing with his landlord, who is actually present. The argument heats up until the speaker threatens to hit the landlord (in line 20). Suddenly and unexpectedly, the voice of the poem shifts to outside observers, who condemn and overtly misrepresent the tenant. (Note how Hughes also abruptly shifts his meter and lineation once the voices change.) The poem ends with three isolated but sequential newspaper headlines in all capital letters. Hughes’s mixture of auditory prosody and visual prosody in this poem is extremely interesting and demonstrates his use of Modernist techniques in seemingly populist works.

*Langston Hughes*, **Theme for English B,** page 1022

This poem demonstrates how a great writer in his maturity can turn a routine homework assignment into a memorable piece of literature. If youth is wasted on the young, so perhaps are writing assignments.

Hughes is so convincing a storyteller that you will probably have to remind students—repeatedly—that this poem is not autobiographical. Hughes was not born in Winston-Salem, but in Joplin, Missouri. He did not go to school in Durham, but in Lawrence, Kansas, and Cleveland, Ohio. He did attend Columbia (where, by implication, the poem takes place), but he left after a year to travel. (He later completed his college education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.) He was nearly fifty when he wrote this poem, not twenty-two as the narrator is.

*MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Comprehension quiz on “Theme for English B.”*

*Langston Hughes*, **Nightmare Boogie,** page 1023

This is one of Hughes’s so-called “Boogie Poems” from his 1951 poetry collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred—“Dream Boogie,” “Easy Boogie,” “Boogie 1 A.M.,”*
“Lady’s Boogie,” “Nightmare Boogie,” and “Dream Boogie: Variation.” The poems make use of the boogie-woogie form—a kind of African American piano music that dates from the 1920s and was influenced by the blues, ragtime, and African music. Its distinctive sound involves the interplay between melodic improvisations played with the right hand and a regular bass figure played with the left hand. As critic Steven C. Tracy has written, the Dream Deferred poems are “improvisations” that “share the exciting, rushing rhythms of boogie-woogie”; behind the words, the reader is meant to hear a “boogie-woogie rhythm.” In his essay on the “Boogie Poems,” Tracy even writes out the complete text of one of the poems and inserts chord changes above the lines, so that it looks like a lead sheet for a boogie-woogie tune.

Boogie-woogie is a form of music identified with African Americans, and the Dream Deferred poems are very much about black identity. The nightmare of “Nightmare Boogie” is precisely a dream about a sudden (“Quicker than light”) and universal loss of that identity. Tracy notes the neatness of the poem’s structure: “the first four lines have a direct parallel relationship to lines five through eight: the dream of line one is the nightmare of line five; the seeing of line two is the revelation of line six; the faces of lines three and seven and the colors of lines four and eight define whether the event was a dream or a nightmare.” For Hughes, the deferral of the black dream is indeed a nightmare, and the closing lines about the “Rolling bass” and “Whirling treble” suggest, in Tracy’s view, that the only way to emerge from the nightmare is to attend to “the ‘message’ of boogie-woogie”—a “message” that somehow resolves the tensions between black and white cultures.

Langston Hughes, HARLEM [DREAM DEFERRED], page 1024

Simile by simile, Hughes shows different attitudes, including violent protest, that blacks might possibly take toward the long deferral of their dream of equality. Students might be asked what meaning they find in each comparison. Also worth noting are the strong, largely unpleasant verbs used to characterize the types of decay caused by deferring the dream: dry up, fester, run, stink, crust and sugar over, and sag. No wonder an explosion is likely to follow.

Hughes's poem supplied the title for Lorraine Hansberry's long-running Broadway play, A Raisin in the Sun (1958), in which the Youngers, a family descended from five generations of slaves, seek to move out of a Chicago ghetto in hopes of fulfilling their dream.

Donald Ritzhein has written a moving account of what the poem has meant to him, starting when his mother cut it out of a newspaper and pasted it to his bedroom door. “By the time I got to high school . . . I still didn’t know a lot about the misery of deferred dreams . . . I knew a little more about them when I heard Martin Luther King, Jr. talk about dreams in Washington. I finally felt a little of what it’s like to defer dreams when John F. Kennedy was killed” (“Langston Hughes: A Look Backwards and Forwards,” Steppingstones, Harlem, Winter 1984: 55–56). Have you any student who would care to write about what the poem has meant to her or him?

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Audio clip, comprehension quiz on “Harlem.”
Langston Hughes, *Homecoming*, page 1024

Like many others of Hughes's poems, “Homecoming” is written in a lean and vivid vernacular style. After the first stanza, it is not yet clear how the speaker regards the situation he's describing: for all we know, he's glad to be rid of the woman in question. But the last lines make his feelings unmistakable: he no longer has a lover, all he has now is vacant space. The title is ironic: *homecoming* usually suggests a warm welcome, not a cold and empty bed (there's a related twist of phrase in line 5, when he speaks of making *down* the bed). The poem is remarkable for what it leaves unsaid, for the economy with which Hughes portrays utter loneliness.

**LANGSTON HUGHES ON LANGSTON HUGHES**

*Langston Hughes, The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, page 1025

Hughes's essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” was the key manifesto of the younger African American artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance. This crucial article originally appeared in the *Nation* as a response to George Schuyler's dismissive article “The Negro-Art Hokum.” Hughes's proud assertion of black identity and the unabashed celebration of jazz and the blues struck a responsive chord among many members of the new generation of African American artists and intellectuals. The new artists saw their role, in the words of Arnold Rampersad, “to assert racial pride and racial truth in the face of either black or white censure or criticism.”

*Langston Hughes, The Harlem Renaissance*, page 1026

In his autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), Hughes gave a vivid account of the Harlem Renaissance. This passage describes both the cultural excitement and the racial tension of Harlem's nightlife after white people began patronizing the local clubs. This profitable influx of white customers led to bizarre situations such as the famous Cotton Club and other nightspots banning African Americans except as performers and staff—“barring their own race,” as Hughes indignantly puts it. But Hughes also celebrates the talent and vitality of the club scene in a way that conveys the African American side of the Jazz Age.

**CRITICS ON LANGSTON HUGHES**, pages 1028–1035

The critical selections on Langston Hughes offer a range of approaches. Arnold Rampersad, Hughes's most distinguished biographer, discusses the innovative aspects of the early poetry, which blended both black and white literary traditions. Rita Dove and Marilyn Nelson examine Hughes's role as spokesman for African Americans. Darryl Pinckney analyzes in both historical and reader-response terms how Hughes connected with his early African American readers. Peter Townsend analyzes how Hughes used jazz influences and speculates on the social impact of his jazz poetry during his long career. Finally, Onwuchekwa Jemie provides a highly sensitive reading of Hughes's most famous poem, “Dream Deferred” (also published under the title “Harlem”).

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As the first poem in T. S. Eliot’s first published volume, and therefore the first poem in every subsequent selected and collected edition of his poetry, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” has been the introduction to Eliot’s work for many readers over the nearly one hundred years since it was first published. To this day, “Prufrock” remains an ideal text for young people to make their first acquaintance with Eliot. It is substantial enough to communicate some of his major themes and techniques, without being daunting in its length or complexity. It can still seem strange and in places even shocking to those who have not encountered it before, and thus it can still suggest to contemporary readers the radical innovations of Modernism, while proving at the same time to be absorbing and accessible. And, despite all indications to the contrary, many adolescents and young adults will still sympathize, and even empathize, with the poem’s preoccupation with such concerns as loneliness, self-consciousness, fear of the opposite sex, the desire to live meaningfully in a trivializing culture, and pervasive feelings of futility and failure.

The poem’s enduring popularity with readers has recently been reaffirmed in an extraordinary fashion. David Lehman, editor of the new *Oxford Book of American Poetry* (2006), selected the ten poems from that anthology that he considered the most popular, and readers were asked to vote for their favorite from the list. “Prufrock” was the clear winner, beating out such warhorses as Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” and Emma Lazarus’s “The New Colossus.”

In addition to “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” this chapter presents a number of supplemental texts and images selected to enrich your students’ understanding of the poem, to enable them to view it in the context of its own time, and to help them understand why it is a work for all time. “Publishing ‘Prufrock’” recounts—with excerpts from Ezra Pound’s letters to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine—Pound’s often frustrating but untiring efforts to get “Prufrock” into print. A selection of excerpts from the reviews, in both Britain and America, of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) gives a vivid sense of both the dismissive incomprehension and the discerning appreciation of some of the poem’s earliest readers. Passages from Eliot’s own critical writings communicate some of his poetic theories and techniques as they bear directly on the poem. A cross-section of some of the best critical discussions of the poem over the last several decades helps to illuminate some difficult passages and other significant aspects of the text—and concludes with observations by two distinguished poet-critics, John Berryman and M. L. Rosenthal. Rosenthal’s reminiscence of what “Prufrock” meant to him in his own
adolescence should prove to be of particular interest to young readers involved in their own first encounter with Eliot’s poem.

T. S. Eliot, THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK, page 1038

Given the wealth of supplemental material presented in the chapter, an extended commentary on the poem seems superfluous, if not presumptuous. But we would like to offer a few questions to start the classroom discussion.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why the epigraph from Dante? What expectations does it arouse? Perhaps that this “song” will be the private confession of someone who thinks himself trapped and unredeemable, and thinks it of his hearer, too; also, that he is emboldened to speak only because he feels that his secrets will be kept.

2. What facts about J. Alfred can we be sure of? His age, his manner of dress, his social circles? What does his name suggest? Can you detect any puns in it? A prude in a frock—a formal coat.

3. What do you make of the simile in lines 2–3? What does it tell us about this particular evening? Etherized suggests fog, also submission, waiting for something grim to happen—his insides are going to be exposed and examined. What does it tell you about Prufrock’s way of seeing things? “A little sick,” some students may say, and with reason.

4. What gnaws at Prufrock? Not just his sense of growing old, not just his inability to act. He suffers from Prufrock’s Complaint: dissociation of sensibility. In line 105, unable to join thought and feeling, he sees his own nerves existing at one remove from him, as if thrown on a screen by a projector.

5. Who are “you and I” in the opening line? Who are “we” at the end? Some possibilities: Prufrock and the woman he is attending. Prufrock and the reader. Prufrock and Prufrock—he’s talking to himself, “you” being the repressive self, “I” being the timid or repressed self. Prufrock and the other eggheads of the Western world—in this view, the poem is Eliot’s satire on the intelligentsia.

6. What symbols do you find and what do they suggest? Notice those that relate to the sea, even oyster-shells (line 7). XJK points out blatantly that water has connotations of sexual fulfillment, and quotes “Western Wind.” Eliot hints that, unlike Prufrock, the vulgar types who inhabit cheap hotels and fish shops have a love life.

7. Try to explain the last three lines.

8. Now summarize the story of the poem. What parts does it fall into? Part one: Prufrock prepares to try to ask the overwhelming question. Then in lines 84–86 we learn that he has failed to ask it. In 87–110 he tries to justify himself for chickening out. From 111 to the end he sums up his static present and hollow future.
A few other points worth making:

That Eliot may have taken the bones of his plot from Henry James's "Crapy Cornelia" (1909) is Grover Smith's convincing theory. "This is the story of White-Mason, a middle-aged bachelor of nostalgic temperament, who visits a young Mrs. Worthington to propose marriage but reconsiders owing to the difference in their worlds" (T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960] 15).

"The meter of 'Prufrock' is peculiar," observes John Heath-Stubbs. "It is not simply free verse, as in [Eliot's] earlier Laforgueian pieces, but in its lines of irregular length, many but not all of which rhyme, suggests a free version of the Dantesque Canzone." This suggestion, and the poem's epigraph from the Inferno, point to Eliot's growing preoccupation with Dante ("Structure and Source in Eliot's Major Poetry," Agenda [Spring-Summer 1985]: 24).

Cleanth Brooks has written an essay full of wisdom and practical advice, "Teaching 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'" which you can find in Eliot's Poetry and Plays, one of the MLA's valuable "Approaches to Teaching" series (1988).

T. S. Eliot Reading His Poetry (Caedmon recording TC 1045) includes the poet's rendition of "Prufrock." There are also recordings of the poem spoken by Alec Guinness (Sir Alec Guinness Reads T. S. Eliot) and Ted Hughes (T. S. Eliot: The Waste Land and Other Poems).

MyLiteratureLab” Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Eliot. Longman Lecture, student essay, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

PUBLISHING “PRUFROCK,” page 1042

This selection is intended to give some sense of the poem's original appearances—including the tangled bibliography of Eliot's first three poetry chapbooks—and to demonstrate the eternal nature of the issues involved. The excerpts from Ezra Pound's letters to Harriet Monroe convey the flavor of Pound's explosive and often arrogant personality, especially in defense of the writers and the artistic principles that he strongly believed in, and they illustrate the age-old clash between the artist's uncompromising integrity and the editor's audience-pleasing instincts. Pound's expostulations, in his letter of January 31, 1915, against what he perceived as Monroe's desire to have "Prufrock" end "on a note of triumph" may put you in mind of the famous witticism about "the ultimate Reader's Digest article: 'New Hope for the Dead.'" It should interest students to discover that many works now regarded as classics encountered a good deal of difficulty in achieving publication, and to learn how much perseverance is often needed in the face of obstacles to success.

THE REVIEWERS ON PRUFROCK AND OTHER OBSERVATIONS:
1917–1918, pages 1044–1046

The two British reviews excerpted here were published anonymously, as was the custom of the times with such publications. The judgments expressed were no doubt intended to sound magisterial and absolute, rather than being presented for what
they were, the opinions of fallible—and at times, it would seem from the internal
evidence, unqualified—individuals. From the tone of these passages it can be seen
how seriously those publications took themselves as “guardians of the faith,” to bor-
row a sarcastic phrase from another of the poems in the Prufrock volume. The
reviewer for the Times Literary Supplement (who was F. T. Dalton, an assistant editor
of the TLS from 1902 to 1923) seems serene in his conviction that what he consid-
ners trivial and unenjoyable will strike most others in the same way; rather more sur-
prising is his description of Eliot’s poems as “untouched by any genuine rush of feel-
ing,” until one considers the gush of hyperbolic sentiment displayed in so much of
the verse of that period. The author of the notice in the Literary World assumes, as
was common in such circumstances, that what he cannot understand is deliberate
nonsense, intended as a hoax by its author; his astuteness in maintaining that “[a]ll
beauty has in it an element of strangeness” makes his overall obtuseness all the more
peculiar. The writer in the New Statesman seems considerably more discerning than
his colleagues, but his tone is somewhat patronizing overall, and, as May Sinclair sug-
gests, it is uncomprehending, if not offensive, to exalt “The Boston Evening Tran-
script” at the expense of “Prufrock.”

More perceptive were the reactions of Eliot’s fellow Americans (and fellow
poets). One would expect a favorable review from Conrad Aiken, given his friend-
ship with Eliot; less expected, perhaps, is the mingling of a bit of blame (“the triv-
ial”) with the praise, showing Aiken’s concern to demonstrate the objectivity of his
judgment—though the phrase “the adorers of free verse” shows his own commitment
to traditional verse techniques. Like Aiken, Babette Deutsch emphasizes Eliot’s
great technical skill and his cleverness. Of the three, it is Marianne Moore who most
clearly communicates the depth and seriousness of Eliot’s achievement in the
Prufrock volume.

This recognition of Eliot’s true value is even more directly displayed in the
review by the British novelist May Sinclair. In the midst of excoriating the New
Statesman review, she uses the word “masterpieces” to describe the poems and refers
several times to Eliot’s “genius.” Among all the reviewers represented in this sam-
ping, she is the one who shows the greatest awareness of the implications of Eliot’s
work for the future development of poetry.

T. S. ELIOT ON WRITING

T. S. Eliot, Poetry and Emotion, page 1046

This passage from the seminal essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” addresses
a number of concerns. In taking issue with William Wordsworth’s classic definition
of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion recollected in tranqui-
lity,” Eliot is a bit puckish in describing it as “an inexact formula,” since he disputes
every term of the phrase he quotes—and surely would have disputed “spontaneous”
as well, had he quoted the entire comment. Eliot also supplies a useful corrective to
some strivers after novelty when he says that it is not poetry’s mission “to seek for
new human emotions to express.” The most famous passage in the excerpt is the last
two sentences; in the light of facts about Eliot’s personal life revealed after his death,
it is fashionable among some to interpret these remarks in a narrowly personal man-

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ner—an unavoidable and, to some extent, valid response, but ultimately an insufficient engagement of the full implications of what Eliot is saying.

T. S. Eliot, The Objective Correlative, page 1047

Here is Eliot’s famous definition of a term of his own devising, a formulation that has become as much a part of the critical discourse as Keats’s “negative capability” and Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.”

T. S. Eliot, The Difficulty of Poetry, page 1047

Eliot’s remarks on the subject of difficulty in poetry are well worth attending to, not only because his own poetry is frequently branded “difficult,” but especially because of the good sense in what he has to say. As he points out, there are different ways in which a poem can be difficult and different reasons for such difficulty, and some of these are more worthy of respect than others. Two points made in this excerpt are particularly worth emphasizing to students: (1) there are times when a poem must be difficult, when its being otherwise would entail an injustice to the complexity or even the intractability of the material and/or the author’s vision; (2) one should read poetry, especially difficult poetry, not in a state of anxiety to determine “what the author is trying to bring out”—that is, to impose an understanding on the text, sum up the theme, and move on as quickly as possible—but, instead, with a relaxed openness and receptivity, to experience the poem on all of its levels, not just that of paraphrasable content.

Critics on “Prufrock,” pages 1049–1057

We begin with the commentary by Denis Donoghue, even though it is the most recent of our critical excerpts, because his speculations on the possible meanings of the epigraph provide an entranceway into discussion of the text. Your students may also appreciate Donoghue’s description of his discovery of “Prufrock” in his adolescence and his immediate awareness that it was “memorable” and “fully achieved,” without any concern for what critics had to say on the subject.

Speaking of speculations and entrances into the poem, Christopher Ricks considers a range of implications arising from the poem’s title—not only the odd coupling of its two halves, but especially the speaker’s name and the assumptions that it provokes; then, having done this, he is just deconstructionist enough to question the legitimacy of the procedure.

In his comments on the referents of the pronouns in “Prufrock,” Philip R. Headings understandably gives most of his attention to the unidentified “you” of line 1; he valuably supplies the source for Eliot’s well-known coy observations on the subject, though Headings’s own conclusion about the identity of “you” is certainly open to challenge.

By considering the ways in which time functions in the poem, Maud Ellmann provides an illuminating analysis of Prufrock’s use of tenses; from there, she addresses the larger issue of what it is that he is expressing when he expresses himself.
Burton Raffel employs the word “indeterminacy” to describe Eliot’s frequent use of allusions that are not fully explained in context. He takes up two instances—Prufrock’s intention to “wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled” and the “overwhelming question”—and decides that, while these references may not be presented with pinpoint precision, they are clear enough in context to satisfy all but the most insecure readers.

As a poet, John Berryman cultivated a notoriously compressed and difficult style, and his prose can also be demanding. But it is worth grappling with here for the illuminations that it affords regarding four central historical and fictional figures that Prufrock invokes in the course of his monologue. Especially rewarding is Berryman’s analysis of one of the strangest and most difficult passages in the poem, the “pair of ragged claws” couplet.

Bringing us full circle, M. L. Rosenthal recalls his own discovery of “Prufrock” in the 1930s and muses on the reasons why Eliot’s early poetry has a perpetual appeal for adolescents.
Students might be asked to read the information about ballads in the chapter “Song,” either before or after reading this ballad. “Lord Randall” exhibits many of the qualities of the traditional folk ballad, including a certain roughness in places, as with the meter in line 19. But, as demonstrated by the shift in the refrain halfway through, it demonstrates a certain degree of literary sophistication as well.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The basic situation in this ballad is slow to unfold. Is this an effective technique here, or do you think that the poem would have benefited by opening with more of a “grabber”?

2. Do you find the repetitiousness of the refrain a hindrance to your enjoyment of the poem? What is gained (or lost) by changing the refrain in the sixth stanza?

3. What is the value to the poem of the question-and-answer method of storytelling? Is the ending of the poem surprising, or do you see it coming from a long way off?

4. What else could the author have told us about Lord Randall’s “true-love” and their relationship? Do you find it troublesome that she does what she does without our knowing why? Might the poem have suffered if the author had more deeply explored her motivations?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In “The Three Ravens,” what is suggestive about the ravens and their conversation? How are the ravens opposed in the poem by the hawks and the hounds? The ravens are selfish eaters of carrion, but the hawks and hounds are loyally standing guard over their dead master’s body. Their faithfulness also suggests that of the fallow doe.

2. Are you persuaded by Friedman’s suggestion (quoted in the note under “The Three Ravens”) that the doe is a woman who is under some enchantment? What other familiar fairy tales or stories of lovers transformed into animals do you recall?

3. For all the fantasy of “The Three Ravens,” what details in the ballad seem realistic reflections of the natural world?
Anonymous, Last Words of the Prophet (Navajo Mountain Chant), page 1061

This valediction is part of the Mountain Chant of the Navajo translated by Washington Matthews, one of the pioneering linguistic anthropologists. His work helped broaden appreciation for the genius of Native American poetry. The Mountain Chants were performed by the Navajo under the direction of a shaman and contain many archaic words whose meanings were lost even to the priesthood.

Matthew Arnold, Dover Beach, page 1061

Arnold and his family did such an efficient job of expunging the facts of his early romances that the genesis of “Dover Beach” is hard to know. Arnold may (or may not) have been in love with a French girl whom he called Marguerite, whose egotistic gaiety made her difficult. See Lionel Trilling’s discussion of the poem and of Arnold’s Marguerite poems in his biography Matthew Arnold (New York: Columbia UP, 1949). Marguerite, Trilling suspects, viewed the world as much more various, beautiful, and new than young Arnold did.

A sympathetic reading of “Dover Beach” might include some attention to the music of its assonance and alliteration, especially the s-sounds in the description of the tide (lines 12–14). Line 21 introduces the central metaphor, the Sea of Faith. Students will probably be helped by a few minutes of discussion of the historical background of the poem. Why, when the poem appeared in 1867, was religious faith under attack? Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Victorian industrialism may be worth mention. Ignorant armies (line 37) are still with us. Arnold probably had in mind those involved in the Crimean War of 1853–1856, perhaps also those in the American Civil War. For sources of the poem, see C. B. Tinker and H. F. Lowry, The Poetry of Matthew Arnold (New York: Oxford UP, 1940) 173–78.

A dour view of the poem is taken by Donald Hall in “Ah, Love, Let Us Be True” (American Scholar, Summer 1959). Hall finds “love invoked as a compensation for the losses that history has forced us to sustain,” and adds, “I hope there are better reasons for fidelity than disillusion. . . . Like so many Victorian poems, its negation is beautiful and its affirmation repulsive.” This comment can be used to provoke discussion. A useful counterfoil to “Dover Beach” is Anthony Hecht’s satiric poem “The Dover Bitch,” in his collection The Hard Hours (New York: Atheneum, 1960) and in many anthologies. For other critical comment, see William E. Cadbury, “Coming to Terms with ‘Dover Beach,’” Criticism 8 (Spring 1966): 126–38; James Dickey, Babel to Byzantium (New York: Farrar, 1968) 233–38 (a good concise general essay); and A. Dwight Culler, Imaginative Reason: The Poetry of Matthew Arnold (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966).

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Audio clip of “Dover Beach.”

John Ashbery, At North Farm, page 1062

It is never easy to decide what an Ashbery poem “means.” This one is rich with suggestions about which students may be invited to speculate. Who is this threatening catlike “someone” for whom we set out milk at night and about whom we think
“sometimes, / Sometimes and always, with mixed feelings”? Is it the grim reaper? And yet Death always knows where to find the person he’s looking for. And what are we to make of lines 7–11? How can the granaries be “bursting with meal, / The sacks of meal piled to the rafters” if “Hardly anything grows here”? The poet hints at a terrible sterility underlying the visible abundance at North Farm. Perhaps the farm can be regarded as, among other things, a paradigm of the world, rich in material things but spiritually empty. But that is to reduce the poem to flat words. Because such paraphrases tend to slip from Ashbery’s poems like seals from icebergs, this poet’s work is a favorite of critics. It challenges them to make subtler and stickier paraphrases.

Margaret Atwood, SIREN SONG, page 1063

Atwood’s “Siren Song” is a wonderfully tricky poem that seduces the reader as cleverly as it does its doomed listener. The reader doesn’t realize that he or she has been taken in, until it is too late.

The poem is in three parts. The first section (lines 1–9) recounts the sirens and their deadly songs. Many readers will recognize the legendary monsters (half bird, half woman) from Book XII of The Odyssey. “Siren” has become a synonym for a dangerously alluring woman. The second section (lines 10–24) switches gears suddenly, as one of the sirens confesses to us her unhappy plight. She offers to tell us the secret of her irresistible song, but mainly she talks about herself and cries for our help. Then, without knowing it until too late, we are in the final section (the last three lines), where we realize that we have been lured into the siren’s emotional grasp.

Feminist poets have often retold famous myths and legends with a twist; Atwood’s “Siren Song” is surely a model of this genre.

You can listen to a recording of Margaret Atwood reading “Siren Song” at www.poetryarchive.co.uk and watch a video clip in which Atwood discusses the significance of myth at www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason.

W. H. Auden, AS I WALKED OUT ONE EVENING, page 1064

This literary ballad, with its stark contrast between the innocent song of the lover and the more knowing song of the clocks, affords opportunities to pay close attention to the poet’s choice of words. Auden selects words rich in connotations: the brimming of the river (which suggests also the lover’s feelings), the crooked neighbor (with its hint of dishonesty and corruption as well as the denotation of being warped or bent by Time, like the “diver’s brilliant bow”). Figures of speech abound: the opening metaphor of the crowds like wheat (ripe and ready to be scythed by Time the Reaper), the lover’s extended use of hyperbole in lines 9–20, the personifications of Time and Justice, the serious pun on appalling in line 34 (both awe-inspiring and like a pall or shroud, as in Blake’s “London”), the final reconciliation in metaphor between the original “brimming river” and the flow of passing Time. Auden’s theme appears to be that as young lovers grow old, their innocent vision is smudged and begrimed by contact with realities—and yet “Life remains a blessing” after all.

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The lover’s huge promises in stanzas 3 and 4 (“I’ll love you Till China and Africa meet . . .”) have reminded Richard Wilbur of the hyperbolic boasts of the speaker in Burns’s “Oh, my love is like a red, red rose.” Burns speaks for the romantic lover, wrapped in his own emotions, but Auden’s view of romantic love is skeptical. “The poem then proceeds to rebut [the lover’s] lines, saying that the human heart is too selfish and perverse to make such promises” (Responses [New York: Harcourt, 1976] 144).

This poem may appear to have too little action in it to resemble folk ballads in more than a few touches. Auden himself, according to Monroe K. Spears, did not call this a ballad but referred to it as “a pastiche of folk-song.”

“As I Walked Out One Evening” is one of the “Five Lyrics” included in W. H. Auden Reading (Caedmon recording TC 1019). For comparison with the poet’s own modest delivery, Dylan Thomas Reading, vol. 4 (Caedmon TC 1061), offers a more dramatic rendition.

W. H. Auden, Musée des Beaux Arts, page 1065

In Brueghel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus (reproduced with this poem), students may need to have their attention directed to the legs disappearing in a splash, one quarter inch below the bow of the ship. One story (probably apocryphal) is that Brueghel’s patron had ordered a painting on a subject from mythology, but the artist had only this landscape painting completed. To fill the order quickly, Brueghel touched in the little splash, gave the picture a mythological name, and sent it on its way. Question: How does that story (if true) make Brueghel seem a shallower man than Auden thinks he is?

Besides the Landscape, Auden apparently has in mind two other paintings of Pieter Brueghel the Elder: The Census, also called The Numbering at Bethlehem (Auden’s lines 5–8), and The Massacre of the Innocents (lines 9–13). If the instructor has access to reproductions, these works might be worth bringing in; however, the Landscape seems central to the poem. This painting seems indebted to Ovid’s Metamorphoses, but in Ovid the plowman, shepherd, and fisherman looked on the fall of Icarus with amazement. The title of Auden’s poem, incidentally, is close to the name of the Brussels museum housing the Landscape: the Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts.

Edward Mendelson has remarked on the poem in Early Auden (New York: Viking, 1981):

The poetic imagination that seeks out grandeur and sublimity could scarcely be bothered with those insignificant figures lost in the background or in the crowd. But Auden sees in them an example of Christianity’s great and enduring transformation of classical rhetoric: its inversion of the principle that the most important subjects require the highest style. If the sufferings of a carpenter turned preacher mattered more to the world than the doom of princes, then the high style, for all its splendor, was a limited instrument. . . . These casually irregular lines make none of the demands for action and attention that marked Auden’s earlier harangues on the urgency of the times, yet beneath the apparent surface disorder a deeper pattern of connectedness gradually makes itself felt. The unassertive rhymes, easily overlooked on a first reading, hold the poem together.
Yet another device of language helps bring unity to Auden’s meditation, in P. K. Saha’s view. Four clauses begin with how, and one phrase begins with anyhow (line 11). These hows vary in meaning; still, the repeated how is the crucial word in the linguistic pattern of the poem (“Style, Stylistic Transformations, and Incorporators,” Style 12 [1978]: 18–22).

Jimmy Santiago Baca, SPliced Wire, page 1066

The controlling metaphor is indicated in the poem’s title and maintained consistently throughout the text: the speaker compares his love for the “you” of the poem to a wire bringing electrical power into her home. How—and how soon—do we know that this is a metaphor, as opposed to the poem’s being literally spoken by a power line? From such phrases as “I brewed your tongue / to a rich dark coffee” (lines 5–6) and “I turned on the music for you, / playing notes along the crest / of your heart” (lines 7–9).

In an interview some years ago, Jimmy Santiago Baca—a New Mexico author who is of Apache and Mexican descent—described his approach to the writing of his poetry as follows:

Well, I really don’t think much about the poetry that I write or much about my writing except that if it feels really good to me, if it feels like I’ve hit on a jugular—’cause I’m around a lot of sheep and bulls and horses, and I know blood, I know hearts, I know a horse’s eyes, I know a dog’s tongue, I know those things very intimately, I know those things. And when I feel a poem, I feel for that: I feel for the dog’s tongue and the horse’s eye or the bull’s chest, you know, and if I feel, if I can feel it in the poem, then the poem’s okay.

In a nutshell, the indication of a good poem, I think, is very emotional; every jagged emotion has a song all its own. You know the Navajos have a tradition: when a man or a woman go traveling, they come back home and they stand in the center of the teepee or the hogan where they live, and they repeat their names seven times. And if the repetition of the name is clear, then they’ve come back with their name intact—no one has stolen their name. No one has stolen their souls, so to speak. And in a society that thrives on stealing souls, I feel pretty good that I can stand up in my little place and repeat “Jimmy Santiago Baca” seven times and it’s done very clearly and then I pray before my altar and I’m okay for the day. I can start to work.

(from Callaloo, Winter 1994, 17.1)

Elizabeth Bishop, Filling Station, page 1067

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the poet’s attitude toward the feeble attempts at beautification detailed in lines 23–33? Sympathy, contempt, or what? How is the attitude indicated? The attempts are doomed, not only by the gas station’s being saturated with oil, but by the limitations of the family, whose only reading appears to be comic books and whose tastes run to hairy plants and daisy-covered doilies. In line 20,
comfy is their word, not the poet’s own. But the tone of the poem seems to be goodhumored amusement. The sons are “quick and saucy”—likable traits. The gas station can’t be beautiful, but at least its owners have tried. In a futile gesture toward neatness, they have even arranged the oil cans in symmetry.

2. **What meanings do you find in the last line?** Somebody has shown love for all motorists by arranging the oil cans so beautifully that they spell out a soothing croon, such as what one might say over and over to an agitated child. But the somebody also suggests Somebody Up There, whose love enfolds all human beings—even this oil-soaked crew.

3. **Do you find any similarity between “ESSO—SO—SO—SO” in “Filling Station” and “rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!” in “The Fish”?** Both lines stand late in their poems and sound similar; both express the speaker’s glimpse of beauty—or at least, in “Filling Station,” the only beauty the people can muster and the poet can perceive.

Helen Vendler, discussing the poem in *Part of Nature, Part of Us* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980), takes the closing statement to mean “God loves us all.” But Irvin Ehrenpreis disagrees: “The ‘—SO—SO—SO’ of overlapping labels on stacked cans is supposed to comfort automobiles as if they were high-strung horses, i.e., like a mother, not a god.” Doily and begonia indicate that some absent woman has tried to brighten up this gas station for her husband and her sons (review of Vendler’s book in *New York Review of Books*, 29 Apr. 1980).

Edward Cifelli, County College of Morris, passes along an insight from his student Joseph Grana. The message “ESSO—SO—SO—SO” may be an SOS from the same “somebody” who embroidered the doily and waters the plant. Professor Cifelli adds, “The pitiable woman who tries to put traces of beauty into a filthy filling station is unconsciously calling out for help, for rescue. Now that engages me!”

Robert Pinsky has also written of “Filling Station” with high esteem. He calls the poem a kind of contest between “the meticulous vigor of the writer” and “the sloppy vigor of the family,” both filling a dull moment and scene with “an unexpected, crazy, deceptively off-hand kind of elegance or ornament.” He particularly admires the poet’s choice of modifiers—including the direct, honest-seeming dirty. “Adjectives,” he notes, “according to a sound rule of thumb for writing classes, do not make ‘good descriptions.’ By writing almost as though she were too plain and straightforward to have heard of such a rule, Bishop loads characterizations of herself and her subject into the comfy dog, the dim doily, the hirsute begonia; the quietest possible virtuoso strokes” (*The Situation of Poetry* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976] 75–77).

“I’ve sometimes thought ‘Filling Station’ would make a good exercise for acting students,” observes critic and teacher David Walker, “given the number of different ways the first line—and much of the rest—might be stressed. Is the opening exclamation solemn and childlike, or prissy and fastidious, or enthusiastic? All we can identify with certainty, I think, is the quality of fascination, the intent gaze on the filling station’s pure oiliness.” Walker is reminded of Frost’s “Design” in that both poets seek to discover “a meaningful pattern in apparently random details”—but while Frost points toward a sinister architecture in what he observes, Bishop finds beauty and harmony (“Elizabeth Bishop and the Ordinary,” *Field* [Fall 1984]).

Brad Leithauser has admired the poem’s ingenious sound effects. At its end, “the cans of oil are arranged like cue cards to prompt that concluding sentence, the SO—
SO—SO grading toward that ‘Somebody loves us all.’ Nearly, the message in the oil cans is reinforced by both the ‘so’ and the ‘softly’ in the fourth line from the end” (“The ‘Complete’ Elizabeth Bishop,” New Criterion [Mar. 1983]: 38).

William Blake, THE TYGER, page 1068
William Blake, THE SICK ROSE, page 1069

“The Tyger,” from Songs of Experience, is a companion piece to “The Lamb” in Songs of Innocence. But while “The Lamb” poses a relatively easy question (“Little lamb, who made thee?”) and soon answers it, “The Tyger” poses questions that remain unanswered. Alert students may complain that some of Blake’s questions have no verbs—what dread hand and what dread feet did what? While the incompleteness has been explained by some critics as reflecting the agitated tone of the poem, it may have been due to the poet’s agitated habits of composition. Drafts of the poem in Blake’s notebook show that, after writing the first three stanzas, he began the fourth stanza with the line “Could fetch it from the furnace deep,” which would have completed the question in line 12. But then he deleted it and wrote stanza four almost as it stands now. (See Martin K. Nurmi, “Blake’s Revision of ‘The Tyger,’” PMLA 71 [1956]: 669–85.) Other useful discussions include that of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Innocence and Experience (New Haven: Yale UP, 1964), who thinks the stars are the rebel angels who threw down their spears when they surrendered; and John E. Grant, “The Art and Argument of ‘The Tyger’” in Texas Studies in Literature and Language 2 (1960): 38–60.

In “The Sick Rose,” why is the worm, whose love is rape, invisible? Not just because it is hidden in the rose, but also because it is some supernatural dweller in night and storm. Perhaps the worm is unseen Time, that familiar destroyer—is the rose then mortal beauty? Those are usual guesses. For an unusual guess, see E. D. Hirsch, Jr.: “The rose’s sickness, like syphilis, is the internal result of love enjoyed secretly and illicitly instead of purely and openly.” In Hirsch’s view, the poem is social criticism. Blake is satirizing the repressive order, whose hypocrisy and sham corrupt the woman who accepts it. Still, like all the best symbols, Blake’s rose and worm give off hints endlessly, and no one interpretation covers all of them. We noted with interest that “The Sick Rose” is rightly included in The Faber Book of Seduction (London, 1988).

Gwendolyn Brooks, THE MOTHER, page 1070

This powerful, direct poem is controversial for many readers, but it so memorably addresses an important contemporary issue that it is worth risking an overheated classroom discussion. Students will easily become polarized according to their moral posi-
tions on abortion, so it will help if you focus the discussion on the poem itself rather than broader social, legal, and theological issues. What does this troubling poem say?

First of all, point out that the poem is not spoken by Brooks about herself, that it employs two voices—first a narrator who speaks to another character (“the mother” of the title), then the mother’s voice itself. Recognizing this literary distancing device will in itself depoliticize the discussion and allow you to focus on the poem’s complex and at times almost contradictory argument. Second, point out the crucial division in the poem. In the first stanza the mother is the you. Another voice describes her situation. (This voice can be seen as either an outsider or part of the mother’s divided self.) In the second stanza, however, the mother suddenly becomes the I and describes her own thoughts, fears, and memories. The you now becomes the unborn children. This switch is quiet but startling. The form of “the mother” is interesting and unusual—rimed free verse. Brooks usually rimes her free verse lines in couplets, but in a few places she varies the pattern. A good question to ask students is what effect does the form have on the poem’s tone?

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Brooks. Longman Lecture, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on “the mother.”

Gwendolyn Brooks, THE RITES FOR COUSIN VIT, page 1071

Despite the fact that her funeral has taken place and she has been sealed in her coffin, Cousin Vit is portrayed as far too vital (her very name suggests vitality) to be confined by her casket or even death itself, unable to be contained by the “stuff and satin aiming to enfold her, / The lid’s contrition nor the bolts before” (lines 3–4). At the end of line 5, the speaker invites the reader to “surmise” Cousin Vit’s desertion of what is supposed to be her final resting place and her return to the “bars” and “love-rooms” she had frequented in life, as well as to “the things in people’s eyes.” What things? Desire? Delight? Disapproval? Probably all of these and many more. Vit’s zest for life is presented as being large enough to encompass the whole range of her experiences, whether “happiness” or “hysterics.” The single, isolated word Is that ends the poem emphatically sums up the dead woman’s undying vigor.

Note that “the rites for Cousin Vit” is a sonnet. It might be characterized as modified Petrarchan in form, with different pairs of rime sounds being used in the two halves of the octave.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Brooks.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, HOW DO I LOVE THEE? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS, page 1071

Dropping this famous sonnet from an earlier edition broke more than one teacher’s heart. The many requests for this poem, “My Last Duchess,” “Mending Wall,” “Death be not proud,” and Poe’s work remind us how much students enjoy reading famous poems—works that an educational theorist like E. D. Hirsch would claim have “cul-
tural utility.” They are poems that are still frequently quoted in newspapers, conversation, and electronic media. Anthologists eager for novelty too often forget that these famous poems are novel to every new generation.

This is the penultimate sonnet of forty-four constituting Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, a book that Ezra Pound once called “The second: that is, a sonnet sequence surpassed in English by one other alone. I would argue for that.” The sonnets document the poet’s growing love for Robert Browning, whom she married, in defiance of her father’s wishes, in her fortieth year. “My little Portuguese” was a pet name Robert often used for Elizabeth: hence the title of her book.

Robert Browning, *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*, page 1072

The “Soliloquy” is a poem especially valuable for combating the notion that poetry can deal only in love and gladness. Here the subject is a hatred so intense that the speaker seems practically demented. In the last stanza, he almost would sell his soul to the Devil in order to blight a flowering shrub. A little background information on abbeys, their organization, and the strictness of their rules may help some class members. From the internal evidence, it is hard to say whether this is a sixteenth-century cloister or a nineteenth-century one; Barbary corsairs (line 31) plied their trade from about 1550 until 1816. The business about drinking in three sips (lines 37–39) may need explaining: evidently it refers to a symbolic observance, like crossing knife and fork.

It might be stressed that the person in this poem is not the poet; the tone isn’t one of bitterness but of merriment. Comedy is evident not only from the speaker’s blindness to his own faults, but from the rollicking rhythm and multisyllable comic rimes (*abhorrence/Lawrence; horsehairs/corsairs; Galatians/damnations; rose-acacia/Plena gratia)*.

Questions: With what sins does the speaker charge Brother Lawrence? (Pride, line 23—monogrammed tableware belonging to a monk!; lust, 25–32; and gluttony, 40.) What sins do we detect in the speaker himself? (Envy, clearly, and pride—see his holier-than-thou attitude in stanza 5. How persuasive are his claims to piety when we learn he secretly owns a pornographic novel?) “Soliloquy” abounds in ironies, and class members can spend a lively few minutes in pointing them out.

Charles Bukowski, *Dostoevsky*, page 1074

In 1936, the poet and critic Allen Tate observed that “the achievement of a new order of experience does not consist in sensations or landscapes that no one has felt or seen before. A new order of experience—the constant aim of serious poetry—exists in a new order of language” (“Modern Poets and Convention,” collected in Tate’s *The Forlorn Demon: Didactic and Critical Essays*, Chicago: Regnery, 1953). His insight is exemplified by the work of Charles Bukowski, who was at a far remove from Tate in his poetry, his politics, and his personality. Bukowski, who spent his entire
life in Los Angeles and worked for many years in the Post Office, aligned himself with the oppressed and victimized, the outcasts and “derelicts.” His artistic credo was “Don’t try”—a rejection of writing that is forced and calculated in favor of what is spontaneous and flows freely from the strength and energy of its inspiration. Accordingly, his poems are written in free form and use what Wordsworth called “the real language of men,” a straightforward diction in which he can speak clearly and directly to “my brothers.” In “Dostoevsky,” he pays tribute to one of his heroes and role models, finding sustenance and hope in the fact that the Russian novelist could endure a horrible extreme of psychological torture and not only survive intact but go on from there to create literary masterpieces.

**Lorna Dee Cervantes, CANNERY TOWN IN AUGUST, page 1075**

Cervantes’s poem brings to life a grim cannery town by personifying both the cannery and town (“‘t humps the air”), not to mention the “[speechless” steam, the “grunting” trucks, and the bird (which “sings” the swing shift / home”). Even as these non-living objects are personified, the cannery workers are given the opposite treatment: they are reduced to their “bodyless” uniforms and shoes, which are colorless (“monochrome”), and to their smells—reduced, even, to a state of muteness, in which they are not really alive but need to be “palm[ed] . . . back to living”). These people are shadow creatures who have no contact with one another—not even the touch of a palm, which might stir them back into life. The cannery is ultimately seen as a state of living death or a walking dream for the people trapped in its precincts.

**Geoffrey Chaucer, MERCILESS BEAUTY, page 1075**

It can be great fun for students to learn (well, more or less) how to pronounce Chaucer’s English, provided one has the time and strength to help them make the attempt. One does much better by Chaucer’s lines if one puts on an Irish brogue. (A couple of Guinness stouts before class usually help.)

Some scholars doubt that Chaucer himself wrote this poem, but if he did not, someone who thoroughly knew Chaucer’s work probably did.


**John Ciardi, MOST LIKE AN ARCH THIS MARRIAGE, page 1076**

If Ciardi’s poem is not an allegory, it comes so close that no significant distinction between symbolism and allegory exists. Ciardi establishes the image of an arch and immediately links it to marriage. Throughout the poem, this single identification between the two things remains constant and consistent. Ciardi carefully elaborates on the qualities of the arch, and in every case the reader recognizes those attributes prove surprisingly true for marriage. The fact that some of those correspondences are
surprising and ingenious ("two weaknesses that lean / into a strength") add to the
poem's memorability and delight. In this poem one sees how much Ciardi learned
from Dante's use of allegory. (Ciardi's verse translation of The Divine Comedy still
remains as good as any poetic version ever done in English.)

The only strong argument one might muster against the allegorical nature of
Ciardi's poem is that this short work is not narrative; therefore, the allegory doesn't
have sufficient space to distinguish itself from an extended metaphor.

A great deal of scholarship was published on Ciardi in the nineties—much of it
done by Edward Cifelli of the County College of Morris, New Jersey. Cifelli pub-
lished The Selected Letters of John Ciardi (Fayetteville: U Arkansas P, 1991). His full-
length biography, John Ciardi, then appeared in 1997 along with a new edition of The
Collected Poems (both from Arkansas). These books present the life and work of the
first major Italian American poet.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, KUBLA KHAN, page 1076

The circumstances of this poem's composition are almost as famous as the poem
itself, and, for the convenience of instructors who wish to read to their students
Coleridge's prefatory note, here it is:

In the summer of the year 1797, the author, then in ill health, had retired to a
lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Som-
erset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had
been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the
moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same sub-
stance, in Purchas's Pilgrimage: "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be
built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were
inclosed with a wall." The author continued for about three hours in a profound
sleep, at least of the external sense, during which time he had the most vivid
confidence that he could not have composed less than from two to three hun-
dred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose
up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expres-
sions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking he appeared
to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink,
and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved.

At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from
Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room,
found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained
some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of his vision, yet, with
the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had
passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has
been cast, but, alas! without the after restoration of the latter!

It is clearly a vulgar error to think the poem a mere pipe dream which anyone
could have written with the aid of opium. The profound symbolism of "Kubla Khan"
has continued to intrigue critics, most of whom find that the pleasure-dome suggests
poetry, the sacred river, the flow of inspiration, or instinctual life. About the ances-
traditional voices and the caves of ice there seems less agreement, and students might be invited to venture their guesses. For a valuable modern reading of the poem, see Humphry House, “Kubla Khan, Christabel and Dejection” in Coleridge (London: Hart-Davis, 1953), also reprinted in Romanticism and Consciousness, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970).

Some instructors may wish to bring in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” as well—in which case it may be a temptation to go on to Jung’s theory of archetypes and to other dreamlike poems such as Yeats’s “The Second Coming.” A fine topic for a term paper might be, after reading John Livingston Lowes’s classic source study The Road to Xanadu (Boston: Houghton, 1927), to argue whether it is worth trying to find out everything that may have been going on in the back of a poet’s mind, and to what extent such investigations can end in certainty.

Billy Collins, CARE AND FEEDING, page 1078

The equation that this poem turns on—that one year of a human being’s life is equal to seven years in the life of a dog—is usually expressed the other way around, as when, in answering a friend’s question about the age of a pet dog, we might say something like: “Harlow is nine, which makes her sixty-three in human years.” Here, on the eve of his sixtieth birthday, the speaker begins by calculating his age in dog years, and through the rest of the poem he imagines himself as both dog and master. He is an adult human being who is mature and responsible, as befits both the dignity of his age and his status as a higher being; at the same time, he sees himself as a dog in the simple, playful side of his nature, prompted entirely by instinct and affection. As the title suggests, he must see to the care and feeding of his inner dog (which, thanks to such care, has become “venerable”) and must nurture that side of himself in order to stay as fully alive, in every sense of the word, as he can.

Hart Crane, MY GRANDMOTHER’S LOVE LETTERS, page 1078

Diane Thiel, a poet and professor of English, has contributed this commentary:

In his correspondence, Hart Crane speaks of the trials of writing this early poem after the initial inspiration. He longs for the “silence” he feels is necessary to properly address his subject. The poem becomes a poignant example of the poet’s process, of the surprising turns a work might take, and of the possible inability to fully embrace certain endeavors at various points in one’s life.

Early in the poem, the speaker tries to chart the constellation of his grandmother’s life, via love letters discovered in the “corner of the roof.” Yet already in the first two stanzas, the images suggest that the speaker feels the tug of imper-
manence: the old letters “are brown and soft / And liable to melt as snow.” Crane continues to evoke an elegiac tone with such images in the third stanza: “It is all hung by an invisible white hair.” In contrast to the impermanence is the rain, constant throughout the space of the poem.

It is “the loose girdle of soft rain” that helps to create the music of the poem. The piece has a generally iambic current, but it is indeed “loose” and “soft,” with an “echo” of meter, rather than a tight pattern. The rhymes as well are “gentle” and “soft”: these two words themselves are repeated in the poem. In Crane’s music, the words “enough,” “Elizabeth,” “roof,” and “soft” provide a light touch of rhyme. Such delicacy makes his exact rhymes all the more intense when they appear: “the invisible white hair” alongside the “birch limbs webbing the air.” He leads his “grandmother by the hand / Through much of what she would not understand.”

The poem ends with the rain on the “roof” gently rhyming its “laughter” at the poet’s attempts to inhabit the past, via his grandmother’s love life. The poem, which initially tried to explore the world of those letters, now recognizes the difficulty of the poet’s role as translator of certain experiences. In his correspondence, after recounting his difficulties with the subject matter, Crane states that the finished poem was “shorter than [he] had planned.”

When the speaker asks himself if his fingers are “long enough to play / Old keys that are but echoes” and longs for the silence to be able to hear the music, one senses not only the longing for his grandmother’s experience, but a longing to feel such a love himself. The speaker seems to wonder at his own ability to love. The poem becomes a quiet harbinger of his later “Voyages”; “Permit me voyage, love, into your hands.” The rain’s “gently pitying laughter” suggests a realization of the distance the speaker feels, not only from the grandmother’s experience, but from his own ability to inhabit the “greatness of such space.” In its longing, the poem, itself, feels like a love letter—to his grandmother, to her life, and to his own desire to “carry back the music to its source.”

**E. E. Cummings, SOMEBEWHERE I HAVE NEVER TRAVELLED, GLADLY BEYOND, page 1079**

Why is this exquisite love poem so rarely anthologized? Cummings surely ranks as one of the great love poets in American literature, and this evocative lyric is one of his finest efforts. Many readers prize it greatly. We recently received a wedding announcement that reprinted the poem, and Woody Allen included the entire poem at a pivotal moment in Hannah and Her Sisters. The striking last line is one of the most famous in modern American poetry, and it serves as epigraph to Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie.

The central image of the poem is a rose which the speaker equates with himself. (If one adopts a biographical strategy by which to interpret the text, it is worthwhile to note that Cummings wrote the poem for Anne Barton, an artist’s model, whom he married in 1929 and divorced in 1932 after she left him for a wealthy New York surgeon. The interesting aspect of a biographical view is that Cummings’s speaker uses the flower image, traditionally a female image, for himself, and it becomes a symbol of sexual and emotional awakening in the presence of his beloved.)

The poem moves via paradox and synesthesia. Eyes are “silent.” The speaker cannot touch things because “they are too near.” Fragility is portrayed as “intense.”
The effect is to endow the situation with strangeness and mystery. Words are used oddly, the lover's looks unclose the speaker. Punctuation is employed for expressive purposes, and normal word order is changed to heighten its musical and semantic effect, as in the lovely lines “you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens / (touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose.” All of these effects are used subtly and unexpectedly. Cummings carefully avoids repeating any verbal trick too often in this poem. Even the form of the poem is alluringly elusive. Many lines slip into iambic pentameter, but the poem never falls into a predictable rhythmic pattern. There are also rimes hidden throughout the poem, but only in the last stanza do they appear conventionally at the ends of the lines. The sheer density of beautifully employed poetic effects and the constant shifting from one effect to another create an intoxicating, almost hypnotic spell on the listener.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Cummings.

Marisa de los Santos, PERFECT DRESS, page 1080

Dr. Johnson famously described remarriage as “the perpetual triumph of hope over experience,” an adage with some applicability to “Perfect Dress.” “Today in the checkout line,” says the speaker, “I felt the old pull, flare / of the pilgrim’s twin flames, desire and faith.” Everyone, of course, feels desires of one kind or another, but it is faith—the belief that these desires can be fulfilled in just the ways that we want them to be—that distinguishes the speaker of this poem, and faith that the speaker finds impossible to relinquish. When she was fifteen, she “reached for polyester satin, / machine-made lace, petunia- and Easter-egg-colored, / brilliant and flammable. Nothing haute about this / couture but my hopes for it”—and yet those hopes are enough for the believer, “despite all we know.” Even toward the end of the poem, she is still willing to credit at least the possibility that such hopes may be realized: “Silly maybe or maybe // I was right, that there’s no limit to the ways eternity / suggests itself . . .” Despite the occasional ruefulness of tone earlier in the poem, this commitment seems, on the surface at least, uncomplicated by irony.

It might be interesting to read and discuss this poem in the context of Margaret Atwood's poem “Siren Song” (for the suggestion that, despite knowing better, we can't help falling for the same old lures every single time).

John Donne, DEATH BE NOT PROUD, page 1081

During the Renaissance, when life was short, a man of the cloth like Donne would have surprised no one by being on familiar terms with death. Still, “Death be not proud,” one of Donne's “Holy Sonnets,” is an almost startling put-down of “poor death.” Staunchly Christian in its sure expectation of the Resurrection, Donne's poem personifies death as an adversary swollen with false pride and unworthy of being called “mighty and dreadful.” (For another bold personification, see “Batter my heart, three-personed God,” another of the “Holy Sonnets,” in which Donne sees God as ravisher.)
In “Death be not proud” the poet accuses death of being little more than a slave bossed around by “fate, chance, kings and desperate men”—a craven thing that keeps bad company, such as “poison, war, and sickness,” and is itself powerless without their assistance. Finally Donne taunts death with a paradox: “death, thou shalt die.”

Of interest, though perhaps of less than immediate usefulness in the classroom, are the articles on Donne’s religious poetry by Helen Gardner, Louis L. Martz, and Stanley Archer in John Donne’s Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Criticism, ed. A. L. Clements (New York: Norton, 1966). All three explore the extent to which Jesuit methods of meditation might have influenced the “Holy Sonnets.”

It might be instructive for students to compare two personifications of death: Donne’s and Emily Dickinson’s in “Because I could not stop for Death,” where death appears in the guise of a courtly gentleman who stops by to take the poet for a pleasant ride.

MyLiteratureLab® Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Donne. Audio clip of “Death be not proud.”

John Donne, THE FLEA, page 1081

This outrageous poem is a good class-rouser on a dull day, but we don’t urge you to use it unless the class seems friendly. (Some women students tend to be offended by Donne’s levity; men tend to be put off by his ingenuity.)

A little familiarity with a seventeenth-century medical notion may help make Donne’s metaphor clear. Conception, it was thought, took place when the blood of men and women mingled during intercourse. That is why Donne declares in line 11 that “we almost, yea more than married are.” Bitten by the flea containing his blood, the woman may already be pregnant.

Instructors fond of Donne’s knotty poems will be grateful for Theodore Redpath’s valuable crib-book The Songs and Sonets of John Donne (London: Methuen, 1956; also New York: University Paperbacks, 1967). Redpath works through the poems line by line, explicating difficulties. He explains line 18: The woman would commit “three sins in killing three” in that she’d commit murder in killing him, suicide in killing herself, and sacrilege in killing the flea. Why sacrilege? Because she would be attacking a “marriage temple” and symbol of the Trinity.

Patricia Meyer Spacks has treated the poem to scrutiny in College English 29 (1968): 593–94.

MyLiteratureLab® Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Donne.

John Donne, A VALEDICATION: FORBIDDING MOURNING, page 1082

In his Life of Donne, Izaak Walton tells us that Donne wrote this poem for his wife in 1611, when he was about to depart on a diplomatic mission to France.

Much of the meaning of the poem depends upon the simile of the compasses in the last three stanzas. There is probably no better way to make sure students under-
stand it clearly than to bring in a draftsman’s compass—even the Wal-Mart variety—and to demonstrate the metaphor with it. There’ll always be someone who thinks Donne means the kind of compass that indicates north.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is a valediction anyway? What is a high school “valedictorian”? The dictionary defines valediction as “a speech or a statement made as a farewell.” Valedictorian is defined as “The student with the highest academic rank in a class who delivers the valedictory at graduation.”

2. Why does the speaker forbid mourning? Do lines 1–4 mean that he is dying? Explain this simile about the passing away of virtuous men. As saints take leave of this world—so sweetly and calmly that one hardly knows they’re gone—let us take leave of each other.

3. In lines 7–8, what is suggested by the words with religious denotations? Profanation (the desecration of a sacred thing), the laity. What is the idea? Love seems to the speaker a holy mystery. He and his wife are its priests or ministers.

4. Explain the reference to astronomy in the third stanza. Earthquakes shake, rattle, and roll; Ptolemaic spheres revolve gently and harmlessly. This takes us to the notion of sublunary lovers in stanza 4. In the medieval cosmos, the heavenly bodies are fixed and permanent, while everything under the moon is subject to change.

5. Paraphrase stanza 4. Unlike common lovers, bound to their earthly passions, we have less need of those things that serve sensual love: namely, bodies.

6. Why is beaten gold an appropriate image in the sixth stanza? What connotations does gold have? Refined, precious, durable, capable of being extended without breaking.

7. Comment on the word hearkens, line 31. As a draftsman’s compass will illustrate, the fixed central foot leans forward when the compass is extended, as if, in Donne’s comparison, eager for its mate’s return.

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Donne.

Rita Dove, DAYSTAR, page 1083

“Daystar” appears in Rita Dove’s Thomas and Beulah (1986), a book-length sequence of poems about the daily life and concerns of an African American couple based in part on the poet’s maternal grandparents. The collection, Dove’s third volume of poems, won the Pulitzer Prize.

The term daystar refers to the morning star, or, in poetic terms, the sun; the poem’s last line suggests that it was the sun that the poet had in mind. Why daystar instead of sun? Does the word connote joy and happiness? Does the conjunction of the word’s two components suggest a search for the repose of a starlit night “in the middle of the day”? Such repose is what the harried wife and mother in the poem
seeks—and finds—when she sits behind the garage, “building a palace” while her children nap. So harried is she, apparently, so desperate to suspend her roles as wife and mother, that she wishes for an hour to be no one that others can make demands upon, to be “nothing, / pure nothing” (lines 21–22). The opportunity to sit in solitude and repose, whether to observe the world around her or to blot it out, sustains her not only through her daily labors but also “that night when Thomas rolled over and / lurched into her” (lines 17–18).

T. S. Eliot, JOURNEY OF THE MAGI, page 1084

The speaker is a very old man (“All this was a long time ago . . .”) looking forward to his death. As his mind roves back over the past, it is mainly the discomforts and frustrations of his journey that he remembers, and when he comes to the part we have been waiting for, his account of the Nativity, he seems still mystified, as though uncertainly trying to figure out what had happened—“There was a Birth, certainly.” Apparently the whole experience was so devastating that he prefers to omit all further details. His plight was to recognize Christ as God and yet to be unable to accept Christ as his savior. Being a king, he did not renounce his people, but they henceforth seemed alien to him, clutching their discredited gods like useless dolls.

The passage beginning “Then at dawn” (lines 21–28) is full of foreshadowings, both hopeful and sinister. Besides the symbolic white horse, the vine leaves suggest Christ, who said to his disciples, “I am the vine, ye are the branches” (John 15:5). The tavern customers suggest the Roman soldiers who will drink and cast dice at the cross.

Although Eliot’s dissatisfied Magus isn’t one of the kings portrayed by Yeats in “The Magi”—being dissatisfied for different reasons—it is curious that Eliot may have taken the dramatic situation of his poem from one of Yeats’s stories. In “The Adoration of the Magi” in Yeats’s prose collection Mythologies (reprinted in 1925, two years before Eliot first published his poem), three old men call on the storyteller and, drawing close to his fire, insist on telling him of a journey they had made when young, and of a vision of Bethlehem. Like Eliot’s speaker, who repeats “set down / This set down / This,” they demand that their story be taken down word for word.

Robert Frost, *Birches*, page 1085

“Birches,” according to Lawrance Thompson, was written during a spell of homesickness in 1913–1914, when Frost and his family were living in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, England (*Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph* [New York: Holt, 1970] 37, 541).

Students may be led to see the poem as much more than a nostalgic picture of boyhood play. From line 43 on, the poem develops a flamboyant metaphor. Richard Poirier has given us a good summary of the poem’s theme: “While there are times when the speaker [of “Birches”] would ‘like to get away from earth awhile,’ his aspiration for escape to something ‘larger’ is safely controlled by the recognition that birch trees will only bear so much climbing before returning you, under the pressure of human weight, back home” (*Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977] 172).

One line in “Birches” meant most to Frost, the line about feeling lost in the woods, facing too many decisions about which way to go. He pointed it out to audiences on several occasions: “It’s when I’m weary of considerations” (line 43). Reading the poem at Bread Loaf in July 1954, he remarked of the line, “That’s when you get older. It didn’t mean so much to me when I wrote it as it does now” (*Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, ed. Reginald Cook [Boston: U of Massachusetts P, 1974] 51). Radcliffe Squires has written interestingly of the birch tree as a path toward heaven fraught with risk, suspense, even a kind of terror. The climbing boy performs his act of birch-bending gracefully, but in doing so goes almost too far, like one filling a cup “even above the brim” (*The Major Themes of Robert Frost* [Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1963] 55–56).

Sidelights on the poem: Frost wrote to his friend Charles Madison in 1950, “‘Birches’ is two fragments soldered together so long ago I have forgotten where the joint is.” Can anybody find it? . . . A particular word he congratulated himself on finding was *crazes* in line 9: “cracks and crazes their enamel” (Cook, 230). Frost’s concern for scientific accuracy is well known. He sought evidence to confirm his claim that birches bend to left and right. “With disarming slyness, he said: ‘I never go down the shoreline [from Boston] to New York without watching the birches to see if they live up to what I say about them in the poem.’ His birches, he insisted, were *not* the white mountain or paper birch of northern New England (*Betula papyrifera*); they were the gray birch (*Betula populifolia*)” (Cook, 232).

Robert Frost, *Mending Wall*, page 1087

This familiar poem is often misread or loaded with needless symbolism. Some possible notions you might meet:

1. That the poem is an allegory: the wall stands for some political barrier such as segregation, immigration quotas, or the Iron Curtain. But can the text of the poem lend such a notion any support? Frost, according to Louis Untermeyer, frowned on all attempts to add to the wall’s meaning: “He denies that the poem
says anything more than it seems to say” (Note in Robert Frost’s Poems [New York: Washington Square P, 1964]).

2. Frost’s theme is that fences should be destroyed. Up with communal land, away with private property! But as Radcliffe Squires points out, none of Frost’s other poetry supports such a left-wing view. Neither does “Mending Wall” support it, “for the poet-narrator himself cooperates with the wall-builder, replacing the stones in the spring even as he protests in spirit” (The Major Themes of Robert Frost [Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1963]).

3. The maxim “Good fences make good neighbors” is just a smug platitude for which the speaker has only contempt. This view would make him out to be a cynic. Yet, by cooperating in the wall-mending, the speaker lends the maxim some truth. Although limited in imagination, the neighbor isn’t an idiot. (Frost is portraying, by the way, an actual farmer he liked: the cheerful Napoleon Guay, owner of the farm next door to the Frosts’ farm in Derry, New Hampshire. See New Hampshire’s Child: The Derry Journals of Leslie Frost [Albany: State U of New York P, 1969].)

At the center of the poem is a contrast between two ways to regard mending a wall. The speaker’s view is announced in the first line; the neighbor’s is repeated in the last. “The opposing statements,” says Untermeyer, “are uttered by two different types of people—and both are right.” Students may be asked to define the very different temperaments of speaker and neighbor. A hard-working farmer to whom spring means walls to mend, the neighbor lacks fancy and frivolity. Spring is all around him, yet he moves in darkness, as though blind. Lines 30–40 compare him to a man of the Stone Age. A conservative from habit, he mends walls mainly because his father did. The speaker, full of mischief and imagination, is presumably a poet who wants to do no more hard labor than he can help. The speaker enjoys having some fun with the neighbor, telling him that apple trees won’t invade pines. Mending walls is a kind of spring ritual, and the speaker likes to pretend there is magic in it: using a spell to make stones balance, blaming the wear-and-tear of winter upon elves—or more exactly, upon some Something not to be offended.

There is an excellent discussion of “Mending Wall” by Matthew Davis (“The Laconic Response: Spartan and Athenian Mindsets in Robert Frost’s ‘Mending Wall,’ ” Literary Imagination 7.3 [2005]: 289–305). Drawing on Frost’s solid classical background and his occasional comments about Greek philosophy, Davis makes the case that the speaker and his neighbor exemplify, respectively, the Athenian approach of imagination and inquiry, with their potentially subversive intent, and the deeply conservative Spartan values of tradition and acceptance. While making the best possible defense of the neighbor and his views, Davis concludes that the poet’s own sympathies are more closely aligned with the speaker. Subjecting the poem to a close reading that illuminates a number of its details, the essay is sensible, thoroughly substantiated, and written with clarity and grace. It is a pleasure to read, and it should be experienced in its entirety.
Robert Frost, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, page 1088

Students will think they know this poem from their elementary school textbooks, in which it is usually illustrated as though it were about a little horse, but they may need to have its darker suggestions underlined for them. Although one can present a powerful case for seeing Frost as a spokesman for the death wish, quoting other Frost poems such as “Come In,” “To Earthward,” and “Into My Own,” we think it best to concentrate on this familiar poem and to draw the class to state what it implies. The last stanza holds the gist of it. What would he do if he *didn’t* keep his promises? There is sense, however, in an objection a student once made: maybe he’d just stay admiring the snow for another fifteen minutes and be late for milking. “People are always trying to find a death wish in that poem,” Frost told an audience at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference in 1960. “But there’s a life wish there—he goes on, doesn’t he?”

Ask students if they see anything unusual about the rime scheme of the poem (rimes linking the stanzas as in *terza rima* or as in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”), and then ask what problem this rime scheme created for the poet as the poem neared its end. How else would Frost have ended it if he hadn’t hit upon that magnificent repetition? In 1950 Frost wrote to a friend, “I might confess the trade secret that I wrote the third line of the last stanza of ‘Stopping by Woods’ in such a way as to call for another stanza when I didn’t want another stanza and didn’t have another stanza in me, but with great presence of mind and a sense of what a good boy I was I instantly struck the line out and made my exit with a repeat end” (qtd. in Lawrence Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph* [New York: Holt, 1970] 597–98). On another occasion Frost declared that to have a line in the last stanza that didn’t rime with anything would have seemed a flaw. “I considered for a moment winding up with a three line stanza. The repetend was the only logical way to end such a poem” (letter of 1923 to Sylvester Baxter, given by R. C. Townsend, *New England Quarterly* 36 [June 1963]: 243).

Frost reads the poem on *An Album of Modern Poetry* (Library of Congress, PL 20) and on *Robert Frost Reading His Own Poems*, record no. 1 (EL LCB 1941, obtainable from the National Council of Teachers of English, 1211 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801). Both recordings also include “Fire and Ice.”

*MyLiteratureLab* Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Frost.

Allen Ginsberg, *A Supermarket in California*, page 1088

A comparison of this poem with Walt Whitman’s work (e.g., “To a Locomotive in Winter”) demonstrates the extent to which Ginsberg, in his tribute to Whitman, uses very Whitmanlike “enumerations.” Ginsberg’s long sentences, his use of free verse, parentheses, and fulsome phrases (“childless, lonely old grubber,” “lonely old courage-teacher,” etc.) are further indications that he is paying tribute to Whitman in part by echoing his style.

There is in “A Supermarket in California” as well a quality of surrealism that is Ginsberg’s own. The existence of a “Neon fruit supermarket,” the juxtaposition of past and present, the inclusion of the Spanish poet García Lorca (like Ginsberg and
Whitman, a homosexual) “down by the watermelons,” and the references to Charon and to the River Lethe all hover at the edges of dream.

Questions for discussion: What does Ginsberg mean when he speaks of “the lost America of love”? What does the poem say about loneliness? About death? (Whitman’s death, in the poem, is as lonely a journey as Ginsberg imagines his life to have been.)

Thomas Hardy, THE CONVERGENCE OF THE TWAIN, page 1089

Most students will be familiar with the history of the Titanic from the many popular films and books. Still, a few facts may need to be recalled. The fateful day was April 15, 1912. The pride of the British White Star lines, the Titanic was the world’s largest ship in its day, celebrated for luxurious trappings (including Turkish baths and a fully equipped gym). Many of the unlucky passengers were wealthy and famous. One reason the Titanic sank with such cost of life was that the builders, smugly assuming the ship to be unsinkable, had provided lifeboats for fewer than half the 2,200 passengers. (Only 705 people survived.) Hardy wrote the poem for the souvenir program of a benefit show for the Titanic Disaster Fund (to aid survivors and the bereaved) given at Covent Garden, May 14, 1912.

Hardy has been seen as an enemy of science and industrialism, those spoilers of rural England, but Donald Davie argues that “The Convergence of the Twain” shows no such animosity. The poem censures vanity and luxury, "but not the technology which built the great ship and navigated her" (Thomas Hardy and British Poetry [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972]). Although Hardy personally knew two victims of the disaster, the “Convergence,” as J. O. Bailey points out, is not a personal lament; indeed, the drowned are hardly mentioned. The poem is a philosophic argument, with the Immanent Will punishing man for pride: “It acts like the Greek concept of Fate that rebukes hubris” (The Poetry of Thomas Hardy [Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1970]). Fate, however, seems personified in the poem as the Spinner of the Years, a mere agent of the Will.

Students can concentrate profitably on the poet’s choice of words: those that suggest the exotic unnaturalness of the Titanic’s furnishings (salamandrine, opulent, jewels . . . to ravish the sensuous mind, gilded). Diction will also point to the metaphor of the marriage between ship and iceberg: the intimate welding and the consummation. The late Allen Tate was fond of reading this poem aloud to his friends, with mingled affection and contempt, and remarking (according to Robert Kent) that it held “too many dead words, dead then as now, and all the more obtuse for having been long dead in Shelley. ‘Stilly,’ for example.” From Hardy’s original printed version of the poem, as given in The Variorum Edition of the Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy, ed. James Gibson (New York: Macmillan, 1979), it appears that he originally cast line 6: “The cold, calm currents strike their rhythmic tidal lyres.” Isn’t thrid an improvement, even though it is stiltedly archaic?
Thomas Hardy, THE DARKLING THRUSH, page 1091

“The Darkling Thrush” comes out of the Romantic pastoral tradition, and through its first two stanzas Hardy pulls out all the stops in displaying the connection between the bleakness of the landscape and the bleakness of the speaker’s mood. Virtually every line yields a word indicative of enervation and hopelessness: note “spectre,” “dregs,” “desolate,” “weakening,” “broken,” and “haunted” in the first eight lines alone.

It is at the poem’s midpoint that the thrush of the title makes his sudden and surprising appearance, a bird who is described as being as “frail, gaunt, and small” (line 21) as the speaker feels himself to be, and thus is presented as a figure with whom the speaker may readily identify, and with whose values and reactions he may therefore be willing to associate himself. And so a reader may be tempted—a temptation to which many students will almost certainly succumb—to characterize the poem’s theme along these lines: I was suffering from gloom induced by the winter-afternoon dying-of-the-light blahs, until the joyous song of this little bird showed me how silly I was to feel that way.

But notice how muted the conclusion of the poem actually is. The speaker says that “I could think” (line 29) that the thrush knew something that he didn’t, not “I did think.” And the very end of the poem reminds us that, if there is any basis for hope, the speaker remains “unaware” of it. You might find it useful to have your students compare “The Darkling Thrush” with Hardy’s own “The Oxen,” in which the speaker describes his attitude to the pious legend of his youth as “hoping,” not “persuaded.” You might also discuss “The Darkling Thrush” in terms of Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” another poem whose subtleties are often overlooked by consolation-seekers who would reduce it to a sort of national anthem of rugged individualism.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Hardy.

Thomas Hardy, HAP, page 1092

This early poem summarizes Hardy’s bleak view of existence. A lesser artist might have been crushed by this sense of hopelessness, but Hardy filled the theological gap with love, compassion, and humor. Students might compare this bitterly atheistic poem with the gentler “The Oxen.” In “The Oxen” Hardy longs for the Christian faith he had as a child.

Two things are worth noting in the poem (since students sometimes overlook them). First, Hardy would rather have a cruel deity than none at all. It is not the pain of existence he bemoans, it is the meaninglessness of life without some guiding divine plan. Second, Hardy’s worldview is so deeply religious that even when he claims there is no God, he ends up personifying the nothingness under which he suffers (“Crass Casualty” and “dicing Time,” which he then groups as “purblind Doomsters”).

The vocabulary of “Hap” is interesting. The title word means both a “happening” and “chance.” Hap is not used much today but is still alive in common terms in “happenstance” and “hapless.” Casualty is a word we are used to seeing primarily in accident reports and insurance forms. Hardy uses it here in its broader original sense
of “chance” in the same way we still use “accident” in the neutral sense of a “chance event.” Detective novel fans may know Doomsters from the title of Ross Macdonald's compelling novel; doomster is an archaic word for a judge (that survives in the family name Dempster). In Scottish courts the doomster not only read the sentence but also carried out the execution. Finally, you might quiz the class on purblind, a perfectly modern term that many of them won't know.

“Hap” is, by the way, a sonnet. Notice how neatly the meaning turns at the beginning of the sestet (“But not so.”). Hardy uses the form so naturally that one might overlook it entirely.

Seamus Heaney, DIGGING, page 1092

When Irish poet Seamus Heaney went to Lewiston, Maine, in 1986 to receive an honorary degree at Bates College, he read “Digging” aloud to the assembled graduates, parents, and friends. It seemed an appropriate choice. Some of the Maine students in his audience must have found expressed in Heaney’s poem their own admiration for hardworking forebears whose course through life they had decided not to follow. Is the speaker in the poem uneasy about choosing instead to be a poet? It is clear that he admires the skill and strength his father and grandfather displayed in their work. But the poem ends on a positive note. The poet accepts himself for what he is.

In “Feeling into Words,” an essay in his Preoccupations (New York: Farrar, 1980), Heaney likens the writing of poetry to digging up archaeological finds. Apparently it is a matter of digging a spade into one’s past and unearthing something forgotten. “Digging,” written in 1964, was his earliest poem in which it seemed that his feelings had found words. “The pen/spade analogy,” he adds, “was the simple heart of the matter and that was simply a matter of almost proverbial common sense.” As a schoolboy, he was often told to keep studying “because ‘learning’s easily carried’ and ‘the pen is lighter than the spade.’”

Anthony Hecht, THE VOW, page 1093

Recurring through this poem is the idea that the blending of Jewish and Irish natures may have been too unstable a mixture and thus responsible for the miscarriage. This theme is first raised in the opening lines: “The mirth of tabrets ceaseth, and the joy” likewise of the Irish minstrel harp (ceaseth adds an echo of the Old Testament; also, the bone gates of line 13 are not only the classical gates of horn but also the mother’s pelvic girdle). “The Vow” appears to be grounded in details of the poet’s life: Hecht, of German-Jewish heritage, was married from 1954 to 1961 to Patricia Harris; after
their divorce, she took their two sons to live with her in Europe; the separation from his children caused Hecht to suffer severe depression.

The metallurgical metaphor of the last stanza suggests that the Gentile and Jewish parents will be tried (refined, perfected) in the flames of their love: Hecht may be alluding to amalgamation, the only gold-refining process that uses a furnace, in which mercury and crude gold unite, then separate under great heat to produce pure gold.

The obvious question to spark a class response is: Does the speaker endorse the miscarried child’s view that “it is best of all the fates / Not to be born”? It’s tempting to say that he doesn’t, as evidenced by his vow in the final stanza. But that vow is cast in such absolute terms that it would seem impossible of fulfillment even if one didn’t know the subsequent events of the poet’s life. The question, then, seems intriguingly open, and should serve to provoke an animated discussion on both sides of the matter.

Hecht recorded “The Vow” for The Spoken Arts Treasury of 100 Modern American Poets, vol. 15. He also appears in an interesting video clip discussing the poetic impulse in general and the sources of his own poetry, as well as reading a few lines—all in just over two minutes—titled “The Poet’s View—Anthony Hecht” on YouTube at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ot0erl0odM>

George Herbert, Love, page 1094

Herbert’s poem is often read as an account of a person’s reception into the Church; the eaten meat, as the Eucharist. Herbert’s extended conceits or metaphors are also evident in “The Pulley.”

For discussion: compare “Love” with another seventeenth-century devotional poem, Donne’s “Batter my heart.” What is the tone of each poem? Herbert may seem less intense, almost reticent by comparison. Douglas Bush comments, “Herbert does not attempt the high pitch of Donne’s ‘Divine Poems.’ His great effects are all the greater for rising out of a homely, colloquial quietness of tone; and peace brings quiet endings—‘So I did sit and eat’” (English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century [New York: Oxford UP, 1945] 139).

Herbert, by the way, is an Anglican saint—the only one who does not also appear in the Roman Catholic calendar.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. eAnthology of additional George Herbert poems.

Robert Herrick, To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time, page 1095

Roses would have suited Herrick’s iambic meter—why is rose-buds richer? Rosebuds are flowers not yet mature and therefore suggest virgins, not matrons. There may be a sexual hint besides: rosebuds more resemble private parts than roses. But in this poem, time flies, the rosebuds of line 1 bloom in line 3. Rose-buds is also rhythmically stronger than roses, as Austin Warren has pointed out: it has a secondary stress as well as a primary. Warren has recalled that when he first read the poem in college in 1917, he misread rose-buds as roses, kept misreading it ever after, and only a half-century later realized his mistake and found a new poem in front of him. “In untutored youth, the sen-
timent and the rhythm suffice: the exactness of the language goes unnoticed. And in later life a remembered favorite escapes exact attention because we think we know it so well” (“Herrick Revisited,” Michigan Quarterly Review 15 [Summer 1976]: 245–67).

Question for discussion: What do you think of Herrick’s advice? Are there any perils in it?

Tony Hoagland, BEAUTY, page 1095

When Tony Hoagland won the second annual Jackson Poetry Prize in 2008, the judges’ citation read in part: “It’s hard to imagine any aspect of contemporary American life that couldn’t make its way into the writing of Tony Hoagland or a word in common or formal usage he would shy away from. He is a poet of risk: he risks wild laughter in poems that are totally heartfelt, poems you want to read out loud to anyone who needs to know the score and even more so to those who think they know the score.”

This sense that anything can happen at any moment in one of his poems is nicely illustrated in “Beauty” by the lines about spring (lines 43–46), which are striking not only for their own unexpected eloquence but also for the insight they offer into the nature of the beautiful, an insight that underlines much of what the rest of the poem is saying. The speaker’s sister undergoes a moment of regret at the loss of what has up to now been her most distinctive characteristic; but it is succeeded a moment later by a sort of liberation from the vacuousness that her beauty had, in the speaker’s view, imposed upon her. The very last line brings everything into precise focus with its sharp suggestion of where true beauty is to be found.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, SPRING AND FALL, page 1097

Hopkins’s tightly wrought syntax may need a little unraveling. Students may be asked to reword lines 3–4 in a more usual sequence (“Can you, with your fresh thoughts, care for leaves like the things of man?”) and then to put the statement into more usual words. (An attempt: “Do you, young and innocent as you are, feel as sorry for falling leaves as for dying people?”) Lines 12–13 may need a similar going over and rough paraphrase. (“Neither any human mouth nor any human mind has previously formed the truth that the heart and spirit have intuited.”) “Sorrow’s springs are the same”—that is, all human sorrows have the same cause: the fact that all things pass away. A world of constant change is “the blight man was born for”: an earth subject to death, having fallen from its original state of a changeless Eden. The difficulties of a Hopkins poem result from a swiftly thoughtful mind’s trying to jam all possible meaning into a brief space (and into words that are musical).

Wanwood is evidently a term the poet coined for pale autumn woods. W. H. Gardner, the editor of Hopkins’s poems, finds in it also the suggestion of “wormwood”—bitter gall, also wood that is worm-eaten. The term leafmeal reminds him of “piecemeal,” and he paraphrases line 8: “One by one the leaves fall, and then rot into mealy fragments.”

| MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information for Hopkins. |  |  |

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"The best thing I ever wrote," said Hopkins. If your students have enjoyed "Pied Beauty" or "God's Grandeur" without too much difficulty, then why not try "The Windhover," despite its famous ambiguities? Some students may go afield in reading the opening line, taking I caught to mean that the poet trapped the bird; but they can be told that Hopkins, a great condenser, probably means "I caught a glimpse of."

Dispute over the poem often revolves around whether or not the windhover is Christ and around the meaning of Buckle! Most commentators seem to agree that the bird is indeed Christ, or else that Christ is like the bird. (Yvor Winters, who thought the poem “minor and imperfect,” once complained, “To describe a bird, however beautifully, and to imply that Christ is like him but greater, is to do very little toward indicating the greatness of Christ.”) Some read Buckle! as a plea to the bird to descend to earth; others, as a plea to all the qualities and things mentioned in line 9 (Brute beauty, valor, act) to buckle themselves together into one. Still others find the statement ending in Buckle! no plea at all, but just an emphatic observation of what the poet beholds. If Christ is the windhover (other arguments run), in what sense can he be said to buckle? Two of the answers: (1) in buckling on human nature and becoming man, as a knight buckles on armor; (2) in having his body broken on the cross. Students can be asked to seek all the words in the poem with connotations of royalty or chivalry—suggestive, perhaps, of Christ as King and Christ as noble knight or chevalier. Why the sheer plod? Hopkins reflects (it would seem) that if men will only buckle down to their lowly duties they will become more Christ-like, and their spiritual plowshares will shine instead of collecting rust. Hopkins preached a sermon that expressed a similar idea: “Through poverty, through labor, through crucifixion His majesty of nature more shines.” The embers, we think, are a metaphor: moist clods thrown by the plow going down the sillion. Hopkins likes to compare things to hearth fire: for instance, the “fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls” in “Pied Beauty.”

For detailed criticism, one might start with Norman H. MacKenzie, A Reader’s Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981). MacKenzie provides facts from ornithology and his own kestrel-watching: no other birds are so expert in hovering, body horizontal, tail and head pointing down as they study the ground for prey. To hang stationary in the air over one spot, they must fly into the wind “with rapidly quivering (wimpling, line 4) wings, missing a few beats as gusts die, accelerating as they freshen”—responding to variations in the wind with nearly computer speed. Once in about every eight hovers, the kestrel will dive, not inertly but with wings held tense and high—it doesn’t “buckle” in the sense of collapse. If it finds no victim, the bird swings and banks and takes an upward “stride,” to hover once more. Hopkins’s “how he rung upon the rein” doesn’t mean that the kestrel climbs in a spiral. No gyring Yeats-bird, he.

An interesting view of the religious imagery informing this poem can be found in James Finn Cotter’s study Inscape: The Christology and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1972). Cotter, who is formidably learned in theology, examines traditional Christian writings to discover how they shaped Hopkins’s sense of imagery. Cotter maintains that “Hopkins fashioned a myth of his own making,” but that his private vision drew from a wide variety of philosophical and theological sources. In his long, careful reading of “The Windhover,” Cotter observes:

Circular motion and form dominate “The Windhover”: the kestrel moves in slow, wide, sharp, and gliding circles which the rhythm and language perfectly
mimic. Christ is present here as throughout the other sonnets, in the sun illuminating the scene; he is the dawn drawing the bird to a brilliant expression of itself and hence of its Lord.

Despite his fondness for Old and Middle English, Hopkins luckily refrained from calling the windhover by its obsolete name: fuckwind or windfucker. (No, that $f$ is not a long $s$.) Thomas Nashe in Lenten Stuffe (1599) speaks of the “Kistrilles or windfuckers that filling themselves with winde, fly against the winde evermore.” See windfucker in the Oxford English Dictionary. (For this dumbfounding discovery, thanks to David Lynch, who copyedited Literature, 4th ed.)

A. E. Housman, LOVEIEST OF TREES, THE CHERRY NOW, page 1098

What is Housman’s theme? Good old carpe diem. If you ask students to paraphrase this poem (it’s not hard), a paraphrase might add, to catch the deeper implication, “Life is brief—time flies—I’d better enjoy beauty now.”

Not part of the rough poem Housman began with, the second stanza was added last. Lines 9–10 originally read: “And since to look at things you love / Fifty times is not enough.” What can be said for Housman’s additions and changes? (These and other manuscript variations are given by Tom Burns Haber in The Making of “A Shropshire Lad” [Seattle: U of Washington P, 1966].)

A. E. Housman, TO AN ATHLETE DYING YOUNG, page 1098

“To an Athlete Dying Young” is another carpe diem poem—but with a mostly retrospective perspective. Rather than advising one to take advantage of life’s opportunities before it is too late, the elegiac poem celebrates the passing of a young man who dies at the height of his physical glory. The deceased was a town hero, a champion runner. Housman’s timeless imagery of footracing and laurels provides the poem with a classical, almost Roman feel.

Help the students point out and explain the significance of repeating images and phrases, especially the various thresholds and the “shoulder-high” carrying of the athlete—first in his victor’s chair, and later his coffin. You might also discuss the poem’s most famous lines, “And early though the laurel grows / It withers quicker than the rose.” What do laurel and rose represent here? Consider the metaphor in line 5 of all human life as a footrace with death at the finish line. Ask the students to state the theme of “To an Athlete Dying Young,” and have them recall living proof of Housman’s observation that sometimes the name dies before the man (forgotten pop stars, retired athletes).
Randall Jarrell, The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner, page 1099

The speaker seems to be an unknown citizen like Auden’s. Jarrell’s laconic war poem is complex in its metaphors. The womb is sleep; the outside world, waking; and the speaker has passed from one womb to another—from his mother into the belly of a bomber. His existence inside the ball turret was only a dream, and in truth he has had no mature life between his childhood and his death. Waking from the dream, he wakes only to nightmare. In another irony, the matter-of-fact battle-report language of the last line contrasts horribly with what is said in it. How can the dead gunner address us? Clearly the poet had written his epitaph for him—and has done so as Jarrell said he wrote “The Woman at the Washington Zoo,” “acting as next friend.”

Robinson Jeffers, Rock and Hawk, page 1099

Robinson Jeffers’s “Rock and Hawk” offers the image of a falcon perched on a tall coastal rock as a symbol of the proper human values: “bright power, dark peace; / Fierce consciousness joined with final / Disinterestedness, / Life with calm death.” That unusual combination of sensual delight and stoical resolve underlies much of Jeffers’s best work.

Two symbols are worth noting—“the cross” and “the hive”—to which Jeffers contrasts his falcon. Here he suggests that nature offers a third (and better) alternative to the worldviews of religion and collective politics (the hive) such as communism or socialism. Jeffers had little faith in the powers of religion or politics to improve humanity. Instead he advises a calm acceptance of our natural state, including mortality and our small place in the vast natural world.

Ha Jin, Missed Time, page 1100

Ha Jin’s simple, direct, and moving “Missed Time” is a poem the average reader can appreciate on first hearing. Poems need not be complex or challenging to matter. What they need be is expressive, true, and beautiful—though no lover of literature will confuse the beautiful with the merely pretty or decorous. Thematically, “Missed Time” plays off the familiar theory that all art is born of suffering—that we write, paint, sculpt, and compose music out of a sense of loss or incompleteness, in order to heal a (perhaps unconscious) psychic wound. The poem’s speaker is loved and happy; therefore, he has nothing to write about and no urge to create. Though the first verse paragraph seems to lament this condition (as in William Butler Yeats’s “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”), the second makes clear that the speaker is perfectly content with things as they are, that he would much rather lead a fulfilled and—as the last line suggests—unwritten life than its opposite. The title is ultimately highly ironic: the “missed time” that might have been devoted to writing has been put to much better use instead.
**Ben Jonson**, On My First Son, page 1100

This heartbreaking poem from Jonson's *Epigrammes*, requested by several instructors, repays close reading. What is “the state he should envy”? Death. Why the dead child should be envied is made clear in the lines that immediately follow (7–8). The final couplet is difficult in its syntax, and it contains a pun on like in a sense now obsolete. The speaker vows, or prays (vow, along with votive, comes from the Greek euchesthai: “to pray”), that anyone whom he loves may not live too long. The seriousness of Jonson's wit is shown in this colossal pun: like meaning “thrive, do well, get on” as well as “to be fond.” See like in the *OED* for other illustrations:

> SHALLOW TO FALSTAFF: “By my troth, you like well and bear your years very well.” (Henry IV, Part 2, 3.2.92)
> “Trees generally do like best that stand to the Northeast wind.” (Holland’s Pliny, 1600)

"Poems Arranged by Subject and Theme" in this manual lists the book's other poems about fathers and children.

**Donald Justice**, On the Death of Friends in Childhood, page 1101

There is more emotional distance and less grief in this poem than in Ben Jonson's. Nor does the speaker in “On the Death of Friends in Childhood” seem to be mourning one specific loss. The “Friends” he mentions suggests friends in general, perhaps other people's as well as his own. Yet, though time has softened the impact of long-ago losses, the narrator urges that we remember dead childhood friends and what was shared with them.

Brief as it is, this poem by one of the finest modern American poets displays the hallmarks of his work—the unerring sense of rhythm, the quiet beauty of the phrasing, the communication of powerful emotion through restrained statement. In its chiseled perfection, it would not be out of place in the *Greek Anthology*.

**John Keats**, Ode on a Grecian Urn, page 1101

Why is the symbol of the urn so endlessly suggestive? It may help students to recall that Grecian urns are vessels for the ashes of the dead, and that their carved or painted figures (of deities or mortal, or of both) depict a joyous afterlife in the Elysian fields. The urn being round, its design appears to continue endlessly. What greater image for eternity, or for the seamlessness of perfected art?

Most good discussions of the “Urn” confront a few of the poem’s celebrated difficulties. Some questions to help speed the confrontation:

1. Assuming that the urn is said to be sylvan because it displays woodland scenes, in what sense is it a historian? What history or histories does it contain, or represent?
2. How can unheard melodies be sweeter than heard ones?
3. Why are youth, lover and loved one, trees, and musicians so lucky to exist upon the urn? (Lines 15–27)

4. What disadvantages do living lovers labor under? (Lines 28–30)

5. In stanza four, the procession of thought turns in a new direction. What additional insight occurs to the poet? That the urn, whose world had seemed perfect, is in some ways limited and desolate. The altar cannot be reached nor sacrifice fulfilled, nor can the unseen little town ever be returned to.

6. Paraphrase the statement that the urn “dost tease us out of thought / As doth Eternity.” The urn lures us out of our habit of useless cogitation. Eternity also stops us from thinking because, for us mere mortals, it too is incomprehensible.

7. How is the urn a “Cold Pastoral”? Literally, it’s lifeless clay; figuratively, it stands aloof from human change and suffering. Compare Stevens’s “Jar.”

8. How then can a Cold Pastoral be called “a friend to man”? It provides a resting place for human ashes; it inspires and delights; and, as the last lines attest, it teaches us.

John Keats, When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be, page 1103

Students will see right away that the poem expresses fear of death, but don’t let them stop there: there’s more to it. Why does the poet fear death? Because it will end his writing and his loving. The poem states what both loving and writing poetry have in common: both are magical and miraculous acts when they are spontaneous. Besides favoring “unreflecting love” for its “fairy power,” Keats would write “with the magic hand of chance.” And—if you care to open up a profundity—what might the poet mean by those “huge cloudy symbols of a high romance”? Literal cloud shapes that look like Tristram and Isolde’s beaker of love-potion, or what?

Note that this poem addresses not Keats’s beloved Fanny Brawne, but “the memory of the mysterious lady seen in adolescence one brief moment at Vauxhall long ago in the summer of 1814,” according to Robert Gittings in John Keats (Boston: Atlantic, 1968) 188. The poem is about a “creature of an hour.” (Fanny, of course, occupied not one hour but many.)

Gittings has found in the poem echoes of two sonnets of Shakespeare, both about devouring time: #60 (“Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore, / So do our minutes hasten to their end”) and #64 (“When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced”). In the copy of the Sonnets that Keats co-owned with his friend Reynolds, these two were the most heavily marked.

This poem has had a hefty impact on later poets, notably John Berryman, who took it the title for an autobiographical collection of his own poems on ambition and desire: Love and Fame (1972).
John Keats, *To Autumn*, page 1103

Although “To Autumn” proved to be the last of the poet’s great lyrics, we have no evidence that Keats (full of plans and projects at the time) was consciously taking leave of the world. On September 21, 1819, three days after writing the poem, Keats in a letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds spoke of his delight in the season: “I never lik’d stubble fields so much as now—Aye better than the chilly green of the Spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm—in the same way that some pictures look warm—this strikes me so much in my Sunday’s walk that I composed upon it.”

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. In the opening stanza, what aspects of autumn receive most emphasis? To what senses do the images appeal?

2. In the first two stanzas, autumn is several times personified (lines 2–3, 12–15, 16–18, 19–20, 21–22). Who are its different persons? Conspiring crony, careless landowner, reaper, gleaner, cider presser.

3. In the third stanza, how does the tone change? Has there been any progression in scene or in idea throughout the poem? Tone: calm serenity. In the first stanza, autumn is being prepared for; in the second, busily enjoyed; in the third, calmly and serenely contemplated. There is another stanza-by-stanza progression: from morning to noon to oncoming night. Like the soft-dying day, the light wind sometimes dies. The gnats in wailful choir also have funereal, mourning suggestions, but the stanza as a whole cannot be called gloomy.

4. What words in stanza 3 convey sounds? Songs, music, wailful choir, mourn, loud bleat, sing, treble, whistles, twitter. What an abundance of verbs! The lines convey a sense of active music making.

5. Do you see any case for reading the poem as a statement of the poet’s acceptance of the facts that beauty on earth is transitory and death is inevitable? Surely such themes are present; the poem does not have to be taken to mean that the poet knows he himself will soon perish.

For an unusually grim reading of the poem, see Annabel M. Patterson, “‘How to load . . . and bend’: Syntax and Interpretation in Keats’s ‘To Autumn,’” *PMLA* 94 (1979): 449–58. Finding that the poem “undermines” our traditional notion of Autumn, Patterson argues that Keats subversively portrays the goddess as deceptive, careless, and demanding. Her proffered ripeness leads only to last oozings and stubble-plains—dead ends not to be desired. In the poet’s view (as she interprets it), “Nature is amoral and not to be depended upon.” Try this argument on the class. Do students agree? Whether or not they side with Patterson, they will have to examine the poem closely in order to comment.

For a good discussion of ways to approach Keats’s poem with a class, see Bruce E. Miller, *Teaching the Art of Literature* (Urbana: NCTE, 1980) 75–84. Miller points out that not all students will know how cider is made, and he suggests asking someone to explain Keats’s reference to the cider-press in stanza 2. He recommends, too, borrowing from your nearest art department some reproductions of landscape paintings:
“Constable’s work, which was contemporary with Keats, to my mind almost catches the spirit of ‘To Autumn,’ but it is a little more literal and photographic. . . .”

With this rich poem, you might well start a discussion of imagery, or review this topic if students have met it earlier. “The students,” remarks Miller, “need not ask themselves as they read, ‘What does it mean?’ Rather they should continually ask, ‘What do I see?’ ‘What do I hear and touch?’ ‘What do I feel?’”

Ted Kooser, ABANDONED FARMHOUSE, page 1104

In the first major essay on Ted Kooser’s poetry, Dana Gioia wrote in 1983:

He offers no blinding flashes of inspiration, no mystic moments of transcendence. He creates no private mythologies or fantasy worlds. Instead he provides small but genuine insights into the world of everyday experience. His work strikes the difficult balance between profundity and accessibility, just as his style manages to be personal without being idiosyncratic. It is simple without becoming shallow, striking without going to extremes. He has achieved the most difficult kind of originality. He has transformed the common idiom and experience into fresh and distinctive poetry.

“Abandoned Farmhouse” is an excellent illustration of this analysis. Grounded thoroughly in common details and presented in straightforward statements, it captures the poignancy of failed efforts and ruined hopes by expressing it through the objects left behind. This poignancy is heightened by the consistent use of the past tense in describing the lives lived in the farmhouse and the present tense in communicating what each of the mute details “says”: the people and their hopes and dreams are gone, but the sadness continues. Inevitably, one is reminded of certain poems by Robert Frost, most notably “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things,” which also chronicle the difficulty and the desolation of life in rural America.

Also worth noting is the subtle artistry of “Abandoned Farmhouse.” At first approach it seems to be written in free verse, and several readings may be required to perceive its underlying iambic rhythm and its use of mixed tetrameter and pentameter lines. The very bareness of statement and description throughout the poem gives added force to its single simile—“Its toys are strewn in the yard / like branches after a storm” (lines 21–22)—which itself reinforces the larger theme of living things ripped apart by the harshness of nature. Coupled with the poem’s only rime, it creates what in this hushed context is virtually a crescendo effect, which is immediately resolved by the diminuendo of the poem’s last sentence.

—Michael Palma

Philip Larkin, HOME IS SO SAD, page 1105

Larkin’s considerable achievement in “Home is so Sad” is that he so beautifully captures the ring of ordinary speech within the confines of a tight a b a b a rime scheme and iambic pentameter lines. Note the slant rimes in the second stanza: as, was, and vase.
In an interview, Larkin recalled a letter he received from a middle-aged mother who had read his poem: “She wrote to say her children had grown up and gone, and she felt precisely this emotion I was trying to express in the poem” (“Speaking of Writing XIII: Philip Larkin,” [London] Times 20 Feb. 1964: 16). Bruce Martin finds the poem written not from a mother’s point of view, but from that of a son who used to live in this house himself. The speaker projects his own sadness into it: it has remained pathetically changeless. What has changed is himself and others who once lived here (Philip Larkin [Boston: Twayne, 1978] 52).

DMK, taking a different view, thinks it quite possible to read the poem as though (as in Larkin’s well-known “Mr. Bleaney” from the same collection, The Whitsun Weddings) the former inhabitants of this house have died. The speaker is left unidentified, an impersonal seeing-eye. Your students, too, will probably come up with differing interpretations.

Is Larkin’s poem sentimental? Hard-eyed and exact in its observations, aided by the colloquialism of line 7, “A joyous shot at how things ought to be,” it successfully skirts the danger. Students might like to discuss the three words that follow: “Long fallen wide.” Does Larkin mean that the home was an unhappy one, or merely ordinary in its deviation from the idea? Or is it that the arrow—the “joyous shot”—has fallen merely in the sense that, meant to be full of life, the home is now “bereft / Of anyone to please”?

Philip Larkin, POETRY OF DEPARTURES, page 1106

The speaker wonders why he doesn’t break with his dull, tame life, just walk out, chuck everything, launch into the Romantic unknown like a highwayman. What an appealing notion! Question: Have you ever yearned to do that very thing? (Who hasn’t?)

Well, why doesn’t he take off? Because he sees all too clearly and painfully that such a grandiose gesture would be ridiculous. Commenting on lines 25–27, in which the speaker imagines himself swaggering nut-strewn roads and crouching in the fo’c’sle, David Timms finds him “unconvinced by such daydreams, though sympathetic to the dreamers, for he is one himself.” And so he dismisses his Romantic urge as too studied and belabored, ultimately false. Still, just because he sees through those dreams, he won’t let himself feel superior. The dreams may be artificial, but so is his own tame life, his room, his specially chosen junk. As he is well aware at the end, his greatest danger is to be trapped in owning things and neatly arranging them: books, china, all fixed on shelves in an order “reprehensibly perfect.” (We have somewhat expanded on Timms’s paraphrase, from Philip Larkin [Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973] 87.)


D. H. Lawrence, PIANO, page 1107

“Piano” isn’t a flawless poem. Lawrence was seldom at ease in rime, and the strained juxtaposition of clamor and glamor indicates his discomfort. Still, glamor is an accurate word in its context: the mature man knows that the child’s eyes endowed the
past with an illusory beauty. The quality of Lawrence’s poem may be seen in the specificity of its detail: “the boom of the tingling strings,” “the small, poised feet.” Lawrence enters into the child’s perspective, while able to criticize it from outside. The speaker is resisting his urge to cry, as the connotations of his words indicate (the song is *insidious*, it *betrays*). But at last he is unable to hold back his tears and, sensibly, yields to them.

How does Lawrence’s poem escape bathos? Robert Pinsky has offered an explanation in “Poetry and Pleasure,” in *Three Penny Review* (Fall 1983). The subject of “Piano,” Pinsky finds, is a stock source for poems, “as mothers-in-law or airplanes with ethnically various passengers are stock sources for jokes.” Yet the poem strikes us with “something fresh, not stock.” Its language is vivid, unconventional; its words *insidious* and *betrays* add a “steely spring”; it sets up an energetic tension between present and past.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information and links for Lawrence.

**Denise Levertov, O TASTE AND SEE, page 1107**

The eighth line of Psalm 34 reads “O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.” Borrowing from the psalm, the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) wrote a famous hymn entitled “O Taste and See” that begins with the line: “O taste and see how gracious the Lord is.” Recognizing the words “O taste and see” on a poster in the subway as a reference to the psalm, the speaker of Levertov’s poem meditates on the words’ message, reflecting that to “taste” God is to sample “all that lives / to the imagination’s tongue.” Tasting God, that is to say, involves everything from experiencing a range of emotions (such as grief) to eating a range of foods (tangerines) to going out in different weathers and making the most of the gift of language. Expanding on the notion of “tasting” God, Levertov’s poem speaks of biting, chewing, and swallowing the things of God’s creation—a message that, we are reminded by the allusion to Adam and Eve in Eden at the end of the poem, is contrary to the message of Genesis, in which the father and mother of mankind are punished for the very act of tasting.

**Shirley Geok-lin Lim, LEARNING TO LOVE AMERICA, page 1108**

The title of this poem may immediately suggest the speaker’s ambivalence about her situation: her love for America is not immediate and instinctive, but must be acquired through a learning process. Complex feelings are shown throughout the text. Lines 2–4 suggest the necessity of letting go of what is past and cannot be regained, along with an acceptance of the newfound land that sounds grudging at best; lines 15–16 also point to the immense difficulties involved in uprooting oneself and one’s family and trying to put down roots in a new place. Many other details point to more positive aspects of the experience of assimilation: a sense of inclusion (line 5), personal integration and wholeness (lines 9–11), and freedom (line 12). The last five lines reinforce the complexity of the speaker’s responses, telling us that
while the love of a new country, or the sense of belonging in the place where one has come, may not be a spontaneous and rapturous response, it is in the end a necessary and inevitable one.

Lim, who was born and educated in Malacca, Malaysia, earned her Ph.D. in English at Brandeis. For years she taught at Westchester Community College in New York. She is currently a professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

*Robert Lowell*, *Skunk Hour*, page 1108

Students should have no trouble in coming up with the usual connotations of skunk, but they may need help in seeing that the title is a concise expression of Lowell's theme. This is an evil-smelling hour in the speaker's life; and yet, paradoxically, it is the skunks themselves who affirm that life ought to go on. After the procession of dying and decadent people and objects in the first four stanzas, the mother skunk and her kittens form a triumph: bold, fecund, hungry, impossible to scare. Although they too are outcasts (surrounded by their aroma as the poet is surrounded by his madness and isolation?), they stick up for their right to survival.

The poem is rich in visual imagery. In the mind's eye, there are resemblances between the things contained in stanza 5 (the Ford car and the hill's skull), and also between the objects set in fixed rows (love-cars, tombstones, beached hulls). Water and the sea (by their decline or absence) are to this poem what they are to Eliot's *Waste Land*. Even the Church is "chalk-dry"; its spire has become a spar like that of a stranded vessel.

This poem is intensively analyzed in *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic: Eight Symposia*, ed. Anthony Ostroff (Boston: Little, 1964). Richard Wilbur, John Frederick Nims, and John Berryman comment on the poem, after which Lowell comments on their comments. Lowell calls the opening of the poem "a dawdling, more or less amiable picture of a declining Maine sea town. . . . Sterility howls through the scenery, but I try to give a tone of tolerance, humor, and randomness to the sad prospect." He sees the skunk hour itself as a sort of dark night of the soul and refers readers to the poem by St. John of the Cross. Lowell's night, however, is "secular, puritan, and agnostical." Lowell notes that the phrase *red fox stain* was intended only to describe the color of vegetation in the fall on Blue Hill, a mountain in Maine.

Elizabeth Hardwick, Lowell's wife when "Skunk Hour" was written, has affirmed that all the characters in the poem were actual—"were living, more or less as he sees them, in Castine [Maine] that summer. The details, not the feeling, were rather alarmingly precise, I thought. But fortunately it was not read in town for some time" (quoted by Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* [New York: Random, 1982] 267).

Sandra M. Gilbert, who sees the poem as "richly magical," reads it for its embodiment of myth. She explores it as a vision of Hell, pointing out that its events happen not on Halloween, but "somewhere in Hallowe'en's ritually black and orange vicinity." (The decorator's shop is "sacramentally orange.") The summer millionaire has departed in fall, like a vegetation deity—Osiris or Attis. Nautilus Island's witch-like hermit heiress is Circe, Hecate, Ishtar, Venus, "the goddess of love turned goddess of death in an All Soul's Night world" ("Mephistopheles in Maine: Rereading Lowell's 'Skunk Hour,'" *A Book of Rereadings*, ed. Greg Kuzma [Lincoln, NE: Pebble and Best Cellar, 1979] 254–64).

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Andrew Marvell, TO HIS COY MISTRESS, page 1110

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. "All this poet does is feed some woman a big line. There’s no time for romance, so he says, ‘Quick, let’s hit the bed before we hit the dirt.’" Discuss this summary. Then try making your own, more accurate one. Suggestion: The poem is divided into three parts, each beginning with an indented line. Take these parts one at a time, putting the speaker’s main thoughts into your own words. There’s a grain of truth to this paraphrase, rude though it be. We might question, however, whether Marvell’s speaker is trying to hoodwink his loved one. Perhaps he only sums up the terrible truth he knows: that time lays waste to youth, that life passes before we know it. He makes no mention of “romance,” by the way—that’s the paraphraser’s invention. A more nearly accurate paraphrase, taking the three divisions of the poem one by one, might go like this:

   Lines 1–20: If we had all the room in the world and if we were immortal, then our courtship might range across the globe. My love for you could expand till it filled the whole world and I could spend centuries in praising your every feature (saving your heart for last). After all, such treatment is only what you deserve.

   Lines 21–32: But time runs on. Soon we’ll be dead and gone, all my passion and all your innocence vanished.

   Lines 33–46: And so, while you’re still young and willing, let’s seize the day. Let’s concentrate our pleasure into the present moment. Although we can’t make the sun stand still (like Joshua in the Bible), we’ll do the next best thing: we’ll joyously make time fly.

   Now, obviously, any such rewording of this matchless poem must seem a piddling thing. But if students will just work through Marvell’s argument part by part, they may grasp better the whole of it.

2. In part one, how much space would be “world enough” for the lovers? Exactly how much time would be enough time? To point out the approximate location of the Humber and the Ganges on a globe (or a simple circle drawn on a blackboard) can drive home the fact that when the poet says world enough, he spells out exactly what he means. A little discussion may be needed to show that in defining “enough” time, Marvell bounds it by events (the conversion of the Jews), numbers the years, and blocks out his piecemeal adoration. Two hundred years per breast is a delectable statistic! Clearly, the lover doesn’t take the notion of such slow and infinitely patient devotion seriously.

3. What is the main idea of part two? How is this theme similar to that of Housman’s “Loveliest of trees”? Both Marvell and Housman in “Loveliest of trees” are concerned with the passage of time; they differ on what needs to be done about it. Marvell urges action; Housman urges filling one’s youth with observed beauty. Of these two expressions of the carpe diem theme, Housman’s seems the more calm and disinterested.

4. Paraphrase with special care lines 37–44. Is Marvell urging violence? In lines 37–44, Marvell’s point seems to be that time works a gradual, insidious violence. It is like a devouring beast (slow-chapped), holding us in its inexorable jaws. Some students will find the imagery odd, even offensive in a love poem: birds of prey (who want to eat, not be eaten), the cannonball of strength and sweetness that bat-
ters life's iron gates. Violence is not the speaker's counsel, but urgency. His harsh images lend his argument intensity and force.

5. Considering the poem as a whole, does the speaker seem playful, or serious? This fifth question presents an easy dichotomy, but of course Marvell's speaker is both playful and serious. In making clear the tone of the poem, a useful poem for comparison is Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd." What are the two speakers' attitudes toward love? Marvell's seems more down-to-earth, skeptical, and passion-driven: a lover in a fallen world, not (like Marlowe's shepherd) a lover in a pastoral Eden.

If later on, in teaching figures of speech, you want some great lines for illustrations, turn back to this inexhaustible poem. There's hyperbole in lines 7–20, understatement ("But none, I think, do there embrace"), metaphor, simile, and of course the great personification of chariot-driving time.

Telling a class that Marvell was a Puritan usually shakes up their overly neat assumptions. Some may be surprised to learn that one can be a Puritan and not necessarily be puritanical.

Defending the poem against charges that its logic is fallacious, a contemporary critic, Richard Crider, has shown that "the speaker's appeal is not merely to the lady's passion, . . . but to a more inclusive and compelling value—completion and wholeness." A good student of Aristotle's logic as well as Aristotle's ethics, Marvell's speaker calls on his listener to exercise all her human powers, among them reason. "Although no single net will capture all the resonances of the final couplet, near the heart of the passage is the thought of living life completely, in accordance with natural law" ("Marvell's Valid Logic," College Literature [Spring 1985]: 113–211).

Edna St. Vincent Millay, RECUERDO, page 1111

There is probably not much to do with this delightful poem but leave it alone and let students discover it for themselves. The only thing we would find in it to discuss: Would that newspaper vendor really break down into tears of gratitude? We bet she is a mere literary convention here, and in real life would probably be one tough old egg.

Would this highly musical lyric make a good song? Might it be sung?

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information and links for Millay.

John Milton, WHEN I CONSIDER HOW MY LIGHT IS SPENT, page 1111

While this famous sonnet is usually taken to refer to the poet's lost eyesight, some critics have argued that it is not about blindness at all. The familiar title "On His Blindness" was given not by Milton, but by a printer a century later.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. If the poem is not about blindness, what might it be about? Possible suggestions: Milton's declining powers of poetry; Milton's fame as a Puritan apologist.

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2. Is “talent” a pun referring to Milton’s talent for writing poetry? What other meanings of the word seem appropriate in this poem? In the New Testament parable (Matthew 25:14–30), the hidden talent is money that should have been earning interest. That Milton is thinking primarily of work and business can be plausibly argued; other words in the poem convey such connotations—spent, true account, day-labor, and perhaps useless, which suggests the Medieval Latin word for interest, usura.

The theme of frustration in life (and reconciliation to one’s lot) is dealt with differently in Shakespeare’s “When, in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes.” Also refer students to Borges’s homage “On his blindness.”

Marianne Moore, POETRY, page 1112

Marianne Moore was a singular poet both on the page and in real life. Her elaborate verse style, complex syllabic meters, and penchant for collage and quotation mirror in some mysterious way her carefully cultivated eccentricity and wry personal reticence. One peculiar feature of her work is that most of her poems—directly or indirectly—explore aesthetics, especially the nature of literary art. In this respect, “Poetry” occupies an important position in her work. This superbly observed and intellectually provocative poem also illustrates a central irony of her work—the more overtly abstract her poem appears, the more covertly personal it proves to be.

“Poetry” appears in several versions in Moore’s various collections. Hardly had she first published the poem in 1921 than she began revising it. By the time she published her Complete Poems in 1967, Moore had grotesquely cut the poem down to only three lines. For this anthology we have reprinted her original version, which seems to us the finest and fullest one. (Instructors should make sure they compare our version to others they may have in different books.)

“Poetry” is both a defense of poetry as an important human enterprise and—to quote critic Helen Vendler—Moore’s “indirect self-reproach for her painstaking absorption in ‘all this fiddle.’” While eventually justifying the art of poetry for its heightened attention to genuine phenomena, the poem also admits its own skepticism about the elaborate “fiddle” of poetry and its recognition of the failure of “half poets” and “derivative” writers. Moore’s aesthetic ideal is best summarized in her famous (and wondrously oxymoronic) image “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” Boldly the poet affirms the utility of poetry. Poetry is “useful” to Moore when it genuinely encompasses both external and internal reality.

The poet Donald Hall, who knew Moore, has commented in similar terms on the poem:

In her well-known poem “Poetry,” Miss Moore begins, “I too, dislike it.” This line has been interpreted as ironic, as an attempt to disarm, or as evidence that she practices her art only half-seriously. Quite obviously, however, her reasoning is serious. She refers to a kind of poetry that is neither honest nor sincere but that has found fashionable approval by virtue of its very obscurity. (Marianne Moore: The Cage and the Animal [New York: Pegasus: 1970] 40)

The form of “Poetry” is also worth discussing. It might help to ask the class if the poem has a form—to see what features they discover on their own. Moore shaped the
version of “Poetry” reprinted here into five complex syllabic stanzas of six lines each. Students can count out the syllables in each line to determine the stanza pattern. The stanzas also rime—although the rimes are more visible to the eye than audible in her run-on enjamed lines. The rime scheme is abbbcc. The poem unfolds in the manner of an impassioned, learned conversation, and it employs prose rhythms in its elaborate syllabic pattern. Spoken aloud, it sounds like free verse; on the page, however, the reader sees how carefully wrought it is as formal verse.

Marilyn Nelson, A STRANGE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN, page 1113

This strange and beautiful short poem has the simplicity of a haiku—a single image doubled in a mirror followed by a single question also doubled. The poem’s power rests in its suggestiveness, and it works—like the mirror—in two ways at once. The poem is affirmative in the speaker’s recognition of her own beauty, but it is also subtly self-critical in noting that the speaker is insufficiently familiar with admitting her own beauty, which initially seems “strange” to her. In the same way, the speaker’s surprised question—“Hey, / I said, / what you doing here?”—acquires a more disturbing existential quality when the reflection repeats it. What is the speaker doing, the image seems to ask, in and with her own life?

Howard Nemerov, THE WAR IN THE AIR, page 1113

This poem can be understood by students who know very little about World War II, but explaining the many allusions will enrich their appreciation. During World War II, air force pilots and crew members suffered the highest mortality rates of any Allied service branch. Sometimes every member of a squadron would be killed in a single engagement. Nemerov, who served in both the Royal Canadian and American air forces, memorializes those who usually died far away and sometimes vanished into the sea or enemy territory.

Here are the major allusions woven into the poem—all of which would be familiar to veterans of the conflict. In praising the contributions of Allied pilots during the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill famously told Parliament, “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.” The inspirational Latin tag per ardua ad astra (“through difficult things to the stars”) served as the motto of England’s Royal Air Force. Mars is, of course, the god of war. “The Good War” was an Allied nickname for World War II. The pun on “for goodness’ sake” (in line 14) is also worth noting to students. This seemingly straightforward elegy is full of wordplay, allusion, and wit.

Lorine Niedecker, SORROW MOVES IN WIDE WAVES, page 1114

Though she published five collections here and in Britain, Niedecker’s work has seldom appeared in anthologies. But here and there, her life and distinctive work have won recognition. In 1985 the Jargon Society published her collected writing, From This Condensery. In 1989 Niedecker, a biographical play by Kristine Thatcher, had a successful Off-Broadway production.
The poet, who spent most of her quiet life on remote Blackhawk Island, Wisconsin, worked for a time as a cleaning person in a hospital. While far from literary capitals, she kept up a lively correspondence with Basil Bunting, Cid Corman, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and other innovative nonacademic poets of her day.

This poem needs to be heard aloud, and in getting into it, students may need a few pertinent questions. What details render the dying woman real to us? (The thimble, surely; her turning blue, her final plea.) What is the point of view? (An objective view of death, this speaker's perspective contrasts sharply with that of Emily Dickinson's subjective, first-person “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died.”) How would you describe the tone of the whole poem? In what words and phrases does it come through?

Sharon Olds, *The One Girl at the Boys' Party*, page 1115

This poem whimsically describes a talented little girl, “her math scores unfolding in the air around her,” during a pool party at which all the other guests are boys. They in lines 2 and 15, their in lines 18 and 19 seem to refer only to the boys. In lines 5, 7, and 11, the word they apparently includes the girl. You might ask students to note the pairs of adjectives that affirm the child's strength and composure: she is “smooth and sleek” (line 3), her body is “hard and indivisible as a prime number” (lines 5–6), her face is “solemn and sealed” (lines 16–17). The adjectives make clear the narrator-mother's respect for her brilliant daughter. Notable too is the metaphor of wet ponytail (itself a by-now-dead metaphor!) as pencil (line 12). That and the “narrow silk suit / with hamburgers and french fries printed on it” remind us that she is in some ways a very typical little girl.

It is the mathematical figures of speech that make this poem unique. Why not ask students to point out and discuss them? Are they apt? Do they ever appear forced? Which ones succeed best?

Wilfred Owen, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, page 1115

Metaphorically, this sonnet draws a contrast between traditional funeral trappings and the actual conditions under which the dead lie on the field of battle: with cannon fire instead of tolling bells, rifle bursts instead of the patter of prayers, the whine of shells instead of choirs’ songs, the last lights in dying eyes instead of candle-shine, pale brows (of mourning girls, at home?) instead of shrouds or palls, the tenderness of onlookers (such as the poet?) instead of flowers—an early draft of the poem reads, “Your flowers, the tenderness of comrades' minds”—and the fall of night instead of the conventional drawing down of blinds in a house where someone has died.

For another Owen war poem, see “Dulce et Decorum Est.” For other war poems, see in this manual “Poems Arranged by Subject and Theme.”

The poet's revisions for this poem, in four drafts, may be studied in the appendix to C. Day Lewis's edition of Owen's *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto, 1963). In its first draft, the poem was called “Anthem for Dead [not Doomed] Youth,” and it went, in our reading of the photographed manuscript:

What minute bells for these who die so fast?
Only the monstrous anger of our guns.
Let the majestic insults of their iron mouths
Be as the priest-words of their burials.
Of choristers and holy music, none;
Not any voice of mourning, save the wail
The long-drawn wail of high, far-sailing shells.
What candles may we hold for these lost souls?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall many candles shine, and [?] will light them.
Women’s wide-spreaded arms shall be their wreaths,
And pallor of girls’ cheeks shall be their palls.
Their flowers, the tenderness of all men’s minds,
And every dusk, a drawing-down of blinds.

Sylvia Plath, DADDY, page 1116

There are worse ways to begin teaching this astonishing poem than to ask students
to recall what they know of Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen (line 33), and other Nazi
atrocities. “Every woman adores a Fascist”—what does Plath mean? Is she sympa-
thizing with the machismo ideal of the domineering male, lashing his whip upon sub-
jugated womankind? (No way.) For an exchange of letters about the rightness or
wrongness of Plath’s identifying with Jewish victims of World War II, see Commen-
tary (July and October 1974). Irving Howe accuses Plath of “a failure in judgment”
in using genocide as an emblem of her personal traumas.

Incredible as it seems, some students possess an alarming fund of ignorance
about the Nazis, and some might not even recognize the cloven foot of Satan (line
53); so be prepared, sadly, to supply glosses. They will be familiar with the story of
Dracula, however, and probably won’t need much help with lines 71–79. Plath may
be thinking of Nosferatu, F. W. Murnau’s silent screen adaptation of Bram Stoker’s
novel Dracula, filmed in Germany in 1922. Hitler’s propagandists seized on the Nos-
feratu theme and claimed that the old democratic order was drinking the country’s
blood. Plath sees Daddy as doing the same to his daughter.

Edgar Allan Poe, A DREAM WITHIN A DREAM, page 1118

“A Dream within a Dream” is a poem that Poe kept coming back to; earlier versions
of it, substantially different from the final one printed here, were published in 1827
and 1829. And the theme is certainly one that recurs frequently in Poe’s verse; in a
body of work that contains fewer than fifty completed poems, there are texts titled
“A Dream,” “Dreams,” and “Dream-Land,” as well as a number of other poems that
treat the concept without using the word in their titles.
In his classic edition of Poe’s complete poems, which inaugurated the Dell Laurel Poetry Series in 1959, the poet Richard Wilbur writes of “A Dream within a Dream”:

The hero of these poems is always separated from his love through betrayal, death, or “destiny.” This poem begins with a farewell to a woman of the real world by a hero whose incompatible destiny it is to dream. His dreams are of his lost visionary past—of a past that was itself a dream; and he argues that the loss of a dream is as painful as the loss of a “reality,” reality itself being only an “insubstantial pageant.” . . . What appalls the poet in the last two lines is that dreams, though seemingly beyond time, are yet as subject to change, loss, and oblivion as any temporal thing.

Alexander Pope, A LITTLE LEARNING IS A DANGEROUS THING, page 1119

This passage is an excerpt (lines 215–232) from Pope’s “An Essay on Criticism,” which he published when he was only twenty-three years old. It was this poem, which Joseph Addison immediately proclaimed “a Master-piece in its kind,” that made Pope a literary celebrity.

Many teachers object to using excerpts from long works; such selections, they feel, betray the author’s original intentions. In general, we agree; we favor including complete poems, so that each part of the work may be seen in relation to the whole. Pope, however, provides a special case. All of his greatest poems are too long to include in total. But it would seem too cruel to deny both teachers and students alike the pleasures of Pope’s verse, so we have bent the rules several times to introduce this satiric master’s work to a new generation. As every teacher knows, one sometimes needs to bend critical rules a bit.

As long as we are bending the rules, we should point out how much this excerpt from a long didactic poem looks like a self-standing lyric in its new form. Examining these eighteen lines in isolation, we see how carefully Pope arranged the images in each line to build toward a cumulative poetic as well as an intellectual effect. The final image of the weary traveler looking over the mountaintop at the endless Alps rising ahead is a brilliant stroke that seems closer to a romantic sensibility than a neoclassical one.


After the death of Ernest Fenollosa, a scholar devoted to Chinese language and literature, Pound inherited Fenollosa’s manuscripts containing rough prose versions of many Chinese poems. From one such draft, Pound finished his own version of “The River Merchant’s Wife.” Fenollosa’s wording of the first line was:

My hair was at first covering my brows (child’s method of wearing hair)
Arthur Waley, apparently contemptuous of Pound for ignoring dictionary meanings of some of the words of the poem, made a translation that began:

Soon after I wore my hair covering my forehead . . .

Pound’s version begins:

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead . . .

Pound, says the critic Waj-lim Yip, has understood Chinese culture while Waley has not, even though he understands his dictionary. “The characters for ‘hair/first/cover/forehead’ conjure up in the mind of a Chinese reader exactly this picture. All little Chinese girls normally have their hair cut straight across the forehead.” Yip goes on to show that Pound, ignorant of Chinese as he was, comes close in sense and feeling to the Li Po original. (Ezra Pound's Cathay [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969] 88–92.)

What is the tone of the poem? What details make it seem moving and true, even for a reader who knows nothing of Chinese culture?

Dudley Randall, A DIFFERENT IMAGE, page 1120

Randall’s memorable and concise poem bears examination from several angles. The poem is in two short stanzas. The first states the challenge in largely abstract terms (the need to create a new image of identity); the second stanza offers a specific solution (to replace a false slave-era stereotype with a majestic African image). Notice that there is nothing specifically African American in the first stanza, but the concluding stanza particularizes the abstract challenge of the opening. Don’t forget to point out (or elicit from the class) the fact that a burnt-cork face minstrel would have been a white man wearing blackface in contrast to the authentic African face of a Benin sculpture. The form of the poem is also very interesting. The lines are iambic, but their length is not constant. (They range from two to eleven syllables.) Every line is also rimed but in no regular pattern. Randall’s rimed iambic lines, therefore, resemble open form in some key respects.

Finally, there is one literary allusion embedded in “A Different Image.” Randall’s opening stanza deliberately echoes Ezra Pound’s famous lines from Hugh Selwyn Mauberly (1921):

The age demanded an image
Of its accelerated grimace,
Something for the modern stage,
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace.

Randall refashions Pound’s search for a meaningful vision of modern beauty in African American terms. Consequently, he returns not to classical Greece but to classical West Africa. Randall’s lucidity and immediacy often lead critics to underestimate the sophistication and complexity of his work. He had a classical sensibility that prizes unity of design, economy of means, clarity of intention, and a governing sense of form. The poems contain intense emotion, but it is always held in balance by the total design.
John Crowe Ransom, Piazza Piece, page 1121

This weird and wonderful sonnet is both funny and disturbing. The old man by the rose trellis is hardly a model senior citizen but the proverbial dirty old man given an existential twist. The fun of the poem is how well it operates simultaneously on a mundane and mythic level. If the man in the dustcoat is an elderly masher, he is also a death figure who has wandered into the beautiful young lady’s moonlit rose garden. The idyllic setting is a classic poetic and artistic archetype for youthful female sexuality and virginity (pervasive in love poetry from “The Song of Songs” to the present). There she waits until her “truelove” comes. In Renaissance painting one also sees this situation frequently—an Edenic pastoral landscape populated by young lovers. These pictures often have a skull hidden in the vines or bushes, bearing the Latin inscription “Et in Arcadia ego,” which means “Even in Arcadia, am I [i.e. Death].”

The old man inhabits the same physical space as the young lady, but he sees the lovely setting as proof of their shared mortality. The roses on the trellis are “dying” and the moon’s song is “spectral.” He will “have [his] lovely lady soon” not because he will rape her in the mundane sense, but because, as Death, he will eventually possess her—no matter how much she ignores his words.

Since “Piazza Piece” is a sonnet, the sestet represents the turn of attitude and perspective. The young lady responds appropriately, affirming life and hope. She considers the old man’s warnings and threats as “dry and faint as in a dream.” By ordering him away, she also rightly asserts that for the time being at least, the garden belongs to her. Whatever her ultimate fate, she is for the present “a lady young in beauty waiting.”

Southerners will probably be familiar with the slightly old-fashioned architectural term piazza, which means an open porch or balcony adjacent to a garden; but Yankees, Midwesterners, and Westerners may need some remedial instruction.

Henry Reed, Naming of Parts, page 1121

This is one of the most teachable poems ever written. There are two voices: the voice of the riflery instructor, droning on with his spiel, and the voice of the reluctant inductee, distracted by the springtime. Two varieties of diction and imagery clash and contrast: technical terms opposed to imagery of blossoming nature. Note the fine pun in line 24, prepared for by the rapist bees in the previous line. Note also the connotations of the ambiguous phrase point of balance (line 27)—a kind of balance lacking in the recruits’ lives?

Students need to be shown the dramatic situation of the poem: the poor inductee, sitting through a lecture he doesn’t want to hear. One would think that sort of experience would be familiar to students, but a trouble some instructors have met in teaching this poem is the yearning to make out of it a vast comment about Modern Civilization.

The poet himself has recorded the poem for An Album of Modern Poets, 1 (Library of Congress, PL 20). Dylan Thomas reads “Naming of Parts” even more impressively in his Reading, Vol. IV: A Visit to America and Poems (Caedmon, TC 1061).

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The title of Adrienne Rich's powerfully pensive poem may need explaining to some students nowadays, and it is essential that they understand the phrase because it sets up the narrative situation of the poem. As the title indicates, Rich's pair of lovers (who are referred to only as “he” and “she”) are living together but not married—a bolder lifestyle in 1955 than today. The woman has expected their life together to be romantic and carefree—“no dust upon the furniture of love”—but the daily reality of housework and habitual intimacy proves dull and disillusioning. This deflation of romantic fantasy suggests the secondary meaning of the title—the Adam and Eve of her hoped-for lover’s Eden have fallen from grace into the humdrum world of everyday disappointment.

Rich has neatly divided the two worlds of the protagonists’ experience into night and day. The night remains romantic—if also diminished from the woman’s original expectations—but the dawn brings only disappointment. The poem never directly states whether the woman’s vacillating feelings will bring matters to a crisis, but the relative impact of each emotional state is suggested by the fact that the evening world of love receives three lines of treatment, whereas the daylight world of disillusionment gets twenty-three. These proportions give “Living in Sin” the feel of an Anton Chekhov short story in which the final outcome remains unstated but the narrative situation has been so carefully presented as to make the conclusion inevitable.

For this reason, “Living in Sin” would be a good poem to use in a classroom discussion of “Saying and Suggesting.” Rich’s poem leaves a great many important things unsaid but implicit. The images suggest conclusions the protagonist seems not yet able to articulate—like the “beetle-eyes” staring at her from the shelf. The poem also has an interesting point of view. Although narrated in the third person, the poem adopts the subjective point of view of the woman.

“Living in Sin” is an early Rich poem (published in 1955 in her second collection, *The Diamond Cutters*). It is tempting, therefore, to read the poem as a narrative that prefigures Rich’s turn to feminism. “Living in Sin” certainly responds to such interpretation. The woman in the poem has mistakenly sought fulfillment by creating a domestic world designed to please her male lover. (The particulars of the apartment “had risen at his urging.”) Now she begins to understand the mistaken idealism and unintentional subjugation of that decision. Some changes—some escape—must happen, even if the particular course of action has not yet been imagined. What must come next, to quote the title of a subsequent Rich volume, is “the will to change.”


“Miniver Cheevy” is one of Robinson’s great character portraits. These miniature character studies (see also “Richard Cory”) are a genre that Robinson perfected. Influenced by the dramatic and narrative poems of poets such as George Crabbe and Robert Browning, Robinson compressed the portrait poem into tighter, often lyric structures. His work, with its stark realism, bitter antiromanticism, and concise form, marks the true beginning of modern (but not Modernist) American poetry.

Mr. Cheevy of the title is a man unable to face reality. He lives in a fantasy world of “the days of old.” Cheevy imagines he would have lived a more exciting and fulfilling life in an earlier age, but Robinson makes it clear that Cheevy’s fantasies are
pure self-deception. Robinson undercuts Cheevy's delusions with irony ("He missed the medieval grace / Of iron clothing").

Writing the introduction to Robinson's posthumous King Jasper in 1935, Robert Frost reminisced about reading "Miniver Cheevy" in London in 1913 with Ezra Pound. They laughed over the fourth thought in "Miniver thought, and thought, and thought / And thought about it." "Three 'thoughts' would have been 'adequate' as the critical praise-word then was," Frost remembered "... The fourth made the intolerable touch of poetry. With the fourth the fun began."

Theodore Roethke, ELEGY FOR JANE, page 1124

By piling up figures of speech from the natural world, Roethke in "Elegy for Jane" portrays his student as a child of nature, quick, thin, and birdlike. A wren, a sparrow, a skit-ter pigeon, Jane has a pickerel smile and neck curls limp and damp as tendrils. She waits like a fern, making a spiny shadow. She has the power to make shade trees and (even more surprising) mold burst into song. For her, leaves change their whispers into kisses.

Then she dies. The poet acknowledges that for him there is no consolation in nature, in the "sides of wet stones" or the moss; his grief is not assuaged. Because he mourns the girl as teacher and friend, no more, he recognizes a faint awkwardness in his grief as he speaks over her grave:

I, with no rights in this matter,
Neither father nor lover.

Roethke, writing about this poem in On the Poet and His Craft (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1965) 81–83, reminds the reader that it was John Crowe Ransom (to whose "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" this poem has often been compared) who first printed "Elegy for Jane." Roethke discusses his use of enumeration, calling it "the favorite device of the more irregular poem." He calls attention to one "of the strategies for the poet writing without the support of a formal pattern," a strategy he uses in "Elegy for Jane": the "lengthening out" of the last three lines in the first stanza, balanced by the progressive shortening of the three lines at the poem's end.

Some readers have interpreted "Elegy for Jane" as the work of a man who never had children of his own; but in fact Roethke as a young man had fathered a daughter, for whom he felt great affection. Although "neither father nor lover" of Jane, he at least could well imagine a father's feelings.

William Shakespeare, SONNET 29: WHEN, IN DISGRACE WITH FORTUNE AND MEN'S EYES, page 1124

Figures of speech are central to many Shakespearean sonnets, but they hardly enter into "When, in disgrace" until line 11, when the simile of the lark is introduced. The lark's burst of joy suggests that heaven, called deaf in line 3, has suddenly become keener of

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Shakespeare.

William Shakespeare, SONNET 30: WHEN TO THE SESSIONS OF SWEET SILENT THOUGHT, page 1125

One of Shakespeare's most famous sonnets, this poem explores the complexity of memory. The speaker recalls old sorrows and failures and bemoans the time he has wasted. His regrets lead him to shed tears (“drown an eye”) over the deaths of friends and over long-ago romantic sorrows, and to suffer emotional wounds he had long since finished suffering as if he had never suffered them before. But, as the closing couplet explains, all this weeping and mourning is overcome by the very thought of his friend, to whom the sonnet is addressed, and who, in some remarkable way, restores to him everything and everyone he has ever lost.

The imagery in the poem is arresting. It begins with a courtroom image: the speaker “summon[s]” sad memories to his “sessions” of thought (as a judge might summon a witness to a session of court). In the reference to “love's long-since cancelled woe,” the speaker conceives of romantic anguish as if it were a cancelled debt. And in the lines about “The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan, / Which I new pay as if not paid before,” note how Shakespeare, after using the word “account” as a synonym for “story,” in the next line writes as if he were speaking of a bank account—an emotional debt, as it were, which he has paid off before (in tears) but finds himself paying off again. Observe that the last line, “All losses are restored,” also has a financial double meaning.

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Shakespeare.

William Shakespeare, SONNET 73: THAT TIME OF YEAR THOU MAYST IN ME BEHOLD, page 1125

Shakespeare's magnificent metaphors will probably take some brief explaining. How is a body like boughs, and how are the bare boughs like a ruined choir loft? Students will get the general import, but they can be helped to visualize the images. “Consumed with that which it was nourished by” will surely require some discussion. Youth, that had fed life's fire, now provides only smothering ashes. The poet's attitude toward age and approaching death stands in contrast to the attitudes of poets (or speakers) in other poems of similar theme: admiration for the exultant sparrows in William Carlos Williams's “To Waken an Old Lady”; defiance in Yeats's “Sailing to Byzantium.”

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Shakespeare. Interactive reading of “That time of year thou mayst in me behold.”
William Shakespeare, SONNET 130: MY MISTRESS’ EYES ARE NOTHING LIKE THE SUN, page 1126

Have students state positively each simile that Shakespeare states negatively, and they will make a fair catalog of trite Petrarchan imagery. Poking fun at such excessive flattery is a source of humor even today, as in an old wheeze: “Your teeth are like the stars—they come out at night.”

Charles Simic, THE BUTCHER SHOP, page 1126

“Butcher Shop” is a constellation of metaphors. Simic works a kind of nighttime transformation by making unlikely but emotionally powerful associations with the ordinary objects of a butcher’s trade. The bare light recalls a convict shoveling his way to freedom in the dead of night. The gleam of the knives suggests the altars of church where the maimed in body and spirit are brought in a desperate attempt to be made whole. The continents, rivers, and oceans of blood called to mind by the smears on the butcher’s apron contract on the chopping block to “a river dried to its bed / Where I am fed”: this sole and unexpected rime brings us up short and locks in the poem’s central insight—the vast amount of pain, suffering, and death that is inflicted to sustain our nourishment and satisfaction. Perhaps the mysterious voice the speaker hears in the last line is a chorus of all the tortured creatures that the poem has evoked.

Christopher Smart, FOR I WILL CONSIDER MY CAT JEOFFRY, page 1127

Telling us more about cats than Carl Sandburg and T. S. Eliot (in “Prufrock,” lines 15–22) put together, Smart salutes Jeoffry in one of several passages in Jubilate Agno that fall for a little while into some continuity. This fascinating poem, and the whole work that contained it, have come down to us in a jumble of manuscripts retrieved from the asylum, sorted out brilliantly by W. H. Bond in his edition of Smart’s work (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1954). Some of Smart’s gorgeous lines seem quite loony, such as the command to Moses concerning cats (lines 34–35) and the patriotic boast about misinformation: the ichneumon (or Icneumon, line 63) is not a pernicious rat, but a weasel-like, rat-killing mammal.

Talking with Boswell of Smart’s confinement, Dr. Johnson observed:

I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people praying with him; and I’d as lief pray with Kit Smart as with any one else. Another charge was, that he did not love clean linen; and I have no passion for it.

A possible paper topic: “Smart’s Cat Jeoffry and Blake’s Tyger: How Are These Poems Similar in View?”
**Cathy Song, STAMP COLLECTING, page 1129**

Song’s poem depends upon an original and illuminating conceit: the speaker views the countries of the world through the stamps they issue. Understanding that the subject of each stamp reflects in some way the culture and geography that produced it, the speaker speculates on the national vision and self-image behind her stamps. “Stamp Collecting” is a political poem, but it unfolds with such delicate observations and employs such ingenious language that it may be easy for students to miss the political content. Moreover, the poem has no specific ideological ax to grind. “Stamp Collecting” explains the concept of national self-identity rather than any particular political cause.

**William Stafford, THE FARM ON THE GREAT PLAINS, page 1130**

In 1962—when Stafford still had three decades of life and poetry before him—he selected this poem, “The Farm on the Great Plains,” for Paul Engle and Joseph Langland’s *Poet’s Choice* (New York: Dial, 1962), an anthology in which one hundred or so English-language poets selected their favorite among their own works and supplied a (usually) brief explanation of their choice. Stafford wrote the following note to accompany his poem:

> A glance at “The Farm on the Great Plains” jolts me with a succession of regrets about it, but these regrets link with reassurances as I confront and accept something of my portion in writing: an appearance of moral commitment mixed with a deliberate—even a flaunted—nonsophistication; an organized form cavalierly treated; a trace of narrative for company amid too many feelings. There are emergences of consciousness in the poem, and some outlandish lunges for communication; but I can stand quite a bit of this sort of thing if a total poem gives evidence of locating itself.

> And the things here—plains, farm, home, winter, lavished all over the page—these command my allegiance in a way that is beyond my power to analyze at the moment. Might I hazard that they signal something like austere hope? At any rate, they possess me. I continue to be a willing participant in the feelings and contradictions that led me to write the poem.

**Wallace Stevens, THE EMPEROR OF ICE-CREAM, page 1131**

Choosing this poem to represent him in an anthology, Stevens once remarked, “This wears a deliberately commonplace costume, and yet seems to me to contain something of the essential gaudiness of poetry; that is the reason why I like it.” (His statement appears in *Fifty Poets: An American Auto-Anthology*, ed. William Rose Benet [New York: Difffield, 1933].)

Some students will at once relish the poet’s humor; others may discover it in class discussion. Try to gather the literal facts of the situation before getting into the poem’s suggestions. The wake or funeral of a poor old woman is taking place in her home. The funeral flowers come in old newspapers, not in florists’ fancy wrap-
pings; the mourners don't dress up, but wear their usual street clothes; the refresh-
ments aren't catered but are whipped up in the kitchen by a neighbor, a cigar-
roller. Like ice cream, the refreshments are a dairy product. Nowadays it would
probably be a sour cream chip-dip; perhaps in 1923 they were blocks of Philadel-
phia cream cheese squashed into cups for spreading on soda crackers. To a corre-
spondent, Stevens wrote that fantails refers not to fans but to fantail pigeons (Let-
poor old woman's pathetic aspiration toward beauty. Deal furniture is cheap. Every-
thing points to a run-down neighborhood, and to a woman about whose passing
nobody very much cares.

Who is the Emperor? The usual guess is Death. Some students will probably see
that the Emperor and the muscular cigar-roller (with his creamy curds) suggest each
other. (Stevens does not say that they are identical.) Ice cream suggests the chill of
the grave—and what besides? Today some of its connotations will be commonplace:
supermarkets, Baskin-Robbins. To the generation of Stevens, ice cream must have
meant more: something luxurious and scarce, costly, hard-to-keep, requiring quick
consumption. Other present-day connotations may come to mind: sweetness, deli-
ciousness, childhood pleasure. Stevens's personal view of the ice cream in the poem
was positive. “The true sense of ‘Let be be finale of seem’ is let being become the con-
cclusion or denouement of appearing to be: in short, ice cream is an absolute good”
(Letters 341). An absolute good! The statement is worth quoting to students who
have doubts about the poet’s attitude toward ice cream—as did an executive of the
Amalgamated Ice Cream Association, who once wrote to the poet in perplexity (see
Letters 501–2). If ice cream recalls sweet death, still (like curds) it also contains hints
of mother’s milk, life, and vitality.

On a visit to Mount Holyoke, XJK was told that, as part of an annual celebra-
tion, it is customary for the trustees and the seniors to serve ice cream (in Dixie cups)
to the freshman class at the grave of Mary Lyon, founder of the college. In a flash he
remembered Stevens’s poem and embraced Jung's theory of archetypes.
Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ULYSSES, page 1132

The following inadequate précis, meant to make lovers of Tennyson’s poem irate, might be quoted to students to see whether they agree with it: A hardy old futzer can’t stand life in the old folks’ home and calls on his cronies to join him in an escape, even though the whole lot of them are going to break their necks.


MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Tennyson.

Dylan Thomas, FERN HILL, page 1134

Fern Hill is the farm of Thomas’s aunt, Ann Jones, with whom he spent boyhood holidays. In line 2 the poet cites a favorite saying of his father’s, “Happy as the grass is green.” The saying is echoed again in line 38. As students may notice, Thomas likes to play upon familiar phrases and transform them, as in line 7, “once below [not upon] a time.”

It came as a great shock when we first realized that this poem, which XJK had thought a quite spontaneous burst of lyric energy, is shaped into a silhouette, and that the poet contrived its form by counting syllables. Such laborious working methods were customary for Thomas. John Malcolm Brinnin has recalled seeing more than 200 separate and distinct versions of “Fern Hill”—a fact worth conveying to students who think poets simply overflow.

We take the closing line to express Thomas’s view of his own poetry, lyrical and rule-bound at the same time: a song uttered in chains. Of course, the last line also means that the boy in the poem was held in chains by Time, the villain, who informs the whole poem (except for stanzas 3 and 4, which see childhood as Eden). Students may be asked to trace all the mentions of Time throughout the poem, then to sum up the poet’s theme. William York Tindall, who offers a line-by-line commentary, makes a fine distinction: “Not how it feels to be young, the theme of ‘Fern Hill’ is how it feels to have been young” (A Reader’s Guide to Dylan Thomas [New York: Noonday, 1962]). And we’d add, “how it would have felt to grow old, if the boy had realized he wouldn’t live forever.”

According to Tindall (in a lecture), Thomas used to grow huffy whenever asked if he were an admirer of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Still, to hear aloud both “Fern Hill” and Hopkins’s “Pied Beauty” is to notice much similarity of sound and imagery. Hopkins studied Welsh for a time, while Thomas never did learn the language; but both at least knew of ancient Welsh poetry and its ingeniously woven sound patterns.

Thomas’s magnificent (or, some would say, magnificently hammy) reading of this poem can be heard on Caedmon recording TC 1002, cassette 51002, compact disk Z1002. The recording, A Child’s Christmas in Wales and Other Poems, also contains “Do not go gentle into that good night.”
John Updike, EX-BASKETBALL PLAYER, page 1135

Updike’s ex-basketball player suffers the fate that Housman’s athlete escapes by dying young. Flick Webb has to live on, unsung, in “fields where glory does not stay.” The man whose “hands were like wild birds” now uses those hands to pump gas, check oil, and change flat tires. “Once in a while, / As a gag, he dribbles an inner tube.” In his spare time, he sits in Mae’s luncheonette and “just nods / Beyond her face toward bright applauding tiers / Of Necco Wafers, Nibs, and Juju Beads.” (Are today’s students familiar with those brand names?)

Updike’s light tone does not obscure the pathos of Flick’s situation. (Students might be asked if they know anyone like Flick Webb.) Though Updike wrote notable light verse, he said of this early poem, his second to be accepted by the New Yorker, that it “is ‘serious’ and has enjoyed a healthy anthology life, though its second stanza now reads strangely to students. . . . That is, they have never seen glass-headed pumps, or gas stations with a medley of brands of gasoline, or the word Esso” (foreword to a reissued edition of Updike’s first book, The Carpentered Hen [New York: Knopf, 1982]).

See how quickly your class can identify the poem’s form as blank verse.

Derek Walcott, SEA GRAPES, page 1136

Born in Saint Lucia in 1930, Derek Walcott is unquestionably the most significant poet that the Caribbean islands have yet produced. In recognition of his achievements as a poet and playwright, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992. Although he has lived and taught in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada, his native region remains his spiritual and cultural anchor. Intertwined with that emphasis is perhaps the most important literary influence on Walcott’s writing, the Odyssey—an influence shown principally in Omeros (1991), a three-hundred-page epic poem in which Homer’s work provides a mythic overlay for a tale of Caribbean fishermen, and The Odyssey (1993), Walcott’s stage adaptation of the ancient epic, in which the characters and actions of Homer’s narrative are framed by the commentary of a blind blues singer. But years before these books, Walcott had blended Homer and the Caribbean in “Sea Grapes,” the title poem of his pivotal 1976 collection.

The poem’s link between the ancient and the modern, the Old World and the New, is beautifully forged by the felicitous rime of Caribbean and Aegean. But what is the substance of the connection? Why could “that schooner beating up the Caribbean” be “Odysseus, / home-bound on the Aegean”? The answer is given explicitly in lines 10–12: “The ancient war / between obsession and responsibility / will never finish. . . .” Odysseus, torn between his responsibility—his desire to return home to his wife and son and the ruling of his kingdom—and his obsession—his all but irrepressible urge to explore every island he encounters on that return voyage—is here a template for this same divided nature that exists in every human being. Out of these primal passions grew the great classical epic, as lines 16–18 imply, and, as the
Margaret Walker, FOR MALCOLM X, page 1137

In this sonnet, Walker employs an adaptation of a traditional poetic form to deal with extremely non-traditional poetic material. The result is jarringly effective. Note Walker’s use of alliteration (violent / voices; cries / clamors / cool / capers, etc.) and imagery (eyes are “hollowed pits,” Malcolm X is a “dying swan”). Note, too, the striking contrasts between black and white (“black faces,” “white devils,” “black bourgeoisie,” “red suns,” “Snow-white moslem head-dress,” “black face”), which are at the center of this poem about a black civil rights activist who vigorously challenged white privilege in America.

Related to the contrasts between black and white are the juxtapositions of gentleness and violence: Malcolm’s mourners have violent dreams, but they are also gentle-hearted people with broken hearts; Malcolm himself was violent—“You have cut open our breasts”—yet was also “holy.” Malcolm was a Muslim, but the poem seems to depict him as a Christ figure, a “holy” person with “flowing wounds,” who in some sense, like Christ, died for “us” (“Our blood and water pour from your flowing wounds”). The poem ultimately offers Malcolm X as a “holy” savior of his people.

Edmund Waller, GO, LOVELY ROSE, page 1137

In some ways quieter than Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” or Herrick’s “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” this poem has the same theme: carpe diem. “Go, Lovely Rose” merits admiration for its seemingly effortless grace and for the sudden, gently shocking focus on our mortality in the poem’s final stanza.


Walt Whitman, from SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD, page 1138

This is the fifteenth and concluding section of a poem that first appeared (as “Poem of the Road”) in the second edition of Leaves of Grass. It was retitled for the 1867 edition and thereafter underwent only slight revision, mainly the elimination of a
few lines. Thus it belongs to the early part of Whitman’s mature career, and it reflects the themes of universal oneness and transcendental optimism that characterize that phase of his work.

In his freewheeling and quirky but often shrewdly insightful *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), the great British novelist D. H. Lawrence observes:

This is Whitman’s message of American democracy.

The true democracy, where soul meets soul, in the open road. Democracy. American democracy where all journey down the open road, and where a soul is known at once in its going. Not by its clothes or appearance. . . . Not by its family name. Not even by its reputation. . . . Not by a progression of piety, or by works of Charity. Not by works at all. Not by anything, but just itself. . . .

The love of man and woman: a recognition of souls, and a communion of worship. The love of comrades: a recognition of souls, and a communion of worship. Democracy: a recognition of souls, all down the open road, and a great soul seen in its greatness, as it travels on foot among the rest, down the common way of the living. A glad recognition of souls, and a gladder worship of great and greater souls, because they are the only riches. . . .

The only riches, the great souls.

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**Walt Whitman, I HEAR AMERICA SINGING, page 1138**

In “I Hear America Singing,” the twentieth of twenty-one “Inscriptions” with which he began the third edition of his *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman presents a vision of America in which people of varied trades and walks of life each sing his or her own individual song (“what belongs to him or her and to none else”), and these individual songs somehow blend to form a harmonious whole, reflective of Whitman’s vision of, and for, America itself. Whitman biographer David S. Reynolds observes that this “picture . . . was more than just a metaphor. It reflected a pre-mass-media culture in which Americans often entertained themselves and each other” (*Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*, [New York: Knopf, 1995]).

Even if the image is grounded in fact, we cannot help but wonder how realistic a depiction it was of Whitman’s society, as opposed to an idealistic vision of what America could and, Whitman no doubt hoped, would be. “I Hear America Singing” was first published, after all, in 1860, the year before the beginning of the Civil War, hardly the most harmonious moment in American history. And it may also be worth pointing out that it was the title piece of a British selection of Whitman’s most idealistic and affirmative verses about American society that was rushed into print in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (*I Hear America Singing: Poems of Democracy, Manhattan, and the Future* [London: Anvil, 2001]).
Richard Wilbur, THE WRITER, page 1139

A searching criticism of Wilbur's work, and this poem, is offered by Andrew Hudgins (Hudson Review, Winter 1989). Sometimes Wilbur implies that it is possible to master the world and its complicated problems in much the same way that a poet, in a successful poem, masters the language—but it isn’t, of course. Wilbur thus places himself in a dilemma, one he is aware of. Hudgins summarizes “The Writer” and interprets it:

Hearing his daughter as she types a story in her room, he compares the house to a ship and the sound of the typewriter keys to “a chain hauled over a gunwale,” while the “stuff” of his daughter’s life is “a great cargo and some of it heavy.” Then, rather glibly, he wishes her a “lucky passage.” As soon as he’s completed the metaphor, however, he rejects the “easy figure” because he remembers how difficult the life of a writer can be. The next metaphor he advances is embedded in the anecdote of a “dazed starling” that once became trapped in the same room his daughter is now working in. . . . Though the poem is touching and even powerful, the implied final metaphor, and the ending of the poem, while infinitely better than the rejected first metaphor of the ship, still have a bit of its premeditated neatness about them.

Whether or not the poem is autobiographical, Wilbur does have a daughter, Ellen Wilbur, a widely published fiction writer and the author of Wind and Birds and Human Voices, a collection of short stories (Stuart Wright, 1984: NAL paperback, 1985).

MyLiteratureLab Resources. Biographical information and links for Wilbur.

William Carlos Williams, SPRING AND ALL, page 1140

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why cannot Williams’s attitude toward spring be called “poetic” and “conventional”? What is his attitude toward the approaching season? By what means is it indicated? Consider especially lines 14–15 and 24–25, and the suggestion of contagious in the opening line. Spring is stealing over the land as a contagious disease infects a victim. But spring is not a disease: it has a “stark dignity.”

2. An opinion: “This poem clearly draws from the poet’s experience as a pediatrician who had attended hundreds of newborns, and whose work was often to describe with clinical exactness the symptoms of his patients.” Discuss. Lines 16–18 especially seem to contain a metaphor of newborn infants. The adjectives mottled, dried, sluggish could occur in a physician’s report. In lines 9–13 also, the description of bushes, trees, and vines seems painstakingly exact in its detail.

Recalling his life as writer and physician in an article for a popular magazine, Williams once told how poems would come to him while driving on his daily rounds. “When the phrasing of a passage suddenly hits me, knowing how quickly such things

Scholars have speculated that the brief lines of many of Williams’s poems may have been decreed by the narrow width of a prescription blank, but we don’t buy that guess. Had he wanted longer lines Williams would have turned the blanks sideways or composed in smaller handwriting.

William Carlos Williams, QUEEN-ANNE’S-LACE, page 1141

In the mid-1950s, a few years before his death, William Carlos Williams was paid a number of visits by a young researcher named Edith Heal. On these occasions, Williams’s wife unlocked the cabinet in which she had guarded a copy of each of his books against his impulsive generosity. One by one, in chronological order, his books were handed to the poet, unleashing a flood of reminiscences. His comments were recorded and shaped into the delightful little volume I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958). Among his statements on his 1921 collection Sour Grapes is the following: “Straight observation is used in four poems about flowers: ‘Daisy,’ ‘Primrose’ (this is the American primrose), ‘Queen Anne’s Lace,’ ‘Great Mullen.’ I thought of them as still lifes. I looked at the actual flowers as they grew. When Whit Burnett asked me to contribute to his anthology, This Is My Best, I chose these four poems.”

This is interesting, as far as it goes, but obviously it doesn’t go nearly far enough. The comparison to a woman’s body at the very outset of the poem and the use thereafter of male and female pronouns indicate that the poem is doing much more than simply describing the careful observation of an actual flower. In its inadequacy, Williams’s comment could be considered a prime example of the intentional fallacy—the mistaken notion that an author’s statement of what was intended in a work must be taken as canonical and given precedence over all other interpretations (for a classic instance, look up John Ciardi vs. Robert Frost on “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”). Many times, the insights of a critic who is trained and experienced in literary analysis, and who has carefully studied the text as it actually exists on the page, can be much more illuminating than an author’s declamation—or imperfect recollection, long after the fact—of what he or she had in mind at the time of writing. As a case in point, consider these comments by Ann W. Fisher-Wirth, which do more justice and honor to Williams’s art in “Queen-Anne’s-Lace” than do the poet’s own words:

But this woman—who is she not? Like the Queen-Anne’s-Lace, she springs up everywhere; those less ardent than Williams often mistake her for a weed and, thinking her common, fail to learn her rampant beauty. She is every woman, a possible woman, in whom there is “no question of whiteness” . . . [H]er beauty
lies not in what she is but in what she becomes, the way in which she flowers by surrendering herself. Her desire awakens “the stain of love . . . .” Here, in this moment, there is “no question of whiteness.” She and the moment are “white as can be”; one might absolutely say “her body thought.”

“Queen-Anne’s-Lace” is a beautiful celebration of sexuality, but it is also more than that. For Williams, sexual awakening and passion remains simply itself, one process among many, but it also becomes a metaphor or type for all awakenings and passions. Surrendered to desire, the woman in “Queen-Anne’s-Lace” remains herself, one flower, but she also makes one of a world or “field” of flowers, comprising all those who surrender….

How beautifully, toward the end, the language of “Queen-Anne’s-Lace” grips down and begins to awaken. For, of course, “Queen-Anne’s-Lace” is not just a flower or a woman; it is also a poem. And like the woman he describes, the poet becomes whole, and reveals himself to be whole, as he enters into the body of his passion . . . . This is the choice he has: to hold himself back at the last, or to surrender absolutely. Either way there is “nothing.” But between the “nothing” of failure and the “nothing” of self-surrender, what a difference there is—what a plenitude has come. (Ann W. Fisher-Wirth, William Carlos Williams and Autobiography: The Woods of His Own Nature, University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1989. 102–103.)

—Michael Palma

William Wordsworth, COMPOSED UPON WESTMINSTER BRIDGE, page 1141

Imaginary conversation:

Instructor: What do you make of the title? Is this a poem composed upon the subject of a bridge, or a poem composed while standing on a bridge’s sidewalk?
Student: The latter, obviously.
Instructor: How do you know?
Student: His eye is located up on the bridge. Otherwise he wouldn’t see with such a wide-angle lens.
Instructor: You genius! To the head of the class!

Whose is the “mighty heart”? Wordsworth is describing the city as a sleeping beauty about to awaken. Of course, the brightness of the scene is increased by the poet’s being out for his stroll before a hundred thousand chimneys have begun to smoke from coal fires preparing kippers for breakfast. Charles Lamb, in a letter to Wordsworth, had chided the poet that the urban emotions must be unknown to him, so perhaps this famous sonnet is an answer to the charge.

Compare “The World Is Too Much with Us” for a different Wordsworth attitude toward commerce; or compare Wordsworth’s London of 1807 with Blake’s “London” of 1794—practically the same city, but seen from a different perspective. (Wordsworth up
on the bridge at dawn, letting distance lend enchantment; Blake down in the city streets
by night, with the chimney sweep, the teenage whore, and the maimed veteran.)

James Wright, AUTUMN BEGINS IN MARTINS FERRY, OHIO, page 1142

Martins Ferry was Wright's hometown. The speaker of the poem describes the men
of Martins Ferry sitting in the high school stadium, the only place in the vicinity
where heroes are likely to appear. Certainly these working-class men have given up
dreams of heroism in their own lives. Gray-faced, ruptured, worn out by their jobs in
heavy industry, they sit in taverns over their beer, “ashamed to go home” to their
wives. Unable even to satisfy the romantic or sexual longings of their wives, who are
“dying for love,” these men turn to their sons for inspiration. In October, as the year
begins to die, they watch the heroic spectacle of their sons' football games. While
there is something gloriously primal about Wright's scene, there is also something
darkly ironic. Will the sons of Martins Ferry achieve true heroism on the gridiron?
Or will they just bang up their knees and dislocate their shoulders for a season or two
before they go on to equally unheroic adult lives? The poem masterfully has it both
ways—both heroic and doomed.

Perhaps the fathers were once football heroes themselves, as George S. Lensing
and Ronald Moran point out in Four Poets and the Emotive Imagination (Baton Rouge:
Louisiana State UP, 1976), a study that discusses nearly the whole of Wright's work.
“From this there is the suggestion that the futures of the current community heroes
may be as bleak as the present time assuredly is for the fathers.”

Did Wright mean to protest the violence of football—at least, football of the
Martins Ferry kind? Not according to the poet himself, who once played on an Ohio
River Valley semipro team. Although the high school games were “ritualized, for-
malized violence,” they had positive qualities: “the expression of physical grace,”
“terrific aesthetic appeal.” Wright's own high school produced not just lads doomed
to frustration (like their fathers), but at least one football hero—Lou Groza, place-
kicker for the Cleveland Browns. (Wright made his remarks in an interview

In the same critical anthology, Robert Hass sees football in the poem as a har-
vest ritual, which, like all good harvest rituals, celebrates sexual potency and the
fruitfulness of the earth (two positive qualities apparently not conspicuous in Mar-
tins Ferry). “Even the stanzaic structure of the poem participates in the ritual. The
first two stanzas separate the bodies of the men from the bodies of the women, and
the third stanza gives us the boys pounding against each other, as if they could, out
of their wills, effect a merging” (line 210).

Jan Hodge, of Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa, wrote us a long letter
full of insights about this poem. (We have incorporated a few of his remarks into our
comments above.) He ends his reading of the poem with some especially interesting
observations:
Isn’t the third stanza (introduced by that powerful placement of “Therefore” on a line by itself) the logical culmination of the first two stanzas—the point being that it is because of both the larger community’s need for heroes and their fathers’ need to find (vicarious) pride in them that the sons give themselves so suicidally (and so beautifully?) to football? The speaker understands the harshness of the lives around him and why therefore football becomes so important. He is also I think compassionate, but refuses to sentimentalize either the game or the failures he sees so accurately. I find Wright’s use of the two oxymorons—“suicidally beautiful” and “gallop terribly”—particularly effective to express his ambiguous attitude toward football, the sons, the fathers, and the workers. If there is violence, there is also a kind of grace in their sacrifice—all the more poignant because (as you and others have pointed out) it is almost certainly futile.

“Does Wright mean to protest the violence of football?” you ask. A majority of my students argue so—but less I think because of the poem than because they think (wrongly) I am opposed to football and assign the poem for that reason. I end up in discussion defending the poem against their second-guessing of it. I had assumed for years that such a protest was not Wright’s intent; your notes confirm my view.

Finally, some comments by poet William Virgil Davis of Baylor University, who considers “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry” to be the key poem in Wright’s work. In an article on “James Wright’s Cogito” in Notes on Contemporary Literature (Jan. 1993), Davis describes the structure of the poem:

The poem follows the pattern of a logical argument, the three stanzas paralleling the arrangement of a syllogism. Indeed, the first stanza asserts, “I think it” (line 2), and the third begins, “Therefore” (1. 9). The two “terms” of the argument are defined at the conclusions of stanzas one and two in the parallel phrases, “Dreaming of heroes” (1. 5) and “Dying for love” (1. 8). These are respectively associated with men (fathers) and women (mothers), and the results of these kinds of “deaths” create situations in which the “sons” of such parents “grow suicidally beautiful / At the beginning of October, / And gallop terribly against each other’s bodies” (11. 10–12). This conclusion, following the “Therefore” of line 9, is more than the “sum” of Descartes’s principle, but, like it, it defines a being born of the realization of a logical argument: what one is is what he believes and feels, based upon his past experiences and his personal history. Still, the “essence,” although born of “existence,” exceeds it. This is, then, beauty born out of the death of self for the sake of self-realization.

Therefore, what the poem “means” is what the speaker reads or feels at the end of it; and, even if the argument is invalid, it is true.

Mary Sidney Wroth, In THIS STRANGE LABYRINTH, page 1142

Feminist scholarship has uncovered many unjustly neglected works by women, but surely Mary Sidney Wroth must rank among the most interesting—and most overdue—additions to the canon. The niece of Sir Philip Sidney and Lady Mary Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke, Mary Sidney grew up in a talented and cultivated family.
An arranged marriage to Sir Robert Wroth, however, proved unhappy during his lifetime and financially precarious after his death.

Wroth's sonnets were added to her prose romance *Urania* (1621), which she boldly published under her own name. Titled *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, the poems (which constitute the first sonnet sequence by an Englishwoman) speak in the voices of the prose romance's two main characters, but the poems also reflect her personal experience after her husband's death, especially her romantic liaison with her married cousin, the Earl of Pembroke, by whom she had two children.

"In this strange labyrinth" employs the image of the labyrinth as a symbol for erotic confusion. Each direction the speaker contemplates taking poses some danger or disappointment. This conceit is developed for thirteen lines until a detail from the myth—Ariadne's thread—is introduced in the final line. As Ariadne's thread guided her lover through the dangers of the labyrinth, so will "the thread of love" guide the speaker.

**Sir Thomas Wyatt**, *They Flee from Me That Sometime Did Me Seek*.

Surely Wyatt knew what he was about. Sounding the final e's helps to fulfill the expectations of iambic pentameter in lines 2, 12, 15, 17, 20, and 21, lines that otherwise would seem to fall short. In other lines, however, Wyatt appears to make the rhythm deliberately swift or hesitant in order to fit the sense. Line 7 ("Busily seeking with a continual change") seems busy with extra syllables and has to be read quickly to fit the time allotted it. Such a metrical feast seems worthy of Yeats, as does line 11, in which two spondees ("loose gown," "did fall") cast great stress upon that suddenly falling garment.

What line in English love poetry, by the way, is more engaging than "Dear heart, how like you this?" And when have a lover's extended arms ever been more nicely depicted? (This line may be thrown into the teeth of anyone who thinks that, in descriptive writing, adjectives are bad things.)

**William Butler Yeats**, *Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop*.

Piecing together a history from this Crazy Jane poem and others, John Unterecker has identified the Bishop as a divinity student who had courted Jane in his youth. She rejected him in favor of a wild, disreputable lover: Jack the journeyman. As soon as he got enough authority, the Bishop-to-be had Jack banished, but Jane has remained faithful to her lover (at least in spirit). (See *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* [New York: Noonday, 1959].) In this poem, the Bishop's former interest in Jane has dwindled to a concern for her soul alone. Or has it? Perhaps the Bishop, no doubt a handsome figure in his surplice, may be demonstrating Yeats's contention that fair needs foul. Jane is living in lonely squalor. The grave, she says, can affirm the truth that her friends are gone, for it holds many of them; and her own empty bed can affirm that Jack is gone, too. Still, she firmly renounces the Bishop and his advice.

Each word of the poem is exact. Love has pitched his mansion as one would pitch a tent. The next-to-last line ends in two immense puns: sole or whole. The Bishop
thinks that soul is all that counts, but Jane knows that both soul and hole are needed. Such puns may be why Yeats declared (in a letter) that he wanted to stop writing the Crazy Jane series: “I want to exorcise that slut, Crazy Jane, whose language has become unendurable.”

What does Yeats mean by the paradoxical statement in the last two lines? Perhaps (1) that a woman cannot be fulfilled and remain a virgin—that, since fair and foul are near of kin, one cannot know Love, the platonic ideal, without going through the door of the physical body; and (2) that the universe is by nature a yin/yang combination of fair and foul (or, as Yeats would have it in A Vision, a pair of intertwining gyres). Crazy Jane may be crazy, but in Yeats’s view she is a soothsayer.

William Butler Yeats, The Magi, page 1144

After writing a lesser poem than this—“The Dolls,” in which dolls hurl resentment at a “noisy and filthy thing,” a human baby—Yeats had a better idea. “I looked up one day into the blue of the sky, and suddenly imagined, as if lost in the blue of the sky, stiff figures in procession” (Yeats’s note at the back of his Collected Poems). Like dolls, the Magi seem frozen, somewhat inhuman (“rain-beaten stones”), unfulfilled. They are apparently troubled that Christ, whose birth was a miracle, died as a man. In hopes of regaining the peace of the Nativity, they pursue a second journey.

Bestial will seem to students an odd word to apply to a stable floor, unless they catch its literal sense: “belonging to beasts.” But they will also need to see that its connotations of brutality fit the poem and interact with Calvary’s turbulence. Compare “The Magi” with the rough beast in “The Second Coming,” a poem written after Yeats had more fully worked out his notion that historical events move in a cycle of endless return. (“Leda and the Swan” can be brought in, too, if there is time for it.)

If comparing Yeats’s unsatisfied wise men to Eliot’s in “Journey of the Magi,” good questions to ask include, Which poet writes as a Christian? How can you tell?

William Butler Yeats, When You Are Old, page 1145

Yeats wrote this poem to the actress Maud Gonne in October 1891. It is based very loosely on Ronsard’s sonnet “Quand Vous Serez Bien Vielle,” but it is not a translation. Yeats merely took Ronsard’s premise (an old woman rereading the verses a poet wrote to her in their youth) and developed it in his own way.

In this gentlest of love poems, the speaker is resigned to not winning the woman he loves. He is merely one of many men who love her. His claim, however, is that his love was not for the surface charms of her grace or beauty; he alone loved her for her searching soul. And he has the satisfaction of being able
to preserve the unique quality of his devotion in words. Yeats’s lyric, therefore, celebrates the ennobling power of both love and poetry.

To be candidly emotional risks seeming sentimental, but as we approach the end of the notes to the “Poems for Further Reading,” we hope that many years from now a few of our students will take down this book to reread a few of the poems we taught them and realize that we spoke to “the pilgrim soul” in them.

Envoi

Let us end this section with another poem about teaching poetry—one by Paul Lake, a professor at Arkansas Technical University in Russellville. Lake’s “Introduction to Poetry” appears in his collection Another Kind of Travel (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988).

Introduction to Poetry

She comes in late, then settles like a sigh
On the first day, returning every week
Promptly at ten, each Monday Wednesday Friday,
To study Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, and Blake;

Enters the room to an approving murmur,
Straightens her dress, then, brushing back her hair,
Arches her body with the slightest tremor,
And sits, while the room grows breathless, in her chair;

Sits for an hour, while busy sophomores worry
Each turgid line, a Botticellian smile
On her rapt face, who’s learned how little study
Love involves; who, walking down the aisle,

Knows in her bones how little poetry
Words breathe, and how—on turning to go home—
All eyes will watch her rise above her “C”
And walk off, like a goddess on the foam.
DRAMAT
In many parts of the country, students rarely if ever see plays other than school or other amateur productions, and the instructor may encounter some resistance to the idea of studying drama. But all students are steeped in film and television drama, and it may be useful to point out that such drama begins with playscripts. One might reason somewhat like this: Movies and television, it’s true, give plays hard competition in our society, and a camera does have advantages. In moments, film can present whole panoramas and can show details in close-up that theaters (with their cumbersome sets and machinery) cannot duplicate. Movies used to be called “photoplays,” but the name implies an unnecessary limitation, for there is no point in confining the camera to recording the contents of a picture-frame stage. Yet a play—whether staged in a proscenium theater or in a parking lot—has its own distinct advantages. It is a medium that makes possible things a camera cannot do. Unlike movies and television, a play gives us living actors, and it involves living audiences who supply it with their presences (and who can move one another to laughter or to tears). Compared, say, to the laughter of live spectators at a comedy, the “canned” laughter often dubbed into television programs is a weak attempt to persuade television viewers that they are not alone.

Susan Glaspell, TRIFLES, page 1153

Analysis of Trifles in relation to the elements of drama—conflict, plot, exposition, dramatic question, crisis, resolution, and so forth—is provided at length in the parent text in the pages following the play.

The comeback of Trifles may be due, we think, not only to Glaspell’s pioneering feminist views but also to its being such a gripping, tightly structured play. Whether or not you have much time to spend on the elements of a play, we think you will find Trifles worth teaching; students respond to it.

The Provincetown Players, who performed in a theater on an abandoned wharf, had a fertile summer in 1916. Besides Trifles, with Glaspell herself playing Mrs. Hale, their season included the first Eugene O’Neill play to be produced, Bound East for Cardiff. Glaspell has said that she derived the plot of Trifles from a murder case she had investigated as a reporter in Des Moines.

Ruth E. Zehfuss of DeKalb College has pointed out a meaningful way to compare Trifles with another classic drama:

The key idea in Trifles, the conflict between outer or legal authority and inner or moral law, was . . . more than simply a feminist statement. The universality of
the question Glaspell poses can be compared to Sophocles’s Antigonê. In each play, the question is whether individuals have a right to follow their own moral beliefs when their beliefs conflict with the law of the state. ("The Law and the Ladies in Trifles," Teaching English in the Two-Year College [Feb. 1992], 42–44)

To compare the themes of Trifles and Antigonê, and how the characters of the two plays embody them, might be a rewarding topic either for class discussion or for a term paper.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of Trifles. Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. What attitudes toward women do the Sheriff and the County Attorney express? How do Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters react to these sentiments? Both men take a patronizing attitude toward women. Sheriff Peters is the one who mocks them for being concerned about the stitching in Mrs. Wright’s quilt block; the resulting laughter at their expense is very embarrassing to them, and may be a factor in their decision to conceal what they have discovered. Mr. Henderson, the County Attorney, is, if anything, even more offensive. He is smugly dismissive of anything that doesn’t fit his preconceived notions—witness his sarcastic observations about Mrs. Wright’s supposed poor housekeeping skills, despite the explanations of the women. Even when he thinks he is being broadminded and tolerant, he sounds smarmy and condescending, as when he says, “And yet, for all their worries, what would we do without the ladies?”

2. Why does the County Attorney care so much about discovering a motive for the killing? Mrs. Wright’s account of her husband’s death may be absurd on its face and highly suspicious, but the County Attorney has no direct evidence to connect her to the murder. He believes that he has two of the three basics—motive, means, and opportunity—in the identification of a prime suspect, and he wants to establish the third in order to seal his case. As he says, near the end of the play, “No, Peters, it’s all perfectly clear except a reason for doing it. But you know juries when it comes to women. If there was some definite thing. Something to show—something to make a story about—a thing that would connect up with this strange way of doing it.”

3. What does Glaspell show us about the position of women in this early twentieth-century community? These lives are filled with long hours of hard work, and they seem to receive little in the way of understanding or appreciation from their husbands and the other men who surround them. Men fail to take them seriously because they regard women as preoccupied with trivial and inconsequential concerns while all the world’s important work is carried on by men.

4. What do we learn about the married life of the Wrights? By what means is this knowledge revealed to us? From Mrs. Hale’s conversations with Mrs. Peters, we learn that over the course of her long, childless (and otherwise empty) marriage to John Wright, a once lively and hopeful young woman has been ground down into a haggard, careworn creature who avoided contact with her neighbors because her husband’s stinginess and controlling nature made it impossible for her to interact with them with any sense of self-respect: “Wright was close. I think maybe that’s why she
kept so much to herself. She didn’t even belong to the Ladies Aid. I suppose she felt she couldn’t do her part, and then you don’t enjoy things when you feel shabby. She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir. But that—oh, that was thirty years ago.”

5. What is the setting of this play, and how does it help us to understand Mrs. Wright’s deed? The setting is the “gloomy kitchen” of the Wrights’ farmhouse, a cramped and cluttered room in a house that is even more isolated and depressing than neighboring farms. As Mrs. Hale says, “I stayed away because it weren’t cheerful—and that’s why I ought to have come. I—I’ve never liked this place. Maybe because it’s down in a hollow and you don’t see the road. I dunno what it is but it’s a lonesome place and always was. I wish I had come over to see Minnie Foster sometimes.” Mrs. Wright was essentially trapped in her life there with her increasingly abusive husband, and she saw no other way out of it than the one that she ultimately took.

6. What do you infer from the wildly stitched block in Minnie’s quilt? Why does Mrs. Hale rip out the crazy stitches? Since her previous work had been neat and straight, the stitching on this block, the last one she had worked on, is suggestive of an extreme agitation of mind and emotions—the kind of agitation that might be produced by a murderous rage. Mrs. Hale rips out the stitches to help Mrs. Wright by destroying this evidence of her state of mind in the hours leading up to her husband’s death.

7. What is so suggestive in the ruined birdcage and the dead canary wrapped in silk? What do these objects have to do with Minnie Foster Wright? What similarity do you notice between the way the canary died and John Wright’s own death? The birdcage has been violently opened and the bird has died by having its neck wrung. Clearly, John Wright has viciously killed his wife’s pet—one of the few joys in her life, if not the only one—to spite her. The manner of his death—with a rope around his neck, having the life choked out of him—obviously suggests a deliberate act of retribution for the strangling of the canary, a retribution that only one person would be motivated to undertake. The “thing that would connect up with this strange way of doing it” that the County Attorney is hoping to find, it points all the more strongly to Mrs. Wright.

8. What thoughts and memories confirm Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale in their decision to help Minnie beat the murder rap? Mrs. Hale knows what a hard and lonely life Minnie has had; she knows the rough, grinding country life from her own experience, and she knows the particular burdens that Minnie has had to bear from observing them, and also from avoiding them: her guilt over shunning Minnie and leaving her to deal alone with her grief is a strong motivating factor in her sympathy and desire to help her. Mrs. Peters, more resistant to these claims through much of the play, is won over near the end when she remembers the boy who had brutally killed her pet kitten when she was girl, and relates Minnie’s isolation to her own situation after the death of her first child out on the Great Plains.

9. In what places does Mrs. Peters show that she is trying to be a loyal, law-abiding Sheriff’s wife? How do she and Mrs. Hale differ in background and temperament? When Mrs. Hale complains about the officials going through Mrs. Wright’s home and possessions while she’s not there, Mrs. Peters counters with “the law is the law.” When Mrs. Hale examines the quilt block, Mrs. Peters says “I don’t think we ought to touch things.” She counters Mrs. Hale’s assumption about John
Wright’s behavior—“We don’t know who killed the bird”—and, even as she empathizes with Minnie’s maddening isolation, says, “The law has got to punish crime, Mrs. Hale.” Mrs. Peters, as a townswoman and the wife of the Sheriff, seems instinctively more inclined to take the conventional view and defend the status quo, even to the point of saying about John Wright, “They say he was a good man.”

10. What ironies does the play contain? Comment on Mrs. Hale’s closing speech: “We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson.” Why is that little hesitation before “knot it” such a meaningful pause? Mrs. Hale’s comment that “Men’s hands aren’t always as clean as they might be” could be taken as an ironic observation on John Wright’s character and behavior. The County Attorney’s request to Mrs. Peters to “keep an eye out for anything that might be of use to us” is ironic on several levels: the usefulness of the evidence she turns up is lost on him and the Sheriff, and in the end she helps to ensure that this evidence will not be of any use to them. The largest irony, of course, inheres in the play’s title: what the law officials consider trifles are the very details that could seal their case for them if they had the wit to realize their significance. The pause before “knot it” reminds us of the reverberations of the phrase in the context of the play: Minnie Wright has knotted not only the quilt stitches but also the rope around her husband’s neck, and, thanks to the actions of the two women in the play, she will be spared having a rope knotted around her own neck.

11. Point out some moments in the play when the playwright conveys much to the audience without needing dialogue. Mrs. Hale is about to sit in the rocker when she remembers her husband’s description of Minnie Wright sitting there and calmly telling him about her husband’s murder, which brings that description—and Mrs. Wright’s situation—vividly back into our awareness. As they discuss the stitching on the quilt block, the two women glance nervously at the door, worried that the men might suddenly return, which conveys their awareness of the dangerous territory they are entering. The most obvious instances come at the end, when they conceal the dead bird and the quilt pieces from the Sheriff and the County Attorney.

12. How would you sum up the play’s major theme? Citing once more the quotation from Prof. Ruth E. Zehfuss earlier in this entry, “the question is whether individuals have a right to follow their own moral beliefs when their beliefs conflict with the law of the state.” A case can easily be made that Glaspell strongly communicates her own answer to this question. The issue of whether or not your students agree with her implied conclusion could be a basis for some very spirited class discussion.

13. How does this play, first produced in 1916, show its age? In what ways does it seem still remarkably new? Thanks to the telephone, radio, television, and the Internet, it is difficult to imagine a modern wife having to endure such total isolation as that experienced by Minnie Wright. It is equally difficult to imagine that the blatant, casual sexism and condescension of the County Attorney would issue from the mouth of a public official nowadays—he might very well think such things, but would probably feel hesitant to express them so openly. On the other hand, central elements of the play are still very much with us, including a social structure that undermines women and trivializes their concerns, widespread domestic abuse, and dilemmas regarding mitigation and justification in cases of this sort.

14. “Trifles is a lousy mystery. All the action took place before the curtain went up. Almost in the beginning, on the third page, we find out ‘who done it.’
So there isn’t really much reason for us to sit through the rest of the play.” Discuss this view. By the standard applied here, the play is “a lousy mystery”; but then, so are Hamlet and Crime and Punishment. Trifles does not, any more than they do, seek to be a whodunit, in which the paramount issue is to discover the identity of the killer. What is of importance here, of course, is what happens after that identity is established—namely, what Mrs. Wright’s motives and provocations were, what the two women decide is the proper way of handling the fact, and whether and how they will act to bring about what they see as the proper outcome. It is the answers to these questions, not “who done it,” that the play turns on, and it is the resolution of these matters that communicates Glaspell’s central themes.

**WRITERS ON WRITING**

_Susan Glaspell, Creating Trifles, page 1168_

By the end of the twentieth century Susan Glaspell regained her rightful position as an important innovator in modern American drama. _Trifles_ is now securely in the canon, but the rest of Glaspell’s work remains too little known; despite some fine recent work, her critical coverage is still incommensurate with her achievement. (Glaspell wrote thirteen plays, ten novels, and nearly fifty short stories.) There is also not yet a comprehensive, full-length modern biography. Much important scholarship needs to be done.

Given the lack of critical and biographical commentary, it is puzzling that Glaspell’s 1927 memoir, _The Road to the Temple_, is not better known. The excerpt from her book in the “Writers on Writing” feature has never appeared in any textbook before (though surely some other enterprising editor will soon lift it—with our compliments).

In this section of _The Road to the Temple_, Glaspell provides a first-hand account of two important events in the history of American drama—the creation of the Provincetown Players and the unusual genesis of her first play, _Trifles_, in 1916. As her autobiography makes abundantly clear, Glaspell and George Cram “Jig” Cook’s marriage was deeply fulfilling for both partners. It is a gentle irony that Glaspell’s feminist play was written at the prompting of her supportive husband. (He also helped create the Provincetown Players to spur her talent.) American literature has had few nicer moments than this one.

_The Road to the Temple_ (New York: Stokes, 1927) was recently reprinted by McFarland (2005). Glaspell’s style is very casual, and the book is fun to read. In addition to her own life story, she provides interesting accounts of American theatrical and bohemian life in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Cambridge’s edition of Susan Glaspell’s _Plays_ (1987), edited by C. W. E. Bigsby, reprints four one-act plays and has excellent scholarly apparatus and a fine introduction. It is indispensable for students of this pioneering playwright.

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Of all the components that make up the complex definition of tragedy, perhaps the most hotly debated is that of the protagonist’s tragic flaw. While there is a fairly general consensus that the protagonist is customarily undone by some form of hubris, one can find significant exceptions to this rule. Our two tragedies by Sophocles would seem to present both the rule and the exception. Clearly, the arrogance and self-importance of Oedipus play a large part in his undoing, from his original actions in defiance of the prophecy—killing any man old enough to be his father and marrying any woman old enough to be his mother—to his very publicly expressed scorn of the power of the gods when he believes that the prophecy has turned out to be false. On the other hand, despite her defiance of Creon’s edict, Antigone’s behavior strikes us as blameless and even noble; much more than her father, she seems the innocent victim of cruel circumstances.

We find a similar situation with our two Shakespeare tragedies: Othello’s fierce jealousy and failure to trust in Desdemona’s love are failings in his otherwise noble nature for which he must be held accountable; but can we truly say that Hamlet’s over-intellectualization and hesitancy to act are weaknesses of sufficient gravity that his destruction seems a proper retribution for them?

No such subtleties and complications need concern us in the case of Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus. It would be hard to imagine a clearer case of cause and effect—of self-destruction engineered by overweening self-assertion and the deliberate spurning of higher values—than the actions of Faustus in the scene that we have presented here. In the very first speech of the scene, he uses the word “Despair” to characterize his attitude toward God: “Despair in God and trust in Belzebub!” He maintains—because of his failure to penetrate the mysteries of existence—that God does not love him; even Job, in the depths of his anguish, never questioned God’s right to dispose of him as He saw fit, but Faustus in his frustration and his pride appears to have decided that only an unloving God would withhold from him the power and knowledge that He alone possesses. When Faustus says, “The god thou serv’st is thine own appetite,” it is not intended as the self-castigation that such a statement obviously ought to be, but is instead a summation of his attitude and his intentions.

Despite God’s attempts to deflect him from this course by means of the Good Angel, the congealing of his blood, and the warning of Homo fuge upon his arm,
Faustus sails through every red light in his mad rush to drive himself over the cliff. Mephistophilis does at one point conjure devils for Faustus to “delight his mind” and distract him from his momentary qualms, but he is uncompromisingly direct and honest in answering Faustus’s inquiries and reminding him of the magnitude and the inevitable consequences of what he is doing, despite Faustus’s blithe “I think that hell’s a fable.”

In the final scene of the play, Faustus’s twenty-four years have elapsed and, accompanied by a group of friends and fellow scholars, he waits in terror and useless, belated repentance for the fulfillment of the contract. It is a truly harrowing moment when, at the very end, the devils arrive at the stroke of twelve to take the agonized Faustus off to hell. The moral code exhibited in Doctor Faustus is quite straightforward: we are judged entirely by our actions, irrespective of motives. Nothing could be simpler, or more terrible. (As indicated in the chapter in the discussion of tragedy, things are quite otherwise at the conclusion of Goethe’s Faust 250 years later. Although Faust has inadvertently destroyed the lives of everyone he has come in contact with—from Gretchen to the old couple whose land he needs for his ambitious building project—he is saved in the end because of his motivations, his refusal to live dully and unquestioningly like the beasts of the field and the greater mass of humanity.)

From what is known of Marlowe’s unorthodox life and opinions, the opening speech of this scene may very possibly embody his own attitudes. Are the conclusion and the whole tenor of the play intended, then, as a sop to conventional morality (provoked not merely by the desire for commercial success but by the urge to avoid arrest and condemnation)? Perhaps so. And if so, there is a point to made here, one that is put forward not at all cynically but simply as a reflection of the facts of life: literary masterpieces are created not merely by the revelation of the heart’s deepest needs, however sincere, but by imaginative projection and patiently honed craft applied to the perennial questions of human existence.

**Comedy**

*David Ives, Sure Thing, page 1186*

When the original off-Broadway production of David Ives’s six one-act comedies, All in the Timing, opened in 1993, Ives was a relative unknown in American theater. Soon he became a minor celebrity. A shy but witty man, he wore his newfound fame with comic nonchalance. When New York magazine listed him as one of the “100 Smartest New Yorkers,” Ives told a reporter from the Columbia University Record that he didn’t approve. “Lists,” he explained, “are anti-democratic, discriminatory, elitist, and sometimes the print is too small.” Audiences of all kinds respond to Ives’s work. All in the Timing has gradually become one of the most widely produced contemporary plays in America.

Sure Thing demonstrates how quickly innovative theatrical technique is incorporated into mainstream drama. Ives bases his play in equal parts on modernist experimental theater and popular comedy—half Luigi Pirandello, one might say, and half Groucho Marx. One might add that Ives uses the modernist techniques of dramatic
distancing, stylization, and fragmentation to tell the most traditional story possible—a young man and woman meet and fall in love. (Youthful romance has been a central subject of comedy since Menander and Plautus.) The resulting work is both surprising and familiar. The best new art often works exactly as Ives’s *Sure Thing* does, by creating a meaningful conversation between the ancient and the new.

If the fragmentary technique of *Sure Thing* isn’t just a clever theatrical gimmick, what meaningful conversations does it open up? By dramatizing every moment of mutual attraction and rejection, Ives’s disjointed narrative structure provides a candid and detailed anatomy of modern romance. It also shows how individuals both speak and listen in social code. *Sure Thing* is as much about language as romance. Ives embodies the mutual exploration of these two characters entirely in language. There is no physical comedy in the play. The only non-verbal element is the bell that punctuates the action to announce that one of the characters has lost interest in the other. (The bell editorializes only once, with multiple rings after Betty begins to talk about astrological signs, but this auditory gag is merely an intensification of its normal role.)

Instructors should remember how easy it is to produce *Sure Thing* in the classroom. All one needs is two actors, two chairs, and a bell (or whistle or buzzer). The play takes less than fifteen minutes to perform. Students can also be asked to write and perform additional scenes of their own.

Students interested in writing on Ives should be directed to the other plays in *All in the Timing*, among them two short plays that provide interesting parallels to *Sure Thing*. This first is *Words, Words, Words*, which presents three monkeys (named Milton, Swift, and Kafka) who have been placed in a laboratory at Columbia University with three typewriters to produce the text of *Hamlet*. The second play is *The Universal Language*, in which a woman takes an introductory lesson in a phony universal language (a parody of Esperanto) that proves to be an educational scam. Both plays are not only hilarious, they offer an insightful critique of language. Ives’s preface to *All in the Timing* is in itself a brilliant comic performance.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of *Sure Thing*. Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Ives originally planned to set *Sure Thing* at a bus stop. What does its current setting in a café suggest about the characters? Two people at a bus stop could be any two people, perhaps with nothing at all in common. Two people in a café—one that’s just down the street from a movie theater running a Woody Allen festival—presumably share certain tastes and interests, and have a similar level of sophistication, and thus have more of a basis for a relationship.

2. What happens on stage when the bell rings? Each time the bell rings, it signifies a dead end in the conversation and the end of any possibility of the two characters getting together, followed by a “rewind” and a resumption of the dialogue, along potentially more fruitful lines.

3. Who is the protagonist? What does the protagonist want? Bill is the protagonist. He is the one who initiates the acquaintance and drives the conversation, asking Betty what she’s reading, if she’s waiting for someone, if she comes here often,
etc. What he wants, obviously, is to get to know this girl that he's instantly attracted to, to overcome her resistance to him, to see where it might go and what, if anything, might come of it.

4. Does the play have a dramatic question? The question the play poses from the outset is whether these two strangers will be able to overcome all the apparent obstacles to their spending enough time in conversation to begin to explore the possibility of their hitting it off.

5. When does the climax of the play occur? Since the bell keeps ringing until nearly the very last minute of the play, the climax doesn't occur until the last few speeches, when Bill and Betty acknowledge their shared enthusiasm for Woody Allen (whose bittersweet comedies of desire and incompatibility are an apt reference point in this context). After that moment, everything else follows in a rush.

6. Is 

Sure Thing


a romantic comedy or a farce? Sure Thing has elements of both romantic comedy and farce. The conversational premise is farcical, but the simple underlying narrative of two strangers falling improbably in love is the essence of romantic comedy.

7. “Sure Thing is not a funny play because it isn't realistic. Conversations just don't happen this way.” Discuss that opinion. Do you agree or disagree? Art is not obliged to provide an exact copy of social reality. Instead, it tries to get at the deeper truths of human existence. Comedy, especially, works by exaggeration and distortion. In great comedy the novelty of the exaggerated treatment allows us to notice everyday truths that we have grown accustomed to overlook. The gap between deeper truth and everyday convention is what makes us laugh with comic recognition.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

1. How well-developed are the two characters in the play? Why does Ives not tell us very much about them? They are not very well developed at all: it's hard to get a precise fix on either one of them, especially since they both say so many conflicting things about themselves. Ives's intention, no doubt, is to keep them lightly characterized in order to avoid limiting the dialogue and the events to the specifics of their personalities, and to suggest instead the universal implications of the play, that a similar pattern would play out in the interaction of any two people.

2. What do the two characters seem to find appealing, or not appealing, in each other? She is put off by his coming on too strongly, and he by her indifference and—in one memorable speech—hostility. Both are put off by any sign of ignorance or shallowness in the other, as when she finds Faulkner boring or he says he just likes to party, just as both are put off by any whiff of pretension or instability. What do they seem to have in common is shared tastes in books and movies, an unwillingness to be neatly labeled and filed away, and loneliness.

3. When the characters restate something after the bell rings, do you think they are really expressing something new or simply telling the other person what he or she wants to hear? Part of what they say to one another seems sincere—it's pretty hard to fake such specifically grounded enthusiasm for Faulkner—and part of it seems to be adjusting to the other's expectations. Here again is the universal
dimension of the play; Ives seems to say that every relationship, especially in its early stages, is a delicate balance between revealing our true selves and trying to be—or at least appear to be—what the other person wants.

4. **How would you describe the theme of *Sure Thing*?** Perhaps the most interesting idea found in *Sure Thing* is the notion that human personalities are so changeable that the timing of an experience is critical to its proper reception. (And, of course, in no mode of human communication is timing more important than in comedy.) When Betty says that she can’t believe she has waited so long to read Faulkner, she initiates a crucial exchange that comments on both the theme and style of the play:

-Bill: You never know. You might not have liked him before.
-Betty: That’s true.
-Bill: You might not have been ready for him. You have to hit these things at the right moment or it’s no good.
-Betty: That’s happened to me.
-Bill: It’s all in the timing.

Bill’s final phrase became the title of Ives’s award-winning night of comedies as well as the title for his collection of fourteen one-act plays, *All in the Timing* (New York: Vintage, 1995). One suspects it wasn’t just the theatrical pun that made the phrase so attractive but also the aesthetic it suggests.

**WRITERS ON WRITING**

David Ives, *On the One-Act Play*, page 1196

Here is a packet of shrewd observations, vivid metaphors, and pungent phrases on the nature of the one-act play, from a—perhaps the—contemporary master of the genre. In his colorful way, Ives reconfirms the truth of the old saying, “I didn’t have time to write an essay, so I wrote a book instead.”
Sophocles, OEDIPUS THE KING, page 1207

One problem in teaching this masterpiece is that students often want to see Oedipus as a pitiable fool, helplessly crushed by the gods, thus stripping him of heroism and tragic dignity. (A classic bepiddlement of the play once turned up on a freshman paper: “At the end, Oedipus goes off blinded into exile, but that’s the way the cookie crumbles.”) It can be argued that Oedipus showed himself to be no fool in solving the riddle of the Sphinx or in deciding to leave Corinth; that no god forced him to kill Laïos or to marry Iocastê.

Another problem in teaching this play is that some students want to make Oedipus into an Everyman, an abstract figure representing all humanity. But Oedipus’s circumstances are, to say the least, novel and individual. “Oedipus is not ‘man,’ but Oedipus,” as S. M. Adams argues in Sophocles the Playwright (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1957). On the other hand, Freud’s reading of the play does suggest that Oedipus is Everyman—or, better, that every man is Oedipus and like Oedipus wishes to kill his father and marry his mother. A passage from Freud’s celebrated remarks about the play is included in the casebook.

Despite Freud’s views, which usually fascinate students, critical consensus appears to be that Oedipus himself did not have an Oedipus complex. Sophocles does not portray Oedipus and locastê as impassioned lovers; their marriage was (as Philip Wheelwright says) “a matter of civic duty: having rid the Thebans of the baleful Sphinx by answering her riddle correctly, he received the throne of Thebes and the widowed queen as his due reward” (The Burning Fountain [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954]). Wheelwright also notes, incidentally, that the title Oedipus Tyrannus might be translated more accurately as “Oedipus the Usurper”—a usurper being (to the Greeks) anyone who gains a throne by means other than by blood succession. Actually, of course, Oedipus had a hereditary right to the throne. (Another interpretation of the play sees Laïos and locastê as having incurred the original guilt: by leaving a royal prince to die in the wilderness, they defied natural order and the will of the gods.)

For the nonspecialist, a convenient gathering of views will be found in Oedipus Tyrannus, ed. Luci Berkowitz and Theodore F. Brunner (New York: Norton, 1970). Along with a prose translation of the play by the editors, the book includes the classic comments by Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Freud, and discussions by later critics and psychologists. Seth Bernardete offers a detailed, passage-by-passage commentary in Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Thomas Woodard (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1966). Francis Fergusson has pointed out that the play may be read (on one level) as a murder mystery: “Oedipus takes the role of District Attorney; and...
when he at last convicts himself, we have a twist, a coup de théâtre, of unparalleled excitement.” But Fergusson distrusts any reading so literal, and he questions attempts to make the play entirely coherent and rational. Sophocles “preserves the ultimate mystery by focusing upon [Oedipus] at a level beneath, or prior to any rationalization whatever” (The Idea of a Theatre [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1949]). Refreshing, after you read many myth critics, is A. J. A. Waldock’s Sophocles the Dramatist (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1951; reprinted in part by Berkowitz and Brunner). According to Waldock, the play is sheer entertainment, a spectacular piece of shock, containing no message. “There is no meaning in the Oedipus Tyrannus. There is merely the terror of coincidence, and then, at the end of it all, our impression of man’s power to suffer, and of his greatness because of this power.” Pointing out how little we know of Sophocles’s religion, Waldock finds the dramatist’s beliefs “meagre in number and depressingly commonplace.”

Although the religious assumptions of the play may not be surprising to Waldock, students may want to have them stated. A good summing up is that of E. R. Dodds, who maintains that Sophocles did not always believe that the gods are in any human sense “just,” but that he did always believe that the gods exist and that man should revere them (“On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex,” Greece and Rome [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966] Vol. 13).

“Possibly the best service the critic can render the Oedipus Rex,” says Waldock, “is to leave it alone.” If, however, other criticism can help, there are especially valuable discussions in H. D. F. Kitto, Greek Tragedy, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1961), and Poetics (Berkeley: U of California P, 1966); Richmond Lattimore, The Poetry of Greek Tragedy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1958); and Patrick Mullahy, Oedipus, Myth and Complex (New York: Grove, 1948).

An especially challenging writing topic: to compare translations of the play. For any student willing to pick up the challenge, we think this topic might produce a great term paper. The differences between versions, of course, are considerable. Sheppard’s rendition, or Kitto’s, is more nearly literal than that of Fitts and Fitzgerald and much more so than that of Berg and Clay. In the last team’s version of 1978, the persons of the tragedy all speak like formally open lyrics in little magazines of the eighties. Lots of monosyllables. Frequent pauses. Understatement. Lush imagery. Berg and Clay perform this service brilliantly, and it might be argued: why shouldn’t each generation remake the classics in its own tongue!

Still impressive is the film Oedipus Rex (1957), directed by Tyrone Guthrie, a record of a performance given in Stratford, Canada. Although the theater of the play is more Stratfordian than Athenian, the actors wear splendid masks. The text is the Yeats version.

In 1984, the Greek National Theater presented a much-discussed Oedipus Rex at the Kennedy Center in Washington. Bernard Knox offers an admiring account of it in Grand Street for Winter 1985. The director, Minos Volankis, staged the play on a “circular, dark brown plate, tilted toward the audience” and etched with a labyrinth pattern. In Volankis’s version, Oedipus and Iocastê cannot see the pattern and ignore it as they move about the stage, but the chorus and Teiresias are aware of the labyrinth and respectfully trace its curves in their movements. Oedipus is a clean-shaven youth, the only young person in the play, “caught in a web spun by his elders.”

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In a useful article on teaching Oedipus, W. A. Senior of Broward Community College suggests ways to present the play as meaningful to freshmen who wonder how anything so ancient and esoteric as classical drama can help them in their lives.
today and advance their pursuit of a C.P.A. degree. His approach is to demythify the character of Oedipus, stressing that the protagonist is no god or superman, but a confused, deceived human being at the center of a web of family relationships (to put it mildly) and political responsibilities. Like a business executive or professional today, Oedipus has to interrogate others, determine facts, and overcome his natural reluctance to face painful realities.

To help students come to terms with the central character, Senior has used specific writing assignments. "I have them compose a letter to Oedipus," he reports, "individually or at times in groups, at the height of the action in the third act to advise him on what to do or to explain to him what he has done wrong so far. In a related essay taking a page from Antigonê and its theme of public versus private good, which is foreshadowed in Oedipus Rex, I ask them to write an editorial on Oedipus as politician; each student must adopt a position and defend it" (“Teaching Oedipus: The Hero and Multiplicity,” Teaching English in the Two-Year College [Dec. 1992], 274–79).

**MyLiteratureLab™ Resources.** Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Sophocles. Interpreting Oedipus the King. Longman Lecture, evaluation questions, comprehension quiz, writing prompts, and essay questions on Oedipus the King. Full-length 1984 TV production of Oedipus, starring John Gielgud and Claire Bloom.

### Sophocles, Antigonê, page 1245

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Some critics argue that the main character of the play is not Antigonê, but Creon. How can this view possibly be justified? Do you agree? Antigonê disappears from the play in its last third, and we are then shown Creon in conflict with himself. Creon suffers a tragic downfall: his earlier decision has cost him his wife and his son; Eurydícê has cursed him; and in the end, he is reduced to a pitiable figure praying for his own death. Still, without Antigonê the play would have no conflict; surely she suffers a tragic downfall as well.

2. Why is it so important to Antigonê that the body of Polyneicês be given a proper burial? “I say this crime is holy.” (See Prologue, lines 55–61. See also the footnote on line 3.)

3. Modern critics often see the play as centering on a theme: the authority of the state conflicts with the religious duty of an individual. Try this interpretation on the play and decide how well it fits. Does the playwright seem to favor one side or the other? The pious Sophocles clearly favors Antigonê and sees divine law taking precedence over human law; but Creon’s principles (most fully articulated in Scene 1, lines 27–40 and 96–123) are given fair hearing.

4. Comment from a student paper: “Antigonê is a stubborn fool, bent on her own destruction. Her insistence on giving a corpse burial causes nothing but harm to herself, to Haimon, Eurydícê, and all Thebes. She does not accomplish anything that Creon wouldn’t eventually have agreed to.” Discuss this view.

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5. Explain the idea of good government implied in the exchange between Creon and Haimon:

CREON. My voice is the one voice giving orders in this city!

HAIMON. It is no city if it takes orders from one voice. (iii, 105–106)

6. What doubts wrack Creon? For what reasons does he waver in his resolve to punish Antigonê and deny burial to the body of Polyneicês? In changing his mind, does he seem to you weak and indecisive? Not at all; he has good reason to pull down his vanity and to listen to the wise Haimon and his counselors.

7. In not giving us a love scene in the tomb between Antigonê and Haimon, does Sophocles miss a golden opportunity? Or would you argue that, as a playwright, he knows his craft?

David Grene has pointed out that the plots of the Antigonê and the Oedipus have close similarities. In both, we meet a king whose unknowing violation of divine law results in his own destruction. In both, the ruler has an encounter with Teiresias, whom he refuses to heed. Creon relents and belatedly tries to take the priest's advice—Oedipus, however, defies all wise counsel (introduction to “The Theban Plays” in Complete Greek Tragedies, ed. David Grene and Richard Lattimore [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1959] II: 2–3).

Charles Paul Segal views the clash between Creon and Antigonê as the result of two conflicting worldviews—one female, the other male:

It is again among the tragic paradoxes of Antigonê's position that she who accepts the absolutes of death has a far fuller sense of the complexities of life. Creon, who lacks a true “reverence” for the gods, the powers beyond human life, also lacks a deep awareness of the complexities within the human realm. Hence he tends to see the world in terms of harshly opposed categories, right and wrong, reason and folly, youth and age, male and female. He scornfully joins old age with foolishness in speaking to the chorus (267–68) and refuses to listen to his son's advice because he is younger (684–85).... All these categories imply the relation of superior and inferior, stronger and weaker. This highly structured and aggressive view of the world Creon expresses perhaps most strikingly in repeatedly formulating the conflict between Antigonê and himself in terms of the woman trying to conquer the man. He sees in Antigonê a challenge to his whole way of living and his basic attitudes toward the world. And of course he is right, for Antigonê's full acceptance of her womanly nature, her absolute valuation of the bonds of blood and affection, is a total denial of Creon's obsessively masculine rationality. (“Sophocles's Praise of Man and the Conflicts of the Antigonê,” in Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Bernard Knox [Twentieth-Century Views Series: Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1966])

Students with experience in play production might be asked to suggest strategies for staging Antigonê today. In their commentary on the play, translators Dudley Fitts...
and Robert Fitzgerald make interesting suggestions. The Chorus had better not chant the Odes in unison, or the words will probably be unintelligible; let single voices in the Chorus take turns speaking lines. The solemn parados might be spoken to the accompaniment of a slow drumbeat. No dancing should be included; no attempt should be made to use larger-than-life Greek masks with megaphone mouths. More effective might be lifelike Benda-type masks, closely fitting the face. "If masks are used at all, they might be well allotted only to those characters who are somewhat depersonalized by official position or discipline: Creon, Teiresias, the Chorus and Choragos, possibly the Messenger. By this rule, Antigonê has no mask; neither has Ismêna, Haimon, nor Euridyce" (The Oedipus Cycle: An English Version [New York: Harcourt, 1949] 242–43).

Entertaining scraps from our sparse knowledge of the life of Sophocles are gathered by Moses Hadas in An Ancilla to Classical Reading (New York: Columbia UP, 1954). The immense popular success of Antigonê led to the playwright's being elected a general, although, as he himself admitted, he was incompetent in battle. Many reports attest to his piety, his fondness for courtesans and boys, and his defeat of an attempt by his sons to have him declared an imbecile. Plutarch relates that when Sophocles, then past ninety, read to the jury from his latest work, Oedipus at Colonus, he "was escorted from the lawcourt as from a theater, amid the applause and shouts of all." One account of the playwright's death is that he strangled while reading aloud a long, breathless sentence from Antigonê.

Suggestions for Writing. Compare and contrast the character of Creon in the two plays. (In Oedipus the King he is the reasonable man, the foil for the headstrong Oedipus.)

How important to the play is Haimon? Ismêna? Euridyce? How visibly does the family curse that brought down Oedipus operate in Antigonê? Does fate seem a motivating force behind Antigonê's story? (In Antigonê fate plays a much less prominent part; the main characters—Creon, Antigonê, and Haimon—seem to decide for themselves their courses of action.)

Ruth E. Zehfuss has noticed that Antigonê cries out for comparison with Susan Glaspell's Trifles: both are plays in which the protagonists find their moral convictions at odds with the law of the state. Interestingly, Zehfuss sees other parallels. "The settings of both Trifles and Antigonê emphasize the relative positions of authority figures and those whose lives they control. Antigonê is played out in front of the palace, the locus of authority." Similarly, in the stage directions for the beginning of Trifles, the Sheriff and the County Attorney are in charge: as guardians of the law, they occupy center stage, near the warm stove, while the women stand off near the cold door. Like Creon, they represent officialdom. Other characters in both plays also reveal similarities. Sophocles' Ismêna, like Glaspell's Mrs. Peters, is a weak character reluctant to challenge the authority of the law. But both Antigonê and Mrs. Hale have the strength to question it and finally to defy it ("The Law and the Ladies in Trifles," Teaching English in the Two-Year College [Feb. 1992], 42–44).
CRITICS ON SOPHOCLES, pages 1273–1280

This critical casebook on Sophocles tries to provide a representative sampling of the many opinions on the tragedian. We begin with two indispensable critiques of *Oedipus the King*—the celebrated commentaries of Aristotle and Freud. Aristotle’s discussion of *Oedipus the King* in his *Poetics* is undoubtedly the single most influential statement in Western drama criticism. In his analysis he tries to define the special psychological and artistic effects of tragic theater. In investigating these questions, the philosopher examines the nature of tragic plotting and characterization.

The father of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud, was also, by nature if not by occupation, a literary critic. Many of his major psychoanalytic concepts came from his close reading of texts—from Sophocles and the Old Testament to Shakespeare and da Vinci. In this short passage from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) Freud expounds one of his most influential ideas, the Oedipus complex. Trying to account for the powerful effect Sophocles’s tragedy has on modern audiences, Freud hypothesizes that both the Oedipus myth and the ancient Greek play must touch something universal within the audience—namely “our first sexual impulse towards our mother and first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father.” The importance of introducing students to these two texts can hardly be overestimated. They are necessary components of cultural literacy as well as illuminating contributions to any discussion of Sophocles.

E. R. Dodds, one of the great Greek scholars of modern times, provides a provocative reading about the nature of Oedipus’s character. Taking a critical rather than a scholarly perspective (discussing his own reaction, that is, rather than trying to ascertain Sophocles’s original intention), Dodds sees Oedipus as a great tragic character not because of his powerful worldly position as king but because of his interior and intellectual qualities. Oedipus seems great, Dodds maintains, as a symbol of restless human intelligence.

By contrast, A. E. Haigh discusses a more general topic, the pervasive role of irony in Sophocles’s plays. The concept of irony is difficult for many students to grasp, but they need to understand it in order to approach either *Oedipus* or *Antigonê*. Haigh’s treatment is so clear and well organized—with its helpful categories of “conscious” and “unconscious” irony—that his explanation will be very useful to assign to students, especially in introductory courses.

David Wiles provides a succinct summation of the complex role of the Chorus in *Oedipus the King*, emphasizing its function both as dynamic performer in the unfolding events that make up the action of the play and as *raisonneur*, standing apart to comment on those events and to express the larger values that the work seeks to affirm.

Patricia M. Lines’s “Antigonê’s Flaw” is a brilliant but accessible analysis of Antigonê as a tragic heroine. We thought we knew the play well, but Lines’s perspective greatly enhanced our understanding of the complexity of Antigonê’s moral position. Antigonê is such a powerfully persuasive figure on stage that the audience is apt to overlook her subtle tragic flaw. As Lines cogently argues, Antigonê is, as the Greek would term it, *autonomos*, a law unto herself, and she acts at the expense of the rest of the *polis*. Any student planning to do a paper on Antigonê should read this essay.
In an afterword to his 1941 solo translation of *Oedipus at Colonus*, Robert Fitzgerald offered a commentary on the challenges of translating Sophocles. His remarks examine the issue of finding poetic language that was neither too elevated nor too common.

Instructors may be interested to know that Dudley Fitts was the young Robert Fitzgerald’s Latin master at the Choate School. They became lifelong friends and collaborated on three celebrated translations of Greek tragedies. When they corresponded, they usually wrote their letters in Latin. Fitts’s mentorship helped guide Fitzgerald to his career as the most distinguished American translator of Greek and Roman classical poetry, including *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid*. Fitzgerald later became the Boylston Professor at Harvard. For an account of Fitzgerald’s teaching methods, see Dana Gioia’s memoir “Learning from Robert Fitzgerald” in the Spring 1998 issue of the *Hudson Review*. 
Othello, Hamlet, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream are each presented in an illustrated format, including production shots from every major scene. Our aim is to make the works more engaging and accessible to students. When teaching the plays, be sure to point students to the many photos. This should help them to visualize the action of the scenes and may make the plays seem less intimidating. (These photos can also provide great starting points for discussions about how the students envision the play in their minds and how it is presented in this production.)

William Shakespeare, Othello, The Moor of Venice, page 1290

Filled with such universal themes as jealousy, betrayal, and competition, Othello resonates with students for generation after generation. For commentary on the play, some outstanding sources of insight still include A. C. Bradley’s discussion in Shakespearean Tragedy (1904; rpt. ed. [New York: St. Martin’s, 1965]) and Harley Granville-Barker, “Preface to Othello,” in Prefaces to Shakespeare, II (Princeton UP, 1947), also available separately from the same publisher (1958). See also Leo Kirschbaum, “The Modern Othello,” Journal of English Literary History 2 (1944), 233–96, and Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of “Othello” (Berkeley: U of California P, 1961). A convenient gathering of short studies will be found in A Casebook on Othello, ed. Leonard Dean (New York: Crowell, 1961). For a fresh reading of the play, see Michael Black, who in The Literature of Fidelity (London: Chatto, 1975) argues that the familiar view of Othello as a noble figure manipulated by the evil Iago is wrong and sentimental. According to Black, we see ourselves and our destructive impulses mirrored in both characters; hence, we are disturbed.

A more recent discussion can be found in Marjorie Garber’s Shakespeare After All (New York: Pantheon, 2004), a 900-page reading of all thirty-eight of Shakespeare’s plays that is an indispensable volume for teachers of his work. Her twenty-nine-page essay on Othello is comprehensive, sensible, and highly readable, and a brief bibliography provides a sampling of classic and contemporary treatments of the play.

Lynda E. Boose has closely read the confrontation scene between Othello and Brabantio, the father of Desdemona, in front of the Duke (I, iii) and has found in it an ironic parody of the traditional giving away of the bride at a marriage ceremony.
Instead of presenting his daughter to Othello as a gift, the thwarted Brabantio practically hurls her across the stage at the Moor. (The scene resembles Lear's casting away of Cordelia in *King Lear*, I, i.) In most of Shakespeare's plays, the father of the bride wants to retain and possess his daughter. Prevented by law and custom from doing so, he does the next best thing: tries to choose her husband, usually insisting on someone she does not desire. But Shakespeare, in both comedy and tragedy, always stages the old man's defeat (“The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare,” *PMLA* 97 [May 1982]: 325–47).

Venice in the Renaissance had no commerce with black Africa, but Shakespeare's many references to Othello's blackness (and Roderigo's mention of the Moor's “thick lips,” I, i, 68) have suggested to some interpreters that Othello could even be a coastal African from below the Senegal. On the modern stage, Othello has been memorably played by African American actor Paul Robeson and by Laurence Olivier, who carefully studied African American speech and body language for his performance at the Old Vic (and in the movie version). A critic wrote of Olivier's interpretation:

He came on smelling a rose, laughing softly with a private delight; barefooted, ankleted, black. . . . He sauntered downstage, with a loose, bare-heeled roll of the buttocks; came to rest feet splayed apart, hips lounging outward. . . . The hands hung big and graceful. The whole voice was characterized, the o's and the a's deepened, the consonants thickened with faint, guttural deliberation. “Put up yo' bright swords, or de dew will rus' dem”: not quite so crude, but in that direction. It could have been caricature, an embarrassment. Instead, after the second performance, a well-known Negro actor rose in the stalls bravoing. For obviously it was done with love; with the main purpose of substituting for the dead grandeur of the Moorish empire one modern audiences could respond to. (Ronald Bryden, *New Statesman*, 1 May 1964)

For a fascinating study of the play by a white teacher of African American students at Howard University, see Doris Adler, “The Rhetoric of Black and White in *Othello*,” in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 25 (Spring 1974): 248–57. Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio hold negative and stereotyped views of black Africans that uncomfortably recall modern racial prejudices. In their view, Othello is “lascivious” (I, i, 126), an unnatural mate for a white woman (III, iii, 245–49), a practitioner of black magic (I, ii, 74–75). Under the influence of Iago's wiles, Othello so doubts himself that he almost comes to accept the stereotype forced on him, to reflect that in marrying him Desdemona has strayed from her own nature (III, iii, 243). Such, of course, is not the truth Shakespeare reveals to us, and the tragedy of Othello stems from a man's tragic inability to recognize good or evil by sight alone. “Eyes cannot see that the black Othello is not the devil,” Adler observes, “or that the white and honest Iago is.”

On the suggestion for writing: Thomas Rymer's famous objections to the play will not be easy to refute. At least, no less a critic than T. S. Eliot once declared that he had never seen Rymer's points cogently refuted. Perhaps students will enjoy siding with the attack or coming to the play's defense.

Was the Othello-Desdemona match a wedding of April and September? R. S. Gwynn of Lamar University writes: 'Has anyone ever mentioned the age difference between Othello and Desdemona? Othello speaks of his arms as 'now some nine moons wasted.' Assuming that this metaphor means that his life is almost 9/12 spent, he would
be over 50! Now if a Venetian girl would have normally married in her teens (think of the film version of *Romeo and Juliet*), that would make about 30 years difference between him and his bride.” This gulf, Othello’s radically different culture, his outraged father-in-law, and Iago’s sly insinuations all throw tall obstacles before the marriage.

“If we are to read the play that Shakespeare wrote,” maintains Bruce E. Miller, “we must acknowledge that Othello as well as Iago commits great evil.” In *Teaching the Art of Literature* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1980), Miller takes *Othello* for his illustration of teaching drama and stresses that Othello went wrong by yielding to his gross impulses. In demonstrating why the play is a classic example of tragedy, Miller takes advantage of students’ previously having read Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case.” That story illustrates “the difference between sadness and tragedy. Paul’s death is sad because it cuts off a life that has never been fulfilled. Yet it is not tragic, for Paul lives and dies in this world of human affairs.” But Othello’s death has the grandeur of tragedy. Realizing at last that Desdemona has been true and that in slaying her he has destroyed his own hopes of happiness, the Moor attains a final clarity of spirit, intuiting the true order of things.

Here are some possible brief answers to the questions given at the end of *Othello*, the Moor of Venice. Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

**QUESTIONS**

**ACT I**

1. What is Othello’s position in society? How is he regarded by those who know him? By his own words, when we first meet him in Scene ii, what traits of character does he manifest? Othello is the general of the Venetian army; it is all the more remarkable an achievement, given his status as a foreigner. He is highly esteemed by all (save Iago and Roderigo), including the Duke, who calls him “Valiant Othello,” and even Brabantio, about whom Othello says, “Her father loved me.” When we first meet him, we see a man of great pride, dignity, noble bearing, and calmness of temperament, who is nonetheless disinclined to boast of his merits.

2. How do you account for Brabantio’s dismay on learning of his daughter’s marriage, despite the fact that Desdemona has married a man so generally honored and admired? Given that Brabantio admires Othello both professionally and personally, his disinclination to have him for a son-in-law is directly attributable to Othello’s race; it’s no coincidence that Iago emphasizes this point in breaking the news to him: “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (I, i, 90–91).

3. What is Iago’s view of human nature? In his fondness for likening men to animals (as in I, i, 49–50; I, i, 90–91; and I, iii, 380–381), what does he tell us about himself? Like many people, especially those of less than admirable nature, Iago projects his awareness of his own nature onto humanity in general. Consequently, he sees people as willing to do anything to secure their own interests and ready to mask their true nature in pursuit of their goals. His frequent comparisons to animals stem from his view of humans as devoted to the satisfaction of their most basic urges, untroubled by any moral compunction or sensitivity to the feelings of others.

4. What reasons does Iago give for his hatred of Othello? At the beginning of Act I, he tells Roderigo that Othello has passed him over for promotion in favor of
Roderigo. In the soliloquy that concludes Act II, Scene i, he says that he loves Desdemona (!) and mentions a rumor that Othello has cuckolded him. Admitting that he doesn’t know if it’s true, he nonetheless says that he will proceed as if it is and be “evened with him, wife for wife,” or at the very least, make Othello think that Desdemona has been untrue to him.

5. In Othello’s defense before the senators (Scene iii), how does he explain Desdemona’s gradual falling in love with him? He says that on his frequent visits to Brabantio’s house, he would tell the story of his life and adventures. Hearing these tales inspired pity and admiration in Desdemona. As Othello famously says, “She loved me for the dangers I had passed” (I, iii, 169).

6. Is Brabantio’s warning to Othello (I, iii, 293–294) an accurate or an inaccurate prophecy? This prediction, made in anger and bitterness, is quite wrong. Desdemona remains unwaveringly devoted to Othello, even as he insults and abuses her in a fit of jealous rage. With her very dying breath, she tries to defend him.

7. By what strategy does Iago enlist Roderigo in his plot against the Moor? In what lines do we learn Iago’s true feelings toward Roderigo? He promises that he will help Roderigo win Desdemona for himself when he has broken up her marriage to Othello. For all his protestations of affection to Roderigo, he refers to him privately, in the soliloquy that concludes Act II, Scene i, as “this poor trash of Venice.”

ACT II

1. What do the Cypriots think of Othello? Do their words (in Scene i) make him seem to us a lesser man or a larger one? Like the statements of the Duke in Act I, the comments of Montano and the other Cypriot gentlemen only serve to bolster our admiration for Othello as a brave and skilled warrior.

2. What cruelty does Iago display toward Emilia? How well founded is his distrust of his wife’s fidelity? In calling her a chatterbox and a deceiver, he is essentially labeling her with the faults he ascribes to all women. And even though Emilia later claims to Desdemona (at the end of Act IV, Scene iii) that she would cheat on her husband if the price were right, there’s no indication in the play that she has actually done so.

3. In II, iii, 221, Othello speaks of Iago’s “honesty and love.” How do you account for Othello’s being so totally deceived? As Iago says in soliloquy, “The Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so” (I, iii, 376–377). It is crucial to remember, however, that Othello is far from alone in trusting Iago, whose general epithet is “honest Iago,” and who is commended at various points in the play by Cassio and Desdemona. Even his wife, Emilia, however exasperated she may be with him at times, is stunned and disbelieving when Othello says that Iago told him that Desdemona was “false to wedlock.”

4. For what major events does the merrymaking (proclaimed in Scene ii) give opportunity? Iago gets Cassio drunk and sets Roderigo upon him. When Othello discovers that Cassio has been brawling while on guard duty, he demotes him from his lieutenancy. Iago then advises Cassio to urge Desdemona to persuade Othello to reinstate him. Her spirited defense of Cassio feeds Othello’s suspicions of an affair between them.
ACT III

1. Trace the steps by which Iago rouses Othello to suspicion. Is there anything in Othello’s character or circumstances that renders him particularly susceptible to Iago’s wiles? In Act III, Scene iii, we see the real turning point of the play. Pretending to be unwilling to speak for fear of upsetting him, Iago cleverly manipulates Othello into pressuring him to reveal his “suspicions.” Iago plays on Othello’s status as an outsider to suggest that Venetian wives customarily take lovers behind their husbands’ backs, and hints at Desdemona’s skill at deception by reminding him of how completely she hid her love for Othello from her father. Having thoroughly discomfited Othello, he then goes so far as to suggest that Desdemona’s love for him was sudden and against her nature, and therefore cannot last, which feeds on Othello’s insecurity about his lack of youth, looks, and other charms. After receiving Desdemona’s handkerchief from Emilia, Iago returns to Othello and, once again pretending to not want to upset him with his suspicions, proceeds to tell him the false story of Cassio’s drunken moaning over Desdemona, and then clinches the matter by telling him that Cassio has Desdemona’s handkerchief; here Iago very cunningly pretends not to know the significance of the handkerchief to Othello, thus persuading Othello that he would have no basis on which to make up such a story.

2. In III, iv, 49–98, Emilia knows of Desdemona’s distress over the lost handkerchief. At this moment, how do you explain her failure to relieve Desdemona’s mind? Is Emilia aware of her husband’s villainy? She is unaware of Iago’s real villainy, as is shown, once again, by her shock and horror when she learns that he has been the agent of Desdemona’s ruin. While she may be bold enough to exchange insulting banter with him, she is probably hesitant to go against him over something that is obviously very important to him. She has no idea why he wants the handkerchief, but it certainly never occurs to her that he intends to use it to destroy Othello and Desdemona.

ACT IV

1. In this act, what circumstantial evidence is added to Othello’s case against Desdemona? Iago tells Othello to hide and observe while he gets Cassio to talk about his affair with Desdemona, when in fact he is drawing Cassio out about his relationship with Bianca. In the midst of this, Bianca herself arrives and flings Desdemona’s handkerchief at Cassio. Desdemona expresses her pleasure in the news that Othello has been summoned to Venice and Cassio appointed in his stead; she feels that way because she thinks that Othello is acting strangely under the strain of his professional duties and the enforced rest will help to restore him, but Othello understands her to mean that she is pleased that her lover has been promoted.

2. How plausible do you find Bianca’s flinging the handkerchief at Cassio just when Othello is looking on? How important is the handkerchief in this play? What does it represent? What suggestions or hints do you find in it? The timing may be a bit too coincidental for plausibility’s sake, but it is surely not beyond the bounds of possibility. The handkerchief was Othello’s first gift to Desdemona. In his view, she should value it as a token of their love. Moreover, as he tells her (III, iv, 51–72), he believes that there is magic in it. It was given to his mother by a sorceress, who told her that her husband would want her as long as she kept it, but if she
lost it or gave it away his feelings would turn to hatred. On her deathbed, Othello’s mother gave it to him to give to his own wife someday.

3. What prevents Othello from being moved by Desdemona’s appeal (IV, ii, 33–92)? His heart has been hardened against her by Cassio’s leering and smirking and Bianca’s possession of the handkerchief. He says that he could have endured illness, poverty, loss of all prospects, and even public scorn and mockery, as long as he had her love to sustain him, but the thought that she no longer loves him is the one thing he cannot cope with. Note the image of his heart as a “cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in” (IV, ii, 63–64): his comparison of human actions to those of loathsome animals shows how completely his thinking has been taken over by Iago.

4. When Roderigo grows impatient with Iago (IV, ii, 181–202), how does Iago make use of his fellow plotter’s discontent? He tells Roderigo that Othello and Desdemona are about to embark for Mauritania, leaving Cassio in command, but Roderigo can prevent this by killing Cassio, which would force Othello to remain in Cyprus. The death of either Roderigo or Cassio—or, optimally, both of them—would work to Iago’s benefit, as he makes clear in soliloquy at V, i, 11–22.

5. What does the conversation between Emilia and Desdemona (Scene iii) tell us about the nature of each? Emilia shows herself to be feisty and rather crass; she feels that the shenanigans of men license women to act the same way, and says that she would betray her husband “for the whole world”: “Why, the wrong is but a wrong i’ the world, and having the world for your labor, ’tis a wrong in your own world, you might quickly make it right” (lines 80–81). Desdemona, on the other hand, rejects such moral relativism: she obviously feels that the wrong is a wrong in another world beyond this one, and seeks by the bad example of others not to justify her own lapses but to seek to improve herself.

6. In this act, what scenes (or speeches) contain memorable dramatic irony? Iago’s “I am a very villain else” (IV, i, 125) could be considered a classic instance, as could his comment to Lodovico about Othello’s shocking behavior: “It is not honesty in me to speak / What I have seen and known” (IV, i, 263–264). At IV, ii, 137–140, Emilia speculates that some lying villain has turned Othello against Desdemona, not realizing that the villain in question is the man she’s speaking to. Also in Scene ii, Iago speaks more presciently than he knows when he tells Roderigo, “If thou the next night following enjoy not Desdemona, take me from this world with treachery and devise engines for my life” (lines 212–213); Roderigo does not, of course, “enjoy” Desdemona, and Iago is to be taken from this world (though not with treachery).

ACT V

1. Summarize the events that lead to Iago’s unmasking. In response to Emilia’s horrified questioning, Othello, after killing Desdemona, says that it was Iago who told him she had been unfaithful with Cassio, to whom she had given her handkerchief. Emilia tells him that she had filched the handkerchief, after Iago’s repeated urging, when Desdemona had dropped it.

2. How does Othello’s mistaken belief that Cassio is slain (V, i, 27–34) affect the outcome of the play? When Desdemona asks for Cassio to be summoned to prove that she didn’t give him the handkerchief, Othello tells her Cassio is dead. When she weeps at this news, he is enraged and proceeds to smother her.

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3. What is Iago’s motive in stabbing Roderigo? “Live Roderigo, / He calls me to a restitution large / Of gold and jewels that I bobbed from him / As gifts to Desdemona. / It must not be” (V, i, 14–18).

4. In your interpretation of the play, exactly what impels Othello to kill Desdemona? Jealousy? Desire for revenge? Excess idealism? A wish to be a public avenger who punishes, “else she’ll betray more men”? Based both on the presentation of Othello over the course of the play and what is generally understood about the intricacies of human nature, our best response would be All of the above, and in descending order of importance as they are listed in the question.

5. What do you understand by Othello’s calling himself “one that loved not wisely but too well” (V, ii, 354)? Essentially, that his feelings for Desdemona were compounded too much of passion, intensity, and an almost obsessive fixation upon her and their relationship as the core of everything valuable, and too little of balance, good sense, and a clearheaded understanding of her true nature and appreciation of her genuine worth and devotion to him.

6. In your view, does Othello’s long speech in V, ii, 348–366, succeed in restoring his original dignity and nobility? Do you agree with Cassio (V, ii, 372) that Othello was “great of heart”? Obviously, in the light of what he has done, nothing can completely “succeed in restoring his original dignity and nobility,” but in this speech, Othello: 1) reminds of us his previous greatness (349); asks not for special pleading on his behalf, but to be judged fairly and completely (350–353); explains his fall (353–356); shows his recovered understanding—recovered tragically too late—of Desdemona’s worth (356–358); acknowledges his profound misery and remorse (358–361); and, in his reference to his encounter with the Turk in Aleppo (362–366), says, in effect, that Othello at his finest never hesitated to execute rough justice on a villain, and that, demonstrating his return to his old self, he has come upon another such villain and proceeds to do likewise to this one. Until Iago’s erosion of his finer self, Othello was indeed worthy of Cassio’s description.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. What motivates Iago to carry out his schemes? Do you find him a devil incarnate, a madman, or a rational human being? This is of course the central issue of the play, one that has in itself inspired a small library of commentary and speculation. There are bases for each of these views: there is something devilish in Iago’s zealous devotion to wickedness and amorality; there is madness in his skewed assumptions about human nature; and there is supremely rational calculation in the planning and execution of his schemes. In his Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation (New York: Atheneum, 1970), the critic Stanley Edgar Hyman considers these and several other interpretations, and concludes that the most fruitful approach is a conflation of all these views, rather than an emphasis on one to the exclusion of the others.

2. Whom besides Othello does Iago deceive? What is Desdemona’s opinion of him? Emilia’s? Cassio’s (before Iago is found out)? To what do you attribute Iago’s success as a deceiver? Basically, Iago deceives everyone. Consider the opening lines of Act III, Scene iii:
Desdemona: Be thou assured, good Cassio, I will do
All my abilities in thy behalf.
Emilia: Good madam, do. I warrant it grieves my husband
As if the cause were his.
Desdemona: O, that’s an honest fellow.

Cassio, himself from Florence, says of Iago: “I never knew / A Florentine more kind
and honest” (III, i, 36–37). Iago himself explains his success as a deceiver at line 60 of the very first scene of the play, when the rather slow-witted Roderigo wonders why he continues to serve Othello after being denied promotion:

In following him, I follow but myself—
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,
But seeming so for my peculiar end.
For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, ’tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at. I am not what I am.

He finds it to his advantage to keep his real self deeply hidden and never let anyone else suspect his true nature. Most interestingly, in the last five lines of this passage, he equates revealing one’s true self with extreme vulnerability—which is not surprising, since his own schemes and machinations thrive on exploiting the personal characteristics that Othello, Cassio, and Roderigo are foolish enough, in his view, to show to the world.

3. How essential to the play is the fact that Othello is a black man, a Moor, and not a native of Venice? Othello is an outsider, one not totally familiar with the ways of the Venetians. Both Iago and Brabantio at various points suggest to his face that there is something unnatural about a beautiful, socially prominent young white woman—one besieged with suitors of a like kind—falling in love with a middle-aged black man. All of this makes it easier for Iago to play on Othello’s latent insecurities and stir his self-doubts; and so the fact seems quite essential to the plot. (See especially I, iii, 60–66, 96–107, and III, iii, 215–23, 244–53, 274–84.)

4. In the introduction to his edition of the play in The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare, Alvin Kernan remarks:

Othello is probably the most neatly, the most formally constructed of Shakespeare’s plays. Every character is, for example, balanced by another similar or contrasting character. Desdemona is balanced by her opposite, Iago; love and concern for others at one end of the scale, hatred and concern for self at the other.

Besides Desdemona and Iago, what other pairs of characters strike balances? Kernan’s introduction continues:

The true and loyal soldier Cassio balances the false and traitorous soldier Iago…. The essential purity of Desdemona stands in contrast to the more “practical”
view of chastity held by Emilia, and her view in turn is illuminated by the
workaday view of sensuality held by the courtesan Bianca. Iago’s success in
fooling Othello is but the culmination of a series of such betrayals that includes
the duping of Roderigo, Brabantio, and Cassio.

5. Consider any passage of the play in which there is a shift from verse to
prose, or from prose to verse. What is the effect of this shift? To be a bit tauto-
logical, the general rule is that prose is used to express the more prosaic elements
of the play—for instance, a good deal of the dialogue between Iago and Roderigo. But
there are many such shifts within individual scenes, and you should focus your stu-
dents’ attention on grounding their responses in the precise particulars of the passage
that they choose.

6. Indicate a passage that you consider memorable for its poetry. Does the
passage seem introduced for its own sake? Does it in any way advance the action
of the play, express theme, or demonstrate character? Many a passage in the play
could be cited for its poetic beauty, but, in our judgment, there is hardly a speech in
the entire play that does not also perform at least one of the functions specified in
the question.

7. Does the play contain any tragic recognition, a moment of terrible enlight-
enment, a “realization of the unthinkable”? It begins at line 242 of the final scene,
when Othello realizes Iago’s villainy after what Emilia says about the handkerchief.
Many would hold that it is what happens thereafter that gives the play its truly tragic
dimension—a dimension that some would find lacking in, say, Arthur Miller’s Death
of a Salesman, in which Willy Loman goes to his death without ever confronting the
harm he has caused by his zealous pursuit of his shallow values.

8. Does the downfall of Othello proceed from any flaw in his nature, or is his
downfall entirely the work of Iago? This is a classic (or cliché) problem, and per-
haps there is no better answer than Coleridge’s in his Lectures on Shake spe:

Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in a conviction forced upon
him by the almost superhuman art of Iago—such a conviction as any man would
and must have entertained who had believed in Iago’s honesty as Othello did.
We, the audience, know that Iago is a villain from the beginning; but in con-
sidering the essence of the Shaksperian Othello, we must perseveringly place
ourselves in his situation, and under his circumstances. Then we shall immedi-
ately feel the fundamental difference between the solemn agony of the noble
Moor, and the wretched fishing jealousies of Leontes.... Othello had no life but
in Desdemona: the belief that she, his angel, had fallen from the heaven of her
native innocence, wrought a civil war in his heart. She is his counterpart; and,
like him, is almost sanctified in our eyes by her absolute unsuspiciousness, and
holy entireness of love. As the curtain drops, which do we pity the most?

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibli-
ography, and links for Shakespeare. Interactive reading, video essay, audio
clips, critical essay, and student essay on Othello. Full-length 1989 TV produc-
tion of Othello, starring South African actors John Kani and Richard Haddon
Haines.
TEACHING SHAKESPEARE

Grace Haddox, of El Paso Community College, has written us to share a teaching method she uses with great success to help students understand and appreciate Shakespeare.

Here at community college, many of my students are returning students, older students, GED students, high school dropouts—well, you get the picture. Most are not interested in Shakespeare in the least because they have never experienced Shakespeare, or they read it in high school and thought the texts were boring. So, when presenting Shakespeare to my college students, I have them bring their textbook to class and we listen to an audiotape as the students follow along and annotate their texts. I use a wonderful series from Arkangel—the texts are unabridged, professional actors are used from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and the Royal Shakespeare Company, and music and sound effects are utilized. We start and stop the tape often to discuss the text and language and work out any problems in understanding or interpretation. After we listen to Act I, we take a short quiz, and then we watch a film version of Act I. Then, we go on to Act II, listen to it, quiz, then the film, and so on and so on.

I can’t tell you the success I’ve had with this method. The students are able to really discuss the text in depth because we can go as fast or as slow as we choose with the tape. Moreover, the students develop “an ear” for the language. They always complain that Act I is very difficult because they cannot understand what’s going on, but by Act VI, if I try to stop the tape for discussion, I get yelled at because the students are following the action perfectly, and they don’t want to be interrupted. Frankly, it’s very gratifying to be yelled at for trying to interrupt Shakespeare. Lastly, the students are presented with two versions of the same Shakespeare play—the taped version and the film version. They are extremely critical of the way both are presented, and they discuss the delivery of lines, the settings, and actors who play each part, motivations, director choices, etc. The general reaction at the end of the semester is always favorable, and students realize Shakespeare is not so bad. Incidentally, I had a lot of success with this method at the high school level too.

On a last note, I’d like to share just a few student stories regarding Othello. I had a college student a few years ago, Jesus, who was a mediocre student. He barely did the minimum and his attendance was not great. His average was a D moving into the end of the semester, and I anticipated he would have to retake the course. However, when we got to Othello, something happened to him. He began discussing the text, and, often, he led the class discussions. His attendance became regular because he “had to see what was going to happen next,” and one day he said to me and the whole class, “You know, Ms. Haddox, I really like Othello, and I keep trying to talk to my friends about the play and Shakespeare, but all they want to do is kick my a**.” Clearly, this was a young man who was transformed by the power of Shakespeare. He earned a B for the course.

This last semester, I had another student, Martin, a brilliant young man actually. I felt that the tape and film method might be too slow or tedious for him, but he told me on the last day of class that the class discussions sparked from the tape really opened up the world of Shakespeare to him. He said to me,
“I never really liked Shakespeare, but some of the things we talked about really interested me. I bought a copy of Macbeth, and I’m reading that now.” Again, I can’t tell you how happy I was to hear that.

William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, page 1396

In 1964 on the quadricentennial anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth, the celebrated Polish critic Jan Kott observed, “The bibliography of dissertations and studies devoted to Hamlet is twice the size of Warsaw’s telephone directory. No Dane of flesh and blood has been written about so extensively as Hamlet.” A few years earlier, Harry Levin of Harvard computed from A. A. Raven’s 1953 Hamlet Bibliography that, over a sixty-year period, a new discussion of Hamlet had been published every twelve days. No work of world literature has generated as much commentary as this play.

The key to teaching Hamlet is not to be intimidated by this Mount Everest of scholarship. Familiarity with some of the criticism will enrich your teaching, but Hamlet has never needed commentary to win over an audience. For more than four hundred years, it has been Shakespeare’s most popular tragedy. Nonetheless, it might be worthwhile to review some of the best critical works, especially those that can be recommended to students.

Still indispensable is A. C. Bradley’s Shakespearean Tragedy (1904), which is available in several inexpensive editions, including a Penguin paperback (1991) with a new introduction by John Bayley. This classic book contains Bradley’s general observations on Shakespeare’s tragedies along with detailed examinations of Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth. If you have never read this volume, you are in for a treat: there has never been a better general introduction written to these plays. Bradley was not only a superb scholar and critic; he remains an engaging and lucid writer. The book grew out of Bradley’s lectures to undergraduates at the University of Glasgow, and in them we see a great teacher in action.

Most libraries will have David Bevington’s excellent critical collection, Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1968). This volume will probably be more useful to students than some later compilations because it presents essays written before the rise of literary theory made them too complicated for most undergraduates to follow easily. We use Professor Bevington’s authoritative text and notes for Hamlet in the current edition of Literature.

Jan Kott’s influential Shakespeare Our Contemporary (New York: Norton, 1964) is a great pleasure to read. Kott writes about Shakespeare from the perspective of an Eastern European and emphasizes the political nature of the plays. His chapter “Hamlet of the Mid-Century” describes how Polish productions of the play reflected the social and political environment around them. “Hamlet is like a sponge . . . it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time.” Although he grounds his discussion in the history of modern totalitarian states, his comments are extremely illuminating. Describing a performance in Cracow in 1956, he captures a central aspect of Hamlet that has eluded most critics (an excerpt from this essay is in our Shakespeare casebook):

In this performance everybody, without exception, was being constantly watched. Polonius, minister to the royal murderer, sends a man to France even after his own son . . . . At Elsinore castle someone is hidden behind every curtain. The good minister does not even trust the Queen. . . .

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Everything at Elsinore has been corroded by fear: marriage, love, and friendship. ... The murderous uncle keeps a constant watchful eye on Hamlet. Why does he not want him to leave Denmark? His presence at court is inconvenient, reminding everybody of what they would like to forget. Perhaps he suspects something? ...

Ophelia, too, has been drawn into the big game. They listen in to her conversations, ask questions, read her letters. It is true that she gives them up herself. She is at the same time part of the Mechanism, and its victim. Politics hangs here over every feeling, and there is no getting away from it. All the characters are poisoned by it. (60–61)

The very useful study of the play is Paul Cantor's *Shakespeare: Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), which is part of Cambridge's generally distinguished "Landmarks of World Literature" series. Cantor's volume provides a concise, informed introduction to the tragedy. (The entire text is only 106 pages, including the notes and bibliography.) Taking recent scholarship into account, Cantor places the tragedy in a historical context and examines the central critical problems raised by the drama. It is a savvy, sophisticated volume that both instructors and students will find interesting.

The best way of teaching Shakespeare is through performance—not just watching one, but doing one. The more the instructor encourages, entices, cajoles, or compels students to perform scenes from the plays, the more deeply they will become involved in Shakespeare's drama. Memorization remains unfashionable in some circles, but few students will regret having to memorize all or part of a famous soliloquy from *Hamlet*. Memorization helps accommodate a contemporary student's ear to Elizabethan speech more quickly than any other method. Most long-term teachers of Shakespeare will have their own stories of classroom productions, but one particularly interesting account can be found in Frederick Turner's fascinating book *Rebirth of Value: Meditation on Beauty, Ecology, Religion, and Education* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991). Turner uses his experiences teaching a "Shakespeare in Performance" course to develop a broader theory of education. Turner's discussion (pp. 151–70) focuses on *Hamlet*, but his procedures can be applied to any play:

The class method was as follows. Each student was assigned to direct a scene from Shakespeare, casting it from the class, and recording the rehearsal process for an essay that would be due later. The rest of the class voted on the performance, and the actors, the director, and any other stage personnel would all get the same grade. In other words, the performing group stood or fell together, and the reward system demanded that it please, move, and inspire a real, experienced, and perceptive audience. As the year went on the productions became more and more elaborate, daring, polished (and time-consuming in rehearsal). The students were addicted and some performed many times more than I had required. They began to use costumes, scenery, makeup, even lights and special effects, improvising with great ingenuity in our drab little classroom, and decorating it festively when appropriate. The grading system was soon forgotten, and we had to remind ourselves to keep it going. Some students even protested their own grades when they thought them too high! (164–65)

Not all classes can afford the luxury of time to perform parts of *Hamlet*, but students should be encouraged to see or hear the play performed. There are several
excellent film versions available on video. Laurence Olivier’s classic 1948 version
won him Academy Awards for best picture and best actor. Olivier’s version is heav-
ily cut and highly interpretive (very Freudian), but it remains compelling. Tony
Richardson’s Hamlet (1969) has Nicol Williamson as one of the most celebrated con-
temporary Hamlets, but it never comes entirely alive. Franco Zeffirelli’s 1991 version
stars Mel Gibson. Anyone who has not seen the film has the right to be skeptical,
but Gibson works surprisingly well. Zeffirelli’s lushly realistic production occasionally
threatens to overwhelm his superb cast (including Glenn Close, Alan Bates, and
Paul Scofield), but he trusts Shakespeare’s drama. Casting an actor such as Gibson,
best known for action-hero roles like Road Warrior or Lethal Weapon, seems very Eliz-
abethan. His cinematic associations as a man of action underscore the divided char-
acter of the Danish prince, a hero who hesitates to begin.

There is also an excellent BBC audio recording of the complete text of Hamlet (dis-
tributed in the United States by Bantam Doubleday Dell Audio publishing, available on
four cassettes or three compact discs). This performance lavishly parades the wealth of
British theater: Kenneth Branagh takes the title role, with Judi Dench as Gertrude and
Derek Jacobi as Claudius. Even the minor roles are superbly cast: John Gielgud is the
Ghost; Michael Horden the Player King; and Emma Thompson the Player Queen.

Hamlet has one of the most complex plots of any Shakespeare play. There is a
large cast. Many characters have different private and public personalities, and Ham-
let himself is probably the most multifaceted protagonist in Shakespeare. It is always
helpful in class to ask questions that make students think through the basic situation,
actions, and characters of the drama. Here are a few possible questions.

QUESTIONS

1. By what means does Shakespeare build suspense before the Ghost’s appearances?
   Why is Hamlet so unwilling to trust what the Ghost tells him? Is it possible to interpret
   the play so that the Ghost is just a projection of Hamlet’s disturbed imagination?

2. What is the play’s major dramatic question? At what point is the question for-
mulated? Does the play have a crisis, or turning point?

3. How early in the play, and from what passages, do you perceive that Claudius
   is a villain?

4. What comic elements does the play contain—what scenes, what characters,
   what exchanges or dialogue? What is their value to a play that, as a whole, is a tragedy?

5. A familiar kind of behavior is showing one face to the world and another to
   oneself. What characters in Hamlet do so? Is their deception ever justified?

6. How guilty is Gertrude? With what offenses does Hamlet charge her (see III,
   iv)? Is our attitude toward her the same as Hamlet’s, or different? Does our sympathy
   for her grow as the play goes on, or diminish?

7. If the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are cut from the play, as is
   the case in some productions, what is lost?
8. Consider Hamlet’s soliloquies, especially those beginning “O that this too too sullied [or solid] flesh would melt” (I, ii, 129–159); “O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” (II, ii, 472–529); and “To be, or not to be” (III, i, 57–91). How do these meditations round out the character of Hamlet? How do they also serve to advance the story?

9. Discuss how Shakespeare differently portrays Hamlet’s feigned madness and Ophelia’s real madness.

10. Is Laertes a villain like Claudius, or is there reason to feel that his contrived duel with Hamlet is justified?

11. How is Hamlet shown to be a noble and extraordinary person, not merely by birth, but by nature? See Ophelia’s praise of Hamlet as “The glass of fashion, and the mold of form” (III, i, 145–153). Are we to take Ophelia’s speech as the prejudiced view of a lover, or does Shakespeare demonstrate that her opinion of Hamlet is trustworthy?

12. Discuss Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia (see especially Act III, Scene i). Does his behavior seem cruel, in conflict with his supposed nobility and sensitivity?

13. In what respects does Hamlet resemble a classical tragedy such as Oedipus Rex? In what ways is Shakespeare’s play different? Is Hamlet, like Oedipus, driven to his death by some inexorable force (Fate, the gods, the nature of things)?

For a classroom discussion of Hamlet’s character, you might present the poet-critic Jack Foley’s radical notion of the character’s individuality (written especially for this handbook):

At the beginning of Sir Laurence Olivier’s acclaimed film production of Hamlet, a disembodied voice, speaking above an image of clouds, says “This is the story of a man who could not make up his mind.” Someone in the theater at which I saw it answered ironically, “Oh, so that’s what it’s about.” The meaning of Hamlet and the nature of the central character are by no means as clear as Olivier wished his audience to believe. To call a play Hamlet or King Lear or Richard III or Othello is not so different from calling a television program The Johnny Carson Show or The Bill Cosby Show or Roseanne. The title implies The Interesting Individual Show. The Renaissance, the period in which Shakespeare wrote his plays, is often described as the great age of individuality and self-assertion.

Plays with titles like Hamlet implicitly promise to “tell all” about some central, charismatic character—someone usually portrayed by the most famous actor in the company—to give us a powerful psychological portrait of a fascinating “individual.” Hamlet the character is, we know from hundreds of performances, just such a fascinating “individual”—and he is overwhelmingly real. Yet the moment we try to “explain” his reality—even to explain his essential problem—we find ourselves confused, uncertain. The reason for this is that Shakespeare’s extremely memorable characters do not behave consistently according to any system of psychology, whether Renaissance or Modern. Freud was right. There are moments in the play when Hamlet is exhibiting clear Oedipal characteristics. But not throughout the play. Hamlet himself suggests that he is
“melancholy”—a psychological condition exhaustively studied by Shakespeare’s contemporary, Robert Burton, in The Anatomy of Melancholy. It’s true, Hamlet is melancholy, but not throughout the play. Hamlet also functions as the figure of the Avenger—as in Thomas Kyd’s famous revenge drama, The Spanish Tragedy. But, again, not throughout the play.

The same character who tells his mother that he “knows not seems” displays a considerable interest in theater (an art of “seeming”) and announces that he will put on an “antic disposition” and pretend to be mad—“seeming” to the max. On the other hand, there are several moments in the play when Hamlet really does appear to be crazy. Nor are such contradictions limited to the character of Hamlet. Polonius is throughout the play nothing but an old fool. Yet his diagnosis of Hamlet as mad for the love of Ophelia is not without some justification in Hamlet’s behavior, and his “This above all: to thine own self be true” speech is one of the great set pieces of the play, something far beyond the powers of the foolish old man he is everywhere else. … The fact is that Hamlet seems real not because he is a coherent character of “self” or because there is some discoverable “essence” to him but because he actively and amazingly inhabits so many diverse, interconnecting, potentially contradictory contexts.

Hamlet is one of the most famous fictional characters ever created. Why is this so? Foley asserts that Hamlet’s reality as a character derives from his multiplicity and inconsistency as a character: Hamlet is as difficult to comprehend with a single explanation as a real person. What do your students think?


William Shakespeare, A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM, page 1512

“Wild and fantastical as this play is,” said the notoriously sensible Samuel Johnson about A Midsommer Night’s Dream in 1773, “all the parts in their various modes are well written and give the kind of pleasure which the author designed.” In 1904 another paragon of English common sense, G. K. Chesterton, argued the work’s merits more emphatically: “The greatest of Shakespeare’s comedies is also,” he wrote, “from a certain point of view, the greatest of his plays.” Chesterton goes on to explain what that “certain point of view” is—psychological complexity and dreamlike verisimilitude—but the first part of his assertion strikes the editors of this volume as eminently plausible. Even amid the varied splendors of Shakespeare’s major comedies, A Midsommer Night’s Dream stands out as a joyously special achievement. The most complexly plotted, fancifully conceived, and overtly erotic of his comedies, it has cast a magic spell on audiences and artists—including Felix Mendelssohn, George Balanchine, Max Reinhardt, and Benjamin Britten—for four centuries.

Shakespeare had no known source for A Midsommer Night’s Dream, though he borrowed details from various earlier works. He purposefully created an ingeniously intricate plot with four sets of characters—royal, aristocratic, plebeian, and super-
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natural. Each group is associated with a certain mood or attitude—noble, romantic,
farcical, or magical. The playwright hilariously—and sometimes tenderly—interweaves these four plotlines and casts of characters with magisterial ease, creating a
work that is simultaneously his most romantic and his zaniest comedy. The elements
of magic in the play and the central metaphor of the dream combine to give the
comedy a specially lyric atmosphere. Important issues of power and responsibility,
love and obsession, and identity and illusion are investigated, but above and beyond
those specific themes is the unifying vision of love as a transformative and redemptive emotion, with marriage as its proper human institution. It is nearly impossible
to read or watch the comedy without being touched by the luminous magic of
Shakespeare’s affirmation.
In considerably more mundane terms, the comedy also provides broader coverage in Literature of Shakespeare’s achievement. A Midsummer Night’s Dream offers a
more generous and inclusive view of love and marriage than Othello or Hamlet, and
Shakespeare’s comic vision both qualifies and illuminates his tragic works. (Instructors should also note the many poems by Shakespeare that appear in the Poetry section of Literature.) One obvious question for the classroom is whether the comic or
tragic vision of existence captures more of life’s experience. This is, of course, an
impossible question to answer conclusively, but it is nonetheless worth asking for the
discussion it might generate. Students may at first be inclined to favor tragedy since
dark and serious art seems more important, but upon reflection they may start to
explore the inclusive nature of comedy.
Although Shakespeare’s Bottom offers cautionary advice to would-be critics of
the play, “Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream,” we offer a few discussion topics for students. Here are ten questions about the play, provided by Ellen
Mease of Grinnell College, that you may want to use in class to clarify a few of its
major themes.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
1. What event does the play’s action look forward to? The play focuses on the
wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, announced in the opening scene and celebrated
in the final one. In some sense every major action in the play suggests, illuminates,
or contrasts with this event. The entire play can be read as an exploration of the
nature of marital love and union. The reasonable and conciliatory behavior of the
two royal lovers, who overcome their previous animosity to marry, also provides perspective on the comic adventures and misadventures of the other couples.
2. What unifies the play? Its plotlines converge on the unifying theme of love
consummated in marriage, its focal point the ducal wedding, later to include the
lovers, with the supernatural blessings of the reconciled fairy king and queen. The general theme of appearance vs. reality highlights the alternative reality of the dream,
whether conceived as a path to transcendence or as a conduit of the (Freudian)
unconscious. The midsummer night’s confusions make concrete the transformative
power of imagination, not only in the lover and the lunatic, but also in the poet of
the theater. Art, magic, and metamorphosis link the mortal and the fairy worlds.
Central to most of these themes are Oberon and Puck, who as “masters of revels”
complicate and then unravel the story lines of the fairies (Titania), the lovers, and
the mechanicals (Bottom’s “translation”).
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3. How is the fairy plot linked to the celebratory marital theme of the play? The language, action, characterization, and imagery of the fairy world combine to create a festival atmosphere in the play. In Elizabethan times the festival was a special period when normal social customs were relaxed or reversed—like modern Mardi Gras in New Orleans. C. L. Barber, in “May Games and Metamorphoses on a Midsummer Night,” chapter 6 of his Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom (1959), links the play’s action to social customs, festivals, and pageantry familiar to Shakespeare’s audience. The May game, for example, mirrors the play’s central social action. A May game would begin in town then move into a grove before returning to town:

The Maying is completed when Oberon and Titania with their trains come into the great chamber to bring the blessings of fertility. They are at once special, a May king and queen making their good luck visit to the manor house, and a pair of country gods, half-English and half-Ovid, come to bring their powers in tribute to great lords and ladies. (119–120)

The spring festival, like the ancient saturnalia, releases energies and transformative powers that are necessary for procreation and social renewal, but are ultimately controlled within the formal bonds of marriage. Shakespeare’s dramatic art, in similar fashion, conjures up and gives civilizing shape to the passions, in a pattern of release and transformation:

Shakespeare, in developing a May-game action at length to express the will in nature that is consummated in marriage, brings out underlying magical meanings of the ritual while keeping always a sense of what it is humanly, as an experience. The woods are a region of passionate excitement [realized in the poetry]. Poetry conveys the experience of amorous tendency diffused in nature; and poetry, dance, gesture, dramatic fiction, combine to create, in the fairies, creatures who embody the passionate mind’s elated sense of its own omnipotence. The woods are established as a region of metamorphosis, where in liquid moonlight or glimmering starlight, things can change, merge and melt into each other. Metamorphosis expresses what love sees and what it seeks to do. (132–133)

4. How does the play exemplify the holiday spirit of revels? In many of his early romantic comedies and late romances, Shakespeare uses an escape to a “green world,” the world of nature, or in this case magic and nature, as a release or holiday revel. As C. L. Barber wrote, “The clarification achieved by the festive comedies corresponds to the release they dramatize: a heightened awareness of the relation between man and ‘nature’—a holiday in celebration of an elemental natural force like summer or harvest. In the alternative reality of the green world, essential human values are rediscovered and secured. Holiday rescues us from everyday.

5. How does the play use sleep and dream as a central theme? In sleep our fantasy perceives the wider truths of human experience—both dark and transcendent—denied to it when we are awake. However, the night’s accidents befalling the lovers are not the “fierce vexations of a dream” (IV.i.60). The fierce passions unleashed by the love juice are endured and safely subdued. The murderous jealousy that erupts into dangerous swordplay is disarmed by Oberon and Puck. The rivalry that threat-
ened the “double cherry on one stem” of Hermia and Helena’s girlhood friendship is banished with the dawn that sees them sleeping side by side in the woods. Titania is disabused of her folly with no apparent injury to her dignity. Bottom is restored to his friends trailing clouds of glory (“a most rare vision” [IV.i.191–203]) with no lasting resentment of class differences that would bar him from the bed of a mortal queen. He takes the gift of transitory joy as his due. Indeed, he addresses Theseus as an equal when he breaks character to correct the Duke’s apparent confusion over the role of Wall (V.i.178–180). Of the lovers’ seeming “dream and fruitless vision,” the lasting fruit will be unions “whose date till death shall never end” (III.2.371–373). Midsummer folly exorcises and dispels the potential dangers of excessive passion.

6. How do the four sets of lovers, in their respective plotlines, contribute to the play’s romantic comedy?

- **Theseus and Hippolyta**: Theseus appears to have won Hippolyta’s love despite having defeated her in battle. Pay attention to their scenes together, especially as he is called upon to mediate in the conflict between Egeus and Hermia (I.i.1–126), the morning hunt scene (IV.i.94–177), and their important exchange in V.i. on fantasy and real experience, reason, and imagination. (Hippolyta’s “something of great constancy” at V.i.26 comes close to expressing our sense of the ultimate coherence and plausibility of what Theseus would dismiss as “antique fables” or “fairy toys.” Watching the play, we have actually seen how the “airy nothing” of the fairy world has been given “a local habitation and a name” in the midsummer night’s confusions and unraveling.) A less obvious theme of the play is the growing sympathy between the two former enemies. They set a moral example of proper marital love for all the other couples.

- **The Young Lovers**: The romantic nature of the young aristocrats is both central and obvious—they are the new generation who are about to enter their procreative period. Their health and happiness suggests the future fate of the city. The younger aristocratic lovers, in their patterned encounters of pursuit and avoidance, also illustrate well one of the most famous principles of comedy, what the French philosopher Henri Bergson called “the mechanical encrusted on the living,” when the human being (capable beyond all creatures of adapting flexibly to changing circumstances) behaves more like a thing or machine in rote reflex. The automatism of the inconstant, aberrant men in their sudden about-faces is a rich source of comedy: “What fools these mortals be.”

- **The Artisans (including both Bottom’s “translation” and the play-within-a-play)**: Bottom’s romance with Titania provides a parodic version of the aristocratic romances. It also offers subtle commentary on the social order of the play. Bottom’s sudden elevation in social status and his democratic union with the fairy queen leaves him totally unfazed; he regards it as his natural right. The love tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe burlesques the tragic potential of the rendezvous of “star-crossed” lovers like Hermia and Lysander.

- **Oberon and Titania**: These elemental nature gods have upset the balance of nature through their marital quarrels. Their reconciliation dance sets the stage for the final act’s royal wedding in Athens and the mechanicals’ wedding performance.
7. **How is love presented and critiqued in the play?** Among the many varieties of love and relationship treated in the play (parent-child, ruler-ruled, god-mortal, friends, sexual lovers), there seems to be a distinction between right relationship and dangerous sexual obsession. The play implicitly recommends due proportion and balanced obligations as the proper order of our affective relations with others. Dotage, obsession, and fixation are important sources of the play's comedy. (Ask students to identify and discuss major instances.) The correction of mistaken or excessive attachment is an important part of the play's resolution.

8. **Does the love juice have a similar effect on all the characters?** The love juice has similar effects on Lysander and Titania (compelling them to dote on love objects not of their choice), but the juice does not appear to work in the same way on Demetrius. Originally in love with Helena and betrothed to her (which technically bars him from contracting a marriage with Hermia, according to Elizabethan law), he has betrayed his true love, swayed either by male inconstancy or by Egeus to pursue a woman who cannot be his. It may bode ill for Helena that Demetrius is still under the influence of the love drug (having received no antidote, unlike Titania and Lysander), but it may also be that the drug merely restores his affection to its proper place.

9. **How is the female role in marital love portrayed in the play? What does it suggest about gender roles in a traditional, custom-bound society?** The theme of “unruly women” and the threat of matriarchal misrule emerges in the adult love relationships, in the first scene's allusion to Theseus's legendary defeat of the Amazons threatening his new city, Athens. Titania's fixation on the orphaned Indian boy has alienated her from her husband, though her devotion to her votress wins our sympathy. (We might think of Freud's Victorian “family romance,” in which the mother/child bond threatens the privileges of the marital bed and requires regulation.) The quarrel between fairy king and queen in turn has brought about an upheaval in the natural order of things. Is Oberon's desire to raise the boy among men, as his page of honor, necessarily a violation of Titania's desire to raise the boy as her own? (Think about rites of passage in patriarchal societies, in which boys are ceremonially removed from the sphere of their mother's influence and inducted into male activities and tribal customs. Such rites preserve traditional gender distinctions and are part of the cultural process by which order is maintained in traditional societies.) In what other ways does the play explore the problem of gender hierarchy?

10. **Do the women truly achieve free choice at the end of the play when they marry their beloveds?** Feminist critics have noticed that of the three brides, only Hippolyta has any lines in Act V. Hermia and Helena are silent. (Their husbands, meanwhile, are wittily engaged in one-upmanship with Theseus.) Either the young women are politely enjoying themselves in the midst of an otherwise very animated scene (no specifically assigned lines being necessary), or once married, they are “barred from discourse.” Hippolyta's role in Act V can be read in counterpoint to their silence.

Professor Mease of Grinnell College, an experienced director and actor, has selected passages in the play as performance assignments for the classroom. She recommends the following monologues and scenes for analysis, memorization, and performance.
Women:
Helena: I.i.226–251 (“How happy some o’er other some can be!”)
Titania: II.i.81–117 (“These are the forgeries of jealousy.”)
Helena: III.ii.192–219 (“Lo, she is one of this confederacy”)

Men:
Robin: II.i.43–57; III.ii.6–34 (“My mistress with a monster is in love”)
Oberon: II.i.146–185 (cut Robin’s brief lines); II.i.249–67 (“I know a bank where the wild thyme blows”); IV.i.40–68
Bottom: IV.i.191–204 (“When my cue comes, call me . . .”)

Scene-work:
I.i.128–179, Lysander and Hermia (“How now, my love?”)
I.i.180–251, Hermia, Helena, Lysander (“Godspeed, fair Helena.”)
I.ii.1–82, the mechanicals’ first meeting
II.i.60–145, Oberon and Titania (“Ill met by moonlight, Proud Titania.”)
II.i.188–244, Demetrius and Helena (“I love thee not, therefore, pursue me not.”)
III.i.1–89, Mechanicals, through Bottom’s translation up to his song
III.ii.43–87, Demetrius and Hermia (“O why rebuke you him that loves you so?”)
III.ii.345–399, Oberon and Robin (“This is thy negligence. . . .”)

Shakespeare’s Sources
There is no major source for A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The plot appears to be Shakespeare’s own creation, though he borrows details from many sources. Of the many generally accepted sources for this most original play, Ovid’s Metamorphoses, The Golden Ass of Apuleius, and Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” and “The Merchant’s Tale” may be familiar to students. Pyramus and Thisbe appear in Ovid or Golding’s translation (1567) and in Chaucer’s “The Legend of Good Women.” The lovers derive generally from romances such as Sidney’s Arcadia and Cinthio’s tales in the Hecatommithi. In “the most lamentable comedy,” Shakespeare may have parodied his own “most excellent and lamentable Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet,” written around the same period. Seneca’s Medea and Hippolytus were favorites with Shakespeare; Seneca’s seascape with the armed Cupid (Hipp.) is the source for the vision Oberon relates to Puck (II.i.149–157). Erasmus’s “Praise of Folly” links asses and folly in ways pertinent to Bottom’s situation as the wise fool vouchsafed “a most rare vision.”

Video
Elijah Moshinsky directed A Midsummer Night’s Dream in 1980 for BBC Television’s Shakespeare Series, distributed by Time/Life in the United States. The BBC Shakespeare Series, produced by Jonathan Miller, is a reliable starting-point for students unfamiliar with the plays. The acting is low-key and realistic, with solid line-work. Directors and designers do their research and take few risks. An uncontroversial production, Moshinsky’s Dream is beautifully designed and shot, the aristocrats dressed in seventeenth-century Cavalier costume, the Tudor manor house interiors and woodland inspired by Dutch masters. The mechanicals’ first scene is set in a tavern a la Frans Hals. The woods are in the Romantic Arcadian style of Claude Lorrain, with an obviously painted though luminous moon reflected in the realistic watery pools where the lovers finally sprawl, wet and muddy from their brawling. Oberon
(Peter McEnery), bare-chested, long-haired, on a black horse, is handsome and sensuous. Titania (Helen Mirren) enters with the “changeling” Indian boy as a vulnerable toddler-in-arms; she is surrounded by a small army of fairies of various ages, male and female, vaguely Celtic and wild. Bottom (Brian Glover) in his hairy ass’s head is not fearsome but endearing; and he takes in stride his elevation to the fairy queen’s bed. Hermia’s “Egypt” or dark gypsy look is transferred to an angry, ethnic Hippolyta; Theseus (Nigel Davenport) wears armor in his first scene with her, but he quickly becomes the mature statesman, man of reason, and affable host.

Productions
Ellen Mease, Professor of Theatre at Grinnell College, has also provided this appreciation of Peter Brook’s celebrated production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Shakespeare’s romantic comedy *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has become, since Peter Brook’s Royal Shakespeare production (1970–1973), the bar exam for ambitious directors. Fitting the protean energies and complexities of the play into the Procrustean bed of a fashionable directorial concept has not killed the patient, but liberated the play’s latent dream materials and manifold meanings, as varied as the audiences that respond to them. As Gary Jay Williams observes in *Our Moonlight Revels: A Midsummer Night’s Dream in the Theater*, “The play comes to the stage as an anthology of gender and class wars, as a critique of state oppression, as a celebration of Third World cultures, and as an exploration of the Victorian or Edwardian past in postmodern angst” (204). Darker visions in this recent theatre history may have cramped the play’s playfulness and threatened its joyousness, but the dyes seem not to take for long. The play is self-renewing in every performance, given the vigor and range of the play’s nature images, the ultimate beneficence of its aims, the dignity of its principals (the mortal and the fairy royals), the wonder seizing its lovers bent on happiness, and the earnest naïveté of the workmen, even Bottom as an ass in the arms of the fairy queen.

The artistic and commercial success of the Academy Award-winning film *Shakespeare in Love*, with a loving, exuberant, and smart script by Tom Stoppard and Mark Norman, has perhaps done more to make Shakespeare fans out of a mass audience than any single live production of the Bard in the four hundred years since he wrote. The wide availability of good productions of many of the plays on videotape has also made serious converts. However, those of us—and there were many of us—fortunate enough to have seen Brook’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (hereafter MND) knew that we were not only seeing but actively making the single most innovative production of the play in the twentieth century. Experiencing a great production can transform a dutiful apprentice into a serious student of drama. Not a local phenomenon but an international one, Brook’s MND was probably seen by more theatre audiences than any single theatrical production of a Shakespearean play before or since.

Brook’s actors made me listen to a living language, speaking the play’s enormously varied verse with an emotional and imaginative immediacy that overrode four hundred years of flattening out and dumbing down of the Queen’s English. Fleeing as they are in performance, every word, every intention, every verbal image and idea contributed to the “something of great constancy” Hippolyta identifies in the lovers’ dream accounts (V.i.26). The crystal-clear intelligence of every
character’s line delivery, the crisp articulation and pointing of the lines, the brightness and energy of the playing—these were stunning gifts for all of us, not just the conservative spectator setting the bar high for Royal Shakespeare performers.

However, Shakespeare is not just in the language. The play is in its dramatic situation, the story told in pictures and concrete stage action. For anyone who knew the history of MND’s staging, Brook’s visual spectacle was a wonder. The production swept away the elaborate pictorial illusions of nineteenth-century productions set in the antiquary’s Athens or Arcadian Salvator Rosa woodlands with real bunnies, and providing an even more “blank” blank slate than the modernist “Shakespearean open stage” (innovated by Granville-Barker and popularized by Guthrie at Stratford [Ontario] and in Minneapolis during the regional repertory movement of the 1950s). Brook’s staging gave us a startling white trapezoidal handball court, the atmosphere of circus (trapezes and swings for the fairies and lovers’ hi-jinks, Puck’s Chinese circus yellow jumpsuit in loose silk) and magic (Cupid’s flower a silver plate spinning on a Lucite rod, soaring from Puck to Oberon as they swung in space), the breathtaking, lush eroticism of Sarah Kestelman’s Titania on her swinging bower of immense red feathers, the exposed stage machine (metal catwalk above the set walls, for the stage manager, flying technicians, and musicians), and the woods created out of coils of wire like gigantic Slinkies, which the fairies manipulated with fishing poles from the catwalk. There was no moonlit obscurity in any moment of the performance, only the brilliant white light on the clean white walls. (This anti-illusionist theatricality was influenced by the example of Bertolt Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble international tour in the mid 1950s.)

The visual magic was embodied in the performers, especially in their colorful costumes (white and pale tie-dye tunics for the lovers, the bright colors of the royals’ billowing robes) and kinetic movement. Long months of preparation in acrobatics, gymnastics, aikido, magic routines, and aerial artistry made the performers athletes of the play’s passions (recalling Meyerhold’s biomechanical training for Russian actors in the 1920s). At the ribald climax (just before intermission), Bottom was buoyed up, a beefy plebeian Dionysus, on the shoulders of the fairies, their phallic good humor in the best tradition of the old-fashioned bachelor party, as they danced him to his aerial bower. Later the lovers ricocheted like handballs off the walls and hurled themselves like projectiles through the swinging doors upstage. Tiny Hermia leaped into the air to plaster herself spider-like horizontally across a door exit, suspended five feet off the floor, barring Lysander’s way. The whooping exuberance of the lovers’ huge quarrel modulated to another key as the play tried to wind down to the after-dinner entertainment, the burlesque of Pyramus and Thisbe performed by blue-collar working stiffs. A magnanimous host, Theseus (who doubled as Oberon) insured that the giddy courtiers’ remarks did not upset the dignity of his earnest amateurs. His democratic sensitivities left the audience free to laugh with the mechanicals, rather than worry about class snobbery and self-regarding wit.

Accounts and photographs of Brook’s production are numerous. The authorized acting version of the production (based on the RSC promptbook) is available. It includes abundant photos, design sketches, and interviews or contributions from Brook, Alan Howard (Theseus/Oberon), composer Richard Peaslee, designer Sally Jacobs, technicians and the stage manager. See Glenn Loney, ed.,
Peter Brook’s Production of William Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” for the Royal Shakespeare Company (1974). Succinct accounts appear in Williams (222–233), Griffiths (66–70), Foakes (21–24) and Holland (72 and passim).

CRITICS ON SHAKESPEARE, pages 1577–1587

The large selection of Shakespeare criticism we have reprinted in the casebook hardly touches the surface of the vast scholarship available, but it does provide students with a broad cross-section of critical opinion. It is easy for students to become intimidated by the mountains of material in Shakespeare studies. The important thing is to get them started somewhere engaging and reliable. We strove to put together an informed but accessible set of selections that both students and instructors could find useful.

Probably no modern novelist thought more deeply about William Shakespeare than Anthony Burgess. His 1964 novel, Nothing Like the Sun, is generally considered the most compelling fictional work about the enigmatic Bard of Avon. His late novel Enderby’s Dark Lady (1984) also begins and ends with brilliant short stories about Shakespeare. Burgess also wrote a full-length critical study of the dramatist as well as a novel about Christopher Marlowe in which Shakespeare appears. Before he began writing fiction (at the age of 38), Burgess worked for the British government as a cultural officer in Asia. The selection that appears in Literature comes from a talk the polyglot Burgess gave at an international conference on translation. He addresses several interesting issues about how literary works travel across languages and cultures. He also speculates on why Shakespeare’s work has proved nearly universal in its appeal. Finally, he reminds us that literary translation involves far more than finding equivalent words. Two questions you might ask students to start discussion:

1. In Burgess’s experience, who seemed to be the only British author with universal appeal in Malaysia? How does Burgess account for this fact?

2. According to Burgess, what does translation involve besides words?

Poet W. H. Auden was fascinated with Shakespeare. He wrote and lectured fascinatingly on a substantial number of the plays. In Auden’s posthumously published Lectures on Shakespeare (2000) alone, he discussed thirty-five of the plays as well as The Sonnets.

This discussion of Iago comes from Auden’s 1961 essay “The Joker in the Pack,” reprinted in his critical collection The Dyer’s Hand (1962). In analyzing Othello, Auden notes how differently the villain operates in the play compared to Shakespeare’s other tragedies. Iago and not the title character stands at the center of Othello, Auden observes, since he motivates the crucial dramatic actions. It is not Fate that dooms Othello; it is another human being. Auden’s view of Iago nearly
complements Maud Bodkin’s identification of Iago as a diabolical figure. The devil, after all, leads persons to voluntary doom by evil advice.

Anyone interested in Auden’s relation to Shakespeare should read his superb introduction to The Sonnets, which is reprinted in Forewords & Afterwords (New York: Random, 1973). Auden also wrote a sequel to The Tempest—his 1944 dramatic poem, The Sea and the Mirror.

Three questions you may ask students about Auden’s analysis are:

1. What aspects of Othello does Auden consider unique?

2. What character does Auden assert stands at the center of Shakespeare’s play? What is unusual about this character?

3. What is peculiar about Othello’s fall in relation to the fall of most tragic heroes?

Maud Bodkin’s Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (1958) remains a useful guide to mythological criticism as a perspective on English poetry. In the volume she analyzes both Hamlet and Othello (among many other classics). Her examination of Iago as a satanic figure is persuasive and revealing. She expands on this central insight to explicate Shakespeare’s tragedy as a conflict between heroic values (embodied by Othello) and diabolic chaos (expressed by Iago). Her psychoanalytical/mythic reading of Iago places him both as a mythic devil and as the internal mental force that can deny or destroy a person’s ideal values.

Virginia Mason Vaughan’s “Black and White in Othello” offers the insight of both historical criticism and cultural studies. She places Shakespeare’s characterization within the social and cultural context of the early Jacobean period, especially the assumptions of the “predominately white audience” that viewed the play. Othello is, in her analysis, the Other, and his darkness is “the visual signifier of his Otherness.” Whether that Otherness is portrayed as an “African” or “Moor” does not matter; Othello stands perpetually as alien to the other characters and the audience.

A. C. Bradley’s classic discussion of Shakespeare’s major tragedies remains interesting a century after its composition. Bradley provides a careful examination of the Danish prince’s mental state—his melancholy or madness—read from a realist perspective. In doing so, the critic addresses what is often considered the central dramatic problem of the play, Hamlet’s inaction and delay in avenging his father’s murder.

Rebecca West’s view of Ophelia is not so well known as Bradley’s, but it is equally interesting and far more revisionist. In a feminist reading of the play, West views Ophelia as an expendable pawn in Polonius’s quest for influence and power in the Danish court. Consequently, Ophelia is not a virgin martyr but a poor girl “sacrificed for family ambition in the days when a court was a cat’s cradle of conspiracies.” Her connecting Shakespeare’s portrait of Ophelia with the situation of young women in the court of Henry VIII is particularly insightful.

Jan Kott’s account of producing Hamlet in Cracow in 1956 offers brilliant insight into the political aspects of Shakespeare’s tragedy. Kott catches something of the importance Hamlet has had for post-World War II drama, which understood the play’s absurdist and existentialist qualities. The notion of Elsinore as a small totalitarian state full of informers is particularly useful and original.
Johann von Goethe, a sublime poet and great playwright, provides a brilliant if slightly subjective reading of Hamlet's character. (Clearly, Goethe is already pondering what his version of Hamlet might be.) Goethe sees Hamlet as a tender aesthete who has been thrown into a brutal drama of revenge for which he is ill-suited. That harsh discrepancy provides the central energy of Shakespeare's powerful transformation of the revenge tragedy.

Edgar Allan Poe's insightful comments about Hamlet argue that it is simplistic to look at Shakespeare in narrowly realistic terms. His remarks open up the play to symbolic and mythic readings. (As usual, Poe's views prefigure modernist perspectives on literature.)

Even taking into account her cautionary comment at the beginning of the last paragraph—"The markers are morally neutral"—the fact is that Clare Asquith's Shadowplay advances a highly controversial and even startling thesis: that William Shakespeare was a passionately committed Catholic in a Protestant England where Catholicism was suppressed and its adherents punished, and that his plays constitute a vast, intricate code that communicates his Catholic values and sympathies. Needless to say, most Shakespeare scholars question her thesis, though a growing number now accept the Bard of Avon's Catholic sympathies. The question is whether there are actually coded messages in the texts of his plays. Asquith has found admirers in Britain among such noted figures as the poet and critic Tom Paulin and the novelist Piers Paul Read, and even many who dispute her conclusions admit that her book is impressively researched. Reviewer Francis Phillips, himself a Catholic, offers a reservation worth noting: "But somehow I feel that this strict, though highly ingenious 'translation' of his deeper meaning, is reductive of its subject. To think of Shakespeare at all times deliberately seeking plots and stories through which to convey one insistent undercover message seems to undermine his prodigality, his life-enhancing bounty, his inventiveness. Although the author insists on his universality, the portrait that emerges from her book is of a man wholly bound up, indeed obsessed, with one theme only."

An interesting, indeed remarkable, aspect of Asquith's writing is that she uses postmodernist critical techniques to reach her traditionalist conclusions. (Her brand of traditionalism, however, is also contrarian, since it rejects the conventional readings of Shakespeare as either Anglican or religiously indifferent.) She deconstructs the texts of the plays to demonstrate that the surface arguments contain contradictory elements; she then uses New Historicist, Reader-response, and Queer Studies techniques to analyze those elements against the political, economic, and ideological background of Shakespeare's age to decipher covert messages as they might have been understood by a persecuted minority of the Elizabethan audience. One may well quibble with particular elements of her ultimate interpretations—and Asquith often seems to go too far—but her overall thesis remains provocative and insightful.

Germaine Greer adds to our understanding of and delight in the play-within-the-play of A Midsummer Night's Dream by providing historical insight about the kinds of criticism theater faced in Elizabethan England. Her observations about Shakespeare's using the Rustics to gently mock and answer his critics add to our enjoyment of the dialogue.

Linda Bamber analyzes A Midsummer Night's Dream as a battle between male and female power. The play begins with a series of female rebellions against male authority (Hermia, Titania, and, perhaps more subtly and implicitly, Hippolyta). The action of the play reveals how these upsets are resolved, according to the Elizabethan
view of natural order, in favor of men. Bamber also relates the gentle comic nature of this disruption of gender roles to the “temporary subversion of social order” allowed in holiday festivals.

**WRITERS ON WRITING**

**Ben Jonson, On His Friend and Rival William Shakespeare,**
page 1588

Anyone who claims that William Shakespeare did not write the plays that bear his name must reckon with the testimony of the poet and dramatist Ben Jonson, who left two accounts of the Bard of Avon—one in verse, the other (reprinted here) in conversation with the poet and nobleman William Drummond of Hawthornden, who entertained Jonson and kept detailed notes. (The selection we reprint is the closest thing Jacobean literature has to a literary interview.) Jonson, who did not enjoy consistent box-office success in commercial theater, had a jealous but affectionate relationship with his immensely popular rival. Here in conversation we overhear Jonson grumbling about the man he claimed to love “on this side idolatry.” Students interested in pursuing the relationship between the two playwright-poets should also read Jonson’s magnificent verse “To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us,” which appeared as the dedication to the First Folio of Shakespeare’s works in 1623. The poem begins:

To draw no envy, Shakespeare, on thy name,
Am I thus ample to thy book and fame;
While I confess thy writing to be such
As neither man nor muse can praise too much.

(Note, too, that three poems by Jonson appear in the Poetry section of Literature.)
Henrik Ibsen, A DOLL'S HOUSE, page 1598

At the heart of the play, as its title indicates, is the metaphor of a house of make-believe. In the play's visible symbols we see Ibsen the poet. In Act I, there is the Christmas tree that Nora orders the maid to place in the middle of the room—a gesture of defiance after Krogstad had threatened her domestic peace and happiness. In the Christmas gifts Nora has bought for the children—sword, toy horse, and trumpet for the boys, a doll and a doll's bed for the girl, Emmy—Nora seems to assign boys and girls traditional emblems of masculinity and femininity and (in Rolf Fjelde's phrasing) is "unthinkingly transmitting her doll-identity to her own daughter." When the curtain goes up on Act II, we see the unfortunate Christmas tree again: stripped, burned out, shoved back into a corner—and its ruin speaks eloquently for Nora's misery. Richly suggestive, too, is Nora's wild tarantella to merry music played by the diseased and dying Rank. Like a victim of a tarantula bite, Nora feels a kind of poison working in her; and it is ironic that Rank has a literal poison working in him as well. (The play's imagery of poison and disease is traced in an article by John Northam included in Rolf Fjelde's Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1965]). Significant, too, is Nora's change of costume: taking off her fancy dress, she divests herself of the frivolous nonsense she had once believed and puts on everyday street attire.

Ibsen's play was first performed in Copenhagen on December 21, 1879; no doubt many a male chauvinist found it a disquieting Christmas present. Within a few years, A Doll's House had been translated into fourteen languages. James Gibbons Huneker has described its fame: when Nora walked out on Helmer, "that slammed door reverberated across the roofs of the world." With the rise of feminism, A Doll's House gradually became Ibsen's most frequently performed play—not only on the stage but in television and film adaptations. In 1973 two screen versions were issued almost simultaneously: Joseph Losey's overly solemn version starring Jane Fonda, and Hilliard Elkin's superior adaptation featuring Claire Bloom (expertly assisted by Anthony Hopkins, Ralph Richardson, Denholm Elliott, and Edith Evans).

Ibsen, to be sure, was conscious of sexual injustice. In preliminary notes written in 1878, he declared what he wanted his play to express:

A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society; it is an exclusively male society with laws drafted by men, and with counsel and judges who judge feminine conduct from the male point of view. She has committed a crime and she is proud of it because she did it for love of her husband and to save his life. But the husband, with his conventional views of honor, stands on the side of the law and looks at the affair with male eyes.
Clearly that is what the finished play expresses, but perhaps it expresses much more besides. A temptation in teaching Ibsen is to want to reduce his plays to theses. As Richard Gilman says, the very name of Henrik Ibsen calls to mind “cold light, problems, living rooms, instruction” (The Making of Modern Drama [New York: Farrar, 1964]).

But is the play totally concerned with the problems of the “new woman”? Ibsen didn’t think so. At a banquet given in his honor by the Norwegian Society for Women’s Rights in 1898, he frankly admitted,

I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than people have generally been inclined to believe. I thank you for the toast, but I must decline the honor of consciously having worked for women’s rights. I am not even quite sure what women’s rights really are. To me it has been a question of human rights.

Elizabeth Hardwick thinks Ibsen made this statement because he had “choler in his bloodstream” and couldn’t resist making a put-down before his admirers. She finds Ibsen nevertheless admirable: alone among male writers in having pondered the situation of being born a woman—“To be female: What does it mean?” (Seduction and Betrayal [New York: Random, 1974]). Perhaps there is no contradiction in arguing that Ibsen’s play is about both women’s rights and the rights of all humanity.

Another critic, Norris Houghton, suggests a different reason for the play’s timeliness. “Our generation has been much concerned with what it calls the ‘identity crisis.’ This play anticipates that theme: Ibsen was there ahead of us by ninety years” (The Exploding Stage [New York: Weybright, 1971]). Houghton’s view may be supported by Nora’s declared reasons for leaving Torvald: “If I’m ever to reach any understanding of myself and the things around me, I must learn to stand alone.”

The play is structured with classic severity. Its first crisis occurs in Krogstad’s initial threat to Nora, but its greatest crisis—the climax—occurs when Helmer stands with the revealing letter open in his hand. We take the major dramatic question to be posed early in Act I, in Nora’s admission to Mrs. Linde that she herself financed the trip to Italy. The question is larger than “Will Nora’s husband find out her secret?”—for that question is answered at the climax, when Helmer finds out. Taking in more of the play, we might put it, “Will Nora’s happy doll house existence be shattered?”—or a still larger question (answered only in the final door slam), “Will Nora’s marriage be saved?”

Ibsen’s magnificent door slam has influenced many a later dramatist. Have any students seen Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler’s musical Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (1979) on stage or on television? At the end, Todd slams a door in the faces of the audience, suggesting that he would gladly cut their throats.

A topic for class debate: Is A Doll’s House a tragedy or a comedy? Much will depend on how students interpret Nora’s final exit. Critics disagree: Dorothea Krook thinks the play contains all the requisite tragic ingredients (Elements of Tragedy [New Haven: Yale UP, 1969]). Elizabeth Hardwick (cited earlier) calls the play “a comedy, a happy ending—except for the matter of the children.”

To prevent North German theater managers from rewriting the play’s ending, Ibsen supplied an alternative ending of his own “for use in an emergency.” In this
alternative version, Nora does not leave the house; instead, Helmer makes her gaze upon their sleeping children. “Oh, this is a sin against myself, but I cannot leave them,” says Nora, sinking to the floor in defeat as the curtain falls. Ibsen, however, thought such a change a “barbarous outrage” and urged that it not be used. Students might be told of this alternative ending and be asked to give reasons for its outrageousness. Direct them to the “Ibsen on Writing” feature following the play for letters about this incident.

Citing evidence from the play and from Ibsen’s biography, Joan Templeton argues that those critics who fail to see A Doll’s House as a serious feminist statement have distorted its meaning and unintentionally diminished its worth (“The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen,” PMLA: January 1989).

For a cornucopia of stimulating ideas, see Approaches to Teaching Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, edited by Yvonne Shafer (New York: Modern Language Association, 1985), in the MLA’s likable paperback series “Approaches to Teaching Masterpieces of World Literature.” June Schlueter writes on using the play as an introduction to drama and notes that, unlike Oedipus, the play does not create an inexorable progress toward disaster. “At any point, we feel, justifiably, that disaster might be avoided.” Irving Deer recommends approaching the play by considering “how it deals with decaying values and conventions.” J. L. Styan urges instructors to have a class act out the play’s opening moments, before and after discussing them, so that Ibsen’s wealth of suggestive detail will emerge, which students might otherwise ignore. Other commentators supply advice for teaching the play in a freshman honors course, in a course on women’s literature, and in a community college. Joanne Gray Kashdan, author of this last essay, reports that one woman student exclaimed on reading the play: “I realized I had been married to Torvald for seven years before I divorced him!”

WRITERS ON WRITING

Henrik Ibsen, Correspondence on the Final Scene of A Doll’s House, page 1651

Ibsen’s letters are a striking reminder of the great pressure that can be exerted upon even the greatest works of art by a deadly combination of middle-class morality, the profit motive, and an utter lack of imagination. The 1880 letter poignantly reflects his frustration and helplessness in his efforts to protect the integrity of A Doll’s House, as he is forced to butcher the ending of his own play as the only way to fend off a much greater desecration. The 1891 letter, written from a position of much greater control, is more satisfying, especially in its last two sentences.

Ibsen, of course, is far from being the only author to have been subjected to such treatment, but most writers are lucky enough to be in their graves when it occurs. A century after Shakespeare, a hack called Nahum Tate—who also happened to be the Poet Laureate of Great Britain—rewrote King Lear with an ending in which Cordelia survived and married Edgar; a century after that, Charles Lamb charitably referred to
Tate's version as “ribald trash.” In our own time, there is the 1995 film travesty of *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Demi Moore's Hester Prynne flaunts her independence and cavorts merrily in the forest with Dimmesdale, unrecognizable as the anguished and guilt-ridden protagonist of Hawthorne's classic novel. At the time of the film's release, a cartoon in the *New Yorker* showed a peg-legged sea captain standing on a dock holding a harpoon, with a white whale hanging beside him; the caption read: “The Demi Moore version of *Moby-Dick.*”

*Tennessee Williams*, *The Glass Menagerie*, page 1653

The gracious world of the old South lives on in Amanda's memories. No doubt its glories shine brighter as the years go by, but all three members of the Wingfield family, in their drab little apartment, live at several removes from the real world. Laura is so shy that she cannot face strangers, yet her mother enrolls her in a business school where she is, of course, doomed to failure. Next, quite ignoring the fact that Laura has no contact with anyone outside her own family, Amanda decides that her daughter ought to marry and cheerfully sets about finding her a gentleman caller. Some students will want to see Amanda as a silly biddy and nothing more, so it may help to ask: In what ways is she admirable? (See Williams's initial, partially admiring description of her in the cast of characters.)

A kindly, well-intentioned young man, Jim O'Connor is a self-styled go-getter, a pop psychologist. Like Biff Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, Jim is a high school hero whose early promise hasn't materialized. He was acquainted with Laura in school but now remembers her only when prompted. Laura's wide-eyed admiration for him flatters Jim's vanity, and in her presence he grows expansive. Gradually, Laura awakens in him feelings of warmth and protectiveness, as well as a sense that her fragility bespeaks something as precious and rare as her glass unicorn. It is with genuine regret that he shatters her tremulous, newly risen hopes with the revelation that he is engaged to be married to Betty, a young woman as unremarkable as himself.

Laura's collection of glass animals objectifies her fragility, her differentness, her removal from active life. Significantly, the unicorn is her favorite. “Unicorns, aren't they extinct in the modern world?” asks Jim; and he adds, a few lines later, “I'm not made out of glass.” When Jim dances with Laura and accidentally breaks off the unicorn's horn, the mythical creature becomes more like the common horses that surround him, just as Laura, by the very act of dancing, comes a few steps closer to being like everyone else. Although Jim can accept the broken unicorn from Laura as a souvenir, he cannot make room in his life for her. Her fleeting brush with reality does not in the end alter her uniqueness or release her from her imprisonment.

Amanda's charge that Tom manufactures illusions seems a case of the pot calling the kettle black. As we know from Amanda's flighty talk and far-fetched plans for Laura, the mother herself lives in a dream world. But she is right about Tom. A would-be poet, a romantic whose imagination has been fired by Hollywood adventure movies, Tom pays dues to the Merchant Seamen's union instead of paying the light bill. So desperate is he to make his dreams come true, he finally runs away to distant places, like his father before him. In truth, each character in the play has illusions—even Jim, who dreams of stepping from his warehouse job into a future as a millionaire television executive. And as Tom's commentaries point out, at the time...
of the play's action all Americans seemed to be dazzled by illusions, ignoring the gathering threat of World War II. "In Spain, there was Guernica! But here there was only hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars, and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows."

For a challenging study of the play, see Roger B. Stein, "The Glass Menagerie Revisited: Catastrophe without Violence," Western Humanities Review 18 (Spring 1964):141–53. (It is also available in Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Stephen S. Stanton [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1977].) Stein finds in the play themes of both social and spiritual catastrophe: the failure of both Christianity and the American dream. Although some of the play's abundant Christian symbolism and imagery would seem just decoration, students may enjoy looking for it. Scene V, in which Tom tells his mother that Laura will have a gentleman caller, is titled on the screen "Annunciation." Laura says she has dreaded to confess she has left business school because her mother, when disappointed, wears a look "like the picture of Jesus's mother." Amanda is also identified with the music of "Ave Maria." When Tom comes home drunk, he tells Laura of seeing the stage magician Malvolio, an Antichrist who can escape from a nailed coffin and can transform water to wine (also to beer and whiskey). Jim O'Connor is another unsatisfactory Savior: he comes to supper on a Friday night and (symbolically?) is given fish, but unlike the Christ, he can work no deliverance. Laura is described as if she were a saint, or at least a contemplative. When she learns that Jim is engaged to Betty, "the holy candles in the altar of Laura's face have been snuffed out." Compare Williams's instructions to lighting technicians in his production notes:

Shafts of light are focused on selected areas or actors, sometimes in contradistinction to what is the apparent center. For instance, in the quarrel scene between Tom and Amanda, in which Laura has no active part, the clearest pool of light is on her figure. This is also true of the supper scene. The light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas.

Most suggestive of all, Williams keeps associating candles with lightning. Amanda's candelabrum, from the altar of the Church of the Heavenly Rest, had been warped when the church was struck by lightning. And when Tom, in his final speech, calls on Laura to blow her candles out, he declares that "nowadays the world is lit by lightning." The playwright suggests, according to Stein, that a hard, antireligious materialism now prevails. (At least, this line of reasoning may be worth an argument.)

The character of Laura apparently contains traits of Williams's sister, Rose. Although the painfully shy Laura is not an exact portrait of his sister (Laura "was like Miss Rose only in her inescapable 'difference,'" Williams has written), the name of Rose suggests Laura's nickname, "Blue Roses." A young woman with "lovely, heart-breaking eyes," Rose felt acute anxiety in male company. She was pressed by her mother to make a painful social debut at the Knoxville Country Club. For a time she was courted by a junior executive, an ambitious young man who soon suspended his attentions. After the breakup, Rose suffered from mysterious illnesses, showed symptoms of withdrawal, and eventually was committed to the Missouri State Asylum. Williams tells her story in his Memoirs (New York: Doubleday, 1975) 116–28. Like Tom Wingfield, apparently Williams as a young man was a restless dreamer and aspiring writer who left home to wander the country.
In his own memoir, William Jay Smith, who knew Williams in St. Louis as a fellow college student at Washington University, remarks on the background of the play:

I am frequently amused by those who take Tom’s autobiographical projection of his family in *The Glass Menagerie* literally and picture him as having inhabited a run-down, seedy old house, if not a downright hovel. The house on Arundel Place, with its Oriental rugs, silver, and comfortable, if not luxurious furniture, was located in an affluent neighborhood. . . . Our entire bungalow on Telegraph Road would have fitted comfortably into one or two of its rooms. Mrs. Williams presided over it as if it were an antebellum mansion. (Army Brat [New York: Persea, 1980] 190)

An excellent reading of the complete play with Montgomery Clift, Julie Harris, and Jessica Tandy is available on audio cassette from Caedmon (A-301). Additionally, Paul Newman’s 1987 version of *The Glass Menagerie*, starring Joanne Woodward and John Malkovich, with Karen Allen and James Naughton, is available on DVD.

For Williams’s instructions for using the slide projector, see “How to Stage The Glass Menagerie” in the “Writers on Writing” following the play. Personally, we think the slide projector a mistake. In trying to justify it, Williams underestimates the quality of his play’s spoken lines—but what do your students think?

MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Williams. Longman Lecture, comprehension quiz, and essay questions on *The Glass Menagerie*.

**WRITERS ON WRITING**

*Tennessee Williams*, *HOW TO STAGE THE GLASS MENAGERIE*, page 1700

**QUESTIONS**

1. How does Williams feel about theatrical "realism"?

2. How does Williams argue for his use of the slide projector? If you were producing *The Glass Menagerie*, would you follow the playwright’s instructions and use the projector, or leave it out?

3. What other antirealistic devices would Williams employ? Would you expect them to be effective?

**EXPERIMENTAL DRAMA**

*Milcha Sanchez-Scott*, *THE CUBAN SWIMMER*, page 1703

Very little criticism has been written about Milcha Sanchez-Scott, but she is a genuine dramatic talent. *The Cuban Swimmer* is one of the most interesting experimen-
tal plays in recent American theater. Sanchez-Scott is also one of the most talented Hispanic playwrights now active. She is not a prolific writer, but her best work is richly conceived and brilliantly executed. Her plays such as Latina (1980), The Cuban Swimmer (1984), and Roosters (1987) are important additions to contemporary American drama.

The Cuban Swimmer is an experimental play in both form and style, but, unlike most experimental drama, it succeeds. This play requires no critical intervention to clarify its aims. Audiences intuitively follow Sanchez-Scott’s innovative devices, and the play’s cumulative impact is considerable. The Cuban Swimmer creates three distinct but interdependent worlds—the swimmer in the water, her family in the boat behind her, and the radio newscasters in the helicopter. Obviously, none of these worlds can be presented realistically on stage. They must be stylized in some way by the director and the designer. This factor highlights the symbolic—almost allegorical—atmosphere of the play, a quality the author both indulges and satirizes.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of The Cuban Swimmer is the bilingual texture of the dialogue. Sanchez-Scott creates two separate linguistic worlds—the mixture of Spanish and English spoken by the Suárez family and the cliché-ridden media English of the newscasters. These two “dialects” also differ in another crucial sense—one is the private language of love, duty, and tradition; the other is the public language of hyperbole and manipulation. Although The Cuban Swimmer brilliantly employs the visual potential of theatrical spectacle, the play centers on language. Significantly, one does not need to know Spanish to enjoy the play (although a sizable portion of the text is en Español). Sanchez-Scott carefully positions the Spanish so that a monolingual English-speaker can guess most of it from context while still experiencing the cultural richness of the characters’ bilingual existence.

There is so much family drama going on in The Cuban Swimmer that an attentive reader might meaningfully examine almost every relationship—across generations, across genders, across cultures. At the center of the family drama is Eduardo Suárez, whose driving ambition is for his daughter Margarita to achieve athletic fame and success. As both coach and father, he projects his own complex set of needs and desires (as father, immigrant, and exile) on Margarita. The play signals some of his desires overtly and others indirectly. His boat, for instance, is named La Havana, an ironic moniker for a political exile who runs a salvage yard. His wife is—Sanchez-Scott revels in symbolic possibilities—the former Miss Cuba. His nineteen-year-old daughter is the “Cinderella entry” in the “Wrigley Invitational Women’s Swim to Catalina” and probably the only amateur among the professional swimmers.

The ending of The Cuban Swimmer deserves commentary. The play has flirted with symbolism from the opening (in a dozen details from the generically named Abuela to the religious prayers and oaths spoken by the family), but now it unfolds into a sort of Magic Realism reminiscent of García Márquez. Pushed by her father past endurance, Margarita seems to drown. She certainly disappears. Then she miraculously reappears on the breakers off Santa Catalina to win the race. The radio announcers call her upset victory in language that bespeaks not only media hype but also the Latin Catholic imagery that is woven through the play. Here are the play’s final words:

This is indeed a miracle! It’s a resurrection! Margarita Suárez, with a flotilla of boats to meet her, is now walking on the waters, through the breakers . . . onto the beach, with crowds of people cheering her on. What a jubilation! This is a miracle!
Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Milton’s “Lycidas” also seem to be hovering around the play’s climax—or, at the very least, the traditional myths of death, sea-change, and resurrection. Sanchez-Scott has so carefully prepared us for the magical final tableau that it seems simultaneously both surprising and inevitable for this daughter of Miss Cuba and the head usher of the Holy Name Society to be reborn miraculously out of the sea to Santa Catalina—like Jesus walking on the waves. *The Cuban Swimmer*’s comic tone allows us to view this final scene ironically, but the play’s tight symbolic structure also suggests we should take it seriously. That so complex and ambitious an ending could work testifies to Sanchez-Scott’s imaginative power.

Sandra Santa Cruz directed a production of *The Cuban Swimmer* in 1997 at the University of Colorado, Boulder. (The photo for *The Cuban Swimmer* that appears in the book was taken from this production.) She wrote an interesting account of her experiences selecting, producing, and directing the play, from which we offer excerpts:

In selecting a play, I began to search for a work that would look at the Hispanic experience, a community we are not normally accustomed to seeing in American theater. I was disappointed to encounter a number of one-act plays written by Hispanic playwrights whose stories seemed to focus negatively on Hispanic life. While I am not particularly interested in a one-sided, idealized portrait of the Hispanic experience, I don’t agree with those works which portray Hispanics, or any other community, from a demoralizing, degrading perspective. In my opinion, this negative imagery only serves to reinforce and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Rather, I am interested in works that present a range of choices. I found Milcha Sanchez-Scott’s *The Cuban Swimmer* to represent a realistic portrait of a family who oscillates between adversity and triumph; frustration and hope.

From the outset, *The Cuban Swimmer* seemed to capture the imagination, interest and excitement of people throughout the Theater department. It presented a unique set of challenges, the most obvious of which is the setting—the ocean! How would that environment be created? Secondly, it portrays the experience of a Cuban family. How would a cast who was largely unfamiliar with this particular culture and language relate to the language and characterization? Although only a seemingly short one-act play, the events of *The Cuban Swimmer* range from stasis to crisis, from calm to fury. The external world imposes itself through the television media and the natural world through calamity.

In my opinion, *The Cuban Swimmer* explores the fundamental question of identity; one’s own image of “self,” how that “self” is defined and how that self-identity is tested. It’s about the loss of dignity and confidence in oneself and how that affects self-image. The play is driven by the emotional, physical, and spiritual survival of a family whose hopes and dreams have been undermined by a callous external world. Despite the dangers and hardships of the open sea, the real battle lies within the family itself; especially when their image of “self” is shattered.

... Ultimately, Margarita finds the inner strength to emerge triumphant; transcending limitations imposed by an external world and in full possession of her self—“self-possessed,” so to speak.
WRITERS ON WRITING

Milcha Sanchez-Scott, Writing The Cuban Swimmer, page 1716

Milcha Sanchez-Scott provides an extremely interesting account of her life and literary development in M. Elizabeth Osborn’s valuable anthology On New Ground: Contemporary Hispanic-American Plays (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1987). This book also reprints Sanchez-Scott’s Roosters. The excerpt reprinted in Literature describes the author’s discovery of herself as a writer as well as the initial inspiration for The Cuban Swimmer.

DOCUMENTARY DRAMA

Anna Deavere Smith, Scenes from Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992, page 1717

When we think of a play, especially in the context of the word “dramatic,” we imagine characters together on the stage, interacting with one another in an emotionally—and sometimes physically—intense manner. But our understanding of theater’s possibilities has been stretched by playwrights and performers who have fashioned a number of first-rate stage works for a single character and/or actor. Early in the twentieth century, Ruth Draper wrote and appeared in a number of monodramas, winning a host of admirers that ranged from Henry James and George Bernard Shaw to Katharine Hepburn and Maurice Chevalier. One of Samuel Beckett’s most highly regarded works is the one-character drama Krapp’s Last Tape (1958). From Hal Holbrook’s Mark Twain Tonight (1957) to the present day, there have been a number of single-performer theater presentations focused on authors or historical figures whose texts are drawn entirely from the writing of their subjects.

Anna Deavere Smith has extended and modified this tradition by creating a form of “documentary theater” that employs the actual words of real people—all portrayed on stage by the same actor—to reflect contemporary reality. In her introduction to the text of Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992, Smith writes: “Theater can mirror society. But in order to do that theater must embrace diversity. It must include new characters in our human drama that have not been portrayed on our stages. Clearly even white mainstream theater could be more interesting, and more honest, if people of color were integrated into the drama rather than used as walk-on stereotypes. We now have the opportunity to be a part of the discovery of a larger, healthier, more interesting picture of America. I went to Los Angeles as part of this process, to listen to those who had lived through the disturbances and to reiterate their voices in the theater” (Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 [New York: Anchor, 1994] xxi–xxii).

Of note, PBS Pictures issued a VHS tape of Twilight: Los Angeles, which was an adaptation written and performed by Smith, interweaving her work with documentary footage.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of the three scenes from Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992. Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

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QUESTIONS

1. What does the speech by the Anonymous Young Man reveal about the escalation of street violence in Los Angeles? First, he suggests that there has been a loss of respect between generations: the older people no longer object when the police hassle and arrest the younger ones, with the result that the younger ones are now willing to prey on the elders of their own community. Then he says that he intimidated potential rivals in a new neighborhood by shooting at them in broad daylight, which they had previously assumed no one would be crazy enough to do. In both instances, traditional rules have broken down that had previously restrained extreme behavior and kept violence in check.

2. Do you find Mrs. Young-Soon Han to be a sympathetic character? Why or why not? Students’ first reaction to this character might be negative: she is apparently well-to-do (a house, a car, and a high tax rate), yet she portrays herself as a victim, despite the fact that many members of the African American community—toward whom her feelings are mixed at best—live in greater poverty than she does. However, despite the common tendency to assume that the wealthy have no right to be unhappy, you should remind the class, if necessary, that not all problems are materialistic, that money doesn’t solve everything, and that virtue is not always in inverse proportion to one’s bank balance. In Mrs. Young-Soon Han’s favor, it might be pointed out that she is not unsympathetic to the black community (“at least they got something back, you know”); that, as the beginning of her monologue makes clear, she complains of the same invisibility, the same indifference and neglect from the mainstream society, that other minority groups have undergone; and that she has a genuine grievance when she maintains that, no matter what injustices others may have suffered, hardworking industrious store owners like herself have done nothing to deserve the destruction of their businesses.

3. Does the speech by Twilight Bey, which concludes the play, seem conciliatory? Does it explain why the play is called *Twilight*? Even in this brief monologue, we see something of the complexity of the character of Twilight Bey. Though a member of the Crips gang, he is an idealist, one who helped to organize a gang truce at a time when others told him that it couldn’t be done. It’s hard not to consider his words conciliatory when he says:

   I see the light as knowledge and the wisdom of the world and understanding others, and in order for me to be a, to be a true human being, I can’t forever dwell in darkness, I can’t forever dwell in the idea, of just identifying with people like me and understanding me and mine.

And if one does associate this speaker and his assumptions with the play’s title, it helps to illuminate the rich ambiguity that emerges from the author’s researches into her immensely complex subject: for all his desire to connect with a broader humanity, he associates the term “Twilight” with limbo, and several times in these few lines describes himself as “stuck in limbo.”

4. Taking these monologues together, what do you see as the mood that emerges from the text—despair? hopefulness? resignation? Explain. As suggested above, the
speeches of these witnesses and participants provide a basis for all of these conclusions, and no doubt for many others. How your students respond to this question should make for a passionate and illuminating class discussion.

—Michael Palma

WRITERS ON WRITING

Anna Deavere Smith, A CALL TO THE COMMUNITY, page 1727

It may be hard to imagine that there’s anyone in America who doesn’t know who Rodney King is, until we recall that the incident that made his name a household word took place nearly twenty years ago. Anna Deavere’s Smith’s commentary is, therefore, useful on the primary level of making the facts of the case known to those who may be too young to remember them. It is even more useful in resolving any issues that might arise regarding exactly what it is that she is doing—and, equally important, not doing—in Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 and her other dramatic works. As she says, it is not her intention to offer, or even to seek, solutions to the social problems that her plays are concerned with; instead, her focus is on “the processes of the problems.” Also worth noting is her statement that “I am first looking for the humanness inside the problems,” making clear that her emphasis is on the creation of literature, not sociology. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, she rejects the notion, put forward perhaps by some people of an overly idealistic temperament, that there can emerge from this welter of perspectives a single “unifying voice” that would presumably have a healing effect. Rather, she reminds us of the fact that we all perceive issues and situations from within the limits of our own ethnicity, and she suggests that realizing these limits is the necessary first step toward transcending them.
This chapter may be particularly useful for students to read before they tackle a play about whose greatness or inferiority you have urgent convictions. The chapter probably doesn't deserve to be dealt with for long in class, but it might lead to a writing assignment: to comment on the merits of any play in the book.

If you assign students to write a play review (see “Reviewing a Play” in the chapter “Writing About a Play”), you might like to have them read this chapter first.
This chapter presents a small cross-section of American plays to supplement the main selections in the book. This section can be taught as a unit to represent the range of modern American drama in both style and subject matter, or instructors can use individual plays to illustrate themes discussed elsewhere in the Drama section. David Hwang’s one-act play *The Sound of a Voice* and Edward Bok Lee’s *El Santo Americano* provide additional selections for “The Modern Theater,” particularly in terms of their experimental techniques. Jane Martin’s *Beauty*, like David Ives’s *Sure Thing*, is a very funny skit that also subtly engages some very serious concerns. Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, a watershed event in the development of modern American drama, is a tremendously powerful work that also—like the plays by Lee and Hwang—illuminates the expressive possibilities of theater beyond the conventions of realism. August Wilson’s *Fences* likewise serves as an excellent text for a discussion of “Modern Theater,” since, like Miller’s masterpiece, it shows that tragic grandeur can be found in the humblest of lives. Critical statements by the playwrights follow four of the five plays. Finally, these plays provide students with potential subjects for research papers. Possible paper topics are suggested in the notes on individual plays.

**David Henry Hwang, The Sound of a Voice, page 1738**

David Hwang’s short play *The Sound of a Voice* is simple, direct, and deeply mysterious. The play unfolds like an eerie folktale. A nameless man visits an enigmatic female hermit who is reputed to be a witch. Although they both recognize that they are potential foes, they fall into a doomed love affair. Eventually, one of them is destroyed. Hwang’s treatment combines elements from both Eastern and Western traditions. *The Sound of a Voice* borrows many features from *Nō* drama, the courtly theater of Japan. Despite their elaborate and allusive language, *Nō* plays have simple narrative structures and focus mostly on the interaction of two principal characters (one of whom is usually a ghost haunting a mysterious locale). Like *Nō* drama, *The Sound of a Voice* prominently deploys music to build a brooding atmosphere rife with emotive impact and symbolic significance. *The Sound of a Voice* also resembles the short symbolist plays of William Butler Yeats, J. M. Synge, and August Strindberg. Yeats’s plays, which masterfully combine elements of *Nō* drama with English verse tragedy to create a poetic form for folk material, seem particularly influential on *The Sound of a Voice*.

The main reason to outline the rich literary background of *The Sound of a Voice* is not that the play needs such explication. Hwang’s play wears its learning lightly; the influences have all been assimilated into a remarkably straightforward and acces-
sibly contemporary style. The importance of Hwang's diverse sources is to demonstrate the complex heritage of an Asian American playwright. There is sometimes a temptation to reduce the work of minority writers to mere autobiography, but in this short play Hwang consciously draws from a Japanese genre that has nothing directly to do with either the Chinese heritage of his family or the historical traditions of the author's native language, English. Hwang himself has complained about how narrowly he has been stereotyped as a writer:

I first became aware of the simplistic nature of this stereotyping when I did the two Japanese plays *The Sound of a Voice* and *The House of Sleeping Beauties*. I thought this work was a departure because these were the first plays I'd written that didn't deal with being Chinese American, with race and assimilation; I felt that they were tragic love stories. Yet they were not perceived as being a departure, because they had Asian actors. (*Contemporary Authors*, ed. Susan M. Trosky, vol. 132 [Detroit: Gale Research])

While *The Sound of a Voice* draws from Hwang's consciousness as an Asian writer, it is also a work that grows out of the traditions of American experimental theater.

**QUESTIONS**

1. How does Hwang’s names for his two characters (“Man” and “Woman”) affect our reading of the play? Although the author lets the woman’s name (Hanako) slip into the stage directions, he otherwise refers to them only by their generic titles of Man and Woman. The two characters never give one another their true names but only self-evident fictions (Yokiko, Man Who Fears Silence, and Man Who Fears Women). By refusing to name them, Hwang encourages us to see them as archetypal or symbolic characters. The visitor is all men, and Hanako is, implicitly, womankind. Their story, by extension, bears some symbolic significance to all male-female relations. When the Woman suggests “Man Who Fears Women” as a name for her visitor, she underscores the symbolic nature of their relationship. The action generally seems not to be realistic in detail but symbolic in import. Hwang is not trying to recreate the texture of daily reality as a naturalistic dramatist might; instead, he attempts to portray a mythic drama—a folk legend come to life. Although the action of Hwang's play takes place in Japan, one could easily imagine a staged production of it set in rural New England or on the Louisiana bayou. All you would have to change is to substitute a Vermont fiddle or Cajun violin for the shakuhachi.

2. Why does the man visit the woman in her remote house? We never know exactly why he visits, but we gradually learn that he came on a quest or dare to kill her. The woman tells of other men who arrived because “great glory was to be had by killing the witch in the woods.” He initially believes (as do the nearby villagers) that she is a witch who enchants and destroys the men who visit her home. He even imagines (scene 7) that her flowers contain the trapped spirits of her previous lovers. As the man falls in love with her, his desire to kill her disappears, but he is nonetheless plagued by guilt at his failure to keep to his quest.

3. The woman is unsure of the length of time since her last visitor. What effect does that uncertainty have on our sense of the dramatic situation? This detail con-
tributes to the mythic quality of the action. It seems possible that she is a supernatural being unaffected by human mortality; or, perhaps more to the point, that this particular plot is played again and again between her and generations of young men. Moreover, at the very least, it adds to the sense of mystery that pervades the play.

4. Does this play have a central conflict? Like Japanese etiquette, the action of Hwang’s play is understated; the real drama is implied mostly in the details. Both the man and the woman understand from the opening scene that they are locked in a potentially mortal combat, but neither of them directly admits that knowledge. Everything concerning the central conflict emerges slowly—and often indirectly—at least insofar as the audience is concerned. But Hwang’s deliberately low-key style eventually intensifies the dramatic tension as it creates a heavy sense of mystery we become anxious to resolve. The central dramatic conflict is the symbolic battle that the man and woman play out. The woman seems to win by removing the man’s fears and arousing love in him. Ironically, however, the man, who could not defeat her by force, manages to destroy her by love. His decision to abandon her after their professions of devotion drives her to suicide.

5. When we read a play, we focus mostly on the text. When we see a play in the theater, however, we experience it visually as well as verbally. What nonverbal elements play important roles in Hwang’s play? The Sound of a Voice illustrates the importance of nonverbal elements in achieving theatrical effects. Two complete scenes (4 and 6), as well as the conclusion, are played without words. Another episode (scene 8) depends on a visual trick (the man balancing his chin on the point of a sword) to create dramatic tension. Likewise, one of the central contests between the two characters is a physical fight with wooden sticks. The play’s finale is a visual tableau. Music also plays an important role in establishing and maintaining the mood of the play. Students will be able to find other nonverbal elements of the play. Hwang reminds us of the importance of spectacle, even in a modest, two-character play. A play works by total representation of a drama, not by the words alone.

There are a great many possible topics for papers based on Hwang’s play. Students could trace a single image from the play (flowers would be an obvious candidate) and discuss its significance. Another interesting notion would be to discuss the use of music in the play: what does it contribute to the atmosphere and tone that words could not? Another good subject would be to examine the two scenes in the play (4 and 6) that are played without words: what effect do they have on the structure and feeling of the drama? Students could also discuss the end of The Sound of a Voice: is the woman’s death tragic? The theme of suicide would be an illuminating topic because both characters contemplate the idea, and the woman hangs herself at the end of the play. Finally, students could compare and contrast The Sound of a Voice with one of its models—either a Nō drama or one of Yeats’s short plays. Nō plays are generally very brief (around ten pages). Arthur Waley’s classic The Nō Plays of Japan (New York: Grove, 1957) provides an excellent starting point. Any play by the most celebrated master of the form, Seami, such as Tsunemasa or Kumasaka (both in the Waley book), would work well. Several of Yeats’s short plays provide excellent contrasts to Hwang’s piece, most notably Deidre, The Only Jealousy of Emer, and Purgatory.
WRITERS ON WRITING

David Henry Hwang, MULTICULTURAL THEATER, page 1752

QUESTIONS

1. What events contributed to Hwang’s heightened consciousness of his Asian roots?

2. What importance does Hwang feel mythology has in drama?

3. On what does Hwang think the notion of “ethnic theater” depends?

Edward Bok Lee, EL SANTO AMERICANO, page 1754

In 2006, after the publication of his collection Real Karaoke People, Edward Bok Lee gave several interviews in which he stated, with great consistency, his intentions as a writer. In one he said, “I write to not forget the things that made me who I am; to preserve the beautiful complexities and contradictions that make people more human than we can sometimes bear,” and in another, “I’m most gratified when someone’s read something of mine and it’s changed the way they look at their friend, or their neighbor. I think that’s really all I can do as a storyteller—tell a story that connects with a reader and helps them empathize, see the person on the bus differently, with more humanity.” He accomplishes this goal in the compact El Santo Americano, letting us see the inner pain and frustration of two people who seem from the outside to be not much more than a hapless buffoon and an implacable shrew.

Here are some possible answers to the questions given at the end of El Santo Americano. Other answers, of equal merit, may occur to you and your students.

QUESTIONS

1. When the play opens, what is the situation Clay and Evalana find themselves in? In the dead of night, Clay is driving his wife, Evalana, and his son, Jesse, to Mexico, where he hopes to restart his career as a professional wrestler. That they are still in the United States is shown by his twice referring, at the end of the play’s first speech, to Mexico as there, not here. Since we later discover that Clay is carrying a gun and that Evalana and Jesse have been “living in some other town,” apart from him, it seems quite likely that he has kidnapped them.

2. What has just happened to Clay in his last wrestling match? He was supposed to lose the match (which appears to be his customary situation) to a new young wrestler being groomed as a contender by Clay’s manager, Darton. But, angered by the real physical pain his opponent was causing him, he let his accumulated frustrations boil over and defeated his opponent, as he says, “fair and square.” As a result, he has been fired by Darton and is presumably washed up as a wrestler in the United States.

3. Why does Clay put a gun in his mouth? Does he seem to be seriously considering suicide? There’s certainly enough gone wrong in his life to drive a man to want to kill himself. His wife can’t stand him, his son is ashamed of him, he literally...
makes his living as a loser—and now even that has been taken from him. No doubt his manic optimism is a way of fending off depression, if not outright despair. Still, as the stage direction tells us, “he then, as a little boy might, twirls the gun on his finger, and pretends what it’d be like to shoot himself in the head. . . . in strange fun.” Even when he puts the gun in his mouth, he only “holds it there for a second or two with his hand, then lets go.” He may be flirting with the idea of ending it all, if only as an escape option to keep him from feeling hopelessly trapped, but he doesn’t seem terribly serious about it.

4. What does the play’s final moment imply will happen between Clay and Evalana? She has already tried twice to escape from him and run off, so she is not likely to be fazed by the prospect of making her way alone through the desert in the middle of the night. Is she pointing the gun just to keep him at bay until she can escape, or does she mean to pull the trigger? We can’t be certain, but she does seem to despise him enough to do it.

5. Who is “El Santo Americano”? Do we know for sure? Again, we cannot know for certain, but the context would suggest that this name, which is never mentioned in the play itself, is the one Clay intends to use professionally as a wrestler in Mexico. There may be trace elements of irony in the phrase: at times Clay portrays himself as suffering for the well-being of others, and at the very end of the play he may be about to undergo a kind of twisted martyrdom.

6. What does the Mexican wrestler’s mask suggest about Clay’s sense of his own identity? As he swings from self-pity to empty boasting, he shows at best a fairly shaky sense of who he really is—and, to the degree that he does know himself, he doesn’t seem to be very happy with that person. The mask, like the flight to another country and the intent to adopt a new professional identity, suggests a deep desire to cover up, if not obliterate, his own identity.

WRITERS ON WRITING

Edward Bok Lee, ON BEING A KOREAN AMERICAN WRITER, page 1758

Edward Bok Lee provides an interesting perspective on the new generation of Asian American writers. He suggests that their innovations go beyond topical subject matter and identity politics into the mysteries of cultural “soul.”

Jane Martin, BEAUTY, page 1759

No one knows for certain who Jane Martin really is, but everyone familiar with her work knows that she is a steely-eyed observer of the contemporary American scene, with a sharp ear for dialogue and a sharp eye for the foibles and excesses of human nature. The one-act play Beauty showcases not only her wit and her mimetic skills, but her inventiveness as well: even after she seems to have exhausted all the possibilities of her theme, the play’s very last line of dialogue forces us to think again about everything that has gone before.
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Reread the discussion of high and low comedy. Which of the two terms, in your view, better applies to Beauty? Explain and support your choice. The play's satiric treatment of cultural shallowness and its occasionally witty turns of phrase are reminiscent of high comedy, but overall it fits more comfortably into the genre of low comedy. Carla and Bethany are not especially sophisticated: their dialogue would sound much more at home in Seinfeld than in The Importance of Being Earnest, and their cultural references are to mass culture—not The Arabian Nights but the animated Disney film Aladdin. Also, the on-stage explosion at the end of the play is quite farcical in nature.

2. Much of the point of the play depends on Carla and Bethany seeing one another as opposites. But do they also have any important traits in common? Despite their perceptions of one another, their differences seem far outweighed by their similarities: both of them are totally self-absorbed; the first half of the play is largely a struggle between them to be the center of attention; and Bethany has lied to her employer about her uncle so that she can go to the beach, even though her uncle actually is in the hospital in intensive care. Each one also claims to be deeply dissatisfied with her own life and envious of the other.

3. Is Bethany's unhappiness with herself a demonstration of her own superficiality, or is it a commentary on the superficiality of our culture? Can it be both at the same time? At first, the phrase “my entire bitch of a life” is a bit shocking in the mouth of someone who went straight from college to a high-paying job, has published several short stories, and is very attractive. And yet virtually every one of us, even the most privileged, has at one time or another begun a pessimistic forecast by saying, “With my luck. . . .” As Abraham Maslow’s famous “hierarchy of needs” might suggest, discontent and feelings of wanting—perhaps even deserving—more are fairly universal; satisfaction is fleeting and quickly replaced by new desires. One commentator, assessing the perceived sour mood in the nation during the 2000 election campaign, said something to the effect that, if someone had told you in 1975 that in the year 2000 the Soviet Union will have collapsed and Eastern Europe will be free, South Africa will have ended apartheid and established black majority rule without a civil war, and the Dow will be over 10,000, you would expect that there would be dancing in the streets.

4. Do Carla's claims of unhappiness with her appearance and her life seem genuine, or are they more accurately described by Bethany's reactions to them? The thrust of the play, with its emphasis on the theme of “the grass is always greener,” would seem to suggest that Carla's complaint is genuine. Remember also that Bethany admits to being “jealous” of Carla, and that Bethany is given to exaggeration; one wonders, for instance, where she manages to find so many men who want to spend a long time getting to know her as a person before they will have sex with her. And just as the play uses the plot device of Aladdin's three magic wishes, we might think here of another legendary character, one whose situation was not nearly as enviable as it seemed from the outside—King Midas.

5. Reread Bethany's speech, beginning “But it’s what everybody wants,” just before she makes her final wish. How validly, in your view, does she speak for “everybody” here? On a superficial level (which is, perhaps, the only level on which
Bethany operates), we might see some truth in this statement. Everyone wants to be attractive to others, to be fussed over and made much of, and to enjoy the confidence and self-assurance that we assume the beautiful possess. But further class discussion will no doubt lead to the conclusion that she is way over the top in suggesting that it is a universal, all-consuming desire churning just below the surface of every human interaction. There are many other things that some people want more than beauty—love, wealth, career advancement, personal fulfillment, and so on. One does not have to be beautiful already to agree with Carla's immediate response: “Well, it’s not what I want.”

6. What elements of tone and characterization help make Beauty an effective comedy? Tonally, the play is an effective comedy because of the rapid pace of the dialogue, the author's accurate ear for contemporary speech rhythms and phrasing (“. . . and I'm like nuts so I say, you know . . .”), the occasional one-liners (“Dealing what, I've even given up chocolate”), and the on-target pop culture references. In terms of characterization, as discussed above, Martin is quite effective in pointing out the narcissism and superficiality that are pervasive in contemporary American society—and so pervasive in these two young women that these qualities come through a sudden and stunning mind swap almost totally intact, with Carla/Bethany exulting over her acquisition of Carla's legs and Bethany/Carla lamenting that “I can't meet Ralph Lauren wearing these shoes!”

Arthur Miller, DEATH OF A SALESMAN, page 1764

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Miller's opening stage directions call for actors to observe imaginary walls when the action is in the present, and to step freely through walls when the scene is in the past. Do you find this technique of staging effective? Why or why not?

2. Miller has professed himself fascinated by the “agony of someone who has some driving, implacable wish in him” (Paris Review interview). What—as we learn in the opening scene—are Willy Loman's obsessions?

3. What case can be made for seeing Linda as the center of the play: the character around whom all events revolve? Sum up the kind of person she is.

4. Seeing his father's Boston side-girl has a profound effect on Biff. How would you sum it up?

5. Apparently Biff's discovery of Willy's infidelity took place before World War II, about 1939. In this respect, does Death of a Salesman seem at all dated? Do you think it possible, in the present day, for a son to be so greatly shocked by his father's sexual foibles that the son's whole career would be ruined?

6. How is it possible to read the play as the story of Biff's eventual triumph? Why does Biff, at the funeral, give his brother a "hopeless" look?

7. How are we supposed to feel about Willy's suicide? In what way is Willy, in killing himself, self-deluded to the end?
8. What meanings do you find in the flute music? In stockings—those that Willy gives to the Boston girlfriend and those he doesn’t like to see Linda mending? In Biff’s sneakers with “University of Virginia” lettered on them (which he later burns)? In seeds and gardening?

9. Of what importance to the play are Charley and his son Bernard? How is their father-son relationship different from the relationship between Willy and Biff?

10. What do you understand Bernard to mean in telling Willy, “sometimes . . . it’s better for a man just to walk away”?

11. Explain Charley’s point when he argues, “The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you’re a salesman, and you don’t know that.” (Miller, in his introduction to the play, makes an applicable comment: “When asked what Willy was selling, what was in his bags, I could only reply, ‘Himself.’”)

12. What do you make of the character of Ben? Do you see him as a realistic character? As a figment of Willy’s imagination?

13. Suppose Miller had told the story of Willy and Biff in chronological order. If the incident in the Boston hotel had come early in the play, instead of late, what would have been lost?

14. Another death of another salesman is mentioned in this play: that of Dave Singleman. How does Willy view Singleman’s death? Is Willy’s attitude our attitude?

15. In a famous speech in the final Requiem, Charley calls a salesman a man who “don’t put a bolt to a nut,” and Charley recalls that Willy “was a happy man with a batch of cement.” Sum up the theme or general truth that Charley states. At what other moments in the play does this theme emerge? Why is Willy, near death, so desperately eager to garden?

16. When the play first appeared in 1949, some reviewers thought it a bitter attack upon the capitalist system. Others found in it social criticism by a writer committed to a faith in democracy and free enterprise. What do you think? Does the play make any specific criticism of society?

17. Miller has stated his admiration for Henrik Ibsen: “One is constantly aware, in watching his plays, of process, change, development.” How does this comment apply to A Doll’s House? Who or what changes or develops in the course of Death of a Salesman?

Directed by Elia Kazan, with Lee J. Cobb superbly cast as Willy Loman, Death of a Salesman was first performed on Broadway on February 10, 1949. Originally, Miller had wanted to call the play The Inside of a Head, and he had planned to begin it with “an enormous face the height of the proscenium arch which would appear and then open up.” Fortunately, he settled upon less mechanical methods to reveal Willy’s psy-
In later describing what he thought he had done, Miller said he tried to dramatize "a disintegrating personality at that terrible moment when the voice of the past is no longer distant but quite as loud as the voice of the present." *Death of a Salesman* has often been called "poetic" despite its mostly drab speech. At first, Miller had planned to make its language more obviously that of poetry, and in an early draft of the play he wrote much of it in verse. He then turned it into prose on deciding that American actors wouldn't feel at home in verse or wouldn't be able to speak it properly. Miller's account of the genesis of the play is given in his introduction to his *Collected Plays* (New York: Viking, 1959).

In the same introduction, Miller tells why he thinks the play proved effective in the theater but did not make an effective film. Among other reasons, the movie version transferred Willy to actual scenes that in the play he had only imagined, and thus destroyed the play's dramatic tension. It seems more effective—and more disturbing—to show a man losing touch with his surroundings, holding conversations with people who still exist only in his mind. Keeping Willy fixed to the same place throughout the play, while his mind wanders, objectifies Willy's terror. "The screen," says Miller, "is time-bound and earth-bound compared to the stage, if only because its preponderant emphasis is on the visual image. . . . The movie's tendency is always to wipe out what has gone before, and it is thus in constant danger of transforming the dramatic into narrative." Film buffs may care to dispute this observation.

Miller's play is clearly indebted to naturalism. Willy's deepening failure parallels that of his environment: the house increasingly constricted by the city whose growth has killed the elms, prevented anything from thriving, and blotted out human hope—"Gotta break your neck to see a star in this yard." Heredity also works against Willy. As in a Zola novel, one generation repeats patterns of behavior established by its parent. Both Willy and Biff have been less successful than their brothers; presumably both Willy and his "wild-hearted" father were philanderers; both fathers failed their sons and left them insecure. Willy explains, "Dad left when I was such a baby . . . I still feel—kind of temporary about myself."

The play derives also from expressionism. Miller has acknowledged this debt in an interview:

I know that I was very moved in many ways by German expressionism when I was in school: . . . I learned a great deal from it. I used elements of it that were fused into *Death of a Salesman*. For instance, I purposefully would not give Ben any character, because for Willy he has no character—which is, psychologically, expressionist because so many memories come back with a simple tag on them: something represents a threat to you, or a promise. (*Paris Review* 38 [Summer 1966])

Ben is supposed to embody Willy's visions of success, but some students may find him a perplexing character. Some attention to Ben's speeches will show that Ben does not give a realistic account of his career, or an actual portrait of his father, but voices Willy's dream versions. In the last scene before the Requiem, Ben keeps voicing Willy's hopes for Biff and goads Willy on to self-sacrifice. Willy dies full of illusions. Unable to recognize the truth of Biff's self-estimate ("I am not a leader of men"), Willy still believes that Biff will become a business tycoon if only he has $20,000 of insurance money behind him. One truth gets through to Willy: Biff loves him.
Class discussion will probably elicit that Willy Loman is far from being an Oedipus. Compared with an ancient Greek king, Willy is unheroic, a low man as his name suggests. In his mistaken ideals, his language of stale jokes and clichés, his petty infidelity, and his deceptions, he suffers from the smallness of his mind and seems only partially to understand his situation. In killing himself for an insurance payoff that Biff doesn't need, is Willy just a pitiable fool? Pitiable, perhaps, but no mere fool: he rises to dignity through self-sacrifice. “It seems to me,” notes Miller (in his introduction to his Collected Plays), “that there is of necessity a severe limitation of self-awareness in any character, even the most knowing . . . and more, that this very limit serves to complete the tragedy and, indeed, to make it all possible.” (Miller's introduction also protests measuring Death of a Salesman by the standards of classical tragedy and finding it a failure.)

In 1983 Miller directed a successful production in Beijing, with Chinese actors. In 1984 the Broadway revival with Dustin Hoffman as Willy, later shown on PBS television, brought the play new currency. Hoffman's performance is available on DVD. Miller added lines to fit the short-statured Hoffman: buyers laughing at Willy call him “a shrimp.” The revival drew a provocative comment from Mimi Kramer in the New Criterion for June 1984: she was persuaded that Miller does not sympathize with Willy Loman and never did.

Since 1949 certain liberal attitudes—towards aggression, ambition, and competitiveness—have moved from the periphery of our culture to its center, so that the views of the average middle class Broadway audience are now actually in harmony with what I take to have been Miller's views all along. In 1949 it might have been possible to view Willy as only the victim of a big, bad commercial system. In 1984, it is impossible not to see Miller's own distaste for all Willy's attitudes and petty bourgeois concerns, impossible not to come away from the play feeling that Miller's real judgment of his hero is that he has no soul.

For a remarkable short story inspired by the play, see George Garrett's “The Lion Hunter” in King of the Mountain (New York: Scribner, 1957).

A natural topic for writing and discussion, especially for students who have also read Othello and a play by Sophocles: How well does Miller succeed in making the decline and fall of Willy Loman into a tragedy? Is tragedy still possible today? For Miller's arguments in favor of the ordinary citizen as tragic hero, students may read his brief essay “Tragedy and the Common Man” in the “Writers on Writing” feature following the play.


MyLiteratureLab™ Resources. Biographical information, critical overview, bibliography, and links for Miller. Interpreting Death of a Salesman. Longman Lecture, comprehension quiz, reading and evaluation questions, and writing prompts on Death of a Salesman.

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QUESTIONS

1. In arguing that a tragedy can portray an ordinary man, how does Miller find an ally in Sigmund Freud? See Miller’s second paragraph and Freud’s comments on Oedipus, page 1275.

2. According to Miller, what evokes tragedy? Unlike the Greek theorist, Miller finds the sense of tragedy arising not from pity and fear, but from contemplating a character who would give his life for personal dignity.

3. In Miller’s view, why is tragedy not an expression of pessimism? What outlook does a tragedy express?

4. Consider what Miller says about pathos, and try to apply it to Death of a Salesman. Does the play persuade you that Willy Loman would have won his battle? That he isn’t witless and insensitive? Or is the play (in Miller’s terms) not tragic but only pathetic?

August Wilson, FENCES, page 1833

Shortly after August Wilson’s death in October 2005, the political commentator and sportswriter Dave Zirin published a tribute to Wilson that included these observations:

[In 1988 when I saw Fences on Broadway, all I knew was that I was 14 years old and thought going to a play would be as much fun as a shot glass of morphine. At the time, I was far more interested in [New York Mets Centerfielder] Mookie Wilson than August Wilson. I settled into my seat and assumed what anthropologists call “the slouch of the sulking brat.” I had no idea that my every conception of theater, sports, and racism, was about to be turned on its head. . . .

Eventually Troy, an absolute black hole of bitterness, almost swallows the Maxson family whole, pushing away his wife, child and friends. Troy can’t overcome the contradiction in his life: the journey from superstar to picking up trash for nickels and dimes. He can’t stand the thought of Cory getting abused by the athletic industrial complex in the same way. But he also can’t stand the thought of Cory succeeding where he failed—just because he happened to be born “twenty years too early.” He also cheats on his wife Rose because he hates the idea that she could love him for who he is—and that she is the best he could do, describing his marriage to her as “living for eighteen years on first base.”

The title of the play is illustrative of Wilson’s brilliance. Troy spends considerable time on stage building a fence for their modest home at the constant prodding of Rose. Her desire to see it built becomes an openly symbolic issue that the characters comment on with insight and sadness which rescues it from being a ham-handed symbolic device. His friend Bono remarks that “Some people build fences to keep people out. Others build fences to keep people in. Rose
wants to hold onto you all. She loves you.” Troy also makes direct reference to the fence. To him it’s the last line of defense against the hellhounds nipping at his heels.

But the word “fences” recalls something else, never mentioned explicitly in the play. “Fences” is baseball slang for the outfield wall that must be cleared for a home run. The phrase “swing for the fences” or “clear the fences” is derived from this. Troy, who could clear the fences with ease on the field, feels trapped by them in his life. Sports, which held the promise of escape, instead fenced him in and swallowed him whole, and he attempts to take his family with him. In the play’s final scenes, we see that his family has more strength than Troy ever gave them credit for—strength to withstand even his pull toward self-destruction.


Zirin begins by touching on something that we hope—and expect—will be reflected in your experience of teaching Fences—that the universality of Wilson’s themes, his genius for character creation, and the sheer emotional power of the play will, in the end, win over even the most resistant and unsophisticated of adolescents. Zirin gives a succinct discussion of the meaning of the play’s title and the varied layers of its function and symbolic resonance in the course of the drama; we may add to his examples the very beginning of Act 1, Scene 2, when Rose stands in the yard hanging the laundry on the line and singing, “Jesus, be a fence all around me every day / Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way.”

Also noteworthy is Zirin’s observation that “his family has more strength than Troy ever gave them credit for—strength to withstand even his pull toward self-destruction.” Troy is far from being the only character in the play who has had to deal with disappointment, frustration, or adversity in his life: Rose speaks quite eloquently, both to Troy and after his death, about her own loneliness and the limited choices in her life; Lyons tells of the emptiness inside him that can only be eased by his music; and Bono offers a moving reminiscence of how he has tried throughout his life to compensate for the absence of his father. Yet each of them remains gentle-souled and compassionate throughout the play, and none of them lets unhappiness or thwarted hopes congeal into bitterness and anger, as Troy increasingly does. (We might also mention, however, as others have pointed out, that at the end of the play every adult member of Troy’s family has either been swallowed up by or sought refuge in some sort of institution—Gabriel in the mental hospital, Lyons in the workhouse, Rose in the church, and Cory in the Marines; quite clearly, Troy has played a major role in driving them into these situations, either through active intervention, in the case of Gabriel, or in his treatment of them.)

In the second paragraph of the excerpt, Zirin addresses the play’s central concern—the frustrations of Troy Maxson’s life and the effect of those frustrations on his attitudes, his behavior, and his dealings with everyone around him. And, given the terms in which he casts his brief discussion, Zirin also touches on what may be the central issue of Fences as far as class presentation is concerned—the great, perhaps even insuperable difficulty of trying to make Troy seem an admirable or even sympathetic character in the eyes of your students. Cory is the character that students are most likely to identify with, and Troy’s treatment of his younger son will almost certainly strike them as arbitrary, mean-spirited, and willfully cruel—and never more so than in the climax of the exchange between them in Act 1, Scene 3, when Troy
angrily cries out, “Who the hell say I got to like you?” and says that in caring for his son he is motivated exclusively by responsibility. Given his fury and his refusal to throw the boy even the slightest crumb of affection, his claim to Rose at the end of the scene—that he is trying to toughen Cory so that he’ll be able to face the cruel world out there—comes across as only a partial truth as well as being rather disingenuous. (He displays much less self-awareness than, say, the doctor-narrator of William Carlos Williams’s memorable short story “The Use of Force,” who recognizes that he has used his authority and good intentions as a cover for his angrily overpowering a little girl who obstinately refuses treatment.)

There seems to be no end to Troy’s unpleasant and off-putting qualities. He is irritated a good deal of the time, and he disputes virtually everything that is said to him; when he has no more substantive rejoinder, he’ll resort to saying “I ain’t talking about no” whatever the subject happens to be. Given the play’s baseball motif, his attitude is reminiscent of Yankees manager Casey Stengel’s response to reporters who second-guessed him: “You’re full of shit, and I’ll tell you why.” Troy constantly complains about others disregarding his wishes, while he constantly and categorically refuses to do anything that anyone else wants him to, such as going to hear Lyons play; he even goes so far as to refuse Lyons’s repayment of his loans so that he can continue to grouse about how Lyons never pays him back. He also feels free to find fault with everyone while denying everyone else the same right in return: as Lyons tells him near the end of the play’s first scene, “Now I don’t come criticizing you and how you live. I just come by to ask you for ten dollars. I don’t wanna hear all that about how you live.”

This hypocrisy that accompanies his unending self-righteousness is perhaps Troy’s most grating characteristic. He complains that all the garbage-truck drivers are white and demands to be made a driver himself, even though, as it turns out, he has no driver’s license and no experience driving a truck—as well as no concern whatsoever about his lack of those basic qualifications. As with his treatment of Cory, his betrayal of Rose is quite alienating, and our alienation is compounded by his lame-sounding excuses and justifications. After sidestepping Bono’s frequent questions and warnings about Alberta, Troy finally tells his friend, in Act 2, Scene 1, that “As long as it sets right in my heart . . . then I’m okay. Cause that’s all I listen to. It’ll tell me right from wrong every time.” Later in that same scene, when he breaks the news to Rose with the explanation that “after eighteen years I wanted to steal second,” it’s hard not to cheer her on when she uses his own rhetorical device on him—with much greater justification than he ever had—and says, “We’re not talking about baseball! We’re talking about you going off to lay in bed with another woman . . . and then bring it home to me.” And after everything, he can still say (in Act 2, Scene 3): “A man’s got to do what’s right for him. I ain’t sorry for nothing I done. It felt right in my heart.”

So, in the light of all this, how do you persuade students that such a man is worthy of their understanding and sympathy, let alone that he has the dignity and stature of a tragic protagonist? In a different world, Troy Maxson would have been a superstar with a major-league baseball team and would have enjoyed all the fame and wealth that his talent and achievements entitled him to, but here he must toil every day at a physically demanding and socially disdained job (remind students that Troy did not have the option of saying the equivalent of “I’m not going to flip burgers”). And he is forced to watch as the world changes around him, tasting the gall—or, more precisely, denying the changes and refusing to taste it—that the ruination of his dreams and his
life was caused, as much as anything, by his bad luck in being born too soon.

A great deal of Troy’s energy is consumed by his shielding himself from this insupportable awareness. Wilson hints at this element of his nature early in the opening scene, when Rose complains about Troy’s continuing to shop at the local grocery store despite the lower prices and greater selection at the A&P; she tells him: “There’s a lot of people don’t know they can do no better than they doing now. That’s just something you got to learn.” But of course that is something that Troy absolutely refuses to learn, because to do so would bring his entire belief system—and his ability to cope with reality as he understands it—crashing down. The point comes up again at the end of Act 1, Scene 3, when he tells Rose that he decided at the time of Cory’s birth that “that boy wasn’t getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports,” to which Rose replies, “Times have changed from when you was young, Troy. People change. The world’s changing around you and you can’t even see it.” There are depths to Troy: while it is true that he wants to protect Cory from the hurts he has endured, there is also truth in Rose’s observations, and truth as well in Cory’s statement at the very end of Act 1 that Troy is thwarting his dreams “Just cause you didn’t have a chance! You just scared I’m gonna be better than you, that’s all!”

Very early in Act 2, as cited above in Dave Zirin’s comments, Bono tells Troy that “Some people build fences to keep people out . . . and other people build fences to keep people in.” While our instinctive reaction to that statement is to class Troy exclusively with the first group, a case might be made that he is actually in both camps, building a fence around himself and excluding everyone, yet at the same time trying to keep his loved ones safe from the threatening world outside—as we see in the passionate soliloquy that ends Act 2, Scene 2, when, having just learned of Alberta’s death in giving birth to their daughter, he defiantly asserts to “Mr. Death” that he intends to build a fence around what belongs to him to keep it safe until the two of them fight their final battle. The complexity of Troy’s character is shown also in his attitude toward his father, whom he admires—and strives to emulate—for his sense of responsibility in working hard and taking care of his family, but whom he rejects for his meanness of spirit and lack of feeling for his family. (In this respect, Troy may put you in mind of Eugene O’Neill’s powerful 1924 tragedy, Desire Under the Elms, in which Eben Cabot fails to see that his hatred of his father is based more on their similarities than on their differences.) And we see too how this relationship is passed on to the next generation: Cory resents his father deeply, and then he replicates his father’s experience by fighting with him and leaving home while still in his teens to make his own way in the world, feeling rejected and undefended despite his father’s vaunted sense of responsibility.

In Troy Maxson, August Wilson has given us a portrait of a proud and honorable spirit repeatedly and severely damaged by life, one whose accumulated hurts ultimately prove too much for him. His story is unique to—and unimaginable outside of—the African American experience in mid-twentieth-century America, as Wilson himself would have been the first to point out. Yet there is something timeless and universal about it as well. Like Oedipus or Othello or any other truly tragic figure, Troy compels our sympathy and our admiration even as we watch him buckle under the pressures of his existence. In the play’s final scene—which will no doubt suggest the Requiem at the conclusion of Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman, just as Troy himself will in some ways remind you of Willy Loman—Troy’s loved ones gather for his funeral in what turns out to be a powerful moment of healing and reconcilia-
tion. Lyons says of him: “He wasn’t satisfied hitting in the seats . . . he want to hit it over everything! . . . Yeah, Papa was something else.” Cory, having at first declared that he will not attend the funeral, then relents and joins Raynell in singing Troy’s father’s song about Old Blue. And Rose tells Cory: “Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn’t . . . and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was. I don’t know if he was right or wrong . . . but I do know he meant to do more good than he meant to do harm.” These are the people closest to Troy, but they are also the ones most deeply hurt by him, and if in the end they can forgive him his trespasses, if they can see the decency in his heart and remember him at his best, then so should we.

Shortly after Wilson received a second Pulitzer Prize for *The Piano Lesson* in April 1990 (his first had been for *Fences* in 1987), he made a few revealing comments to an interviewer. Nothing in his work is autobiographical, he declared; nothing he had written had been taken from his own experience. He had successfully avoided studying other playwrights and claimed to have read nothing by Shakespeare except *The Merchant of Venice* (in high school), nothing by Ibsen, Miller, or Tennessee Williams. The only other playwrights whose work he acknowledged an acquaintance with were Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and Athol Fugard. He claimed that he never attended the theater himself and hadn’t been to a movie in ten years. “Part of this creative isolation is self-protective fear,” explained the interviewer, Kevin Kelly. “Wilson is afraid of tampering with those chaotically rich and whimsically independent forces in his head, terrified of confusing their voices and stories with the voices and stories of other writers” (“August Wilson’s True Stories,” *Boston Globe*, 29 April 1990).

**WRITERS ON WRITING**

*August Wilson*, *A LOOK INTO BLACK AMERICA*, page 1883

As brief as this excerpt is, in it Wilson makes several trenchant observations. He makes clear that his own stance is not primarily social or political, but aesthetic, yet he acknowledges the power of art to generate social and political effects. For those to whom its characters and subject matter are alien, a work of art can be a window into new experience and a bridge to awareness of a shared humanity. For those to whom the characters and subject are familiar, the work can be a surprising affirmation of the value and the dignity of their lives.
WRITING
This chapter is a brief guide to informal and formal writing about literature, with emphasis on writing short critical essays. As succinctly as we can, we escort the student through the various procedures of reading and thinking about a piece of literature; doing pre-writing exercises to discover writing ideas; finding a topic; developing a literary argument; and organizing, drafting, revising, correctly formatting, and finishing a paper. (In the chapter “Writing a Research Paper,” we present material appropriate to gathering information and writing and documenting a long, well-researched critical essay.)

If these writing chapters fulfill their purpose, they will save you some breath and spare you from reading many innocent (and perhaps not-so-innocent) plagiarisms, floating unidentified quotations (of the kind that suddenly interrupt the student’s prose with Harold Bloom’s prose in quotation marks), and displays of ill-fitting critical terminology.

Once—at the end of a class in which argument had waxed over the question “Is ‘Naming of Parts’ an antiwar poem or isn’t it?”—XJK made the mistake of cutting off the discussion and telling students to go home and write their opinions down on paper. The result was to cool future class discussions: students were afraid that if they talked animatedly, they would be told to write. A different approach is that of the instructor who would halt a class discussion that had grown driveling, or bad-tempered, or without heart, and cry, “For God’s sake, let’s all stop talking! Now get out your pencils and write me a paragraph. . . .” He claims that in the next class the discussion improved markedly.

PREPARING TO WRITE: DISCOVERING IDEAS

The section “Preparing to Write” quickly covers a number of tried-and-true pre-writing methods and, using Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay” as a text, provides student samples of each one. You may also wish to dedicate some class time to invention exercises that help students generate writing topics. Asking and answering questions is always an excellent way to generate material for an essay. Questions and answers can help students clarify their views on a subject, identify patterns, and make connections. You might develop questions on different elements of a text: plot, theme, point of view, setting, character. Students can work in small groups on one element and then come together as a class to discuss their “findings” and brainstorm to generate specific topics. Individually, they can then generate a working thesis.
DEVELOPING A LITERARY ARGUMENT

Some of your students may do most of their reading on the Internet, where the majority of blogs and posts—with their unfounded assertions, *ad hominem* attacks, and illogical rants—will only reinforce in their minds the popular meaning of the word *argument*. In this section, we emphasize points such as a clear thesis, logical development, a thoughtful and measured tone, and the use of textual evidence to back up one’s claims. This discussion seeks not only to make clear to students what is meant by argument in the intellectual sense, but also to assist them in formulating a successful argument and developing it in a focused and persuasive manner.


This poem, which was first shown to us by Cara Nusinov, of Miami, Florida, has long circulated on the Internet. The version reprinted in our book seems to be based on a longer piece of light verse by Jerrold H. Zar, who is Associate Provost for Graduate Studies at Northern Illinois University. His original poem was titled “Candidate for a Pulitzer Surprise” (note the pun) and was first published in the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* (39.1, Jan./Feb. 1994). The Internet seems to have worked rather like the old oral tradition in compressing and modifying his text into a new collective and anonymous version, but Professor Zar deserves proper credit for its early version.
If your students complain, “I’ve never written about stories before—what am I supposed to do?” you can have them read this section. We can’t imagine spending whole class hours with this material; it is supplied here mainly to provide students with illustrations of acceptable papers written by each of four usual methods, and a few pointers on format and mechanics. If you like, you can assign this section for outside reading when you first make a writing assignment.

A GIFT TO INSTRUCTORS: THE CARD REPORT

XJK comments: The card report (pages 1922–1924) may well be God’s gift to the instructor overwhelmed with papers to grade. At least, I can’t take credit for its creation. This demanding exercise first impressed me as a student in the one course I took at Teachers College, Columbia. The professor, Lennox Grey, assigned us aspiring literature teachers to pick ten great novels we hadn’t read and to write card reports on them. Among the novels were War and Peace and Les Misérables, and although Grey allowed us as many as two cards to encompass them, I must have spoiled a pack of cards for every novel I encompassed. But the task was an agreeable challenge, and I felt it obliged me to look more closely at fiction than I ever had. Later, as a graduate student in Ann Arbor, I found the same device heavily worked by Kenneth Rowe, Arthur Miller’s teacher of playwriting, in a popular course in modern drama. Every week, students were expected to read two full-length plays and to turn in two card reports. Nearly a hundred students swelled the course, and Rowe employed two teaching assistants to do the grading. As one of them, I soon realized the beauty of the method. Even a novice like me could do a decent job of grading a hundred card reports each week without being crushed under the toil, either. For an hour a week Rowe met with the other assistant and me and superintended our labors a little, and we thrashed out any problem cases.

If you care to give such an assignment a try, don’t feel obliged to write a card report of your own as a Platonic ideal to hold your students’ reports up to. When you gather in the sheaves, you can compare a few of them (looking hard at the reports of any students whom you know to be intelligent and conscientious) and probably will quickly see what a better than average report on a story might encompass. In grading, it isn’t necessary to read every item on every card: you may read the plot summaries with intermittent attention and concentrate on the subtler elements: symbol, theme, evaluation. Because extensive remarks by the instructor don’t seem called for (and, anyway, wouldn’t fit on the card), your comments may be short and pointed. If
a student reporting on “The Tell-Tale Heart” has omitted a crucial symbol, you may simply query, “The eye?” or “The heartbeat?” One can probably grade thirty card reports in less than an hour and do an honest job; whereas a set of thirty essays, even brief ones, will take at least four hours.

By asking students to produce so few words, you need not feel that their writing skills are being slighted. To get the report to fit the card, a good student has to do several drafts and revisions, none of which the instructor has to read. A shoddy job by a student who hasn’t thoroughly read the story is painfully obvious. Once in a while, after a surfeit of expansive essays, I have asked a class for a card report just to rest my eyes and to remind them of the virtues of concision. Some students inevitably grumble, but most are in for a reward, and some will even be delighted that the assignment is so clearly defined and limited!

Warn your students to allow plenty of time to do this job right. Stephen Marcus, of the University of California, Santa Barbara, tells us that some of his students were appalled to find it took them two or three hours to write one card report. That sounds about par for the assignment; if you want to abbreviate it, you can omit some of the required elements.

Topics for Writing

In choosing an essay topic, when given a choice, many students have trouble deciding how large a topic to attempt in an assigned word length, and many are tempted to choose a topic larger than they can handle. Some want to make sure they’ll have enough ideas to meet the word length. Even if you don’t care to assign any of the topics suggested in the text, having students read the lists in the “Topics for Writing” section in this chapter may give them a clearer notion of the right amplitude of topics on Fiction for papers of various lengths.

If this list, the writing assignment, “More Topics for Writing” at the end of most chapters, and your own inspiration don’t suffice, additional suggestions for writing may be quarried from the questions that follow the stories.
Here are notes on the poems contained in “Writing About a Poem.”

Robert Frost, Design, page 1934
Robert Frost, In White, page 1953

If you wish to deal with this section in class, you might have students read “Design,” the two student papers that follow the poem, and Randall Jarrell’s explication. What did these writers notice about the poem that you didn’t notice? What did you notice about it that they left out?

Also of interest is Frost’s early draft of this poem, titled “In White,” found on page 1953 of the text. What is the theme of each version? Is it more difficult to tell from the vaguer, more general draft? In rewriting, Frost seems to have made his details more specific and also to have defined the central idea.

Abbie Huston Evans, Wing-Spread, page 1948

The student’s evaluation seems just to us. While “Wing-Spread” is not so vivid a cameo as “Design,” nor so troubling in its theme, and while it contains trite rimes (except for beryl/peril), we think it a decent poem and admirably terse.

Insufficiently recognized (like most poets), Evans (1881–1979) had a long, productive life. Her Collected Poems was published in 1970 by the University of Pittsburgh Press. It contains dozens of poems better than “Wing-Spread.”

Suggestions for Writing

Here are a few more topics for paper assignments to supplement the list at the end of the chapter.

Topics for Brief Papers (250–500 Words)

1. A précis (French, from Latin: “to cut short”) is a short abstract or condensation of a literary work that tries to sum up the work’s most essential elements. Although a précis, like a paraphrase, states the poet’s thought in the writer’s own
words, a paraphrase is sometimes as long as the original poem, if not longer. A précis, while it tends to be much briefer than a poem, also takes in the essentials: theme, subject, tone, character, events (in a narrative poem), and anything else that strikes the writer as important. A précis might range in length from one ample sentence to a few hundred words (if, say, it were condensing a long play or novel, or a complex longer poem). Here, for instance, is an acceptable précis of Robert Browning's "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister":

The speaker, a monk in a religious community, voices to himself while gardening the bitter grudge he has against Brother Lawrence, one of his fellow monks. He charges Lawrence with boring him with dull talk at mealtime, sporting monogrammed tableware, ogling women, drinking greedily, ignoring rituals (unlike the speaker, who after a meal lays knife and fork in a cross—which seems overly scrupulous). Having vented his grudge by slyly scissoring Lawrence's favorite flowering shrubs, the speaker is now determined to go further, and plots to work Lawrence's damnation. Perhaps he will lure Lawrence into misinterpreting a text in Scripture, or plant a pornographic volume on him. So far gone is the speaker in his hatred that he is even willing to sell his soul to the devil if the devil will carry off Lawrence's; and so proud is the speaker in his own wiles that he thinks he can cheat the devil in the bargain. Vespers ring, ending the meditation, but his terrible grudge seems sure to go on.

As the detailed précis makes clear, Browning's poem contains a chronicle of events and a study in character. The précis also indicates the tone of the poem and (another essential) its point of view.

Students might be supplied with a copy of the above material to guide them and be asked to write précis of four or five poems, chosen from a list the instructor compiles of six or eight poems in the "Poems for Further Reading."

2. Find a poem that you like, one not in this book so that it may be unfamiliar to other members of the class. Insert into it a passage of five or six lines that you yourself write in imitation of it. Your object is to lengthen the poem by a bit of forgery that will go undetected. Type out the whole poem afresh, inserted lines and all, and have copies duplicated for the others in the class. Then let them try to tell your forged lines from those of the original. A successful forgery will be hard to detect, since you will have imitated the poet's language, handling of form, and imagery—indeed, the poet's voice.

**TOPICS FOR MORE EXTENSIVE PAPERS (600–1,000 WORDS)**

1. Relate a personal experience of poetry: a brief history of your attempts to read it or to write it; a memoir of your experience in reading poetry aloud; a report of a poetry reading you attended; an account of how reading a poem brought a realization that affected you personally (no instructor-pleasing pieties!); or an account of an effort to foist a favorite poem upon your friends, or to introduce young children to poetry. Don't make up any fabulous experiences or lay claim
to profound emotions you haven’t had; the result could be blatantly artificial (“How I Read Housman’s ‘Loveliest of trees’ and Found the Meaning of Life”). But if you can honestly sum up what you learned from your experience, then do so, by all means.

2. Write an imitation or a parody of any poem in the book. This and the following topic may result in a paper of fewer words than the essay topics, but the amount of work required is likely to be slightly more.

(Note: This assignment will be too much of a challenge for some students, and not all ought to be required to do it. But those who possess the necessary skills may find themselves viewing the poet’s work as if they were insiders.) The instructor has to insist that the student observe the minimal formal requirements of a good imitation. A convincing imitation of, say, Thomas Hardy can hardly be written in Whitmanic free verse. Students may be urged to read entire collections of work in order to soak up a better sense of the poet. This assignment asks much, but the quality of the results is often surprising. Honestly attempted, such an exercise requires far more effort from students than the writing of most critical essays, and it probably teaches them more.

3. After you have read several ballads (both folk ballads and literary ballads), write a ballad of your own, one at least twenty lines long. If you need a subject, consider some event recently in the news: an act of bravery, a wedding that took place despite obstacles, a murder or a catastrophe, a report of spooky or mysterious happenings. Then, in a prose paragraph, state what you learned from your reading of traditional or literary ballads that proved useful to you as a ballad composer yourself.

TOPICS FOR LONGER PAPERS (1,500 WORDS OR MORE)

1. Leslie Fiedler, the critic and novelist, once wrote an essay in which he pretended to be a critic of the nineteenth century (“A Review of Leaves of Grass and Hiawatha as of 1855,” American Poetry Review 2 [Mar.–Apr. 1973]). Writing as though he subscribed to the tastes of that age, Fiedler declared Whitman’s book shaggy and shocking and awarded Professor Longfellow all the praise. If you can steep yourself in the literature of a former age (or a recent year) deeply enough to feel confident, such an essay might be fun to write (and to read). Write about some poem once fashionable and now forgotten; or about some poem once spurned and now esteemed. Your instructor might have some suggestions.

2. For a month (or some other assigned period of time), keep a personal journal of your reading of poetry and your thinking about it. To give direction to your journal, you might confine it to the work of, say, half a dozen poets who interest you; or you might concentrate on a theme common to a few poems by various poets.
In an introductory literature course that saves drama for last, there seems never enough time to be fair to the plays available. That is why many instructors tell us that they like to have students read at least two or three plays on their own and write short papers about at least one or two of them.

If you decide to assign such critical writing but find your time for paper-grading all the more limited as your course nears its end, you might consider assigning a card report (discussed and illustrated on pages 1956–1959). Earlier in this manual (in “Writing About a Story”), we trumpet the virtues of card reports—which aren’t every instructor’s salvation, but which we have found to work especially well for teaching plays. The card report shown in the book—on Glaspell’s *Trifles*—manages to cover a one-act play in two card faces. For a longer and more involved play, you might want to limit the students’ obligation to just a few of that play’s elements (leaving out, say, Symbols and Evaluation). Otherwise, they’ll need more than one card.

Among the “Topics for More Extended Papers” (pages 1964–1965), number 5 invites the student to imagine the problems of staging a classic play in modern dress and in a contemporary setting. If you prefer, this topic could be more general: Make recommendations for the production of any play. In getting ready to write on this topic, students might first decide whether or not the play is a work of realism. Ask them: Should sets, lighting, and costumes be closely detailed and lifelike, or should they be extravagant or expressionistic? Would a picture-frame stage or an arena better suit the play? What advice would you offer the actors for interpreting their roles? What exactly would you emphasize in the play if you were directing it? (For a few insights into methods of staging, they might read Tennessee Williams’s “How to Stage The Glass Menagerie” on page 1700.)
This chapter focuses on the essential aspects of a research paper:

- **Doing Research for an Essay: Print, Electronic, and Web Resources**—finding research resources, recording information, analyzing research material.
- **Evaluating and Using Internet Sources**—conducting worthwhile Internet searches, determining reliable resources.
- **Guarding Academic Integrity**—covering both intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Includes the disconcerting issue of plagiarized term papers (note that in the short section “A Warning Against Internet Plagiarism,” we detail how professors can now use software and services to identify plagiarized work—our token contribution to your ongoing battle).
- **Acknowledging and Documenting Sources**—acknowledging others' ideas and words, using citations within an essay, preparing a Works Cited list based on MLA standards.
- **Using Visual Images**—finding, integrating, and documenting visual images into a research paper.

For many students, the Internet is their primary research tool, and too often there is only cursory evaluation of the source of the accessed material. We have given specific examples of reliable websites and why those sites can be regarded as trustworthy. We have also provided a checklist for judging the reliability of both print and web resources. Some instructors report that they like to spend a class session in the school's computer lab exploring both reliable and unreliable sites. They identify topics pertaining to a story or poem from the syllabus, and then search out a number of sites for students to consider in advance of the class session. This hands-on exercise can help students learn to differentiate between reliable sites and questionable sites as they do their own research.

When developing your research paper assignment, determine the number and type of Internet sources that you will allow students to use. Students should understand that they need to use printed as well as electronic sources. Obviously, search engines such as Google have transformed the landscape of research and the Internet should never be banned out of hand as a place to find research material, yet much valuable scholarship is still not available online. To reduce the chance of plagiarism (unintended or blatant) from the web, and to ensure that Internet-referenced material
is from a reliable source, you might require students to turn in a printed copy of the Internet source material with their final papers.

If you want to encourage students to begin their research in their own college library, you might consider having the Reference Librarian conduct a class session devoted to doing literary research. Many students do not know how to use all the resources available in their college library. An introduction tailored to their needs for your specific assignment may help make them efficient academic researchers.

Documenting sources, especially Internet sources, is challenging for most students. We have provided detailed information for citing print and Internet sources, a sample Works Cited list, and a comprehensive guide to the types of citations that students will likely use in their papers. Encourage students to allow sufficient time to prepare their Works Cited page, and review their papers for scrupulous documentation.

Because students are human and we humans procrastinate, it is advisable to break the task of generating a research essay into dated steps. Establish a calendar of due dates when you issue your assignment: topic with working thesis statement; working list of reference material; outline; first draft; revised draft; peer review session; final draft. Our goal should be to have students engage in the real writing process—that process by which writing, thinking, rewriting, and rethinking lead to real re-vision. We want our students to realize the depths of meaning present in the literature that they read and the depths of their own responses and ideas through continued exploration.
A COMMENT ON STUDENT JOURNALS

In “Keeping a Journal,” we establish the value of student writing as a key component in the active process of understanding and making meaning of a piece of literature. Directed journal responses (specific questions that you pose) can allow students to come prepared to take part in a class discussion. Open responses (a subject of interest chosen by the student) can foster the discovery and exploration of ideas and interpretations. Ideally, journal writing should offer students the chance to sharpen their skills of literary analysis, and it may provide the seed of an idea that can be nurtured into a formal essay.

To ensure that students keep up to date with assignments, we recommend that you collect journal responses every few weeks. Read the responses and comment on whether the work is meeting your expectations. If you allow and encourage students to revise or expand their journal entries, they should staple the revised entry to the original; this way, when you collect the journal as a whole, you can readily see whether additional work has been done.
As a student, you may have written your essay exams the way most of us did—frantically spewing out whatever came into your head, no matter how repetitious or off the main point it might have been, as you listened to the ever-louder rumble of Time’s wingèd chariot. The intent of this chapter is to provide your students with valuable insights and reminders that will help them to sharpen their awareness of what exam questions actually ask of them and to answer the questions as effectively as possible. The few extra minutes taken in following these suggestions will save them many more minutes that might otherwise be spent in writing sentences and paragraphs of unresponsive comments.

We constantly remind our students to express themselves in such a way as to be certain that their intended meaning is clearly communicated to the reader, but it's very easy to forget that the same rule applies to us as well. One of the most useful features of this chapter is a listing, with concise definitions, of the imperative verbs that we tend to favor in writing essay questions, so that students will understand precisely what is expected of them when we ask them to analyze or contrast or explain.


Beneath its surface rowdiness and vigorous phrasing, Toni Cade Bambara’s “The Lesson” is a shrewdly observed and subtly presented study of an adolescent girl caught at a complex moment of growth. Sylvia, the narrator, clings defensively to her set views and her fixed coping mechanisms of mockery and acting out, in order to resist uncomfortable insights into the world around her and the people and places in it, and to fend off anyone who tries to make her deal with the larger issues of her life in any manner other than denial. The first half of the first sentence—“Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right”—establishes several of the story’s principal emphases: Sylvia’s way of dealing with the frustrations and insecurities of her life is to cut down everyone else to establish her own sense of superiority; she is insecure enough in this to need an ally in the person of Sugar (and consequently feels betrayed late in the story when Sugar responds to Miss Moore’s efforts to sensitize the children to society’s inequities, even as she feels and tries to suppress a similar response in herself); the very opening words suggest that Sylvia has ultimately outgrown the phase in her life that the story deals with.

The second and third sentences of the opening paragraph deepen these emphases by describing the ridicule and hatred with which she approaches everyone around her, especially adults. In this way, she equates Miss Moore and her seeming affectations
with the winos who blight her neighborhood and foul her apartment building, and deprives them equally of the ability to intrude upon and hurt her: as much as she hates the situation, she bristles when Miss Moore says that she and her friends are “all poor and live in the slums” (paragraph 3). Here we also find a foreshadowing of a key moment, when Sylvia simultaneously comes to an awareness of what Miss Moore is trying to show her and privately proclaims her own triumph over Miss Moore (paragraph 44). Sylvia struggles mightily throughout the story to keep her defenses intact, but we see by the end that they have suffered an irreparable breach.

As you prepare your students to respond to the sample essay exam question on Toni Cade Bambara’s “The Lesson,” you may find it especially useful to review and discuss the items in the Checklist on page 1999 and apply them to the specifics of what the essay question asks them to do. In emphasizing that the focus of the question is the story’s theme, remind the students what a theme is and how to state it, suggest that the essay should begin with the statement of the story’s theme, and make clear that the body of the essay should be devoted to clarifying the theme and illustrating it with relevant references to the text itself, stressing the point that they should avoid plot summaries and other details that do not bear directly on the story’s theme.

You will make your own determination as to what degree of class presentation of the “The Lesson”—if any—should precede the writing exercise. If you intend a full class presentation of “The Lesson,” you may wish to discuss it in connection with several other stories in the anthology in which an adolescent narrator has a complex confrontation with the adult world, John Updike’s “A & P,” Alice Munro’s “How I Met My Husband,” and Inés Arredondo’s “The Shunammite.”

—Michael Palma
48 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE

PURPOSE OF CRITICAL APPROACHES

This chapter is designed to introduce students to the variety of possible approaches they can take in analyzing literature. Theory and criticism have become such important aspects of undergraduate literary study that many instructors have asked for an informed beginner's guide to the subject. Our objective has been to cover the area intelligently without overwhelming or confusing the beginning student.

This section presents overviews of ten critical approaches. While these ten methods do not exhaust the total possibilities of literary criticism, they represent the most influential and widely used contemporary approaches. Each approach is introduced with an overview designed to explain to beginning students the central ideas of the critical method. The general note does not try to explain every aspect of a critical school or to summarize its history; instead, it focuses on explaining the fundamental insights that motivate each approach. While many contemporary critics combine methodologies, it seemed wisest to keep the categories as simple and separate as possible because students may be wrestling with these ideas for the first time.

CRITICAL SELECTIONS

After the introductory note, each critical school is illustrated by three critical excerpts. The first excerpt is usually a theoretical statement explaining the general principles of the approach. In each case, we have selected a passage from one of the methodology's leading practitioners that summarizes its central ideas in an accessible way. There is, for example, Cleanth Brooks listing the principles of Formalist Criticism, Northrop Frye explaining the concept of Mythic Archetypes, and Stanley Fish presenting the parameters of the Reader-Response method. These selections reinforce and broaden the ideas found earlier in the introductory notes. They also familiarize the student with a major figure in each school.

This general statement is then followed by two more critical excerpts that discuss actual works in the book. These critical analyses have been selected with great care to provide illuminating but accessible examples of each school. The excerpts are not only well argued and informed analyses, they are also clearly written, with a minimum of theoretical jargon. Footnotes have been added to explain any references that might be unfamiliar to students.

It was not always possible to find critical excerpts that could do the double duty of illustrating a school of thought and analyzing a text at hand. Sometimes, as in
Harold Bloom’s discussion of poetic influence or Roland Barthes’s announcement of “the death of the author,” we chose the clearest exposition available of an influential critical concept. (We also felt that students would profit by seeing where these influential ideas originated.) Some of these critical texts are challenging because the ideas are subtle and complex, but—one again—we have always tried to find the most accessible excerpt.

**LITERARY WORKS DISCUSSED**

Critical methods are always easier to understand when they discuss a poem, play, or story you know. Consequently, we have tried to find noteworthy excerpts that illustrate a particular critical approach and that also focus on a literary text found in the book. This feature allows the instructor the possibility of assigning many of these critical texts as ancillary readings.

The criticism on fiction lends itself well to classroom use. Daniel Watkins’s Marxist reading of D. H. Lawrence’s “The Rocking-Horse Winner,” for example, would surely help students understand the symbolic structure of that arresting story. Nina Pelikan Straus’s “Transformations in The Metamorphosis” suggests that the sibling relationship has been neglected in favor of the father-son struggle, and it offers a provocative discussion of the gender role reversal that occurs between Gregor and Grete. Edmond Volpe’s analysis of “Barn Burning” illuminates the mythic structure that underlies Faulkner’s story. Emily Toth’s biographical study of Kate Chopin shows how the circumstances of Chopin’s early widowhood and subsequent romances provide the template for her themes and even more specifically for her character Alcée in “The Storm.” Gretchen Schulz and R. J. R. Rockwood give a persuasive psychological reading of Joyce Carol Oates’s “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” with a detailed analysis of fairy tale motifs in the story. In “The Economics of ‘Sweat,’” Kathryn Lee Seidel provides rich historical background information on the unique black town of Eatonville, Florida, and its symbiotic relationship to its white “twin” of Winter Park, the sturdy social platform on which Zora Neale Hurston constructed her artistic achievement in that story. Seamus Deane looks at the influence of growing up in Dublin on James Joyce’s work. Michael Clark’s formalist analysis of “Sonny’s Blues” examines the interplay of symbol and meaning in James Baldwin’s story.

In poetry, Robert Langbaum’s formalist analysis of “My Last Duchess” makes a good supplementary assignment to reading Browning’s poem. Brett Millier’s biographical comment on Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art” might broaden a discussion of the villanelle into other issues. Richard R. Bozorth employs the framework of Gender Criticism to suggest an alternative approach to W. H. Auden’s “Funeral Blues” in the context of the poet’s sexual orientation. Hugh Kenner places Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” in a historical context by re-creating the heady atmosphere of Modernist London. Geoffrey Hartman deconstructs Wordsworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” while Camille Paglia uses the perspectives of Cultural Studies to provide a reading of William Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper.”
USING THE CHAPTER

Some instructors may want to use “Critical Approaches to Literature” as a formal part of the course, but more, we suspect, will prefer to use it in a less systematic way as a resource that can be tailored to whatever occasion seems suitable. An excellent way to introduce students to the section is to assign a short paper analyzing a single poem according to the critical approach of their choice. This method allows them to explore the introductory material for each critical school and then learn one approach in depth by trying it out on a specific text.

Many poems in the book lend themselves to this assignment. Some likely choices (from the first few Poetry chapters) would include: D. H. Lawrence’s “Piano,” Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz,” Anne Bradstreet’s “The Author to Her Book,” Anne Sexton’s “Her Kind,” Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est,” Langston Hughes’s “Theme for English B,” and Alfred Tennyson’s “Tears, Idle Tears.” All of these poems invite multiple readings from a variety of perspectives.

Certain stories naturally suggest multiple readings. Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” for instance, allows formalist, biographical, psychological, mythological, reader-response, and deconstructionist readings. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” is similarly open to multiple interpretations; openly autobiographical, it directly addresses issues of gender, sociology, psychology, and myth. Other stories that invite wide approaches include Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” Tan’s “A Pair of Tickets,” Joyce’s “Araby,” Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” Walker’s “Everyday Use,” O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” and Cather’s “Paul’s Case.” If you want to assign a single work for students to try out the critical approach of their choice, you could probably not do better than Kafka’s The Metamorphosis.

Plays such as Oedipus the King, Antigonê, Othello, and Hamlet have already been analyzed from every conceivable critical perspective, but there’s no reason why a student shouldn’t try his or her own hand at them. A Doll’s House, Trifles, and Death of a Salesman are naturally open to multiple approaches.

OTHER RESOURCES

If any of your brighter students should start writing papers following any of these critical approaches, and you should want to provide them with models longer than the brief illustrative samples we supply, a new series of paperbacks may be helpful to them. It will be still more helpful if they are familiar with a classic such as Frankenstein, The Scarlet Letter, Wuthering Heights, Heart of Darkness, Hamlet, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Gulliver’s Travels, The Awakening, or The House of Mirth. Titles dealing with each of these classics and others have appeared, or will appear shortly, in the series “Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism,” whose general editor is Ross C. Murfin of the University of Miami (Bedford Books and St. Martin’s Press). Each book contains five essays on its novel or play, illustrating five different approaches: Psychoanalytic criticism, Reader-Response criticism, Feminist criticism, Deconstruction, and the New Historicism. There are also readable essays that explain each critical school, and bibliographies of critical books representing each of them.
WRITING A POEM (Some notes by XJK)

These notes are provided mainly for the instructor who employs this anthology in a creative writing course. Some may be of interest, however, to anyone who in teaching composition includes a unit on writing poems. Such an instructor will probably have firm persuasions about poetry and about the teaching of poets. Instead of trying to trumpet any persuasions of my own, let me just set down some hunches that, from teaching poetry workshops, I have come to feel are mostly true.

In reading a student’s poem, you have to look at it with your mind a blank, reserving judgment for as long as possible. Try to see what the student is doing, being slow to compare a fledgling effort to the classics. There’s no use in merely reading the poem and spotting the influences you find in it—"Ha, I see you’ve been reading Williams!" You can, however, praise any virtues you discover and you can tell the student firmly, kindly, and honestly of any adverse reactions you feel. Point to anything in the poem that causes you to respond toward it or against it. Instead of coldly damning the poem’s faults, you can inquire why the writer said something in such-and-such a way rather than in some other. You can ask to have anything you don’t understand explained. If a line or a passage doesn’t tell you anything, you can ask the student to suggest a fresh way of wording it. Perhaps the most valuable service you can perform for a student poet is to be hard to please. Suggest that the student not settle for the first words that flash to mind, but reach deeper, going after the word or phrase or line that will be not merely adequate but memorable.

The greatest method of teaching poetry writing I have ever heard of was that of the late John Holmes. Former students at Tufts remember that Holmes seldom made comments on a poem but would often just lay a finger next to a suspect passage and fix the student with a look of expectancy until the silence became unendurable and the student began to explain what the passage meant and how it could be put better. (I have never made the Holmes method succeed for me; I can’t keep from talking too much.)

Most workshop courses in poetry fall into a classic ritual. Students make copies of their poems, bring them in, and show them to the class. This method of procedure is hard to improve upon. Some instructors find that the effort of screening the work themselves first and deciding what to spend time on in class makes for more cogent class sessions, with less time squandered on boring or inferior material. In general, class sessions won’t be any more lively or valuable than the poems that are on hand. (An exception was a workshop I once visited years ago at MIT. The poems were literal, boring stuff, but the quality of the students’ impromptu critical analyses was sensational.) Often a great class discussion will revolve around a fine poem with deep faults in it.
The severest challenge for the instructor, incidentally, isn’t a bad poem. A bad poem is easy to deal with; it always gives you plenty of work to do—passages to delete, purple adjectives to question. The challenge comes in dealing with a truly surprising, original, and competent poem. This is risky and sensitive work because genuine poets usually know what they are doing to a greater degree than you or any other outsider does; and you don’t want to confuse them with reactions you don’t trust. For such rare students, all a poetry workshop probably does is to supply an audience, a little encouragement, and sometimes even an insight.

There are natural temptations, of course, to which teachers of poets fall prey. Like coin collectors, they keep wanting to overvalue the talents they have on hand, to convince themselves that a student is a Gem Mint Condition poet, when a less personal opinion might find the student just an average specimen, although uncirculated. It’s better to be too slow than too quick to encourage a student to seek nationwide publication. It is another temptation, if you have a class with a competent poet in it, to devote most of each session to that poet’s latest work, causing grumblings of discontent (sometimes) among the other paying customers. I believe that a more competent poet deserves more time, but you have to conduct a class and not a tutorial.

Poetry workshops can become hideously intimate. They are bound to produce confessional or diary poems that, sometimes behind the thinnest of fictive screens, confide in painful detail the writer’s sexual, psychic, and religious hang-ups. I have known poetry workshops where, by semester’s end, the participants feel toward one another like the members of a hostile therapy group. That is why I believe in stressing that a poem is not merely the poet’s self-revelation. It usually helps to insist at the start of the course that poems aren’t necessarily to be taken personally. (See “Poetry and Personal Identity” if you need ammunition.) Everybody will know, of course, that some poets in the class aren’t capable of detached art and that a poem about a seduction may well be blatant autobiography; but believe me, you and your students will be happier if you can blow the trumpet in favor of the Imagination.

There is no point in circulating poems in class anonymously, pretending that nobody knows who wrote them. Somebody will know, and I think that the sooner the members of the class freely admit their identities, the more easy and relaxed and open the situation will be. To know each one personally, as soon as you can, is essential.

As the workshop goes on, I don’t always stick to a faithful conference schedule. Some will need (and wish for) more of your time than others, but I like to schedule at least one conference right away, at the beginning of the course. This is a chance to meet with students in private and get a sense of their needs. I tell them to bring in a few poems they’ve already written, if they’ve written any. But I make it clear that class sessions will deal only with brand-new poems. At the end of the course, I program another such conference (instead of a final exam), sit down with each student, and ask, “Well, where are you now?”

Some students will lean on you for guidance (“What shall I write about?”); others will spurn all your brilliant suggestions and want to roar away in their own directions. Fine. I believe in offering the widest possible latitude in making assignments—but in giving some assignments. Even the most inner-directed poet can learn something from being expected to move in a new direction. Having a few assignments will discourage the customers who think they can get through any number of creative writing courses by using the same old yellowed sheaf of poems. Encourage revision. Now and then, suggest a revision as an assignment instead of a new poem.
In “Writing a Poem” I offer a radical suggestion: that the students memorize excellent poems. Feeling like a curmudgeon for making this recommendation, I was happy to find support for it in the view of Robert Bly, who remarked in Coda (June/July 1981):

I won’t even read a single manuscript now, when I visit a university workshop, unless the poet in advance agrees to memorize fifty lines of Yeats. At the first workshop I visited last fall it cut the number of graduate-student writers who wanted to see me from 15 to 2. Next year I’m changing that to fifty lines of Beowulf.

Bly may seem unreasonably stern, but he and I agree on the value of memorization. I believe it helps coax the writing of poetry down out of the forebrain and helps it unite with the pulse.

Bly has sane things to say, in the same article, about the folly of thirsting for publication too early. And here’s one of his unorthodox exercises for a writing workshop (imparted in an interview in the Boston Globe Magazine for April 10, 1988):

One workshop, I brought in an onion for each of the students. I asked everybody to spend 10 to 15 minutes describing the exterior of the onion, using all of their senses. That requires every bit of observation you have, to remain looking at the onion. Then, in the second part of the exercise, I said, “Now I want you to compare the onion to your mother.”

That must have rocked ‘em! I wonder if it produced any good results.

CREATIVE WRITING RESOURCES IN LITERATURE

Although knowing something about any element of poetry may benefit a poet-in-training, here is a list, chapter by chapter, of material in Literature that may be particularly useful in a creative writing class.

Chapter 14, Listening to a Voice: THE PERSON IN THE POEM, page 693
Novice poets often think of their poems as faithful diary accounts of actual experiences. This section may be useful to suggest to them that, in the process of becoming art, the raw material of a poem may be expected to undergo change.

Chapter 17, Imagery: ABOUT HAIKU, page 757
Assignment: Write some haiku, either original or in imitation of classic Japanese haiku.

Chapter 17, Imagery: EXPERIMENT: WRITING WITH IMAGES, page 761
A poetry writing assignment with possible examples.

Chapter 18, Figures of Speech: HOWARD MOSS, SHALL I COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER’S DAY?, page 772
Assignment: Choosing a different famous poem, write a Moss-like version of it. Then try to indicate what, in making your takeoff, was most painful to leave out.
Chapter 18, Figures of Speech: Jane Kenyon, THE SUITOR, page 785
Assignment: Write a poem similarly constructed of similes or metaphors.

Chapter 19, Song: Paul Simon, RICHARD CORY, page 796
Assignment: In somewhat the fashion of Simon’s treatment of Robinson, take a well-known poem and rewrite it as a song lyric. Try singing the result to a tune.

Chapter 20, Sound: EXERCISE: Listening to Meaning, pages 813–814
Assignment: After reading these examples, write a brief poem of your own, one heavy with sound effects.

Chapter 20, Sound: READING AND HEARING POEMS ALOUD, pages 823–826
Assignment: Ponder this section before reading your own poems aloud in class.

Chapter 21, Rhythm: METER, page 835
Assignment: After working through this section on your own, write a poem in meter.

Chapter 22, Closed Form: page 849
This chapter may be of particular value to a poetry writing class. Not only does it analyze some traditional forms, it also suggests a rationale for formally open verse.
Assignment: After considering the definition of syllabic verse given in this chapter, carefully read Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill.” Work out the form of the Thomas poem with pencil and paper, then try writing a syllabic poem of your own.

Chapter 23, Open Form: page 870
This chapter is important for students to read and consider because it tries to suggest why competent verse is seldom entirely “free.” It also helps students who are enamored of traditional, formal notions of poetry to open themselves up to new possibilities.
Assignment: Ponder, not too seriously, Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” Then, as the spirit moves you, write a unified series of small poems. Or, on a more modest scale, write a fourteenth way of looking at this poetic fowl.

Chapter 25, Myth and Narrative: MYTH AND POPULAR CULTURE, page 916
Assignment: Read the final section of the chapter, “Myth and Popular Culture.” Retell a popular story (from the Bible, folklore, or the movies) in the form of a poem, but give the story some new twist that allows the reader to see the familiar tale in a novel way.

Chapter 27, Translation: pages 949–955
Assignment: Consider the translations in this section and decide what you admire or dislike in each of them. Translate a poem of your choice, from any language with which you are familiar or can follow in a bilingual edition.

Chapter 27, Translation: PARODY, pages 955–960
Assignment: Read these parodists, comparing their work with the originals. Then, choosing some poet whose work you know thoroughly, write a parody yourself.
APPENDIX 2
NOTES ON TEACHING POETRY
BY XJK

These notes are offered in response to the wishes of several instructors for additional practical suggestions for teaching poetry. They are, however, mere descriptions of a few strategies that have proved useful in my own teaching. For others, I can neither prescribe nor proscribe.

1. To a greater extent than in teaching prose, the instructor may find it necessary to have poems read aloud. It is best if students do this reading. Since to read a poem aloud effectively requires that the reader understand what is said in it, students will need advance warning so that they can prepare their spoken interpretations. Sometimes I assign particular poems to certain people, or I ask each person to take his or her choice. Some advice on how to read poetry aloud is given in the chapter “Sound.” I usually suggest only that students beware of waxing overemotional or rhetorical, and I urge them to read aloud outside of class as often as possible. If the student or the instructor has access to a tape recorder, it may be especially helpful.

2. It is good to recall occasionally that poems may be put back together as well as taken apart. Sometimes I call on a student to read a previously prepared poem just before opening a discussion of the poem. Then, the discussion over and the poem lying all around in intelligible shreds, I ask the same student to read it over again. It is often startling how the reading improves from the student’s realizing more clearly what the poet is saying.

3. I believe in asking students to do a certain amount of memorization. Many groan that rote learning is mindless and grade-schoolish, but it seems to me one way to defeat the intellectualizations that students (and the rest of us) tend to make of poetry. It is also a way to suggest that we do not read a poem primarily for its ideas: to learn a poem by heart is one way to engrave oneself with the sound and weight of it. I ask for twenty or thirty lines at a time, of the student’s choice, then have them write the lines out in class. Some students have reported unexpected illuminations. Some people, of course, can’t memorize a poem to save their souls, and I try to encourage but not to pressure them. These written memorizations take very little of the instructor’s time to check, and they need not be returned to the students unless there are flagrant lacunae in them.

4. The instructor has to sense when a discussion has gone on long enough. It is a matter of watching each student’s face for the first sign of that fixed set of the
mouth. Elizabeth Bishop once wisely declared that, while she was not opposed to all close analysis and criticism, she was against “making poetry monstrous and boring and proceeding to talk the very life out of it.” I used to be afraid of classroom silences. Now, I find it helps sometimes to stop a discussion that is getting lost, and say, “Let’s all take three minutes and read this poem again and think about it silently.” When the discussion resumes, it is usually improved.

Some of the finest, most provocative essays on teaching poetry in college I have seen are these:

Alice Bloom, “On the Experience of Unteaching Poetry,” *Hudson Review* (Spring 1979): 7–30. Bloom: “I am interested in the conditions of education that would lead a student to remark, early in a term, as one of mine did, that ‘I wish we didn’t know these were poems. Then it seems like it would be a lot easier.’”

Clara Claiborne Park, “Rejoicing to Concur with the Common Reader” in her volume *Rejoining the Common Reader: Essays, 1962–1990* (Evanston: Northwestern, 1991). Park was a professor at Williams College, but for many years she taught in a community college. This essay recounts the joys and disappointments of working with students who were just discovering literature. Park is most concerned by how to relate literature to the lives of her students without condescending to them. She praises a kind of simplicity in approaching literature that “need not mean narrowness.” Discussing the teacher’s realization that he or she participates “in a process that changes lives,” Park writes an essay that proves both moving and enlightening.
How do you teach students to read poetry and, at the same time, to write good prose? Instructors who face this task may find some useful advice in the following article, first published in The English Record, bulletin of the New York State English Council. It is reprinted here by the kind permission of the author, Irwin Weiser, director of developmental writing, Purdue University.

THE PROSE PARAPHRASE:
INTEGRATING POETRY AND COMPOSITION
Irwin Weiser

Many of us teach composition courses which demand that we not only instruct our students in writing but that we also present literature to them as well. Such courses often frustrate us, since a quarter or a semester seems too brief to allow us to teach fundamentals of composition alone. How are we to integrate the teaching of literature with the teaching of writing? What are we to do with a fat anthology of essays, fiction, poetry, or drama and a rhetoric text and, in some cases, a separate handbook of grammar and usage?

Recently, I tried an approach that seemed to provide more integration of reading and writing than I previously had felt I attained in similar courses. The course was the third quarter of a required freshman composition sequence; the departmental course description specifies the teaching of poetry and drama, but also states “English 103 is, however, primarily a composition, not a literature, course. Major emphasis of the course should be on writing.” The approach I will describe concerns the study of poetry.

Because this is a writing course, I explained to my students that we would approach poetry primarily as a study of the way writers can use language, and thus our work on denotation and connotation, tone, irony, image, and symbol should help them learn to make conscious language choices when they write. Chapters in Kennedy/Gioia’s Literature entitled “Words,” “Saying and Suggesting,” and “Listening to a Voice” fit nicely with this approach. Further, because this is a writing course, I wanted my students to have frequent opportunities to write without burying myself under an even greater number of formal, longish papers than I already required. An appropriate solution seemed to be to have my students write prose paraphrases of one or two poems from those assigned for each discussion class.
During the first week of the course, we discussed and practiced the paraphrase technique, looking first at Kennedy’s explanation of paraphrasing and then at his paraphrase of Housman’s “Loveliest of trees, the cherry now.” By reading my own paraphrase, not among the ablest in the class, I was able to place myself in the position of co-inquirer into these poems, most of which I had not previously taught. This helped establish a classroom atmosphere similar to that of a creative writing workshop, one conducive to the discussion of both the poetry in the text and the writing of the students. In fact, while the primary purpose of assigning the paraphrases was to give my students extra writing practice, an important additional result was that throughout the quarter their paraphrases, not the teacher’s opinions and interpretations, formed the basis for class discussion. There was rarely a need for the teacher to explain a poem or a passage: someone, and frequently several people, had an interpretation, which satisfied most questions and resolved most difficulties.

At the end of this essay are examples of the prose paraphrases students wrote of Emily Dickinson’s “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died.” Two of the paraphrases, at 90 and 112 words, are approximately as long as Dickinson’s 92-word poem; the 160-word third paraphrase is over 75% longer because this student interpreted as she paraphrased, explaining, for example, that the narrator willed her earthly possessions in a futile attempt to hasten death. Such interpretation, while welcome, is not at all necessary, as the two shorter, yet also successful, paraphrases indicate. In fact I had to remind students that paraphrases are not the same as analyses, and that while they might have to interpret a symbol—as these students variously explained what the fly or the King meant—or unweave a metaphor, their major task was to rewrite the poem as clear prose.

The first paraphrase is perhaps the most straightforward of this group. The author’s voice is nearly inaudible. He has stripped the poem of its literary qualities—no “Heaves of Storm,” only “the air before a storm”; no personification; the author is only present in the choice of the word “sad” to describe the final buzz of the fly. His paraphrase is a prose rendering of the poem with no obvious attempt to interpret it.

Paraphrase II seems to ignore the symbolic importance of the fly, and perhaps in the very casualness of the phrase “and the last thing I was aware of was this fly and its buzz” suggests the same insignificance of death from the perspective of the hereafter that Dickinson does. More interesting is this student’s treatment of the willing of the keepsakes: the formal diction of “proper recipients,” “standard fashion,” and “officially ready to die” suggests death as a ritual. Unexpected interpretations like this appear frequently in the paraphrases, demonstrating the flexibility and richness of language, emphasizing the error in assuming that there is one right way to interpret a poem, and sometimes, when the interpretations are less plausible, leading to discussions of what constitutes valid interpretation and how one finds support for interpretations of what one reads.

The third paraphrase, as I suggested before, offers more interpretation as well as a stronger authorial voice than the previous two. The author adds a simile of her own, “as if the winds had ceased temporarily to catch their breaths,” and more obviously than the other students uses the fly as a metaphor for death in her final sentence.

I will not take the space for a thorough analysis of these paraphrases, but I think that they suggest what a teacher might expect from this kind of assignment. Clearly,
these three students have read this poem carefully and understand what it says, the first step towards understanding what it means. Small group and classroom discussions would allow us to consider these paraphrases individually and comparatively, to point out their merits and weaknesses, and then to return to the original verse with new perspectives.

Most heartening were the comments of several students during the quarter who told me that they felt more confident about reading poetry than they previously had. Though I doubt that my students are any more ardently devoted to poetry now than they were before the course began, they are not intimidated by verse on the page. They have an approach, a simple heuristic, for dealing with any unfamiliar writing. Ideally, my students will remember and use their ability to paraphrase and their ability to use their paraphrases to understand and evaluate what they read when they come upon a particularly difficult passage in their chemistry or history texts during the next three years or in the quarterly reports or technical manuals or journals they will read when they leave the university and begin their careers.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE PARAPHRASES

PARAPHRASE I
I heard death coming on. The stillness in the room was like the stillness in the air before a storm. The people around me had wiped their eyes dry, and they held their breaths waiting for that moment when death could be witnessed in the room. I wrote a will which gave away my possessions—that being the only part of me I could give away. A fly then flew between the light and me making a sad, uncertain buzz. My eyesight faded and I could not see to see.

PARAPHRASE II
I heard a fly buzz as I was about to die. The sound of the fly broke the quietness in the room which was like the calm before a storm. The people sitting around waiting for me to die cried until they could not cry anymore. They began to breathe uneasily in anticipation of my death when God would come down to the room to take me away. I had willed all of my valuables to the proper recipients in the standard fashion. I was officially ready to die, going through the final dramatic moments of my life, and the last thing I was aware of was this fly and its buzz.

PARAPHRASE III
I could feel the approach of death just as I could hear the buzz of an approaching fly. I knew death was buzzing around, but I did not know when and where it would land. The stillness of death was like the calmness that exists between storms, as if the winds had ceased temporarily to catch their breaths.

I was aware of the sorrow in the room. There were those who had cried because death was near, and they waited for death to stalk into the room like a king and claim its subject.

I willed all of my earthly possessions, all that could legally be assigned to a new owner, in an attempt to hasten death. But there was no way to control death; I was
at the mercy of its timing. And then like the fly that finally lands on its choice place, death fell upon me, and shut my eyes, and I could no longer see.

*   *   *

Mr. Weiser reported in a letter that, once again, he continues to use the method of poetry paraphrase in his writing course, and remains pleased with it. “My students,” he remarked, “no longer treat poems as holy scripts written in some mystical code, but attack them fearlessly.”
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