INSTRUCTOR’S HANDBOOK
TO ACCOMPANY

Literature
for Composition

Reading and Writing Arguments About
Essays, Stories, Poems, and Plays

TENTH EDITION

Edited by

Sylvan Barnet
Tufts University

William Burto
University of Massachusetts at Lowell

William E. Cain
Wellesley College

PEARSON
Contents

Preface xv
Using the “Short Views” and the “Overviews” xvii
Guide to MyLiteratureLab™ xix
The First Day 1

PART I
Getting Started: From Response to Argument

CHAPTER 1 How to Write an Effective Essay: A Crash Course 4

CHAPTER 2 The Writer as Reader 5
KATE CHOPIN Ripe Figs 5
LYDIA DAVIS City People 6
RAY BRADBURY August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains 7
MICHELE SERROS Senior Picture Day 8
GUY DE MAUPASSANT The Necklace 9
GUY DE MAUPASSANT Hautot and Son 13
T. CORRAGHESSAN BOYLE Greasy Lake 13

CHAPTER 3 The Reader as Writer 15
KATE CHOPIN The Story of an Hour 15
KATE CHOPIN Désirée’s Baby 16
KATE CHOPIN The Storm 17
ANTON CHEKHOV Misery 19
V. S. NAIPaul The Night Watchman’s Occurrence Book 21
vi Contents

CHAPTER 13 Reading and Writing about Essays 100
BRENT STAPLES Black Men and Public Space 100
LANGSTON HUGHES Salvation 101
LAURA VANDERKAM Hookups Starve the Soul 102

CHAPTER 14 Reading and Writing about Stories 103
GRACE PALEY Samuel 103
DIANA CHANG The Oriental Contingent 104
GISH JEN Who’s Irish? 106
RON WALLACE Worry 108

CHAPTER 15 Thinking Critically: A Case Study about Flannery O’Connor 110
FLANNERY O’CONNOR A Good Man Is Hard to Find 110
FLANNERY O’CONNOR Revelation 111

CHAPTER 16 Graphic Fiction 114
R. CRUMB AND DAVID ZEN MAIROWITZ A Hunger Artist 115

CHAPTER 17 Reading and Writing about Plays 117
SUSAN GLASPELL Trifles 117
DAVID IVES Sure Thing 118
SOPHOCLES Oedipus the King 119

CHAPTER 18 Reading and Writing about Poems 122
EMILY DICKINSON Wild Nights—Wild Nights 122
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE Sonnet 146 (Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth) 124
ROBERT FROST The Telephone 124
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE Sonnet 130 (My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun) 126
DANA GIOIA Money 127
ROBERT FROST The Hardship of Accounting 128
EDMUND WALLER Song (Go, lovely rose) 128
WILLIAM BLAKE The Sick Rose 129
ROBERT HERRICK Upon Julia’s Clothes 129
BILLY COLLINS Sonnet 130
ROBERT BROWNING My Last Duchess 131
E. E. CUMMINGS anyone lived in a pretty how town 132

Contents

SYLVIA PLATH Daddy  133
GWENDOLYN BROOKS We Real Cool  134
ETHERIDGE KNIGHT For Malcolm, a Year After  134
ANNE SEXTON Her Kind  137
JAMES WRIGHT Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota  138

CHAPTER 19 Thinking Critically about Poems: Two Case Studies  140

A CASE STUDY ABOUT EMILY DICKINSON  140
I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—  140
The Soul selects her own Society  141
These are the days when Birds come back  142
Papa above!  142
There’s a certain Slant of light  143
This World is not Conclusion  145
I got so I could hear his name—  147
Those—dying, then  148
Apparently with no surprise  148
Tell all the Truth but tell it slant  149

A CASE STUDY ON COMPARING POEMS AND PICTURES  150
JANE FLANDERS Van Gogh’s Bed  150
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS The Great Figure  151
ADRIENNE RICH Mourning Picture  153
CATHY SONG Beauty and Sadness  155
MARY JO SALTER The Rebirth of Venus  156
ANNE SEXTON The Starry Night  157
W. H. AUDEN Musée des Beaux Arts  159
X. J. KENNEDY Nude Descending a Staircase  160
GREG PAPE American Flamingo  162
CARL PHILLIPS Luncheon on the Grass  164
JOHN UPDIKE Before the Mirror  167
WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA Brueghel’s Two Monkeys  169

PART III
Standing Back: A Thematic Anthology

CHAPTER 20 The World around Us  172
LOUISE ERDRICH Ringo’s Gold  172
viii  Contents

BILL MCKIBBEN  Now or Never  172
AESOP  The Ant and the Grasshopper  174
AESOP  The North Wind and the Sun  177
JACK LONDON  To Build a Fire  178
SARAH ORNE JEWETT  A White Heron  179
PATRICIA GRACE  Butterflies  182
MATTHEW ARNOLD  In Harmony with Nature  182
THOMAS HARDY  Transformations  184
JOHN KEATS  To Autumn  184
GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS  God’s Grandeur  185
WALT WHITMAN  A Noiseless Patient Spider  187
EMILY DICKINSON  “Nature” is what we see  188
EMILY DICKINSON  A narrow Fellow in the Grass  190
JOY HARJO  Vision  191
MARY OLIVER  The Black Walnut Tree  192
KAY RYAN  Turtle  192
ROBERT FROST  The Pasture  193
ROBERT FROST  Mowing  195
ROBERT FROST  The Wood-Pile  197
ROBERT FROST  The Oven Bird  197
ROBERT FROST  The Need of Being Versed in Country Things  198
ROBERT FROST  The Most of It  199
ROBERT FROST  Design  199

CHAPTER 21  Journeys  201
JOAN DIDION  On Going Home  201
MONTESQUIEU (Charles de Secondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu)  
Persian Letters  201
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE  Young Goodman Brown  202
EUDORA WELTY  A Worn Path  205
TONI CADE BAMBARA  The Lesson  206
AMY HEMPEL  Today Will Be a Quiet Day  208
JAMES JOYCE  Eveline  209
JOHN KEATS  On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer  211
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY  Ozymandias  212
ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON  Ulysses  213
COUNTEE CULLEN  Incident  214
WILLIAM STAFFORD  Traveling Through the Dark  215
ADRIENNE RICH  Diving into the Wreck  216

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEREK WALCOTT</td>
<td>A Far Cry from Africa</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHERMAN ALEXIE</td>
<td>On the Amtrak from Boston to New York City</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS</td>
<td>Sailing to Byzantium</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHRISTINA ROSSETTI</td>
<td>Uphill</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMILY DICKINSON</td>
<td>Because I could not stop for Death</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. E. HOUSMAN</td>
<td>To an Athlete Dying Young</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANONYMOUS</td>
<td>Swing Low, Sweet Chariot</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANONYMOUS</td>
<td>Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 22 Love and Hate</strong></td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUDITH ORTIZ COFER</td>
<td>I Fell in Love, or My Hormones Awakened</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERNEST HEMINGWAY</td>
<td>Cat in the Rain</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZORA NEALE HURSTON</td>
<td>Sweat</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAYMOND CARVER</td>
<td>Cathedral</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANONYMOUS</td>
<td>Western Wind</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE</td>
<td>The Passionate Shepherd to His Love</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIR WALTER RALEIGH</td>
<td>The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOHN DONNE</td>
<td>The Bait</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE</td>
<td>Sonnet 29 (When, in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes)</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE</td>
<td>Sonnet 116 (Let me not to the marriage of true minds)</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOHN DONNE</td>
<td>A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANDREW MARVELL</td>
<td>To His Coy Mistress</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY</td>
<td>Love Is Not All: It Is Not Meat nor Drink</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROBERT FROST</td>
<td>The Silken Tent</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROBERT PACK</td>
<td>The Frog Prince</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NKIKI GIOVANNI</td>
<td>Love in Place</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TERRENCE MCNALLY</td>
<td>Andre’s Mother</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 23 Making Men and Women</strong></td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEVEN DOLOFF</td>
<td>The Opposite Sex</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRETEL EHRLICH</td>
<td>About Men</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN</td>
<td>The Yellow Wallpaper</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOHN UPDIKE</td>
<td>Oliver’s Evolution</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANONYMOUS</td>
<td>What Are Little Boys Made Of</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANONYMOUS</td>
<td>Higamus, Hogamus</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOROTHY PARKER</td>
<td>General Review of the Sex Situation</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOUISE BOGAN</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
x  Contents

RITA DOVE Daystar 255
THEODORE ROETHKE My Papa’s Waltz 256
SHARON OLDS Rites of Passage 256
FRANK O’HARA Homosexuality 257
JULIA ALVAREZ Woman’s Work 261
MARGE PIERCY Barbie Doll 262
HENRIK IBSEN A Doll’s House 263

CHAPTER 24 Innocence and Experience 267
GEORGE ORWELL Shooting an Elephant 267
HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN The Emperor’s New Clothes 267
JAMES JOYCE Araby 268
HA JIN Love in the Air 271
ZZ PACKER Brownies 272
WILLIAM BLAKE Infant Joy 273
WILLIAM BLAKE Infant Sorrow 273
WILLIAM BLAKE The Echoing Green 274
WILLIAM BLAKE The Lamb 275
WILLIAM BLAKE The Tyger 275
GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS Spring and Fall: To a Young Child 277
E. E. CUMMINGS in Just- 277
LOUISE GLÜCK The School Children 278
LOUISE GLÜCK Gretel in Darkness 279
LINDA PASTAN Ethics 280
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark 280
A NOTE ON STAGING SCENES IN THE CLASSROOM 281
A NOTE ON WRITING A REVIEW 283
SCENE-BY-SCENE COMMENTARY 284

CHAPTER 25 All in a Day’s Work 321
BARBARA EHRENREICH Wal-Mart Orientation Program 321
STOP ME IF YOU’VE HEARD THIS ONE: JOKES ABOUT LINES OF WORK 322
THE BROTHERS GRIMM Mother Holle 324
WILL EISNER The Day I Became a Professional 325
DANIEL OROZCO Orientation 326
JOHN UPDIKE A & P 327
B. TRAVEN Assembly Line 329
LORRIE MOORE How to Become a Writer 330

Contents

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH  The Solitary Reaper  332
WALT WHITMAN  I Hear America Singing  333
CARL SANDBURG  Chicago  334
GARY SNYDER  Hay for the Horses  335
ROBERT HAYDEN  Those Winter Sundays  335
SEAMUS HEANEY  Digging  336
MARGE PIERCY  To be of use  337
MARGE PIERCY  The Secretary Chant  338
JOHN UPDIKE  Ex-Basketball Player  339
JANE MARTIN  Rodeo  340
ARTHUR MILLER  Death of a Salesman  342

CHAPTER 26  Identity in America  346
ANNA LISA RAYA  It’s Hard Enough Being Me  346
ANDREW LAM  Who Will Light Incense When Mother’s Gone?  347
AMY TAN  Two Kinds  348
ALICE WALKER  Everyday Use  350
EMMA LAZARUS  The New Colossus  352
THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH  The Unguarded Gates  355
JOSEPH BRUCHAC III  Ellis Island  357
ANONYMOUS  Slavic Women Arrive at Ellis Island in the Winter of 1910 (photograph)  358
AURORA LEVINS MORALES  Child of the Americas  358
GLORIA ANZALDÚA  To Live in the Borderlands Means You  359
JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA  So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans  360
LANGSTON HUGHES  Theme for English B  361
MITSUYE YAMADA  To the Lady  361
NILA NORTHSUN  Moving Camp Too Far  363
LUIS VALDEZ  Los Vendidos  364
LORRAINE HANSBERRY  A Raisin in the Sun  365

CHAPTER 27  American Dreams and Nightmares  368
CHIEF SEATTLE  My People  368
ELIZABETH CADY STANTON  Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions  369
ABRAHAM LINCOLN  Address at the Dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery  370
A NOTE ON CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS  371
STUDS TERKEL  Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Dream  375

CONTENTS

KURT VONNEGUT JR. Harrison Bergeron 375
LANGSTON HUGHES One Friday Morning 377
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS The Use of Force 378
SHIRLEY JACKSON The Lottery 380
GRACE PALEY A Man Told Me the Story of His Life 381
TOBIAS WOLFF Bullet in the Brain 383
TIM O’BRIEN The Things They Carried 383
SHERMAN ALEXIE The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven 387
AMY STERLING CASIL Perfect Stranger 389
RALPH ELLISON Battle Royal 390
ROBERT HAYDEN Frederick Douglass 391
LORNA DEE CERVANTES Refugee Ship 392
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON Richard Cory 394
W. H. AUDEN The Unknown Citizen 394
ALLEN GINSBERG A Supermarket in California 395
MARGE PIERCY What’s That Smell in the Kitchen? 395
YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA Facing It 396
MAYA LIN Vietnam Veterans Memorial (photograph) 397
BILLY COLLINS The Names 398
GWENDOLYN BROOKS The Bean Eaters 401
DOROTHY PARKER Résumé 401

CHAPTER 28 Law and Disorder 403

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. Letter from Birmingham Jail 403
ELIZABETH BISHOP The Hanging of the Mouse 404
URSULA K. LE GUIN The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas 406
WILLIAM FAULKNER Barn Burning 407
TOBIAS WOLFF Powder 408
ANONYMOUS Birmingham Jail 409
A. E. HOUSMAN The Carpenter’s Son 410
A. E. HOUSMAN Oh who is that young sinner 411
CLAUDE MCKAY If We Must Die 413
JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA Cloudy Day 415
CAROLYN FORCHÉ The Colonel 417
BILLY GODA No Crime 419
SOPHOCLES Antigoné 419

CHAPTER 29  Worlds beyond Worlds  421

STEPHEN KING  Why We Crave Horror Movies  421
GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ  A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: A Tale for Children  421
ARTHUR C. CLARKE  The Nine Billion Names of God  423
ANONYMOUS  The Demon Lover  426
ANONYMOUS  The Wife of Usher’s Well  427
JOHN KEATS  La Belle Dame sans Merci  428
A. E. HOUSMAN  Shropshire Lad #27 (“Is My Team Ploughing?”)  428

NOTES ON APPENDIX B  Writing about Literature: An Overview of Critical Strategies  429

INDEX OF AUTHORS AND TITLES  433
Our title, *Literature for Composition*, announces the aim of this tenth edition, and our preface to the book clearly, we hope, explains the organization. We want to repeat that the first ten chapters offer a good deal of advice about writing, especially about writing arguments, and the next nine are a mini-anthology arranged by genre—essays, fiction (including graphic fiction), drama, poetry, and other chapters with case studies (on Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner, and Emily Dickinson). The rest of the book (except for the appendices) is devoted to a thematic anthology. Several of the thematic chapters include case studies.

We have tried to choose works of literature that will interest students in a composition class, and we have suggested topics for essays in the book and in this handbook. Some of these topics are the sort that are common in literature courses—“The function of religious imagery in ‘Araby,’” for example, or “To what extent is Nora [in *A Doll’s House*] a victim, and to what extent is she herself at fault for her way of life?” Such topics need no defense; they help to bring the student into close contact with the work of literature, and they help to develop analytic powers.

But we have also included some topics that invite students to try their hands at imaginative writing: for instance, “Write a dialogue—approximately two double-spaced pages—setting forth a chance encounter when Torvald and Nora meet five years after the end of Ibsen’s play.” Such an assignment will, if nothing else, give students some idea of the difficulty of writing dialogue; but of course it will do much more, for again, it will require them to think about the play itself, especially if the instructor cautions them that their dialogue ought to be rooted in Ibsen’s play.

Still other suggested topics in this handbook, however, use the work of literature as a point of departure for expository or persuasive essays. For instance, for an essay that takes off from Grace Paley’s “Samuel,” we ask:

If you had been on the train, would you have pulled the emergency cord? Why, or why not?
We have just said that such topics use the literary work as a point of departure; we do not mean that the work gets left behind. A good essay will be based on a close reading of the text, but it will also allow the student to develop an argument on an issue larger than the work. Moreover, such topics as those on Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions can easily be made into small-scale research papers if the instructor wishes to teach research methods. In the text, Chapter 10, “Research: Writing with Sources,” provides information about electronic sources, and Appendix A provides an overview of critical approaches. Appendix B provides information about documentation.

In this handbook we discuss, in varying degrees of detail, every literary selection that we reprint, except for a handful that are discussed extensively within the text itself. We also offer in this handbook additional Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing on many of the works. Unfortunately, however, assignments that work well for one instructor may not work well for another, and even an assignment that works well at nine o’clock may not work well at ten. Still, over the years we have had good luck with the selections we include and with the writing assignments given in the text and in this handbook. We will be most grateful to any instructors who write to us to suggest additional topics. If there is an eleventh edition of the book, we will try to include such suggestions, giving credit to the contributors.

Note: We provide bibliography for most of the authors included in this handbook, but we do not repeat this information in the case of authors for whom we have more than one selection. You will find the bibliography the first time that the author is discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
We cannot adequately express our indebtedness to Chris Heath and to Dianne Hall, whose sharp eyes and inquiring minds caused us to revise many passages in this handbook.
Using the “Short Views”
and the “Overviews”

Each thematic section of *Literature for Composition* (Chapters 20–29) begins with a group of brief statements entitled “Short Views.” These range from epigrammatic sentences to a few paragraphs. Often the views are controversial, and sometimes we juxtapose contrasting views.

Short Views can be used in a variety of ways to stimulate writing—and to call to the attention of students some of the characteristics of effective prose. We have found it useful to start a class hour by asking students to take turns reading aloud the Short Views from the unit they are working on. We have noticed how few students nowadays can read aloud with any comfort, probably because they have seldom been asked to read aloud or have had anyone read to them. Reading aloud is a good way to learn to pay attention to the text—the beginning, of course, of thinking critically about it. Having Short Views read aloud also lets the instructor see which ones create a response from the class, a question, a look of puzzlement, a laugh, a groan. Any one of these responses is a good place to start a discussion. “What is it here that makes you laugh?” “Is there something here you don’t understand? Or are you saying that you disagree? Try to slow down your reaction and see if you can explain it.”

Each group of Short Views is followed by specific questions on the theme, but here are two writing assignments that can be applied to Short Views on any of the thematic topics.

1. Select a quotation that especially appeals to you, and make it the focus of an essay of about 500 words.
2. Take two of these passages—perhaps one that you especially like and one that you think is wrong-headed—and write a dialogue of about 500 words in which the two authors converse. They may each try to convince the other, or they may find that to some degree they share views and they may then work out a statement that both can accept. If you do take the first po-
position—that one writer is on the correct track but the other is utterly mistaken—do try to be fair to the view that you think is mistaken. (As an experiment in critical thinking, imagine that you accept it, and make the best case for it that you possibly can.)

Each thematic section ends with “Overviews: Looking Backward/Looking Forward,” topics that invite students to reflect on the readings and to write essays that connect works to each other and to the student’s own experience.
Guide to

www.myliteraturelab.com

Introduction

*MyLiteratureLab*™ gives you and your students access to a wealth of online resources that bring literature to life as well as writing and research resources that help students succeed. You will save time by managing assignments and grading in one convenient place, and your students will benefit from having 24/7 access to terrific resources.

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, instructors 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:

- **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, *Antigonê* 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 captioning 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, e-mail, 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.
The First Day

When you meet your students on the first day of classes, in addition to the usual business of taking attendance and reviewing the syllabus, you may want to spend a few minutes describing *Literature for Composition*. Explain how this book will enable the students to fulfill the goals of the course. Your students have purchased the book, and they will be spending lots of time working with it; they will benefit from hearing from you why you have chosen it and about the features in it that will help them to improve their writing.

On the first day, we also give the students some advice about other resources upon which they should draw. These are obvious enough: a good dictionary and a thesaurus. But we recommend that you be more specific. Bring to class the dictionary and the thesaurus that you keep on your own desk. One of us in fact carries to each and every class a dictionary he especially admires: *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, third edition (1996); he places the dictionary, open and ready for reference, on his desk in the classroom, alongside his copy of *Literature for Composition*.

This, we know, may seem heavy-handed. But we think the teacher needs to provide a model for the students; if you urge the students to use the dictionary to check on the meanings of words and to expand their vocabularies, show them that you do this yourself—that it is a natural part of studying literature and becoming a skillful writer.

It is tempting on this first day or during the first week to identify for students many other books and Internet resources to which they can turn. But be careful not to give students more than they can handle or absorb, especially if you are teaching first-year students in the first semester of college, who tend to feel overwhelmed anyway. We also increasingly find that many of our students are non-native speakers; indeed, it is not unusual for us to encounter students for whom English is their third language.¹ We try to keep this point in mind, even as we set a high standard for these students and all of the others. There

¹One of the best students one of us has ever taught began her college career by writing her papers first in Vietnamese, then translating them into French, and, finally, into the English version she handed in.
will be plenty of opportunities, as the semester unfolds, to outline the elements of a research paper and the relevant print and electronic sources for them. At the outset, keep the focus on the resources that *Literature for Composition* itself contains from one chapter to the next, and on the value derived from regular use of the dictionary and the thesaurus.

The only exception we make to this rule is when we are teaching a course, or a section of a course, designed for English majors, say, in the second semester of the first year or the first semester of the second. In these cases, we highlight two basic tools of the trade:


Students who know that they will be majoring in English enjoy hearing about the reference books that matter in particular for them. We suggest that you bring your own copies of these books to class. You might even make copies of an entry or two so that the students can see for themselves how the information in such books can prove useful to them in interpreting literature and writing about it.
PART I

Getting Started

From Response to Argument
This brief chapter was written at the suggestion of some instructors. These instructors felt that although their students already had completed one semester of a composition course—*Literature for Composition* was assigned as the text for the second semester of a two-semester sequence—and probably had retained the rhetoric or handbook that had been assigned for the first semester, the students nevertheless would profit from what in effect was a review of what they had learned in the first semester.

We haven’t taught this chapter so we can’t offer much in the way of tips about teaching it, but our suggestion is that you might assign it without spending time going over it in class. That is, we trust it is lucid, and we hope it will serve to remind students of what they learned in the first semester.

We have just said that you might assign the chapter but not spend time on it in class, but we want to modify the statement: All of the epigraphs are engaging, and surely some are worth a brief discussion in class. Admittedly Peter de Vries’s comment (“I love being a writer. What I can’t stand is the paperwork”) is here just for the laugh, and Dr. Johnson’s (“What is written without effort, in general is read without pleasure”) is here merely to urge students to spend time revising, but the comments by Porter (about the need for a writer to serve an apprenticeship) and the comment by Mann (“A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people”) might well be discussed, at least briefly. About the comment by Mann: One might ask students *why* writers find “writing more difficult than it is for other people.” The answer surely is that writers *care* about what they write; they are not just knocking off stuff. They are concerned with communicating, which means—at a minimum—they are concerned with (a) being clear and with (b) holding the reader’s attention. This means—again, at a minimum—they are constantly putting themselves into their readers’ shoes, constantly expressing doubt about what they have written, and constantly revising in the light of their own questions. We think that if you can get your students to question their own drafts, they will be well on the way to being good writers.
Chapter 2

The Writer as Reader

Kate Chopin

Ripe Figs (p. 9)

This story teaches marvelously. Some stories supposedly teach well because the instructor can have the pleasure of showing students all sorts of things that they missed, but unfortunately stories of that kind may, by convincing students that literature has deep meanings that they don’t see, turn students away from literature. “Ripe Figs” teaches well because it is a first-rate piece that is easily accessible.

Elaine Gardiner discusses it fully in an old but still fresh essay in Modern Fiction Studies 28:3 (1982), reprinted in Harold Bloom’s collection of essays Kate Chopin (1987), pp. 83–87. Gardiner’s essay is admirable, but instructors will be interested to find that their students will make pretty much the same points that Gardiner makes. Gardiner emphasizes three of Chopin’s techniques: her use of contrasts, natural imagery, and cyclical plotting.

The chief contrast is between Maman-Nainaine and Babette, that is, age versus youth, patience versus impatience, experience versus innocence, staidness versus exuberance. Thus, Chopin tells us that “Maman-Nainaine sat down in her stately way,” whereas Babette is “restless as a hummingbird” and dances. Other contrasts are spring and summer, summer and fall, figs and chrysanthemums.

Speaking of natural imagery, Gardiner says, “Not only are journeys planned according to when figs ripen and chrysanthemums bloom, but places are defined by what they produce; thus, Bayou-Lafourche, for Maman-Nainaine, is the place ‘where the sugar cane grows.’” Gardiner calls attention to the references to the leaves, the rain, and the branches of the fig tree, but of course she emphasizes the ripening of the figs (from “little hard, green marbles” to “purple figs, fringed around with their rich green leaves”) and the flowering of the chrysanthemums. The contrasts in natural imagery, Gardiner says, “ultimately convey and emphasize continuity and stability.”

Turning to cyclical plotting—common in Chopin—Gardiner says, “With the ripening of the figs in the summertime begins the next period of waiting, the continuance of the cycle, both of nature and of the characters’ lives. . . . The reader finishes the sketch anticipating the movements to follow—movements directed by the seasons, by natural happenings, by the cyclical patterns of these people’s lives.”
Our classes on Chopin's stories are always successful. Students find her work subtle and intriguing and enjoy writing their first critical essays for the course about them. For this reason, we make sure to take a few moments to encourage students to read—on their own—more of her stories and her novel *The Awakening*. *The Awakening and Selected Stores*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert (1984), is a good, inexpensive paperback edition you can recommend. Your best students may not need prodding of this kind, but many students do need to be reminded that a rich world of books awaits them outside the classroom, beyond the list on the syllabus.

Dated, but still useful, are the sections on Chopin in Marlene Springer, *Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin: A Reference Guide* (1976). Per Seyersted has written a cogent, well-paced biography (1969); Emily Toth has written another—more recent and more detailed (1990). In addition to the collection edited by Harold Bloom that we noted above, we have also benefited from the range of work included in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou*, ed. Lynda S. Boren and Sara deSaussure Davis (1992), and *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (1996).

**LYDIA DAVIS**

*City People* (p. 19)

In our second question in the text we ask if it is reasonable to offer a conjecture as to why these people have moved from the city to the country. We are aware that the characters in “City People” are fictional, that they have no “real” lives—they are only what Lydia Davis tells us they are, and we cannot speculate about their earlier experiences any more than we can speculate on Hamlet’s days at the university. That is, we cannot speculate on (for instance) whether Davis’s characters moved to the country from New York or from San Francisco, whether they lived in more than one city, whether they now are middle-aged or younger or older, and so forth. Still, our answer to our question is, Yes, we can guess why they have moved from the city to the country. It is because they are unhappy, isolated, alienated—perhaps that is the human condition—and they have moved thinking they will find some sort of tranquility. But, in this Beckett-like world a change in locale is meaningless. Someone—maybe Horace?—said something to the effect that travelers change only the skies, not themselves.

We think it is worth discussing, in class, the physical form of the story, its shape on the page even though, unfortunately, in our text we cannot print it with the abundance of white space that surrounds the story in Davis’s book. In the first paragraph Davis gives us a solid block of third-person omniscient narration, chiefly short simple sentences. The effect of the sentences is almost childlike, especially near the end of the paragraph:

He hates the mice. The pump breaks. They replace the pump. They poison the mice. Their neighbor’s dog barks. It barks and barks. She could poison the dog.
Even as one silently reads the first paragraph, the reader’s eye sees the next (and only other) paragraph, a very short paragraph. This second paragraph, a single sentence, gives us some dialogue. We at last hear these people (or at least one of them) rather than get the narrator’s report of their action. And what do we hear? The stupid yet pitiful “We’re city people,” he says, ‘and there aren’t any nice cities to live in.’” In terms of thoughtfulness, the line bears comparison with an inane line in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” where the grandmother says, “People are certainly not nice like they used to be.” But our point here is not to comment on the shallowness of the man’s speech; rather, our point is to comment on the shape of the story: In its original format the text is centered on the page, with generous margins at the top, bottom, and sides so we get a block of print, varied only by a slight indentation (the beginning of the second paragraph) near the bottom of the block, followed by the inane line of dialogue. And then we are left on our own, with ample space at the bottom of the page, i.e., we are in this isolated world of these city people, surrounded by blankness.

RAY BRADBURY

August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains (p. 22)

Because the story is short, and because it is in a genre familiar to most students (even if they know the genre only through films), “There Will Come Soft Rains” can be taught effectively during one of the first two or three meetings of the term.

There must be at least several reasons why science fiction is enormously popular, but one of them surely is stated by Kurt Vonnegut’s Eliot Rosewater, who says that science-fiction writers are “the only ones who’ll talk about the really terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage.” Although fairly often the end of the “terrific changes” is the annihilation of our highly technological society, the idea that “life is a space voyage” does allow writers of science fiction to discuss questions of value. (“Science Fiction” here refers to the serious stuff, not to sword-and-sorcery or to space opera.)

The future society envisioned is not much different from contemporary society. Today we read about (or maybe we even live in) a world of “smart houses” equipped with computers that, for instance, enable the owner to set the temperature of the oven, and the timing, by means of a telephone call. In Bradbury’s story we seem to be in the world of a typical nuclear family, tidy, prosperous, obsessed by efficiency—and of severely limited interests. “There Will Come Soft Rains” is, in short, a satire on life as we already know it, with its obsession for cleanliness, its labor-saving devices, its bridge tables and egg salad sandwiches, and its slavery to the clock. Perhaps fondness for sentimental verse can be added to this list, though it is possible (a point for discussion in class) that Teasdale’s
poem is meant to suggest that the family, concerned only with its comfortable little world, is tragically indifferent to the natural world around it.

**MICHELE SERROS**

*Senior Picture Day* (p. 29)

This engaging story will cause no difficulty for students, or, rather, they can easily understand it, but it is conceivable that some students will be offended by the depiction of a young woman of Central American Indian ancestry who is disturbed by her large nose.

Some but not all of your students may know that the Maya esteemed a large nose as a sign of high social status: Sculptures of high priests and of aristocrats always show them with large noses; in fact, the bridges of the noses extend well up into the forehead. Other cultures, too, esteemed a long nose. Some of your students may know a line from the Song of Solomon (7:4):

> Thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus.

Our own favorite quotation about noses appears in William Hazlitt's *My First Acquaintance with Poets* where Hazlitt—who had an ample nose—describes Keats:

> His nose, the rudder of the face, the index of the will, was small, feeble, nothing.

Alas, an adolescent with a large nose is not likely to take comfort in the fact that the Maya, the biblical world, and William Hazlitt endorsed large noses.

In the book we ask students what their response is toward the narrator. It is our guess that many, especially students who themselves are close in age to the narrator, will condemn her for her snobbism; she talks about “snooty” people in the first paragraph, but clearly she regards herself as superior to persons of Indian heritage, even though she herself is such a person. Our own view, and the view of some other older readers, is more charitable. Yes, her snobbism is deplorable, and so is her self-hatred (though that term is a bit strong), but, well, she is young. She is an adolescent, and much can be forgiven. Adolescence has its problems, and one of its characteristics is shame of one’s parents—with their funny speech (especially if the parents are immigrants), their flabby flesh, and, yes, in some cases their big noses. We happen to have come across a comment about adolescence that we think we may test in class when we teach this story:

> The conflict between the need to belong to a group and the need to be seen as unique and individual is the dominant struggle of adolescents.

Jeanne Elium and Don Elium, *Raising a Daughter* (1994), 11

The narrator very much wants to belong to the group of blond Californians, to Terri’s group, though, as we learn, Terri does not have much use for this girl—this girl who, in Terri’s words, has “this nose, a nose like . . . like an Indian”; and Terri’s father is scarcely a role model.

Given the Anglo society’s view of Indian physiognomy, it is not surprising that the narrator is ashamed of her nose. And surely the narrator will in time find that squeezing her nose is not going to make it smaller. Meanwhile a reader can deplore her pretensions and yet smile a bit at them and can wish her well in the long run.

GUY DE MAUPASSANT

The Necklace (p. 34)

This story apparently remains a favorite among instructors and students, though perhaps because (at least for many readers) it is a story they love to hate. When we typed “Maupassant necklace” into a search engine, a couple of student essays came up, including one by someone—presumably an undergraduate—named Gregory Weston. His essay ends thus:

I earlier compared “The Necklace” with “Cinderella,” but the story reminds me more of the myth of Icaris [sic]. Mathilde wanted more then [sic] what was given to her and used her natural talents to get what she aspired to. She did, and her only crime was trying to fly high. Maupassant delights in melting her wings, and then cheapens her fall with his “ironic twist” at the end. Why someone would write such a vicious and cynical story is beyond me.

Why someone would post such an essay is beyond us, but, come to think of it, instructors might well start a class discussion by distributing copies of this paragraph and inviting comment. Does Mathilde “use her natural talents” to get what she aspires to? Does Maupassant “delight” in reducing her? Is the story “vicious and cynical”?

A second essay that we found on the Internet is an anonymous piece entitled “Diamonds and Paste: A Marxist Reading of Guy de Maupassant’s ‘The Necklace.’” There is absolutely nothing Marxist about it, other than that it talks about “class distinction,” “the social ladder,” and “different economic classes.” That is, it reveals no understanding of Marxist views of the role of the artist in bourgeois society or of class relationships. Here is the final paragraph:

This story illustrates the different perspectives on value that are created by different economic classes. Value is viewed differently by different classes because of their different perspectives. The couple in the story
would not have had to go into so much debt if they had simply realised that the necklace might not have much monetary value. Their social class made them believe that only expensive things are valuable and this brought them down.

Are we to understand that only lower-middle-class people “believe that only expensive things are valuable” and that, for instance, Mme. Loisel’s rich friend holds a different view?

We confess that “The Necklace” is not our favorite Maupassant story, but we do think it is far richer than these two essayists indicate. Yes, the heart of the story is the ironic twist, the idea that the couple engaged in ten years of needless drudgery, that a moment or two of humiliating confession would have spared them a decade of slavery. But Maupassant is convincing in his swift characterization, for instance in the husband’s “triumphant air” (paragraph 7) when he presents the invitation to his wife, in the wife’s unexpected (but to us natural) expression of “disdain” (11), in the husband’s embarrassment that he had not thought about what she might wear to the affair (15–18), in the wife’s “intoxication” at the ball (54) and then her shame as she leaves, dressed in the “modest wraps of common life” rather than in the furs of the other women (55). We might notice, too, Maupassant’s unsentimental (is it cynical—or merely realistic?) statement that her years of drudgery coarsened her (“she went to the fruiterer, the grocer, the butcher, her basket on her arm, bargaining, insulted, defending her miserable money sou by sou”).

All these skillful touches of characterization raise the story to a level far above a merely ironic anecdote. Notice, too, how Maupassant darkens the tale when the couple leaves the ball, first by the wife’s thoughts about her wraps, then by the difficulty they have in finding a cab. From here on, things go downhill swiftly. In class one might talk about the ways in which Maupassant from the very beginning prepares for the outcome. For instance, the very first paragraph speaks of “destiny,” more specifically of “a mistake of destiny.” Admittedly a reader does not put much weight on this phrase at first but on rereading, it takes on significance. There is something odd, something almost unnatural or freakish, Maupassant suggests, in the fact that this pretty, charming girl was born into the class she finds herself. Further in this paragraph we are told that “she let herself be married to a little clerk,” that is, she seems to have no will of her own; her fate is settled for her. And surely we all realize that although we feel we are acting freely, chance plays an enormous part in our lives: had we gone to a different college, we might well now have a different spouse, and we might be engaged in a different career. And (unless we smoke cigarettes) we do not choose to fall ill or to die the way we will die. And—nagging thought—had our parents not met (an act that was not of our doing), we would not be here, thinking these thoughts. For the most part we feel as though our actions are free—we may think we are the captain of our fate, the master of our soul—but most of us probably recognize that in many ways we are pup-
pets. A good deal of proverbial wisdom holds this view: Man proposes, God disposes; _che sarà sarà_ (what will be will be); _ça ira_ (it will go its own way—supposedly said by Benjamin Franklin about the American Revolution, when he was in Paris in 1776–1777).

Our point is, in brief, that Maupassant’s characterization is convincing (the people behave plausibly) and that the overarching idea is scarcely shocking: our mistakes, sometimes rooted in a combination of our character and bad luck, can be catastrophic. If Mme. Loisel out of pride borrows jewelry, loses it, and later makes the mistake of not admitting that she has lost it, all three actions are entirely intelligible to us—we might do exactly what she has done. As for disastrous mistakes, well, if we haven’t made them ourselves, we know of other people who have. Further, even as we say, “Why _of course_ X _should_ have done such-and-such,” we realize that X (for whatever reasons) couldn’t have done it, or perhaps didn’t do it because there seemed to be no need to do it at the time.

Still, it might be worth asking students whether they do indeed find the story “cruel.” One could ask them, even more generally, what it means for an author to treat his or her characters cruelly.

What’s behind this question is a common fact of the students’ experiences as readers—that characters in novels and stories can take on for them and, for that matter, for us a life of their own, a life that we feel keenly interested in and that—so compelling does the illusion seem—we believe that the writer himself or herself should not interfere with. The character is, on the one hand, the writer’s creation, yet, on the other hand, enters into the reader’s imagination as more than that, as an independent person rather than as something that the writer controls. There is a magic and mystery in the creation of a literary character that teachers are sometimes hesitant to admit to, but that they, and certainly their students, respond to when caught up in the story of, for example, Emma Woodhouse, Jane Eyre, or Anna Karenina.

Thus, when a writer seems to us to be imposing an unfair fate on a character we care about, a fate that the character does not deserve or that is not in keeping with his or her nature or that makes the character no more than a victim, we may be led to protest that the author or story is a cruel one. Again, this touches on a dimension of the students’ experiences as readers, and perhaps the analysis of “The Necklace” can invite some discussion of it.

A few words about several of the questions that we ask in the text:

_Question 1._ What do we learn about Mme. Loisel in the early part of the story, and what is the reader’s response to the narrator’s generalization about women in the second paragraph? All generalizations are suspect (including even William Blake’s assertion that “To generalize is to be an idiot”), but we find something attractive in the narrator’s comment that “Natural fineness, instinct for what is elegant, suppleness of wit, are the sole hierarchy,” and in his comment that lowborn women may thus be the equals of great ladies. In this period, with very few exceptions women had no way of rising, other perhaps than by selling their bodies, and so we take Maupassant to be asserting that even though
a woman may be of low status, she may indeed be the mental equivalent of “the very greatest ladies.”

**Question 2.** Is she “justly punished for her vanity and pride”? We don’t think so. Yes, she shows traces of vanity and pride, but what kind of justice requires that vanity be sentenced to ten years at hard labor?

**Question 3.** Is “heroism” the appropriate word? We are glad that Maupassant used this word. Up to now, Mme. Loisel has exhibited petulance, vanity, and some other less-than-attractive qualities, though she has certainly not been villainous. Now, confronted with adversity, we are heartened to see her accept responsibility: “She took her part, moreover, all of a sudden, with heroism. That dreadful debt must be paid. She would pay it.” And so she begins a decade of hard work, in which she comes to know “the horrible existence of the needy.” Notice that Maupassant does not sentimentalize her behavior. Her heroic willingness to pay for the necklace does not mean that she becomes noble-minded. Rather, the reverse is true, as we indicated when we quoted the passage that tells us she harangued the fruiterers, the grocer, the butcher. Suffering doesn’t ennoble, it harshens (or at least it usually does). But surely readers are able to see something heroic—however mistaken, however ironic—in her struggle.

**Question 4.** How well does the story fit with Maupassant’s comment on the aim of a writer? In the text we isolate three issues: the purpose of fiction (“to make us understand the hidden meaning of events”); the assertion that fiction gives the reader a “personal view”; and the assertion that readers should be moved but should not be aware that the writer has foisted a personal view on them, i.e., the writer’s purpose and artistry should be inconspicuous. We have already indicated that we think Maupassant’s highly anecdotal story does imply a view of life, a revelation of “the hidden meaning of events,” and it does indeed seem that Maupassant’s “personal view” was that we have little control over our destiny. Finally, we think that the work has been constructed so skillfully that—despite the outrageous irony—the reader cannot say, “Oh, no; people do not behave this way. Maupassant, like the writer of a soap opera, is inventing crazy improbabilities and crazy inconsistencies in the characters merely to create a gripping story.” In our view, the characters are sketched convincingly, and the plot is plausible enough. People are sometimes motivated by vanity, and they do lose things, and they do conceal embarrassing truths. For us, the behavior of Mme. Loisel and her husband is entirely believable.

In our view, the great improbability is that the Loisels could somehow find a real diamond necklace that was so similar to the paste necklace that the owner, Mme. Forestier, would not notice the difference. Curiously, we don’t recall a student ever bringing up this point—further proof, of course, that Maupassant has done his work very well.

A second oddity that our students have never noticed: The Loisels presumably are entitled to own the necklace, which means they are now—to their surprise—quite rich.
GUY DE MAUPASSANT

Hautot and His Son (p. 40)

In the typical Maupassant story, even inexperienced readers perceive that something happens—for instance rape, or murder. (Unfortunately, if students know anything by Maupassant it is likely to be “The Necklace,” an uncharacteristic story and one that is far from his best.) “Hautot,” however, is somewhat unusual for Maupassant: the father’s violent death is a preliminary, and the important happening takes place gradually, almost imperceptibly. This is not to say, of course, that “Hautot” is Chekhovian or Joycean, but what happens is less obvious than what happens in many of his other stories. On the other hand, “Hautot” is characteristic of Maupassant in its concern with sex and its use of the extraordinary.

Maupassant begins with a leisurely sketch of French provincial life, creating a sense of place and personality. This sense will not be unexpectedly reversed at the end, but will be completed or complemented. Similarly, the woman’s failure to comprehend the report of the accident and the son’s repetition of the tale are realistic details that reveal character and at the same time look forward to the ending. The son’s repetitions, for example, indicate that he is gradually coming to master the fact, and when he has mastered it (as when, for example, we have sufficiently punished ourselves after doing a stupid thing by telling everyone how stupid we have been), he can go on to live unfettered. This does not strike us as cynical. Maupassant does not sneer at young Hautot, or at life; rather, he suggests that grief is genuine, but that it usually does not last a lifetime.

Is this view immoral? Maupassant is not preaching, but depicting. His depiction may strike some as false, in which case it is bad art, but scarcely bad morality.

T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE

Greasy Lake (p. 48)

The story of course is about the movement from innocence to experience, but the reader knows, from the first sentence, that that’s what it will be about:

There was a time when courtesy and winning ways went out of style, when it was good to be bad, when you cultivated decadence like a taste.”

So we sit back and are prepared to hear what this now-courteous narrator, with winning ways, has to tell us about the time when he was “bad.” Along the way, readers encounter many interesting sentences, and in our role as teachers we try to call some of these to the attention of our students. Most students are chiefly
interested in plot and character, but we do what we can to help them to enjoy the sentences as they come, to help them to enjoy what we can call the *style* of the story.

Take the very first words: To our ear, “There was a time when” is not very far from “Once upon a time,” i.e., *this* storyteller, like the teller of a traditional fairy tale with a happy ending, is thoroughly comfortable in the role of narrator and, further, implicitly assures the readers that they will hear about strange happenings, but things will turn out okay. If one looks at the story from the viewpoint of a critic interested in archetypes, one sees essentially a story of baptism—in *Greasy Lake*!—from which the protagonist emerges into a new life, but this is treated semi-comically. The narrator is a highly sophisticated, wry fellow. Note such language as “cultivated decadence” (paragraph 1), “fetid,“ “primeval susurrus” (2), “exoskeleton” (5)—well, we need not go on, except, perhaps, to point out a sort of mock heroic conceit in paragraph 7, where he compares the loss of the car keys to General “Westmoreland’s decision to dig in at Khe San.” In short, we think that students must look closely at the words, the sentences, and savor them, not just read the story for the plot, a plot that does indeed chronicle a change from “bad” behavior to mature reflection.

In an interview, Boyle offers this comment on “Greasy Lake”:

In “Greasy Lake” we have three college kids on summer break who are locked into the invincibility of their cool—“We were all dangerous characters then,” the narrator says. They have some harrowing adventures of the teenage type and decide finally that no matter how bad you think you are, there is always someone a whole lot badder, and that the world, far from being your oyster, is a dangerous place of shadow and dislocation and death. Of course, I am that narrator, and I, like all my contemporaries, have been to Greasy Lake at one time or another, and yet all the incidents related are purely invented.

The first sentence of the story proves to be essential to the end, though during the middle of the story the initial care to protect Mrs. Mallard from the “sad message” seems almost comic. Students may assume, too easily, that Mrs. Mallard’s “storm of grief” is hypocritical. They may not notice that the renewal after the first shock is stimulated by the renewal of life around her (“the tops of trees ... were all aquiver with the new spring of life”) and that before she achieves a new life, Mrs. Mallard first goes through a sort of death and then tries to resist renewal: Her expression “indicated a suspension of intelligent thought,” she felt something “creeping out of the sky,” and she tried to “beat it back with her will,” but she soon finds herself “drinking the elixir of life through that open window,” and her thoughts turn to “spring days, and summer days.” Implicit in the story is the idea that her life as a wife—which she had thought was happy—was in fact a life of repression or subjugation, and the awareness comes to her only at this late stage. The story has two surprises: the change from grief to joy proves not to be the whole story, for we get the second surprise, the husband’s return and Mrs. Mallard’s death. The last line (“the doctors ... said she had died ... of joy that kills”) is doubly ironic: The doctors wrongly assume that she was overjoyed to find that her husband was alive, but they were not wholly wrong in guessing that her last day of life brought her great joy.

In a sense, moreover, the doctors are right (though not in the sense they mean) in saying that she “died of heart disease.” That is, if we take the “heart” in a metaphorical sense to refer to love and marriage, we can say that the loss of her new freedom from her marriage is unbearable. This is not to say (though many students do say it) that her marriage was miserable. The text explicitly says “she had loved him—sometimes.” The previous paragraph in the story nicely calls attention to a certain aspect of love—a satisfying giving of the self—and yet also to a most unpleasant yielding to force: “There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending her in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature.”
A biographical observation: Chopin’s husband died in 1882, and her mother died in 1885. In 1894 in an entry in her diary she connected the two losses with her growth: “If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to earth, I feel that I would unhesitatingly give up every thing that has come into my life since they left it and join my existence again with theirs. To do that, I would have to forget the past ten years of my growth—my real growth.”

Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing

Chopin does not tell us if Mrs. Mallard’s death is due to joy at seeing her husband alive, guilt for feeling “free,” shock at the awareness that her freedom is lost, or something else. Should the author have made the matter clear? Why, or why not?

KATE CHOPIN

*Désirée’s Baby* (p. 73)

Students tend to differ in their responses to this story, and in particular to the ending. In the final lines, Armand learns that his own mother “belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery.” The point is that he carries within himself the traces of the “black” race that he found intolerable in his wife, whom he has exiled from his presence and who, apparently, commits suicide along with their child.

But what exactly is it that Armand learns? Is he learning with a shock something he never suspected, or, instead, something he sensed was true (or might have been true) all along? Some students contend that the letter from his mother that Armand reads stuns him with its sudden, shocking disclosure, whereas others maintain that he really knew the truth all along, or that he may not have known the truth for sure but likely suspected it.

We tend to start the class, then, by asking the students for their responses to the ending of the story. And we have always found some version of this sharp difference in interpretation to emerge from the opening discussion. There is of course a risk in keying the structure of the class to a debate; sometimes the positions can become too polarized, too rigidly upheld. The way to avoid this is to keep pressing the students to connect their positions to details in the language, moments in the story’s unfolding narrative. As the students talk about the ending, ask them to explain where, earlier in the story, they find evidence that supports their interpretation.

On the one hand, this reminder spurs the students to seek evidence for their statements about the text: they must return to the text and its organizations of language. On the other hand, this close attention to passages usually complicates the polarized terms of the debate, making the story more complex and harder to simplify.

Notice, for example, the detail about Armand that Chopin gives halfway through: “And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his
dealings with the slaves.” This is the kind of detail that is worth lingering over. Does Armand begin to act cruelly because of his rising anger at his wife and child? Or, somewhat differently, because he knows on some level that he cannot deny the truth about who he is—the truth that his mother’s letter will later confirm?

In her biography of Chopin (1990), Emily Toth states that “Désirée’s husband, Armand, has a relationship with the slave La Blanche.” We are not sure that the text sustains this intriguing idea, but it’s a useful comment to mention in class, for it returns the students once more to the text, leading them to focus on a key passage in order to test whether they agree with Toth or not. Students are frequently unsure about how to make use of secondary sources in their own analytical essays, and an example like this one, which a student could cite for agreement or disagreement and work with, can be instructive to them.

We might mention a couple of assignments that have gone over well for Chopin’s story. On occasion we have asked students to “complete the story” by writing a new final paragraph that presents Armand’s reaction to his mother’s letter. Sometimes we have also assigned a student to present an oral report on the term miscegenation, which derives from the title of a faked anonymous pamphlet written during the Civil War. The authors, David Goodman Croly and George Wakeman, were Democratic newspapermen, and their pamphlet (which they pretended had been written by a member of the Republican Party) was designed to discredit Abraham Lincoln and his fellow Republicans by revealing that they favored interracial marriages—which was untrue. The student might be directed to dictionaries and encyclopedias and, for more detail, to George M. Fredrickson, The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on the Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914 (1971), which includes an insightful account of how the term miscegenation arose and gained prominence.

KATE CHOPIN

The Storm (p. 81)

Chopin wrote this story in 1898 but never tried to publish it, presumably because she knew it would be unacceptable to the taste of the age. “The Storm” uses the same characters as an earlier story, “The ’Cadian Ball,” in which Alcée is about to run away with Calixta when Clarisse captures him as a husband.

Here are our tentative responses to the topics for discussion and writing in the text.

On the characters of Calixta and Bobinôt. In Part I, Bobinôt buys a can of shrimp because Calixta is fond of shrimp. Our own impression is that this detail is provided chiefly to show Bobinôt’s interest in pleasing his wife, but Per Seyersted, in Kate Chopin, finds a darker meaning. Seyersted suggests (p. 223) that shrimp “may represent a conscious allusion to the potency often denoted by sea foods.” (To the best of our knowledge, this potency is attributed only to oysters,
but perhaps we lead sheltered lives.) At the beginning of Part II, Calixta is “sewing furiously on a sewing machine,” and so readers gather that she is a highly industrious woman, presumably a more-than-usually diligent housekeeper. The excuses Bobinôt frames on the way home (Part III) suggest that he is somewhat intimidated by his “overscrupulous housewife.” Calixta is genuinely concerned about the welfare of her somewhat simple husband and of her child. The affair with Alcée by no means indicates that she is promiscuous or, for that matter, unhappy with her family. We don’t think her expressions of solicitude for the somewhat childlike Bobinôt are insincere. We are even inclined to think that perhaps her encounter with Alcée has heightened her concern for her husband. (At least, to use the language of reader-response criticism, this is the way we “naturalize”—make sense out of—the gap or blank in the narrative.)

**Alcée’s letter to his wife** suggests that he thinks his affair with Calixta may go on for a while, but we take it that the affair is, like the storm (which gives its title to the story), a passing affair. It comes about unexpectedly and “naturally”: Alcée at first takes refuge on the gallery, with no thought of entering the house, but because the gallery does not afford shelter, Calixta invites him in, and then a lightning bolt drives her (backward) into his arms. The experience is thoroughly satisfying, and it engenders no regrets, but presumably it will be treasured rather than repeated, despite Alcée’s thoughts when he writes his letter.

**Clarisse’s response.** By telling us, in Part V, that Clarisse is delighted at the thought of staying a month longer in Biloxi, Chopin diminishes any blame that a reader might attach to Alcée. That is, although Alcée is unfaithful to his wife, we see that his wife doesn’t regret his absence: “Their intimate conjugal life was something which she was more than willing to forego for a while.”

**Is the story cynical?** We don’t think so, since cynicism involves a mocking or sneering attitude, whereas in this story Chopin regards her characters affectionately. Blame is diminished not only by Clarisse’s letter but by other means. We learn that at an earlier time, when Calixta was a virgin, Alcée’s “honor forbade him to prevail.” And, again, by associating the affair with the storm, Chopin implies that this moment of passion is in accord with nature. Notice also that the language becomes metaphoric during the scene of passion. For instance, Calixta’s “lips were as red and as moist as pomegranate seed,” and her “passion . . . was like a white flame,” suggesting that the characters are transported to a strange (though natural) world. There is, of course, the implication that people are less virtuous than they seem to be, but again, Chopin scarcely seems to gloat over this fact. Rather, she suggests that the world is a fairly pleasant place in which there is enough happiness to go all around. “So the storm passed and everyone was happy.” There is no need to imagine further episodes in which, for instance, Calixta and Alcée deceive Bobinôt; nor is there any need to imagine further episodes in which Calixta and Alcée regret their moment of passion.

**Two additional points** can be made. First, there seems to be a suggestion of class distinction between Calixta and Alcée, though both are Creoles. Calixta uses some French terms, and her speech includes such expressions as “An’ Bibi? he ain’t wet? Ain’t hurt?” Similarly Bobinôt’s language, though it does not
include any French terms, departs from standard English. On the other hand, Alcée speaks only standard English. Possibly, however, the distinctions in language are also based, at least partly based, on gender as well as class; Calixta speaks the language of an uneducated woman largely confined to her home, whereas Alcée—a man who presumably deals with men in a larger society—speaks the language of the Anglo world. But if gender is relevant, how can one account for the fact that Bobinôt's language resembles Calixta's, and Clarisse's resembles Alcée's? A tentative answer: Bobinôt, like Calixta, lives in a very limited world, whereas Clarisse is a woman of the world. We see Clarisse only at the end of the story, and there we hear her only through the voice of the narrator, but an expression such as “The society was agreeable” suggests that her language (as might be expected from a woman rich enough to take a long vacation) resembles her husband's, not Calixta's.

ANTON CHEKHOV

Misery (p. 85)

Like all good stories, this one can be taught in many ways. Since we teach it near the beginning of the course, we tend to emphasize two things: the artistry of the story and the reader’s response, especially the reader’s response to the ending. But first we want to mention that plot is given little emphasis. The cabman encounters several passengers, but these encounters do not generate happenings—actions—in the obvious or usual sense, though of course they are in fact carefully arranged and lead to the final action when Iona speaks to the mare. Second, we want to mention that we believe that writers usually express their values in the whole of the story, not in a detachable quotation or in a statement that a reader may formulate as a theme. Chekhov himself made a relevant comment to an editor: “You rebuke me for objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil, absence of ideals and ideas, etc. You would have me say, in depicting horse thieves, that stealing horses is evil. But then, that has been known for a long while, even without me. Let jurors judge them, for my business is only to show them as they are.”

By “the artistry,” we mean chiefly the restrained presentation of what could be a highly sentimental action. Chekhov does not turn Iona into a saint, and he does not turn the other characters into villains. The passengers are unsympathetic, true, but chiefly they are busy with their own affairs, or they are drunk. (One of the drunks is a hunchback, and although we feel that he behaves badly toward Iona, we feel also that nature has behaved badly toward him.) Second, Chekhov does not simply tell us that the world is indifferent to Iona; rather, he takes care to show the indifference before we get the explicit statement that Iona searched in vain for a sympathetic hearer. Third, it seems to us that the episodes are carefully arranged. First we get the officer, who, despite his initial brusqueness, makes a little joke, and it is this joke that apparently encourages Iona to
Chapter 3: The Reader as Writer

speak. The officer displays polite interest—he asks of what the boy died—and Iona turns to respond, but the passenger immediately (and not totally unreasonably) prefers the driver to keep his eyes on the road. Next we get the drunks, who can hardly be expected to comprehend Iona’s suffering. All of this precedes the first explicit statement that Iona searches the crowd for a single listener. Next, in an extremely brief episode (we don’t need much of a scene, since we are already convinced that Iona cannot find an audience) the house-porter dismisses him, and finally, again in a very brief scene, even a fellow cabman—presumably exhausted from work—falls asleep while Iona is talking. But again Chekhov refrains from comment and simply shows us Iona going to tend his horse. At this point Iona does not intend to speak to the animal, but the sight of the horse provokes a bit of friendly talk (“Are you munching”?), and this naturally leads to a further bit of talk, now about the son, couched in terms suited to that horse—and this, in turn, opens the floodgates.

So far as responses go, all readers will have their own, but for what it’s worth, we want to report that we find the ending not so much painful as comforting. The tension is relieved; Iona finds an audience after all, and if the thought of a man telling his grief to his horse has pathos, it also has its warmth. It seems to us to be especially satisfying, but we will have to explain our position somewhat indirectly. First, we will talk about attempts to state the theme of the story.

We sometimes ask students to state the theme. Of the responses we have received, “Suffering is incommunicable, but the sufferer must find an outlet” is the closest to our response. That is, we are inclined to think that the reason Iona cannot tell his story to the officer or to any other person is that grief of this sort cannot be communicated. It isolates the grief-stricken person. One notices in the story how much physical effort goes into Iona’s early efforts to communicate with people. As a cabman, of course, he is in front of his passengers, and he has to turn to address his audience. At first his lips move but words do not come out, and when he does speak, it is “with an effort.” Near the end of “Misery,” just before he goes to the stable, Iona thinks about how the story of his son’s death must be told:

He wants to talk of it properly, with deliberation. He wants to tell how his son was taken ill, how he suffered, what he said before he died, how he died. He wants to describe the funeral and how he went to the hospital to get his son’s clothes. He still has his daughter Anisya in the country. And he wants to talk about her too. Yes, he has plenty to talk about.

Now, we are all decent people—not at all like the brusque officer or the drunken passengers or the indifferent house-porter or the sleepy young cabman—but which of us could endure to hear Iona’s story? Which of us really could provide the audience that he needs? Which of us could refrain from interrupting him with well-intended but inadequate mutterings of sympathy, reassurances, and facile pity? Iona’s grief is so deeply felt that it isolates him
from other human beings, just as the indifference of other beings isolates them from him. Overpowering grief of this sort sets one apart from others. We hope we are not showing our insensitivity when we say that the mare is the only audience that can let Iona tell his story, in all its detail, exactly as he needs to tell it. And that is why we think that, in a way, this deeply moving story has a happy ending.

Chekhov once said that the aim of serious literature is “truth, unconditional and honest.” He stated, too, that, in his estimation, “the artist should be, not the judge of his characters and their conversations, but only an unbiased witness.” Both of these observations can prove useful in opening up the story for discussion. Ask students to point to moments in the text where Chekhov’s intentions for his art are realized.


For biography, the standard work is still Ernest J. Simmons, *Chekhov: A Biography* (1962). But Ronald Hingley, *A New Life of Anton Chekhov* (1976), is also worth consulting. The most recent biography is Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (1998); he is excellent on the sources of the stories and plays, and he draws a complex portrait of a troubled, sometimes cruel and detached man, but he does not deal with the texts themselves as works of art.

Students can be encouraged to seek out an excellent selection of stories, supplemented by critical essays: *Anton Chekhov’s Short Stories: Texts of the Stories, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. Ralph E. Matlaw (1975).

**V. S. Naipaul**

*The Night Watchman’s Occurrence Book* (p. 89)

This delightful story can be especially effectively taught when discussing point of view. The story is told by two people, each of whom is (in special ways) an innocent eye. It would of course shock the self-confident Inskip to learn that we consider him an innocent eye, but he is an innocent in two ways: He does not understand that his words reveal that he is a fatuous ass, and he does not see that he is bringing about his own fall. Hillyard, the watchman, is closer to the traditional innocent eye—relatively uneducated, and inclined to report what he sees without interpretation—but he is no fool. When Inskip writes, “I want to know what is meant by nothing unusual,” Hillyard appropriately responds, “Sir, nothing unusual means everything usual.”

Hillyard obviously is black (“I don’t like meddling in white people business”), and it seems evident to us that Inskip, the manager of a hotel that caters to whites, is white, though one student in class argued that Inskip is a black who
has been co-opted by the white world. We pointed to a nasty comment about Hillyard's religion ("Save your preaching for your roadside prayer meetings"), but the student took this very comment to confirm her view that Inskip, is a black who feels superior to other blacks. We remained unconvinced—and so did the student, but it seems to us that part of the fun of the story is to see that the pompous white man is undone by the decent black man. And of course it is a nice irony that Inskip falls partly because Hillyard follows to the letter Inskip's instructions.

It's worth mentioning in class that Inskip's nasty comment about Hillyard's religion is given some emphasis in the story. Hillyard decorously replies, "You must not abuse my religion sir because the good Lord see All and will have His revenge Sir." And on the next day he writes, "I feel the day of reckoning is at hand." The reader need not be a believer in order to take pleasure in the fate handed to Inskip.
Chapter 4

The Pleasures of Reading—
And of Writing Arguments
about Literature

Bruce Holland Rogers

Three Soldiers (p. 97)

We think this is a first-rate story, and it is our guess that students will find it of
great interest. (Just a guess; we are using it for the first time.) We also guess—
rather, we strongly believe—that the abundant apparatus in the textbook makes
any discussion here unnecessary.

John Steinbeck

The Chrysanthemums (p. 103)

Because most students find this story accessible, it can be effectively taught
early in the semester. To say that most students find it accessible, however, is
not to say that they see all its workings. Some class discussion can be devoted
to the opening paragraph on the setting: “A closed pot” suggests that there
may be an explosion, and the flaming leaves similarly prepare one for violence.
The first description of Elisa, too, can be studied, with an eye toward the impli-
cations of the fact that she wears a man’s hat and almost completely covers her
“figured print dress.” Like the winter fog that has “closed off the Salinas
Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world,” Elisa’s clothing seems
to suppress her femininity.

One can go on to talk about her energy, which turns out to be devoted not
to any children but to the “neat white farm house” and to her flowers. The
flowers are an expression of her vitality, or of her otherwise unexpressed drive
to procreate. The shrewd traveling repairman brings out her femininity (“She
tore off the battered hat and shook out her dark pretty hair”) and her generos-
ity or creativity. The story becomes strongly sexual in Elisa’s comment about the


23
pointed stars driven into her body, and in the narrator’s report that “her hand went out toward his legs,” but as soon as the man receives the saucepans his manner changes; he becomes “professional.” Elisa, however, remains in a state of excitement (the hot bath, the vigorous scrubbing, the look at her body in the mirror, the ritual of putting on feminine clothing and makeup); her womanliness revived, she confronts a husband who is somewhat puzzled by her new, attractive vitality. Then comes her disillusionment when she perceives that the tinker wanted only some work and the pot, not her gift of flowers, a disillusionment that at first finds an outlet in her thoughts of drinking wine, and of seeing men pummeled (i.e., of vicariously pummeling a male), and finally in tears.

There is, however, another angle from which the story may be viewed, for one can also see “The Chrysanthemums” as a story of two ways of life, that of the solid, rooted citizen (here the farmer) versus the amoral wanderer who scratches out a living. The wanderer’s treatment of Elisa is despicable, but it is part of a way of life that Steinbeck implies is not without its strengths. Like his mismatched team, he gets along; and like his dog—who wisely refrains from taking on two shepherds—he knows how to survive as an outsider. The story is not the tinker’s—it is chiefly Elisa’s—but he is worth attention. During the course of class discussion, students may come to feel that he is not the villain they may at first have taken him to be.

One other point: judging from the published criticism of the 1960s and early 1970s, many readers saw in Elisa’s gardening a sublimation of her maternal instincts. Today perhaps readers are more likely to see Elisa’s gardening as a woman’s effort to establish a creative role in a man-dominated society.

WILLA CATHER

_A Wagner Matinée_ (p. 110)

We think students will learn a great deal by comparing the two versions that we print in our book—the magazine version and the revised version that appears in _The Troll Garden_. (By the way, for some unaccountable reason, most books on Cather say the story appeared in the February issue of _Everybody’s Magazine_, but when we looked for it, we found it in the March issue.) As for students comparing the two versions that we reprint, there is of course a physical problem—one cannot put the pages side by side. The solution is simple: Tell the students to photocopy the magazine version, and then they can place the photocopies next to the pages of the revised version.

Most of the revisions were in the direction of cutting unfavorable descriptions of the aunt. For example, in the first (1904) version, the second paragraph began thus:

> The name of my Aunt Georgiana called up not alone her own figure, at once pathetic and grotesque, but opened before my feet a gulf of recollections. . . .

In the 1920 version the corresponding passage reads thus:

The name of my Aunt Georgiana opened before me in a gulf of recollection.

But the revisions consist of additions, too, the most interesting of which we call attention to in our questions in the text. There is, of course, throughout the story an opposition between the musical (i.e., high cultural) life of Boston and the farm life in Nebraska, but it seems to us that the added passage, describing the moment after the performance, when the performers leave “the stage to the chairs and music stands, empty as a winter cornfield,” presents a devastating comparison. The deserted stage, with its sticks of furnishings, Cather suggests, is an image of the life in the West to which the aunt must return.

Biographers point out that Cather indeed had an aunt, by marriage, who had musical interests, who had been educated at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, and who married and went off to Nebraska with her husband, and who did make a brief return to the East. Biographers further point out that Cather wrote the story while she was living in Pittsburgh, and some of them suggest that the story expresses her fear that she too may some day be forced to return to the bleak frontier life that awaits the aunt. Certainly the picture of life in Nebraska is unattractive, and Cather rubs it in, for instance by juxtaposing within a single paragraph the frontier, “where, as in a treadmill, one might walk from daybreak to dusk without perceiving a shadow,” against

the clean profiles of the musicians, the gloss of their linen, the dull black of their coats, the beloved shapes of the instruments, the patches of yellow light on the smooth, varnished bellies of the ‘cellos and the bass viols in the rear, the restless, wind-tossed forest of fiddle necks and bows.

But the story is not really, at bottom, about two parts of the country, or even about two ways of life. And even less is it about the extinction of sensibility that overtakes those who live on the frontier. Quite the opposite. The story is about the aunt’s ability to respond to the music or, we might generalize, about the ability of music to raise us above ourselves. Not that even without music we are such bad creatures. The aunt displays a thoroughly commendable concern for “a certain weakling calf” and for “the freshly-opened kit of mackerel in the cellar,” but somehow the music makes even such humane considerations evaporate.

Some readers emphasize the change in the narrator. Thus, Susan J. Rosowski, in The Perilous Voyage: Willa Cather’s Romanticism (1986) suggests that Clark moves “from cold objectivity to empathy” (27). Certainly the story is about emotions, rather than about geography, but to say that the narrator undergoes a great change is (we think) to overlook such early explicit statements of feeling as Clark’s assertion, in the fourth paragraph, that he regarded his aunt with “awe and respect,” and (the first sentence of the next paragraph) that he “owed to this woman most of the good that ever came [his] way in [his] boyhood,” and that he “had a reverential affection for her.” True, he says he
judged her “superficially” in thinking she might be embarrassed by her clothing, but this is only to say he made an intellectual error, not that he regarded her coldly. Similarly, Clark sounds a trifle condescending when in the middle of the story he begins to think perhaps he ought to get his aunt “back to Red Willow County without waking her,” but this thought strikes us as not only well-intentioned but also as perfectly natural. In fact, by the end of the story, although presumably readers are glad that the aunt has been deeply moved, they probably also are distressed on her behalf. That is, we would not want to deprive her of the ecstasy, but we realize that the experience immensely heightens the pain of her return to Nebraska, and surely we don’t condemn Clark for entertaining the idea of sparing her this distress. In brief, our view is that during the progress of the story a reader of course gets deeper into Clark’s mind as well as into the aunt’s, but we think it is a mistake to turn the story into one about a callow youth who comes to respect his aunt.

We are also unconvinced by the suggestion in Loretta Wasserman, Willa Cather: A Study of the Short Fiction (1991), that (in the paragraph we quote above, where Cather juxtaposes the shadowless plains of Nebraska with the contours and colors of the orchestra) Cather “hints, just hints, that there is a link between the austere beauty of the plains and the designs of musical form” (30). But the point is worth raising in class.

Students who are especially drawn to Cather’s short stories will benefit from Sheryl L. Meyering, A Reader’s Guide to the Short Stories of Willa Cather (1994). Perhaps the best survey of Cather’s life and work is Hermione Lee, Willa Cather: Double Lives (1989). For biography, see Sharon O’Brien, Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice (1987), and James L. Woodress, Willa Cather: A Literary Life (1987). Books and articles on Cather have been appearing at a rapid rate, as her popularity grows. See, for example, Janis P. Stout, Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World (2000), which highlights the topics of gender, ethnicity, pluralism, social class, and manifest destiny. For a survey of the life and writings, see Jamie Ambrose, Willa Cather: Writing at the Frontier (1988).
CHAPTER 5

Writing as Performance

ROBERT FROST

The Span of Life (p. 121)

In the parent textbook we return to this poem at the beginning of the next chapter (page 133).

JAMAICA KINCAID

Girl (p. 123)

Jamaica Kincaid, like her fictional heroine Annie John, lived in Antigua, a much-doted-on only child, until she was seventeen, when she came to the United States to continue her education. In an interview in the New York Times Book Review (April 7, 1985, 6), she said, “I did sort of go to college but it was such a dismal failure. I just educated myself, if that’s possible.” She has published three collections of short stories based on her life in the West Indies.

In this story we meet a girl in her early adolescence, under the constant tutelage of her mother for her coming role as a woman. In today’s terminology, we see the social construction of gender. The mother is a powerful presence, shrewd and spirited as well as overprotective and anxious about her daughter’s burgeoning sexuality. The girl is attentive to her mother, and mostly submissive; we sense that it is through her reverie that we hear her mother’s monologue, which the daughter twice interrupts briefly. But the repetition of instruction and correction in the monologue, especially of the incessant “this is how to,” suggests the tension between the two that we know, from our own experience, will lead to a confrontation that will permanently alter the relationship. Despite the references to the island culture, which provide the story’s rich, exotic texture, the central drama of coming of age could be happening anywhere.

A good way to teach the story is to have two students read it aloud in class. It’s short, humorous, and in passages pleasantly rhythmical. The students will hear the shift in voices, and will want to discuss the characters and the conflict.
We especially admire Kincaid's novel, *Annie John* (1985), which consists of eight interrelated chapters (which were first published separately in *The New Yorker*) that explore a mother-daughter relationship.


Additional Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. What is the conflict in this story?
2. Is the girl naive? Explain.
3. Taking “Girl” as a model, write a piece about someone—perhaps a relative, teacher, or friend—who has given you more advice than you wanted.

**ANATOLE FRANCE**

*Our Lady’s Juggler* (p. 125)

First, a word about the title. “Our Lady” and the French original, “Notre Dame,” of course are indebted to the Italian “Madonna” (= My Lady), a term that originally was used of any woman of rank, but that in the Middle Ages came to refer specifically to the Virgin Mary, and especially to a picture or a sculpture of her. Although Mary is mentioned relatively few times in the New Testament, images of Mary have been an enormous presence in the history of art. She may be depicted by herself or with the infant Jesus sitting or standing on her lap, or she may be shown seated, with the dead Jesus across her legs, and she may be accompanied by saints or angels. She is often represented—especially in medieval and Renaissance altarpieces, as Queen of Heaven, seated on a throne, usually identified as the Throne of Solomon. The image described by Anatole France, where doves (representations of seven gifts of the Holy Spirit) fly above the Virgin and where lions flank the throne, is relatively rare, but a medievalist has called our attention to a reproduction of such a mural (in the cathedral at Gurk, Austria) in Otto Demus, *Romanesque Mural Painting* (1970), page 19, and for a larger view of part of the image, page 298.

Next, a few words about the narrator. The narrator—we are not talking about Anatole France but about his invented narrator—seems to be a pious fellow, someone recounting without any trace of skepticism a medieval religious tale. We hear a speaking tone of voice, almost the voice of a professional storyteller, in the opening sentence:

In the days of King Louis there lived a poor juggler named Barnaby, a native of Compiègne, who wandered from town to town performing feats of strength and skill.
Certainly a more economical version would go thus:

In the days of King Louis there lived a poor juggler named Barnaby, a native of Compiègne, who wandered from town to town performing feats of strength and skill.

That is, the language itself, as well as the substance, takes us out of our world of everyday speech, into the voice of a storyteller recounting an old tale.

The second thing we can say about the narrator is that he is a pious fellow (the same could not be said about the author). For instance, in the third paragraph he tells us that Barnaby, because of the “misbehavior of our Father Adam,” had to earn his bread “by the sweat of his brow”—an echo of Genesis 3.19—and in the fifth paragraph, when he tells us that “woman is the enemy of the strong man,” he supports his assertion by reminding us that it is confirmed by the biblical story of Samson. Finally, if yet another example is wanted, we refer to the passage in paragraph 12 about peace being granted to men of good will, an echo of Luke 2.14. In short, we think that France does a good job of creating a narrator who is sympathetic to the pious medieval tale that he tells.

Of course the gist of the story is that the highly educated and highly talented monks do not comprehend the piety of the ignorant juggler, or, rather, cannot—until a miracle takes place—comprehend that the Virgin may value his offering as much as theirs, so we can say that the story implies some criticism of the clergy. France does not, however, caricature the clergy, does not make them evil or even ridiculous. True, they compete with each other in their service of the Virgin (the translator says “each of them vying,” for the French célèbrant l’envi le culte de la sainte Vierge), but there is no suggestion that their piety is feigned, or that their zeal is corrosive. That is, the contrast through most of the story is not between faith and hypocrisy or faith and envious competition but, rather, it is between the unlettered juggler and the highly trained talented monks. At the end of the story, when the monks understand, through the Virgin’s miraculous intervention, that the juggler’s offering is at least as worthy as their own, they humbly show their respect.

We began this discussion with a brief comment about images of the Virgin, often seated on a throne, with the infant Jesus on her lap, and a little later we mentioned that France specifically says that Barnaby earned his bread by the sweat of his brow (Gagnant son pain à la sueur de son front). At the end of the story sweat reappears when the monks see the image of the Virgin descend from the altar and, with her blue mantle (the color of heaven), wipe “the sweat that dripped from the juggler’s forehead” (ils virent la sainte Vierge descendre . . . , por veni essuyer d’un pan son manteau bleu la sueur qui dégouttait du front de son jongleur.) We think it is not at all fanciful to see in this passage an evocation of another common artistic representation of the Madonna, the type called a pietà (Italian: pity), that is, an image of the Virgin bending over the crucified body of her child, his brow covered with drops of blood and sweat. In this instance, Mary is moved to minister to another of her children, the sweating
juggler. Some students may be familiar with the sculpture by Michelangelo, in St. Peter’s, in Vatican City.

Finally, two bibliographic references: Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Western Art* (2005) is an oversize book with many handsome illustrations in color, accompanied by an excellent text. Also of interest, though the pictures are relatively few and they are poorly reproduced, is Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* (1996).

**JULIA BIRD**

*14: a txt msg pom.* (p. 129)

Joining the Conversation: Critical Thinking and Writing

Since the editors of *Literature for Composition* were not born digital, we are grateful for the translation: We assume that most of your students will find it superfluous. But despite the translation, we ask our students (and you might ask yours):

What does the 14: in the title mean?

We don’t know the answer, but two possibilities come to mind. Perhaps the reader is supposed to pronounce the number, in which case the first syllable may stand for the preposition “for” (as in “For a friend”), though we don’t know what to make out of “teen.” More likely, we think, is the possibility that the number denotes the age of the supposed speaker of the poem, or of the subject of the poem.

We ask our students to analyze the components of the txt pom that make it successful. (By the way, some students may not notice that Bird employs rhyme [e.g., “bl%” in line 2 rhymes with “thru” in line 4], but if you ask them to read the poem aloud they will hear the rhymes.) What images does the speaker use to describe the young man she fancies? And what class are they in? Suppose they were in an economics class, what images might the speaker use there? We also ask our students to compare the txt pom with the translation. Which do they prefer? and why?

We found this poem in David Crystal’s fascinating book, *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8*, and we will now summarize Crystal’s discussion. He mentions that although the poem is “orthographically innovative,” it retains some features of standard language:

- The first-person singular pronoun is capitalized
- Five of the seven lines end with punctuation
- fe, ac, and dc are standard abbreviations
- Of the thirty-four words, more than half—eighteen—are standard English spelling
Crystal goes on to point out that although there is much in the poem that is conventional, because the unusual spellings and symbols demand our attention we get “the impression of total deviance.”

**NORMAN SILVER**

*txt commandments* (p. 130)

The poem of course is based on the Ten Commandments (also called the decalogue), which appear twice in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 20:2-17, and Deuteronomy 5.6-21). The commandments are numbered differently in Judaism and in Christianity, and indeed Christians do not agree on the numbering (thus the commandment against murder is the sixth for Jews and for some Anglicans but it is the fifth for Roman Catholics and for Lutherans).

In any case, Silver’s poem does not parallel the Ten Commandments line by line, but there are a few connections. Thus, his first line,

\[
\text{u shall luv ur mobil fone with all ur hart}
\]

more or less echoes the idea of the biblical “You shall have no other gods before me,” the second commandment in the Jewish tradition, the first in Christian traditions. Silver’s eighth commandment, about not speaking, perhaps is remotely connected with the biblical injunction against lying, numbered eight in the Catholic and Lutheran traditions. But, again, we would not push these slight connections. The use of red, however—we mention in the text that in Silver’s book the word “hart” (line 1) is printed in red, as are the capitalized words in line 9—does perhaps evoke Christianity for some readers because ecclesiastical calendars print important feast days and saints’ days in red. (That’s the origin of the term “red-letter day.”) In the first line the word “hart,” however, is printed in red because red is the color of the heart.
In the eight lines enclosed within the frame (that is, between the first and next-to-last lines) we get four possibilities: The Dream may “dry up,” “fester,” “crust and sugar over,” or “sag.” Each of these is set forth with a simile, for example, “dry up / like a raisin in the sun.” By the way, the third of these, “crust up and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet,” probably describes a dream that has turned into smiling Uncle Tomism. Similes can be effective, and these are effective, but in the final line Hughes states the last possibility (“Or does it explode?”) directly and briefly, without an amplification. The effect is, more or less, to suggest that the fancy (or pretty) talk stops. The explosion is too serious to be treated in a literary way. But, of course, the word “explode,” applied to a dream, is itself figurative. That is, the last line is as “literary” or “poetical” as the earlier lines, but it is a slightly different sort of poetry.

A word about the rhymes: Notice that although the poem does use rhyme, it does not use a couplet until the last two lines. The effect of the couplet (“load” / “explode”) is that the poem ends with a bang. Of course, when one reads the poem in a book, one sees where the poem ends—though a reader may be surprised to find the forceful rhyme—but an audience hearing the poem recited is surely taken off-guard. The explosion is unexpected (especially in the context of the two previous lines about a sagging, heavy load) and powerful.

Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing

One might keep the first line where it is, and then rearrange the other stanzas—for instance, putting lines 2–8 after 9–11. Which version (Hughes’s or the one just mentioned) do you prefer? Why?

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

*Sonnet 73 (That time of year thou mayst in me behold)* (p. 144)

Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets were published in 1609, although it is thought that most of them were composed in the middle 1590s, around the time *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* were written. Francis Meres spoke of Shakespeare’s “sugared sonnets” in 1598, and two were published in an anthology in 1599. The order of the sonnets is probably not Shakespeare’s, but there are two large divisions (with some inconsistent interruptions). Sonnets 1–126 seem to be addressed to, or concerned with, a handsome, aristocratic young man who is urged to marry and thus to propagate his beauty and become immortal. Sonnets 127–152 are chiefly concerned with a promiscuous dark woman who seduces a friend, at least for a while.

Wordsworth thought the poems were autobiographical (“With this key Shakespeare unlocked his heart”), to which Browning replied, “If so, the less Shakespeare he.” Scholars have not convincingly identified the friend or the lady, and the whole thing may be as fictional as *Hamlet*. Certainly it sounds like autobiography, but this is only to say that Shakespeare is a writer who sounds convincing. The chief argument that the poems really may be autobiographical is that the insistence that the friend marry is so odd a theme. As C. S. Lewis says in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, what man (except a potential father-in-law) cares if another man gets married? One other point: Do the poems addressed to the beautiful friend suggest a homosexual interest? Certainly they suggest a passionate interest, but it doesn’t seem to be erotic. Sonnet 20, a bawdy and witty poem, expressly denies any interest in the friend’s body. It seems reasonable to say that what the speaker of the sonnets wants from the friend is not sex but love.

Of the many studies, we are partial to Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1969), and to his edition of the sonnets (1977), which prints both the facsimile of the first edition and a modernized text, along with extremely detailed commentaries. For a fuller discussion of each sonnet, see Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1997), which also prints a facsimile of each sonnet.

Sonnet 73 is chiefly a meditation on growing old, though the couplet relates this topic to the theme of love that is the subject of many of Shakespeare’s sonnets. All three quatrains, in varying degrees, glance at increasing coldness and darkness, and each successive quatrain is concerned...
with a briefer period. In the first, the human life is compared to a year; in the second, to a day; in the third, to a few hours. In the first quatrain, there is a further comparison: the boughs of the autumnal trees are compared (in “bare ruined choirs”) to the churches that had fallen into decay after England broke with Rome. (“Sweet birds” refers primarily to the feathered creatures that recently sang in the boughs, but it also glances at choristers in the choirs.) Note, too, that it is reasonable to perceive, faintly, a resemblance between the shaking boughs and a trembling old person. The first quatrain, then, is rich in suggestions of ruined beauty and destroyed spirituality.

The second quatrain, by speaking of night as “Death’s second self,” explicitly introduces death into the poem. The third quatrain personifies the fire, speaking of its “youth” (i.e., the earlier minutes or hours of the blaze) and its “deathbed,” and in its reference to ashes it introduces a common idea of the decayed body. (The idea, of course, is that the last embers lie on the ashes, which were the “youth” or earlier hours of the fire, and these ashes now help to extinguish the embers.) The year will renew itself, and the day will renew itself, but the firewood is utterly destroyed. In the final line the speaker is reduced to “that,” not even “me.”

JOHN DONNE

Holy Sonnet XIV (Batter my heart, three-personed God) (p. 145)

“Batter my heart” has been discussed several times in Explicator (March 1953, Item 31; December 1953, Item 18; April 1954, Item 36; October 1956, Item 2). In College English 24 (January 1963): 299–302, John Parrish summarized these discussions, rejecting the idea that in the first quatrain, especially in lines 2 and 4, God is compared to a tinker mending a damaged pewter vessel, and offering his own reading. All these are conveniently reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of John Donne’s Poetry, ed. A. L. Clements.

Our own winnowings from these essays follow. Although the first line introduces the “three-personed God,” it is impossible to associate each quatrain with only one of the three persons. Still, the idea of the trinity is carried out in several ways: “knock, breathe, shine” becomes “break, blow, burn.” And there are three chief conceits: God as a tinker repairing the speaker, damaged by sin; the speaker as a town usurped by satanic forces; God as a forceful lover who must ravish the sinful speaker; or (lest one get uneasy at the thought that Donne presents himself as a woman) God as a lover who must fully possess the speaker’s soul (the soul is customarily regarded as female). “O’erthrow” in the first quatrain, in line 3, leads to the image of the besieged town in the second quatrain; “untrue” at the end of the second quatrain leads (because it can refer to marital infidelity) to the conceit of the lover in the third quatrain; and “ravish” in the final line can take us back to “heart” in the first line of the poem.

A useful, relatively long explication by M. T. Wanninger appeared in *Explicator* (December 1969), Item 37. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 50–51, points out that in “Batter my heart” Donne draws on Revelation 21:5 (“Behold, I make all things new”), and that “the ultimate marriage with the Bridegroom, represented as the rape of the longingly reluctant soul” draws on “commonplaces of Christian devotion.”


**Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing**

How do you feel about an observation made in *Explicator* (Spring 1980), to the effect that “no end” (line 6) is an anagram for “Donne”? What is the point? According to the author of the note, “This anagram is, I think, another of the many ingenious samples of Donne’s playing upon his name for poetic effect.” Is this reading helpful? Why? Why not?

---

**EMILY BRONTË**

*Spellbound* (p. 146)

We first came across this poem in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. Helen Gardner (1972), where it is given the title “Spellbound,” though we have since seen it printed without this title as well. Here is a good place to begin: ask the students what it means to be “spellbound” and how this word creates in us a set of associations—about enchantment, fascination—that in the poem itself Brontë seeks to capitalize upon and develop. You can return to a version of this question after you have reached the end of the poem. How much does the poem benefit from this title? Would the poem change, for better or worse, if it were printed not with this title, but (as it sometimes is) with the opening line as the title?

Another good question for the class: Where is the speaker? More precisely, is she outside, with the night “darkening” around her and the winds blowing? Or is she—less likely, but still possible—inside, looking outward on a wintry scene from which she cannot break free? Or—another possibility—is the description of the scene not something that is happening “outside” the speaker but, rather, the expression of something within her: this is how she feels—in the dark, cold, alone.

When we pitch the discussion in this way, we are trying to prompt the students to perceive that a description is not only that, but it is also a means through which a writer can dramatize the temperament and personality of a speaker. What counts is not just the description in its own terms but also the description as it serves to reveal to us the speaker’s thoughts and feelings. The point is perhaps an obvious one, but we have found that it needs to be made explicitly and demonstrated to the students through examples.

Still another question: What is it that has overtaken the speaker? It is more than a little hard to say. She gives us some indication—“a tyrant spell has bound me.” “Tyrant” tells us that the spell is oppressive, harsh, and cruel; and “bound” suggests the physical force of the spell, as if it had literally tied down the speaker. But what about the spell itself? What does it consist of, and from where has it come?

Brontë does not explain or clarify the nature of the spell. It is present, and it is powerful—so powerful that the storm’s intense power cannot shake the speaker free from it.

The spell seems terrible and terrifying, but not entirely. It is one thing for you or I to say, “I cannot go,” which implies that a force is holding us back, and another thing to say, as does the speaker in the final line, “I will not” go, which intimates that the choice is one’s own. Perhaps, one suspects, the speaker will not go because she needs to discover what this spell is about.

“Drear” is a curious word. The American Heritage Dictionary defines it simply as “dreary,” which is unhelpful. Webster’s Third New International Dictionary is better: cheerless and depressing; uninteresting and dull. The Oxford English Dictionary weighs in with dreariness, sadness, gloom. But how then does this word fit in the poem? Is the speaker saying: No matter how cheerless and gloomy the scene is around me, I will not, cannot, go from it—the spell is too powerful? Maybe, but one might have expected to find here a different, stronger phrase: “But no great fear can move me.” As poetry, this revision may not be appealing, but it has the virtue of naming the speaker’s predicament more directly.

It could be that the modern dictionaries we consulted are not the right ones for this word. When our curiosity led us to Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language (4th ed., 1773), we found that he includes for “drear” the meaning “dread, terror.” This would give the forcefulness to the line that we might otherwise assume is oddly missing from it. And it seems likely that Brontë’s own sense of the word would be close to or the same as Johnson’s.

“Spellbound” is an alluring, yet mysterious, poem—it has a spellbinding power itself. The speaker tells us that something intense is happening to her, but she leaves unstated its exact source or cause. We can probe and speculate, but this speaker remains distant from us even as she tells us that paralysis has overtaken her. Unless, that is, we are drawn to say that this speaker is not addressing us at all but, rapt as she is, is speaking solely to herself.

For students interested in reading more of Brontë’s poetry, The Poems of Emily Brontë, ed. Derek Roper with Edward Chitham (1995), is recommended. Chitham has also written a good biography: A Life of Emily Brontë (1987).

**LI-YOUNG LEE**

*I Ask My Mother to Sing* (p. 147)

Singing is infectious; the speaker asks his mother to sing, and his grandmother joins her. The reference to the deceased father—who would have joined in too if he had been there—adds a note of pathos and thus anticipates the second stanza, where we learn that the song is about the land of the speaker’s ancestors, a land he has never seen.

The song apparently is joyful (picnickers—though admittedly the picnic is dispelled by rain), but since it is about a lost world it is also sorrowful (the women begin to cry). Yet, even singing about sorrow provides the singer with joy, or, we might say, the making of a work of art (here, singing a song) is pleasurable even when the content is sorrowful. One way of mastering sorrow, of course, is to turn it into art.


**RANDALL JARRELL**

*The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner* (p. 148)

We reprint here a good explication, by a student, Juan Alonso.

Reading the first line aloud, one pauses slightly after “sleep,” dividing the line in half. The halves make a sharp contrast. The point of transition in this line is “I fell,” a helpless movement from the mother to the State, from sleep to the State. The mother and the State make an evident contrast, and so do “sleep” and “the State,” which resemble each other in their first sound and in their position at the end of a half-line but which have such different associations, for sleep is comforting and “the State” is associated with totalitarianism. (“The country” or “the land” might be comforting and nourishing but “the State” has no such warm suggestions.) We will soon see in the poem that life in the “belly” of the State is mindless and cold, a death-like life which ends with sudden and terrible death. A mother, even in her “sleep,” naturally protects and nourishes the child in her warm womb; the State unnaturally cramps the man in its icy belly. He “hunched in its belly” until his “wet fur froze.” We gather from the title that “its” refers not only to the State but also the airplane in whose womb-like ball turret he led his
Chapter 6: Reading Literature Closely: Explication

confined existence and died. Given the title, the fur probably literally refers to the fur lining of the jackets that fliers wore in World War II, and it also suggests the animal-like existence he led while confined by this unfeeling foster parent, the State-airplane.

His unnatural existence is further emphasized by the fact that, in the airplane, he was “Six miles from earth.” From such an existence, far from the “dream of life” that people hope for, and still hunched in the turret like a baby in the womb, he was born again, that is, he awoke to (or became aware of) not a rich fulfillment of the dream but a horrible reality that is like a nightmare. “Woke to black flak” imitates, in its rattling k’s at the end of words, the sound of gunfire that simultaneously awakened and killed him. His awakening or birth is to nightmarish reality and death. It is not surprising, but it is certainly horrifying, that in this world of an impersonal State that numbs and destroys life, his body is flushed out of the turret with a hose. That this is the third horrible release: the first was from the mother into the State; the second was from the belly of the State into the belly of the airplane; and now in shreds from the belly of the airplane into nothing. That this life-history is told flatly, with no note of protest, increases the horror. The simplicity of the last line more effectively brings out the horror of the experience than an anguished cry or an angry protest could do.


Jarrell reads and discusses the poem on Caedman cassette SWC 1363.
Suggestions for Further Reading

Subsequent chapters will cite a fair number of recent titles relevant to this chapter, but for a start a reader might first turn to an old but readable, humane, and still useful introduction, David Daiches, A Study of Literature (1948). Another book of the same generation, and still a useful introduction, is a businesslike survey of theories of literature by René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, 2nd ed. (1956). For a fairly recent, readable study, see Gerald Graff, Professing Literature: An Institutional History (1987).

Some basic reference works should be mentioned. C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon have written an introductory dictionary of movements, critical terms, literary periods, and genres: A Handbook to Literature, 7th ed. (1996). For fuller discussions of critical terms, see Wendell V. Harris, Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory (1992), which devotes several pages to each concept (for instance, “author,” “context,” “evaluation,” “feminist literary criticism,” “narrative”) and gives a useful reading list for each entry.

Fairly similar to Harris’s book are Irene Makaryk, ed., Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms (1993), and Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, ed., The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism (1994). The Johns Hopkins Guide, though it includes substantial entries on individual critics as well as on critical schools, is occasionally disappointing in the readability of some of its essays and especially in its coverage, since it does not include critical terms other than names of schools of criticism. Despite its title, it does not have entries for “theory” or for “criticism,” nor does it have entries for such words as “canon” and “evaluation.” In coverage (and also in the quality of many entries) it is inferior to an extremely valuable work with a misleadingly narrow title, The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (1993). Although The New Princeton Encyclopedia does not include terms that are unique to drama or fiction, it does include generous, lucid entries (with suggestions for further reading) on such terms as “allegory,” “criticism,” “canon,” “irony,” “sincerity,” “theory,” and “unity,” and the long entries on “poetics,” “poetry,” and “poetry, theories of” are in many respects entries on “literature.”
The story is told chiefly to emphasize Solomon's wisdom, or, more specifically, to indicate that "the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgment" (3:28), but we include the story here because it seems to us to be a moving tale of a mother's love and (a lesser reason, but a respectable one) because it relates to Raymond Carver's "Mine" and "Little Things," included in our book.

The biblical story is, in a way, a sort of early detective story. There is a death, a conflict in the testimony of the two witnesses, and a solution by a shrewd outsider. We say "shrewd" because although any of us could have reached the correct judgment after the two women had responded to Solomon's proposal to divide the child, few of us would have been shrewd enough to have devised the situation that led each woman to declare what she really was.

Consider Solomon's predicament. There seems to be nothing that distinguishes the two claimants. There came before him "two women, that were harlots." Until late in the story—that is, up to the time that Solomon suggests dividing the child—they are described only as "the one woman," "the other woman," "the one," "the other." The reader, like Solomon, has nothing to go on, since neither of the witnesses is known to be morally superior, and since there are no other witnesses. Solomon's inspired wisdom, then, is to set up a situation in which each claimant will reveal her true nature—the mother will reveal her love, and the culprit will reveal her hard heart.

Instructors interested in discussing the literary structure of the story may want to call attention to the nice way in which the author takes the cry of the true mother (in which she gives up her suit), "Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it," and then puts these identical words, without change, into Solomon's mouth as his final judgment, though of course the meaning of "her" shifts from (in the first case) the liar to (in Solomon's sentence) the true mother. This exact repetition of a sentence is, of course, especially appropriate in a story about two seemingly indistinguishable women and about a proposal to divide an infant into two.

We have already mentioned that it is important for the two women to be, in effect, indistinguishable, but why did the author make them harlots? We can
offer a few guesses: (a) the story demands that there be no witnesses, and by making the women harlots the author thus disposed of husbands, parents, and siblings who might otherwise be expected to live with the women; (b) the author wishes to show that Solomon’s justice extended to all, not only to respectable folk; and (c) the author wished to dispel or at least to complicate the stereotype of the harlot as thoroughly disreputable by calling to mind another—overriding—stereotype of the mother as motivated by overwhelming maternal love.

One other point: the basic motif of two women fighting over an infant, and the true mother revealing her identity by rejecting a proposal that will kill the infant, is found in many cultures. For instance, in an Indian Jataka story (a story of the lives of the Buddha before he reached his final incarnation as the Historical Buddha, Siddhartha), a mother brought her child to a river bank, where a she-demon claimed it as her own. The two brought the case to the Buddha-to-be, who ordered the women to engage in a tug-of-war with the child in the center, but the mother yielded her claim rather than destroy the child. See E. B. Cowell and W. H. D. Rouse, *Jataka Stories*, 6 (1912), p. 163.

For a strong feminist reading—a reading very much against the grain of the traditional interpretation that Solomon’s deep wisdom solved a difficult problem—see Anne C. Dailey, “The Judgment of Women,” in *Out of the Garden*, ed. Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel (1994). We quote a few extracts; you may want to try them out with your students.

Shouldn’t we question Solomon’s responsibility for raising the sword in the first place? Had he not called for the sword, the other woman might never have expressed her seemingly violent impulse. . . . (p. 147)

But does the second woman really choose to have the child killed? Maybe she would have picked up the sword and slain the child with her own hands, but we certainly do not know that. All we know is that she says, “Cut him up.” Her response may have represented many things besides a heartless desire to see the child killed: futility, hopelessness, anger, or perhaps a disbelief that Solomon would follow through on his murderous threat. . . . (p. 147)

The institutional violence that the two women confront in the sword of Solomon mirrors the violence that women face in their everyday lives. Women are expected to back down, negotiate, settle, and accept arbitrary assaults of men at home, on the street, and in the workplace. They are expected to respond with the self-sacrifice of the first prostitute. And when they do not, when they defiantly transgress the laws of men, women must endure, Eve-like, the punishment meted out to them. . . . (p. 148)

Blind faith in the correctness of Solomon’s judgment can be maintained only because we hear so little from the women. When the sword is raised and the command given to divide the child, the women know that they have but
moments to plead their case. Their speech is uttered in a fearful rush, a female cry in the face of seemingly arbitrary male violence. Had Solomon recognized that the women’s initial responses were incomplete, had he desired to know these women rather than to judge them immediately according to a preconceived ideal, then, had he been truly wise, he would have listened with a patient ear to all they had to say. . . . (p. 148)

Solomon succeeds in resolving the dispute over the child in a swift and expedient manner, but he fails to comprehend the cost in human terms of doing so. By judging the women on the basis of a few frantic words, he erases the fullness and complexity of their lives. (pp. 148–149)

LUKE

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (p. 154)

A bibliographic note about parables may be useful. In the Encyclopedia Britannica, in a relatively long article entitled “Fable, Parable, Allegory,” fable and parable are defined as “short, simple forms of naive allegory,” and yet a few paragraphs later the article says, “The rhetorical appeal of a parable is directed primarily toward an elite, in that a final core of its truth is known only to an inner circle, however simple its narrative may appear on the surface. . . .” Perhaps, then, a parable is not a “naive allegory.” Two other passages from the article are especially interesting: “The Aesopian fables emphasize the social interaction of human beings,” whereas “parables do not analyze social systems so much as they remind the listener of his beliefs.” That may not always be true, but it is worth thinking about.

The traditional title of this story is unfortunate, since it makes the second half of the story (the father’s dealings with the older brother) superfluous. Joachim Jeremias, in The Parables of Jesus, rev. ed. (1972), suggests that the work should be called “The Parable of the Father’s Love.”

Here is a way to provoke thoughtful discussion of the parable. Roger Seamon, in “The Story of the Moral: The Function of Thematizing in Literary Criticism,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 47 (1989): 229–236, offers an unusual way of thinking about this parable. He summarizes his approach as follows:

I want to reverse the traditional and common sense view that stories convey, illustrate, prove or emotionally support themes. Morals and themes, I argue, convey to audiences what story is to be made out of sentences. The story flows, so to speak, from theme, rather than the theme following from the story. (p. 230)

He goes on to suggest an experiment. “Imagine,” he says, that instead of reading a story that traditionally is called “The Prodigal Son,”
we were to find the same set of sentences in another book under the title “The Prodigal Father,” and at the end we found the following moral: “waste not your heart on the unworthy, lest you lose the love of the righteous.” We now go back and re-read the sentences, and we find that we are now reading a different story. In the new story the father’s giving the son money is wrong.

Seamon goes on to say that in this story the son’s confession is “a way of evading responsibility for his error,” and that the father is as prodigal with his love as he was with his property. In this version (remember: the sentences are identical, but the title is different), Seamon claims, “The story concludes with the father happily returning to his error. The absence of poetic justice at the end is meant to arouse our indignation” (p. 232).

It’s interesting to hear students respond to this view. Of course Seamon’s title, “The Prodigal Father,” is merely his own invention, but the conventional title (“The Prodigal Son”) has no compelling authority. The question is this: Once we apply Seamon’s title, do we read the story the way he suggests—that is, do we see the father as blameworthy and the stay-at-home son as justified? If not, why not? Again, Seamon’s point is that although the common-sense view holds that the story yields a moral, in fact the reverse is true: the moral (i.e., the theme we have in mind) yields the story. For Seamon, “A thematic statement conveys information about how the critic constructs the nature and motivations of the characters, [and] the value of their actions . . .” (p. 233). True, but can’t we add that the skilled critic, i.e., reader, is in large measure guided by the author who knows (again, at least in large measure) how to control the reader’s response? Seamon apparently takes a different view, for he holds that “the sentences used to project the events are not, in themselves, sufficient to tell us how we are to characterize or evaluate what is going on.” Our response to Seamon is of no importance; what is important is to get students to think about why they do or do not accept the view that the story might be entitled “The Prodigal Father.”

We spend some time in class teaching this parable because we find the artistry admirable—and also because the story is profound. One small but telling artistic detail may be noted here, a detail mentioned by Joachim Jeremias, who points out that the elder son, speaking to his father, “omits the address”; we had never noticed this, but now it seems obvious, and surely it is revealing that when the younger son addresses his father he says, “Father,” and that when the father addresses the older son he says, “Son.” The older son’s lack of address, then, speaks volumes: he refuses to see himself as bound by family ties of love—a position evident also when, talking to his father, he identifies the prodigal not as “my brother” but as “this thy son.” The story is (among many other things) an admirable example of work in which a storyteller guides an audience into having certain responses.

It’s also worthwhile in class to spend some time cautioning against a too vigorous attempt to find meaning in every detail. (Professionals as well as students sometimes don’t know when to leave well enough alone. For instance, a writer in Studies in Short Fiction 23 (1986), talking about Updike’s “A & P,” says that Queenie’s pink bathing suit “suggests the emerging desires competing with
chastity.” But come to think of it, this statement isn’t surprising, considering what has been said about the pink ribbon in “Young Goodman Brown.” One writer, for instance, says it symbolizes feminine passion, and another says it symbolizes a state between the scarlet of total depravity and the white of innocence.

To illustrate the danger of pressing too hard, you might mention medieval allegorizations of the story. The gist of these is this: the older brother represents the Pharisees and teachers who resented the conversion of the Gentiles. Thus the fact that the older brother was in the fields when the prodigal returned was taken as standing for the remoteness of the Pharisees and the teachers from the grace of God. The younger brother, according to medieval interpretations, represents the Gentiles, who wandered in illusions and who served the devil (the owner of the swine) by tending the devil’s demons (the swine). The pods that the prodigal ate represent either the vices (which cannot satisfy) or pagan literature (again, unsatisfying). The father represents God the Father; his going forth to meet the prodigal stands for the Incarnation; his falling on the neck of the prodigal stands for the mild yoke that Christ places on the neck of his followers (Matthew 11:29–30). The music the older brother hears represents the praise of God, and the feast of the fatted calf represents the Eucharist. A great deal more of this sort of thing can be found in Stephen L. Wailes, Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables (pp. 236–245). The point should already be clear.

On the other hand, it’s also worth mentioning that the medieval interpreters of the parable at least paid it the compliment of taking it seriously. Odd as the interpretations now seem, they were the result of an admirable love of the word, and surely such an excess is preferable to indifference.

Is the parable an allegory? No, and yes. Certainly it does not have the detailed system of correspondences that one associates with allegory. Moreover, since the prodigal says, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and . . . thee,” the father cannot be said to represent heaven, i.e., God. And yet, as Jeremias says (p. 131):

The parable describes with touching simplicity what God is like, his goodness, his grace, his boundless mercy, his abounding love.

Need a reader believe in God or in the divinity of Jesus in order to value this story? The point is surely worth discussing in class. Most students will agree that such belief is not necessary, and from here one can go on to discuss stories as ways of imaginatively entering alien worlds.

JAMES THURBER

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty (p. 167)

Class discussion may begin with an examination of the point at which it is apparent that this story is comic. Anyone who knows Thurber’s name will of course expect comedy, but few students today have heard of him. The first two
sentences do not (on first reading) reveal themselves as comic, though in hindsight one sees that at least the first sentence is from the world of inferior adventure stories. An alert reader may become suspicious of the third sentence with its “full-dress uniform” and its “heavily braided white cap pulled down rakishly over one cold gray eye.” Suspicions are confirmed with “ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa”; the ludicrous “eight-engined Navy hydroplane” and the cliché about the Old Man make the comedy unmistakable.

Instructors may find it useful to introduce the concept of pathos and to lead the class in a discussion of the relation of the pathetic to the tragic and the comic. Here, of course, Mitty’s daydreams are comic; we may pity him because of his weakness, but we can only laugh at his daydreams, which (1) are so greatly in contrast with the actual event, and (2) are so indebted to bad movies and pulp magazines.

Brooks and Warren provide an interpretation of the story in various editions of Understanding Fiction; Charles S. Holmes’s The Clocks of Columbus (1972) is a useful study of Thurber. Carl Sundell examines the structure of the story (e.g., it begins and ends with Mitty dreaming) (English Journal 56 [1967]: 1284–1287). James Ellis (English Journal 54 [1965]: 310–313) points out that Mitty’s fantasies are made even more fantastic by various bits of misinformation. For example, Mitty the sea captain calls for “full strength in No. 3 turret,” mistakenly thinking that the turrets move the ship; the surgeon nonsensically speaks of obstreosis (primarily a disease of cattle and pigs) of the ductal tract and thinks coreopsis (a flower) is a disease; the marksman refers to a 50.80-caliber pistol (its diameter would be more than four feet); the pilot speaks of von Richtman but means von Richthofen.

One other study of the story should be mentioned, Ann Ferguson Manx’s in Studies in Short Fiction 19 (1982): 315–357. This essay is a vigorous defense of Mrs. Mitty, who is usually thought of as a nag. Manx argues that Mitty’s fantasies are not provoked by Mrs. Mitty’s naggings. Rather, Mitty is a hopeless fantasist, and it’s a good thing for him that he has Mrs. Mitty to see that he wears his galoshes, doesn’t drive too fast, and so on. Manx writes: “If we think seriously about what life with a man like Mitty would be like, Mrs. Mitty seems responsible and concerned.” Perhaps the best thing is not to “think seriously” about what living with Walter Mitty would be like.

For a well-annotated selection of Thurber’s work, along with a detailed chronology of his life, see James Thurber: Writings and Drawings (Library of America, 1996). See also Charles Shiveley Holmes, The Clocks of Columbus: The Literary Career of James Thurber (1972), and Robert Emmet Long, James Thurber (1988).

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. In a paragraph, characterize Mrs. Mitty.
2. In an essay of 500 words, evaluate the view that Mrs. Mitty is exactly the sort of woman Walter Mitty needs.
Although the allegory may at first seem unfamiliar to relatively inexperienced readers, if you ask students whether they have ever heard of any connections between love and war, they will quickly come up with phrases such as “the battle of the sexes” and “all is fair in love and war,” and someone will mention that Cupid is armed with a bow and arrows. And although we don’t want to push this delightful poem too far in the direction of realism, probably many students will find Behn’s characterization of love as “tyrannic” quite intelligible.

It happens, however, that what especially interests us about the poem is the issue we raise in our first question: Why do people enjoy songs about unhappy love? Because it gives us a chance to impose form onto suffering and thus implies a kind of mastery over suffering? In any case, many students will be familiar with the motif and will be able to offer explanations accounting for the pleasure they take in the material.

Aphra Behn was not only a poet but also a playwright and novelist, and when teaching her poetry, we often take note of her powerful narrative of slavery and colonization, *Oroonoko* (c. 1688).

Because many students will have read this story in high school, it can be used effectively as the first assignment. They will start with some ideas about it, and at the end of the class discussion they will probably see that they didn’t know everything about the story. It may be good to begin a class discussion by asking the students to characterize the narrator. The opening paragraph itself, if read aloud in class, ought to provide enough for them to see that the speaker is probably paranoid and given to a monstrous sort of reasoning, though, of course, at the start of the story we cannot be absolutely certain that Fortunato has not indeed heaped a “thousand injuries” on him. (In this paragraph, notice too the word “impunity,” which we later learn is part of the family motto.) When we meet Fortunato, we are convinced that though the narrator’s enemy is something of a fool, he is not the monster that the narrator thinks he is. And so the words at the end of the story, fifty years later, must have an ironic tone, for *in pace requiescat* can apply to Fortunato, they cannot apply to the speaker, who is still talking (on his deathbed, to a priest?) of his vengeance on the unfortunate Fortunato.

The story is full of other little ironies, conscious on the part of Montresor, unconscious on the part of Fortunato:
The narrator is courteous but murderous.
The time is one of festivity but a murder is being planned.
The festival of disguise corresponds to the narrator’s disguise of his feelings.
Fortunato thinks he is festively disguised as a fool, but he is a fool.
He says he will not die of a cough, and the narrator assures him that he is right.
Fortunato is a Freemason, and when he asks the narrator for the secret sign of a brother, the narrator boldly, playfully, outrageously shows him the mason’s trowel that he will soon use to wall Fortunato up.

But what to make of all this? It has been the fashion, for at least a few decades, to say that Poe’s situations and themes speak to our anxieties, our fear of being buried alive, our fear of disintegration of the self, and so on. Maybe. Maybe, too, there is something to Marie Bonaparte’s interpretation. She sees the journey through the tunnel to the crypt as an entry into the womb; the narrator is killing his father (Fortunato) and possessing his mother. And maybe, too, there is something to Daniel Hoffman’s assertion in Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe (223) that Montresor and Fortunato are doubles: “When Montresor leads Fortunato down into the farthest vault of his family’s wine-cellar, into a catacomb of human bones, is he not . . . conducting his double thither? My treasure, my fortune, down into the bowels of the earth, a charnel-house of bones.” Maybe.


KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

The Jilting of Granny Weatherall (p. 188)

Students do not always understand that there are two narratives here: one of a woman’s dying hour and another of the past that floods her mind. The old lady, a tough Southerner or Southwesterner with an intense love of life, has “weathered all,” even a jilting; she had expected a groom, George, and was publicly disappointed when he failed to show up. Now, at her death, again a priest is in the house, and again she is disappointed or “jilted”: The bridegroom (Christ) fails to appear. (It surely is worthwhile to call attention to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, in Matthew 25:1–13, where the bridegroom does appear, but the foolish virgins miss him.) The first jilting could in some measure be overcome, but the second is unendurable.

Porter gives us the stream of Granny’s consciousness, and if we are not always perfectly clear about details (did Hapsy die in childbirth?), we are nevertheless grateful for the revelation of an unfamiliar state of consciousness.

Exactly who is Hapsy? We assume that Hapsy was her last child, “the one she really wanted,” and that is why Hapsy plays such an important role in
Granny’s consciousness. Presumably she had at last come to love her husband. (On this point, it is relevant to mention, too, that one of her sons is named George—presumably for the man who jilted her—and the other son is not named John, for his father, but Jimmy.) But other readers interpret Hapsy differently. Among the interpretations that we find far-fetched are (1) Hapsy was a black friend and midwife who secretly delivered Ellen of an illegitimate child, but George learned of this and therefore jilted Ellen, and (2) Hapsy was Ellen’s illegitimate child, fathered by George, and George then jilted her.

Also, who is the “he” who, at the first jilting, “cursed like a sailor’s parrot and said, ‘I’ll kill him for you’”? Among the answers usually given are: her father, a brother, the man she later married. Probably the question can’t be answered authoritatively. And who is the driver of the cart, whom she recognizes “by his hands”?

These details probably do not affect the overall interpretation of the story. To return to a larger matter, what interpretation of the story makes the most sense? What happens if we consider the story chiefly in the light of the Parable of the Ten Virgins? “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” has engendered considerable comment in books on Porter, in journals, and especially in the instructors’ manuals that accompany textbooks, but it is probably fair to say that the story is usually interpreted as setting forth the picture of an admirable—even heroic—woman who finds, at the end of her life, that there is no God, or, more specifically, that Christ the Bridegroom does not come to her. That is, putting aside the matter of the author’s own beliefs (and putting the whole matter rather crudely), the story shows us an energetic woman who at the end of her life learns that she lives in a godless world.

This is the way we have long seen the story, and we still have a strong attachment to that view, but a rereading of the parable (Matthew 25.1–13) may raise some doubt:

1. 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 foolish 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.
13. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the son of man cometh.

Before we learned (chiefly from Wimsatt and Beardsley) of “the Intentional Fallacy,” we might have studied Porter’s letters, prefaces, and other stories in an effort to ascertain her view of the parable—we still might try to do so, but if we do we will be frustrated since Porter apparently did not comment on the parable, except in this story. Nor does the fact that she had a Catholic education tell us much about what she made of the parable. It appears that to understand the story we can do nothing more than read the story, and perhaps read the parable.

Matthew’s final line, “Watch [i.e., remain awake] therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the son of man cometh,” somewhat confuses the point of the parable, since the wise virgins as well as the foolish virgins slept, but the point nevertheless is very clear: the foolish virgins—foolish because they were shortsighted—overlooked the possibility of the bridegroom’s delay. The bridegroom may come unexpectedly.

Can one (or should one) interpret the story in the light of the evident meaning of the parable? If one interprets it thus, the point or theme might be roughly stated along these lines: Granny, despite all of her apparently commendable worldly activity—ministering to the sick, keeping the farm in good repair, etc.—is (in a spiritual sense) improvident. The second bridegroom does not appear at the moment that she expects him, and she therefore despairs and abandons her belief:

For the second time there was no sign. Again no bridegroom and the priest in the house. She could not remember any other sorrow because this grief wiped them all away. Oh, no, there’s nothing more cruel than this—I’ll never forgive it. She stretched herself with a deep breath and blew out the light.

One might almost say Granny Weatherall is guilty of the sort of hubris shown by some of Flannery O’Connor’s characters, who think (for example) that because they wear clean clothing (the grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”) or hose down their pigs (Mrs. Turpin in “Revelation”) they will be saved. Some support for this reading can be found in this passage:

Granny felt easy about her soul. . . . She had her secret comfortable understanding with a few favored saints.

However, another way of looking at the story is to emphasize the point that, although at the end she is deeply disappointed, she remains active; she blows out the light. Against this, David C. Estes argues [Studies in Short Fiction 22 (1953)], “Her final act . . . reveals the ironic futility of all that has kept her so busy.”
The interpretation that she is hubristic is offered very tentatively, and certainly not as one that gives the meaning of the story. But a reading of the parable is bound to call into question the usual view that “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” is a story about a strong woman’s perception that her faith is delusive.


José Armas

El Tonto del Barrio (p. 195)

If you have any Spanish-speaking students in your class, or even students whose acquaintance with Spanish does not go beyond a few years of high school study, you might ask them how they would translate the title. We thought of glossing “El Tonto” as “The Fool” or “The Idiot,” but “Fool” is a bit old-fashioned and “Idiot”—as Armas suggested to us—is too strong. Armas’s own suggestion, “Dummy,” strikes us as exactly right.

While one is reading the story, say through the first one-third, it may seem to be chiefly a character sketch of Romero and a sketch of the community in which he lives, but then come two sentences that mark a turning point:

Romero kept the sidewalks clean and the barrio looked after him. It was a contract that worked well for a long time.

“Worked well for a long time” implies that something happened that broke the contract, and we are promptly introduced to the disruptive element:

Then, when Seferino, Barelas’ oldest son, graduated from high school he went to work in the barber shop for the summer. Seferino was a conscientious and sensitive young man and it wasn’t long before he took notice of Romero and came to feel sorry for him.

In the light of what happens next, some readers may think that the narrator (or the author?) is being ironic, even sarcastic, when he characterizes Seferino as “conscientious and sensitive,” but Seferino really is conscientious and sensitive. He just isn’t mature, or wise in the ways of the barrio, and (an important point) isn’t able to understand that not everyone feels as he does. Thus, when he argues with his father he says, “How would you like to do what he does and be treated in the same way?” That’s a reasonable position (we all know that we should do unto others as we would have others do unto us)—but Barelas’s answer is wiser than Seferino’s question: “I’m not Romero.” Further,
and this may seem to be a paradox, Barelas is not only wise enough to know that he is not Romero, but he is also wise enough to know (as Seferino does not) why Romero sweeps the sidewalks: “He sweeps the sidewalks because he wants something to do, not because he wants money.”

Although the conflict between Seferino and Romero is the obvious conflict, the conflict (though that is almost too strong a word) between Seferino and Barelas is worth discussing in class. (The question in the text about Barelas’s character is one way of approaching it.) This conflict is amusingly resolved when the well-meaning Seferino disappears into Harvard, thus sparing us a potentially embarrassing or painful scene in which the boy acknowledges his error. Indeed, instead of emphasizing the conflict between Barelas and his son, we get a scene in which Barelas—whose son has caused Romero to misbehave—is pitted against the rest of the community, which now seeks to confine Romero. And although Barelas again is on the right side, in one tiny detail he reveals that he too has been rattled, we might even say corrupted, by his son’s well-intentioned plan. When one of the men of the barrio says, “What if [Romero] hurts . . . ?” Barelas interrupts: “He’s not going to hurt anyone.” Tino replies: “No, Barelas, I was going to say, what if he hurts himself?” It’s a lovely touch, showing that Barelas (who is right about so much) can be mistaken, and, more important, showing that even though the community wants to lock Romero up, it is concerned chiefly for Romero’s well-being.

These comments are obvious, and perhaps a bit too solemn, since the story has a good deal of delightful humor in it. (One can ask the class what it finds amusing in the story.) A favorite passage is the bit recounting how Romero, after breaking with Seferino, at first simply skipped the barber shop in his sweeping, but then refined his action and pushed all of the trash from elsewhere in front of the barber shop.

Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing

The story is about Romero, but almost as interestingly it is about Seferino. We can fairly easily guess what will happen to Romero in the next few years. What would you guess will happen to Seferino? Will his Harvard education lead to his increasing alienation from his community? (Our own response is yes, in the short run, but—since he is a bright and sensitive youth and he has a wise father—we can hope that in the long run he will learn to appreciate and to cherish the ways of the barrio.)

Leslie Marmon Silko

The Man to Send Rain Clouds (p. 200)

The church—especially perhaps the Roman Catholic Church—has often adapted itself to the old ways and beliefs of new converts, sometimes by retaining the old holidays and holy places but adapting them and dedicating them to the new reli-
gion. For instance, although the date of Jesus’s birth is not known, from the fourth century it was celebrated late in December, displacing pagan festivals of new birth (e.g., the Roman Saturnalia, which celebrated the sowing of the crops on December 15–17, and the feast of the Natalis Solis Invicti, celebrating the renewal of the sun a week later).

Practices of this sort have facilitated conversion, but from the church’s point of view the danger may be that the new believers retain too much faith in the old beliefs. In Silko’s story the priest has every reason to doubt that his parishioners have fully accepted Christianity. The unnamed priest—he’s just “the priest” or “the young priest,” not anyone with a personal identity, so far as the other characters in the story are concerned—is kind and well meaning, and he is even willing to bend the rules a bit, but he knows that he does not have the confidence of the people. He is disturbed that they didn’t think the Last Rites and a funeral Mass were necessary, and he is not at all certain that they have given up their pagan ways: “He looked at the red blanket, not sure that Teofilo was so small, wondering if it wasn’t some perverse Indian trick—something they did in March to ensure a good harvest...” He is wrong in suspecting that Teofilo (the name means “beloved of God,” from the Greek theos = God, and philos = loving) is not in front of him, but he is right in suspecting that a “trick” is being played, since the reader knows that the holy water is wanted not to assist Teofilo to get to the Christian heaven but to bring rain for the crops. In Part One we hear Leon say, “Send us rain clouds, Grandfather”; in Part Three we hear Louise express the hope that the priest will sprinkle water so Teofilo “won’t be thirsty”; and at the very end of the story we hear that Leon “felt good because it was finished, and he was happy about the sprinkling of the holy water; now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure.”

We aren’t quite sure about what to make of the passage in which the water, disappearing as soon as it is sprinkled on the grave, “reminded” the priest of something, but the passage is given some emphasis and surely it is important. Our sense is that the priest vaguely intuits an archetypal mystery, something older and more inclusive than the Roman Catholic ritual he engages in.

During most of the story the narrator neither editorializes nor enters the minds of the characters; we are not told that the characters are reverential, and (for the most part) we are not allowed to hear their thoughts. Rather, we see them perform ceremonies with dignity, and, because the point of view is chiefly objective, we draw our own conclusions. Possibly, too, by keeping outside of the minds of the characters the narrator helps to convey the traditional paleface idea that Native Americans are inscrutable people, people of few words. Certainly Leon hoards words when, responding to the priest’s admonition not to let Teofilo stay at the sheep camp alone, he says, “No, he won’t do that any more now.” But we do get into the priest’s mind, notably in the passage in which he suspects trickery, and we get into Leon’s mind at the end of the story when, in what almost seems like a thunderstorm of information, we are told his thoughts about the water.
Because the narrator, like the characters, is taciturn, some readers may think that Leon and his companions are callous. “After all,” one student said, “don’t they first round up the sheep before attending to the burial rites? And why don’t they weep?” Class discussion can usually bring out the dignity of the proceedings here, and some students may be able to provide specific details about burial customs unfamiliar to other members of the class.

We do not know if the different colors of paint—white, blue, yellow, and green—have specific meanings, but perhaps blue suggests the sky and the water, yellow suggests corn meal, and green suggests vegetation. White is a fairly widespread sign of purity, but we have not been able to find out how Pueblo people regard it. (If you know about these things, we’ll be most appreciative if you write to us, in care of the publisher.)

**Billy Collins**

*Introduction to Poetry* (p. 203)

This is an interesting poem, but it is a tricky poem to teach well. As we always do with short poems, we first ask a student to read the poem aloud, and after he or she is done, there is usually an awkward silence. That is because the students perceive Collins’s final lines to be an attack on them: through a macabre image, the speaker declares that students malign and torment poems.

Students are not happy about such criticism. After all, here they are in a literature course, where they are being taught to read analytically, examining tone, meter, metaphor, simile, and so on. Now they encounter an eminent poet—a former U.S. poet laureate!—who claims in a poem that students fail to approach poems in the proper state of mind and spirit.

Therefore, in the teaching of “Introduction to Poetry,” we start with the final lines. We ask the class, “What is Collins saying?” And from there, we ask “Why is he saying this?” To these questions, the students typically respond, “Collins is saying that readers are so busy trying to get deep meanings out of poems that they become unable to enjoy them.”

It is quite intriguing to see how the conversation next unfolds. In our experience, the students begin to shift from feeling under attack to feeling sympathetic to Collins’s judgment. That is because plenty of students themselves harbor some suspicion about analyzing literature—why isn’t it enough simply to enjoy the books? Why does literature have to get “taken apart” all the time?

For us as teachers, the challenge is to encourage students to enjoy literature while, at the same time, developing their interpretive skills. We know, as teachers, that learning to interpret literature carefully often leads us to enjoy poems that, at first, we did not enjoy: we did not enjoy these poems because we did not understand them, and once we do understand them, we can enjoy them—or at least can understand why other readers might.
For this reason, we think it’s important for us to say during the semester how much we enjoy this or that poet, and how much pleasure we take in rereading and savoring this or that poem. The students should see us performing important intellectual work, but they should also see us as lovers of literature, whose pleasure in literature has not faded away from too many years of close, careful critical interpretation.

Now, we return to the first part of the poem, in which Collins describes the approach—really, the approaches—that he invites students to take. You can have some fun with the images, as when Collins professes that he wants students to “waterski” across the surface of poems. Invite the students to say what it’s like to waterski—the thrill, the excitement of being just barely in control, the spray in the air as the waterskier cuts into the water, almost hovering at high speed above it. The joy, the exhilaration, the possibility that one might fall—plus the wave of the hand toward the shore, which here Collins invokes in order to imply that it is the experience of the poem that matters, not the identity of the author that is over there, off in the distance.

Our exploration of the first part of the poem dramatizes for the students the contrast that Collins aims for in the final lines. That matters for our grasp of Collins’s intention. Still, we find we do tend to quarrel with his “But” in line 12. There is a contrast between what comes before it and what comes next, and the starkness of the contrast makes it provocative. Yet, it also polarizes the issues that the poem engages, and that is our own critique of what Collins has done.

Through his vivid images, Collins, to us, sets up a contrast that places enjoyment and analysis at odds with one another. In this respect, “Introduction to Poetry” is both stimulating and coercive. On one level, the poet-speaker calls for receptivity, for pleasure and appreciation. However, on another level, the poem’s structure and content impose too-narrow limits on the reader’s experience—on the reader’s effort to think deeply and flexibly about what it means to read a poem.

This is indeed an irksome poem, and sometimes we wonder how much we really admire it. However, it is a poem that sticks with students: it unsettles them and leaves them with a good measure of doubt and concern—and with lingering questions. “Introduction to Poetry” is not a long or a dense and difficult poem, but it is a poem that can serve your course well, prompting your students to think about why they are in the course and what they hope and expect to get from it.


Note: We mentioned above that when dealing with short poems in particular, we like to begin by asking a student to read the poem aloud. This is a good idea, we think; among other things, it enables quiet students, who are fearful about offering interpretive comments, to find a safer (for them) way to enter into the discussion. But over the years we have come to realize that it is best to
seek volunteers beforehand—e.g., in an e-mail the day before, “Susan, could you read aloud poem xxx on Thursday?” The student can then look up the pronunciation of unusual words, practice her reading, and as a result make the experience more rewarding for the other students and for her.

ROBERT FROST

The Road Not Taken (p. 205)

Our questions in the text call attention to the fact that the two middle stanzas complicate the poem. Without these stanzas, Frost’s poem would suggest some sort of clear-cut choice, a choice between two distinctive ways of life, but with the middle stanzas, the choice becomes much less clear. In line 8 he suggests that one road “was grassy and wanted wear,” but in the very next two lines he says, “Though as for that the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.” The beginning of the third stanza continues to emphasize the similarity of the roads: “And both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black.” We think you can get students to agree, then, that the choice is not clear-cut. Still, the situation requires that a choice be made; one cannot come to a fork in the road and (in Yogi Berra’s words) “take it.”

In our view, the emphasis on the similarity of the roads is part of the strength of the poem. Of course sometimes in our lives we do make clear-cut choices between stark alternatives, but for the most part the choices are small, and are between things that seem pretty similar. For instance, a student may have been accepted at two very similar colleges, and the choice of where to go may be based on something rather trivial, e.g., College X has a nicer campus than College Y, or X is a slightly easier commute than Y. But the decision may indeed prove fateful: One may meet one’s future spouse at college, one may happen to take a very interesting college course and therefore decide to major in that subject, etc. The choice indeed may make “all the difference,” though the circumstances that prompted the decision may not have involved any significant difference.

In our second question in the text we suggest that the speaker is playfully mocking himself in the first two lines of the last stanza (“I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence”), but of course this playfulness does not mean that the poem cannot have serious implications.

ROBERT HERRICK

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time (p. 206)

On Herrick’s “To the Virgins,” see the classic discussion in E. M. W. Tillyard’s The Metaphysicals and Milton (1956); Tillyard argues effectively that in “To the Virgins,” “the trend of the poem is urgency, touched with reflection.” Tillyard’s book is old, but it remains useful.

This wonderful lyric seems ideally suited to introduce students to matters of persona and tone. We have found that when asked, “Who is speaking?” most students will answer, “A man.” (Possibly some offer this opinion simply because a man wrote this poem.) A few will say that a woman is the speaker, and we have found it interesting to ask them why. (Those who say that a woman is the speaker usually suggest that she is unmarried and is speaking regretfully.) Almost all students hear the voice of an older person, though they cannot always say why. Similarly, although a few students find the speaker aggressively offering unsolicited advice, most hear a friendly voice. True, the first and last stanzas begin with imperatives (“Gather ye rosebuds,” “Then be not coy”), but most students hear in “Old Time,” “a-flying,” and “a-getting” an engaging old-codgerliness. They may hear, too, even a touch of elderly loquacity in the explanation of a fairly obvious figure: “The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun.”

One other point about Herrick’s poem: The shift to “you” in the last stanza (from the earlier “ye”) gives the moral great emphasis.

The carpe diem motif allows the poem to be related easily to Marvell’s “Coy Mistress.” What is especially interesting, however, is the difference in tone, even though the poems share both a motif and a structure—the logical argument.

Is the poem offensive to women? Some of our students have found it so. Our hope is that readers will be able to read the poem not so much as advice to women to submit passively to marriage, but rather as advice (which can apply to males as well as to females) “to make much of time.” Against “dying” and “setting,” we can “gather,” “smile,” and “run.”

MARTÍN ESPADA

Bully (p. 207)

The editors of Literature for Composition belong to a generation that was taught, in grade school and in high school, that Teddy Roosevelt was a hero. Some of his words entered the classroom, just as half a century later some of the words of John Kennedy—notably the Inaugural Address—entered the classroom. In school we heard such Rooseveltisms as “I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life” (1899), “In life, as in a football game, the principle to follow is: Hit the line hard” (1901), and “There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism. . . . The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, of preventing all possibility of its continuing to be a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities” (1915). In the fifth question in the text, we quote yet another (in)famous remark, expressing the opinion that all immigrants should be required to learn English within five years. Persons who doubt that Roosevelt was regarded as one of America’s greatest heroes need only call to mind Mount Rushmore National Memorial, in South Dakota, where an enormous bust of Roosevelt, along with busts of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, is carved. Although the sculptures...
(visible for some sixty miles) were not finished until the 1950s, the monument was dedicated in 1927, and in effect it represents the values of the 1920s.

In our third question, we ask about the word “bully,” as an adjective and as a noun. Roosevelt used the adjective, meaning “excellent,” in a famous comment, to the effect that the presidency is a “bully pulpit.” But given Roosevelt’s enthusiasm for military action, in particular for the Spanish-American War (a war whose name somehow omits the efforts of the Cuban patriots who fought for independence), it is hard not to think of the other and more common meaning of the word. Certainly in this poem entitled “Bully,” where it is said of Roosevelt that “each fist [is] lonely for a sabre,” the image that comes across is of someone who pushes other people around. A century ago Roosevelt stormed San Juan with his Rough Riders, but today Puerto Rican children invade Roosevelt School (line 11). The end of the poem, with its reference to Roosevelt’s “Victorian mustache / and monocle,” presents a hopelessly outdated and somewhat comic figure who contrasts with the vitality of the “Spanish-singing children.”
CHAPTER 8

Arguing an Interpretation

The entries that we cite in this manual for Chapter 6 are relevant here too. Steven Mailloux’s entry on “interpretation” in Critical Terms for Literary Study, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (1995), provides a good starting point. You may next want to turn to a short, readable, but highly thoughtful book by Monroe Beardsley, The Possibility of Criticism (1970). Also of interest are E. D. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation (1967); Paul B. Armstrong, Conflicting Readings: Variety and Validity in Interpretation (1990); and Umberto Eco, with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose, Interpretation and Overinterpretation (1992). This last title includes three essays by Eco, with responses by Rorty, Culler, and Brooke-Rose, and a final “Reply” by Eco.

P A T  M O R A

Immigrants (p. 211)

At least three voices are heard in Mora’s poem: the voice of the immigrant who hopes that his or her child will resemble Americans (WASPs, that is); the voice of the immigrant who fears that the child will not be liked because the child will not seem sufficiently American; and the ironic voice of the poet, expressing skepticism about the hopes for assimilation to an Anglo-American model.

The almost comic glimpse of imperfect pronunciation given in line 7 (“hallo, babee, hallo”)—the speaker of the poem here seems to have a somewhat superior attitude—disappears in the last three lines which, though written in English, sympathetically represent the fear that is thought “in Spanish or Polish.” If you discuss these lines, you may want to invite students to express their opinions about why “american” is not capitalized in the last two lines, even though it is capitalized in the first (“the American flag”), and “Spanish” and “Polish” are capitalized. It’s our guess that by not capitalizing “american” in the last two lines the poet implies that it’s not all that wonderful to become an “american”; indeed there may be a loss in changing from “Spanish” or “Polish” to “american.”

Put it this way: the poem shifts from the eager activity of immigrant parents (presented almost comically in lines 1–7) to a more sympathetic presentation of
deep fears in lines 8–13, but the whole is complicated by the author’s implied criticism (chiefly through “american”) of the immigrants’ understandable but mistaken activity.

**ROBERT FROST**

*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (p. 215)

On “Stopping by Woods,” see John Lynen, *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (1960), and *Frost: Centennial Essays* (1976), vol. 3, ed. Jac L. Tharpe. We number ourselves among the readers who see in the poem a longing for death (“frozen lake,” “darkest evening of the year,” “The woods are lovely, dark and deep” seem to support this view), but that is not what the poem is exclusively about. If there is a momentary longing for death in the poem, there is also the reassertion of the will to face the tasks of living. As Frost put it, at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference in 1960, “People are always trying to find a death wish in that poem. But there’s a life wish there—he goes on, doesn’t he?”

Frost reads the poem in *Robert Frost Reading His Own Poems* (Record No. 1, EL LCB, 1941), distributed by the National Council of Teachers of English.

**Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing**

1. As the manuscript indicates, line 5 originally read: “The steaming horses think it queer.” Line 7 read: “Between a forest and a lake.” Which version do you prefer? Why?
2. The rhyming words in the first stanza can be indicated by *aaba*; the second stanza picks up the *b* rhyme: *bbcb*. Indicate the rhymes for the third stanza. For the fourth. Why is it appropriate that the rhyme scheme differs in the fourth stanza?
3. Hearing that the poem had been interpreted as a “death poem,” Frost said, “I never intended that, but I did have the feeling it was loaded with ulteriority.” What “ulteriority” is implicit? How is the time of day and year significant? How does the horse’s attitude make a contrast with the speaker’s?

**ROBERT FROST**

*Mending Wall* (p. 222)

Some critics applaud the neighbor in Frost’s “Mending Wall,” valuing his respect for barriers. For an extreme version, see Robert Hunting, “Who Needs Mending?” *Western Humanities Review* 17 (Winter 1963): 88–89. The gist of this faction is that the neighbor wisely realizes—as the speaker does not—that individual identity depends on respect for boundaries. Such a view sees the

poem as a Browningesque dramatic monologue like “My Last Duchess,” in which the self-satisfied speaker unknowingly gives himself away.

Richard Poirier, in Robert Frost (1990), makes the interesting point that it is not the neighbor (who believes that “good fences make good neighbors”) who initiates the ritual of mending the wall; rather, it is the speaker: “I let my neighbor know beyond the hill.” Poirier suggests that “if fences do not ‘make good neighbors,’ the making of fences can,” for it makes for talk—even though the neighbor is hopelessly taciturn. For a long, judicious discussion of the poem, see John C. Kemp, Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist (1979).

Addendum: In the quest to connect literature with life, some instructors have called attention to two fences or walls that are very much in the news, the fence being built in the U.S. to deter illegal immigration from Mexico, and the wall that the Israelis are building. Our own instincts are not to refer to either of these. We do not think the poem offers a useful comment about immigration or about Israeli-Palestinian relations. On the other hand, several instructors assure us that students do deepen their understanding of the poem and of life by considering these issues.

T. S. Eliot

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock (p. 224)

It is well to alert students to the fact that “Prufrock” is not a Browningesque dramatic monologue with a speaker and a listener, but rather an internal monologue in which “I” (the timid self) addresses his own amorous self as “you.” (Not every “you” in this poem, however, refers to Prufrock’s amorous self. Sometimes “you” is equivalent to “one.”) Possibly, too, the “you” is the reader, or even other people who, like Prufrock, are afraid of action.

Among the chief points usually made are these: The title proves to be ironic, for we scarcely get a love song: “J. Alfred Prufrock” is a name that, like the speaker, seems to be hiding something (“J.”) and also seems to be somewhat old-maidish (“Prufrock” suggests “prude” and “frock”); the initial description (especially the “patient etherised”) is really less a description of the evening than of Prufrock’s state of mind; mock heroic devices abound (people at a cocktail party talking of Michelangelo, Prufrock gaining strength from his collar and stickpin); the sensuous imagery of women’s arms leads to the men in shirt-sleeves and to Prufrock’s wish to be a pair of ragged claws.

We print the original (1915) version, from Poetry magazine, but in line 19 we give soot instead of spot (an obvious typo in Poetry). When the poem later appeared in book form it differed only in punctuation (e.g., square brackets instead of parentheses) and one verbal change—no doubt instead of withal in line 114.
Let's begin at the end, with the issue of the punctuation of the last two lines. Does the urn speak the two lines, or does it speak only “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”? The matter has been thoroughly and apparently definitively discussed by Jack Stillinger, in an appendix to his book called The Hoodwinking of Madeline (1971). The problem is this: when the poem was first published, in Annals of the Fine Arts (1819), the lines were printed thus:

Beauty is Truth,—Truth Beauty.—That is all
Ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know.

When Keats published the ode in his book Lamia and Other Poems (1820), the lines were punctuated thus:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

The two printed versions thus set off “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” as a unit separate from the remaining words. But Keats probably did not supervise the publication in The Annals, and because he was ill when Lamia was in production he may not have read the proofs or may not have read them attentively. Many scholars therefore do not feel obliged to accept the punctuation of the two printed texts. They point to the four extant manuscript transcripts of the poem (none by Keats, but all by persons close to Keats). Because none of these transcriptions uses quotation marks or a period after “beauty,” these scholars argue that the punctuation suggests that the urn speaks all of the last two lines:

Beauty is Truth,—Truth Beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Stillinger points out that none of the six readings (the four transcripts and the two published versions) offers conclusive proof of Keats’s intention. He goes on to summarize the interpretations, and we now summarize Stillinger.

1. **Poet to Reader.** The urn speaks the first five words of line 49 (“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”), and the poet, addressing the reader, speaks the rest of the last two lines (“that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”). The objection to this view is that earlier in the last stanza the poet and the reader are “us,” and the poet says that later woes will belong to a generation other than “ours.” Why, then, does the poet shift the address to “ye,” where we would expect “we”? Second, the statement is obviously false; we need to know much more than that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.”
2. **Poet to Urn.** The poet speaks the end of line 49, and all of the last line, to the urn. The poet tells the urn that *it* need know no more—but that we need to know a great deal more. The objection, Stillinger points out, is that “ye” is normally a plural pronoun—though in fact Keats did sometimes use it as a singular. A second objection: What can Keats possibly mean by saying to the urn, “that is all / Ye know on earth . . .”? 

3. **Poet to Figures on Urn.** The poet speaks the end of 49 and all of the last line to the figures on the urn. This fits with “ye” as a plural. The objection is that the figures are not “on earth” and, further, that the poet is no longer thinking of them as alive and capable of hearing. Further, *why* should the figures on the urn know this and only this? 

4. **Urn to Reader.** The urn speaks all of the two last lines. The objection is that the statement seems to defy common sense, and more important, it is *not* the way the *Lamia* volume punctuated the line. Some critics have suggested that the quotation marks were meant to set off these five words as a sort of motto within a two-line statement by the urn. 

   It is our impression that most editors today disregard the *Lamia* punctuation, put the whole of the two lines within quotation marks, and take the lines as spoken by the urn to the reader. In any case, a reader is still left to wonder whether the passage is profound wisdom or nonsense.

   Now to begin at the beginning. In the first line “still” probably has several meanings (motionless; as yet; silent); the urn is the “foster-child of silence and slow time” because its real parent is the craftsman who made it, but it has been adopted, so to speak, by silence and the centuries. Although the poet begins by saying that the urn can tell a tale “more sweetly” than a poet can, in fact by the end of the stanza it is clear that the urn cannot tell a tale; it can only (of course) show some isolated moment and let the viewer try to guess what actions came before and will come after. It is worth mentioning, too, that this stanza praises the urn’s staying-power (“slow time”) but is rich in words that imply transience: “Sylvan,” “flowery,” “leaf-fringed,” “haunts” (suggesting the insubstantial or ethereal). The stanza ends with urgent questions conveying agitation and implying that the urn cannot tell a tale satisfactorily.

   The second stanza begins on a note of composure; in the space between the stanzas, so to speak, the poet has stilled his questioning spirit and has progressed to a state where he can offer something for meditation (“Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter”). As the stanza continues, a slightly painful note is introduced: the pastoral landscape will never die—but the lover will never kiss the woman. The poet urges the lover not to grieve, which means that he in fact introduces into this Arcadian world the idea of potential grief. Although the stanza ends by asserting the youth’s eternal love, and the woman’s eternal beauty, there is something almost painful in the last words of the next-to-last line of the stanza, “though thou has not thy bliss.” 

   The third stanza begins with a renewed note of joy, again apparently gained in the blank space that precedes the stanza, though perhaps we may also detect a note of hysteria in the repetition of “Ah, happy, happy boughs.” This stanza too,
despite its early expressions of joy, moves toward distress. We are told that the figures on the urn are “far above” human passion, but the last lines dwell on the pains of human passions: “a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed, / A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.”

We cannot quite say that the fourth stanza begins with the by-now expected note of composure because in fact it begins with a question, but it is true to say that in fact this stanza too begins in a quieter mood. The poet is contemplating with interest a new scene on the urn, a scene showing a “mysterious priest” and a “heifer lowing at the skies, / . . . her silken flanks with garlands drest.” As the poet describes this highly picturesque scene, again we hear a note foreign to the beginning of the stanza. The poet begins by conveying his interest in what he sees—“the mysterious priest,” the “heifer,” and the “folk, this pious morn”—but then his mind turns to the “little town” that is “emptied of this folk” and whose “streets for evermore / Will silent be.” The last two lines of the stanza are deeply melancholy: “not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.” Jack Stillinger, in an essay on the odes (reprinted from his *Twentieth Century Views*) in *The Hoodwinking of Madeline* suggests that “desolate” in line 40 is the counterpart of “forlorn” in *Ode to a Nightingale.* It brings the speaker back to his sole self” (p. 106).

The fifth stanza begins with the expected renewed joy, but it is worth noticing that the urn, which in the first stanza was a “Sylvan historian” capable of telling a “flowery tale,” now is a “shape” and a “silent form” and a “Cold Pastoral.” The poet by now has clearly seen that what he at first took for a world of idealized love is “cold,” and its figures are “marble men and maidens.” That is, if it is perfect and permanent it is also cold, bloodless, without the passion that (however painful) is what we want from life. Stillinger puts it this way:

Like the nightingale, [the urn] has offered a tentative idea—momentarily “teasing” the speaker “out of thought”—but has also led the speaker to understand the shortcomings of the ideal. (p. 108)

Stillinger’s comment on the last two lines is also worth quoting:

The final lines present a special problem in interpretation, but it is clear that, while the urn is not entirely rejected at the end, its value lies in its character as a work of art, not in its being a possible substitute for life in the actual world. However punctuated, the urn’s “message” amounts to what the speaker has come to realize in his speculations—that the only beauty accessible to mortal man exists “on earth.” The urn is “a friend to man” for helping him to arrive at this conclusion through just such ponderings as we have witnessed in the course of the poem. (pp. 108–109)

*Bibliographic note:* For detailed analyses of the poem, see Earl Wasserman, *The Finer Tone* (1953), and Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (1983); for briefer discussions, see the books on Keats by Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (1963), and by Douglas Bush, *John Keats, His Life and Writings* (1966). Also useful is a collection
edited by Jack Stillinger, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats's Odes* (1968). Ian Jack, in *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (1967), has an interesting well-illustrated chapter on urns—and pictures of urns—that Keats is likely to have seen, but, unfortunately, no one urn is the model; in fact, “that heifer lowing at the skies” probably came not from an urn but from the Elgin Marbles. Jack’s concern is only with identifying motifs; he does not offer an interpretation of the poem.

**THOMAS HARDY**

*The Man He Killed* (p. 230)

The speaker’s diction is that of a simple, uneducated rustic (“old ancient,” “Right many a nipperkin,” “’list,” “off-hand”). He tells us (line 15) that he enlisted because he was out of work and broke, but line 10 reveals that he also responded to customary wartime propaganda and appeals to patriotism. He is still too trusting to reject what he was told about his “foe,” but in the third stanza the repetitions, abrupt pauses, and attempts to reassure himself in “of course he was,” and “That’s clear enough” all indicate his struggle to overcome incipient doubts. The heavy pauses in the fourth stanza show the difficulty a man unused to thinking about large matters has when what he has been taught by his “betters” conflicts with his own feelings. In the fifth stanza he resolves his doubts with a platitude—war is “quaint and curious”—but we feel that he’ll be retelling his story at one pub or another and pondering his experience for the rest of his life.

One can have a field day talking about irony; here the ironic distance between poet and speaker and between speaker and reader, the “irony of fate” in which the soldier is trapped, the dramatic irony in the fact that the speaker had to kill a man before he could recognize him as a potential neighbor or friend, a man like himself. And, finally, this simple man is one of us. Like him, we are mere pawns trapped between forces whose meaning, though it continues to elude us, we continue to question.

**Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing**

What state of mind would you have to be in to think of war as “quaint and curious”? To think of a man you killed as a “foe”? Is the speaker convinced by the words he utters? Whether your answer is “Yes” or “No,” why do you think so?

**GWENDOLYN BROOKS**

*The Mother* (p. 231)

It’s our guess that discussion in class will concentrate on the last three lines. For what it’s worth, we find those lines convincing, partly because of their simplicity (no metaphors, no inversions, no unusual diction) and partly because of
the repetition. Of course the repetition *might* suggest insincerity, the speaker’s awareness that she does not sound convincing and so she piles it on (some readers may feel that the lady doth protest too much), but we do not hear any such suggestion.

**JOYCE CAROL OATES**

*Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* (p. 233)

The title seems to be derived from Judges 19:17 (“So the old man said, ‘Where are you going, and where do you come from?’”), a point made in a rather strained discussion of the story in *Explicator* (Summer 1982).

Tom Quirk, in *Studies in Short Fiction* 18 (1981): 413–419, pointed out that the story derives from newspaper and magazine accounts (especially one in *Life*, March 4, 1966) of the activities of a psychopath known as “The Pied Piper of Tucson,” who drove a gold-colored car and seduced and sometimes murdered teenage girls in the Tucson area. Because he was short, he stuffed his boots with rags and flattened tin cans, which caused him to walk unsteadily.

Oates herself has confirmed, on various occasions, her use of this material (e.g., *New York Times*, March 23, 1986).

According to Oates, in an early draft of her story “Death and the Maiden” (she is fond of a type of fiction that she calls “realistic allegory”), “the story was minutely detailed yet clearly an allegory of the fatal attractions of death (or the devil). An innocent young girl is seduced by way of her own vanity: She mistakes death for erotic romance of a particularly American/trashy sort.” The story went through several drafts. Oates has said she was especially influenced by Bob Dylan’s song, “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue.” One line of Dylan’s song (“The vagabond who’s standing at your door”) is clearly related to the story, and note that in the story itself Connie wishes “it were all over.”

In speaking of the revisions, Oates writes that “the charismatic mass murderer drops into the background and his innocent victim, a fifteen-year-old, moves into the foreground. She becomes the true protagonist of the tale. . . . There is no suggestion in the published story that Arnold Friend has seduced and murdered other girls, or even that he necessarily intends to murder Connie.” Oates goes on to explain that her interest is chiefly in Connie, who “is shallow, vain, silly, hopeful, doomed—perhaps as I saw, and still see, myself?—but capable nonetheless of an unexpected gesture of heroism at the story’s end. . . . We don’t know the nature of her sacrifice [to protect her family from Arnold], only that she is generous enough to make it.” Instructors who are interested in discussing the intentional fallacy (and is it a fallacy?) will find, if they use this passage, that students have strong feelings on the topic.

The story has abundant affinities with the anonymous ballad called “The Demon Lover.” The demon lover has “music on every hand,” and Connie “was hearing music in her head”; later, Arnold and Ellie listen to the same radio sta-
tion in the car that Connie listens to in the house; the demon lover’s ship has “masts o’ the beaten gold,” and Arnold’s car is “painted gold.”

The second sentence tells us that Connie “had a quick nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors.” Her mother attributes it to vanity, and indeed Connie does think she is pretty, but a more important cause is insecurity. Connie’s fear that she has no identity sometimes issues in her a wish that “she herself were dead and it were all over with.” “Everything about her had two sides,” which again suggests an incoherent personality.

Arnold Friend has a hawklike nose, thick black lashes, an ability to see what is going on in remote places, a curious (lame) foot, a taste for strange bargains, incantatory speech, an enchanted subordinate, and a charismatic personality; all in all he is a sort of diabolical figure who can possess Connie, partly because he shows her an enormous concern that no one else has shown her. (The possession—“I’ll come inside you, where it’s all secret”—is possession of her mind as well as of her body.) Notice, too, that like a traditional evil spirit, Arnold Friend cannot cross the threshold uninvited.

The dedication to Dylan has provoked considerable comment. Marie Urbanski, in Studies in Short Fiction 15 (1978): 200–203, thinks it is pejorative, arguing that Dylan made music “almost religious in dimension among youth.” Tom Quirk, on the other hand, says it is “honorific because the history and effect of Bob Dylan’s music had been to draw youth away from the romantic promises and frantic strains of a brand of music sung by Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, and others.” A. H. Petry, in Studies in Short Fiction 25 (1988): 155–157, follows Quirk and goes on to argue that Ellie is meant to suggest Elvis Presley (lock of hair on forehead, sideburns, etc.). According to Petry, Oates is seeking “to warn against the dangerous illusions and vacuousness” generated by Elvis’s music, in contrast to Bob Dylan’s.

Perhaps the most astounding comment is by Mike Tierce and John Michael Crafton (Studies in Short Fiction 22 [1985]: 219–224). Tierce and Crafton argue that Arnold Friend, the mysterious visitor, is not satanic but rather a savior, and that he is (as his hair, hawklike nose, unshaved face, and short stature suggest) an image of Bob Dylan. Arnold’s visit, in their view, is a fantasy of Connie’s “overheated imagination,” and it enables her to free herself “from the sense of confinement she feels in her father’s house. . . . She broadens her horizons to include the ‘vast sunlit reaches of the land’ all around her.”

Many readers find resemblances between the fiction of Oates and Flannery O’Connor, but in an interview in Commonweal (Dec. 5, 1969), Oates said that although she at first thought her fiction was indebted to Flannery O’Connor, she came to see that in O’Connor there is always a religious dimension whereas in her own fiction “there is only the natural world.”

The story has been made into a film called Smooth Talk (Spectra Films, 1986). For further study of this story, we recommend the casebook “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”, ed. Elaine Showalter (1994). For biography, see Greg Johnson, Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates (1998). A good critical overview is Johnson’s Understanding Joyce Carol Oates.
The story has a first-person narrator, but the plot is not much concerned with the doings of the narrator, and it is not at all concerned with the narrator's encounters with other characters; rather, the narrative concerns the history of the lottery. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to neglect the narrator: he, like all others, is part of the grand scheme, subject to a mysterious "they."

What do we know of the narrator? He has held low and high ranks at Babylon (slave and proconsul), and he believes that he owes "this almost atrocius variety" to the lottery. "Now, far from Babylon" (according to the second paragraph), he at last turns his thoughts to this institution. About the only other thing we know of him—aside from his report of the history of the lottery—is this:

I don't have much time left; they tell us that the ship is about to weigh anchor.

Exactly where he is, and where he is sailing to, we are not told. Nor are we told who "they" are, though we can conjecture that "they" are the Company. George R. McMurray, in Jorge Luis Borges (1980), suggests that the narrator may be facing death—hence his insight into the lottery—and that the journey is with Charon, who ferries the spirits across the Styx to Elysium.

But we do know at least one more thing about the narrator: he seems not to be defeated or even distressed by his personal history or by his understanding of reality. He seems to hold a somewhat ironic but by no means bitter view. In fact, he seems comforted by his understanding of the system. On the other hand, some readers detect in the narrator's voice a sign of near desperation.

If there is almost nothing in the way of conflict between characters, can one say that there is no conflict in the story? Not quite; the story sets forth a conflict between two views of life, or two views of history. One view is set forth only briefly, when the narrator glances at what we can call the Greek view. He says that he has "known what the Greeks do not know, incertitude." He does not amplify this point, but we can say that the Greek view assumes a just, rational order, perhaps even a beneficent deity. It is the view of Greek science and of Greek tragedy, both of which show us (in the words of Alfred North Whitehead) "the remorseless working of things." There is an order, and human beings can know it and live harmoniously within it; one sign of this order is that
if they defy it (whether the order is seen as a scientific principle such as the law of gravity or, on the other hand, a moral law), they will suffer. (Although calling this view “the Greek view” of course involves a great deal of oversimplification, we can go even further and call it the Judeo-Christian view.)

The other view, the view symbolized by the lottery, is this: There is no relation between our choices (moral or otherwise) and our fates. In fact, we do not really make choices; there is no such thing as free will. We may think that we can order our lives and live them in accordance with the order of the universe, but we live the lives that the Company allots to us. Instead of living in a world of moral order we live (as the story puts it) in a world in which “there is a periodical infusion of chaos in the cosmos.” Babylon (in contrast to the Greek cosmos or order) is, in the last words of the story, “an infinite game of chance.”

Not surprisingly, readers have offered allegorical interpretations of the story. (After all, in the prologue to *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Borges says that this story is *not* “innocent of symbolism.”) The usual interpretation goes thus:

Babylon is the unknowable world;
our desire for order leads us to invent the lottery, a ridiculous attempt to make sense out of chaos. The Company is the God that we invent.

For Emir Rodriguez Monegal, in *Jorge Luis Borges* (1978), the allegory is this:

The story is meant to symbolize destiny: the lottery to which all of us are unwitting subscribers.

But these interpretations reduce the story, with its subtleties, to a formula. Take, for instance, a single detail to which Monegal and others call attention. The narrator tells us that among the places that “led to the Company” was “a sacred latrine called Qaphqa.” Well, a “sacred latrine”—though not at all impossible—sounds as though the author may be having a little fun. And how would one pronounce the name of this latrine? Can “Qaphqa” be pronounced other than “Kafka”? And surely one feels that Borges’s story, like Kafka’s stories, is elusive; the narrator painstakingly sets forth the details, but the world that is presented—that is built up brick by brick—remains mysterious.

Classroom discussion of the story almost always gets into a discussion of why people gamble in lotteries. (By the way, in 1964 only New Hampshire had a lottery, but today 43 states and the District of Columbia have lotteries.) Of course the chief reason is to become rich, but one also hears promoters of lotteries (as well as some psychologists) say that what a one dollar ticket in a state lottery buys is cheap entertainment. Thus Edward Stanek, commissioner of the Iowa lottery, says buyers “can spend $1, and then spend the rest of the week dreaming what they would do if they actually won.” Who buys lottery tickets? In the United States, at least, most of the players are said to be middle income.
or higher, and they are said to bet relatively lightly, all of which does suggest that betting is a sort of entertainment. On the other hand, a small percentage of the players are said to be very poor.

**WILLIAM FAULKNER**

*A Rose for Emily* (p. 249)

The chronology of the story—not very clear on first reading—has been worked out by several writers. Five chronologies are given in M. Thomas Inge, *William Faulkner: “A Rose for Emily”* (1970); a sixth is given in Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (1978) (pp. 382–384). Brooks conjectures that Miss Emily is born in 1852, her father dies around 1884, Homer Barron appears in 1884 or 1885, dies in 1885 or 1886, the delegation calls on Miss Emily about the smell in 1885/86. In 1901 or 1904 or 1905, Miss Emily gives up the lessons in china-painting. Colonel Sartoris dies in 1906 or 1907, the delegation calls on her about the taxes in 1916, and Miss Emily dies in 1926.

The plot, of course, is Gothic fiction: a decaying mansion, a mysteriously silent servant, a corpse, necrophilia. And one doesn’t want to discard the plot in a search for what it symbolizes, but it is also clear that the story is not only “about” Emily Grierson but also about the South’s pride in its past (including its Emily-like effort to hold on to what is dead) and the guilt as well as the grandeur of the past. Inevitably much classroom discussion centers on Miss Emily’s character, but a proper discussion of her character entails a discussion of the narrator.

(This next paragraph summarizes an essay on this topic by John Daremo, originally printed in early editions of S. Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature.*) The unnamed narrator is never precisely identified. Sometimes he seems to be an innocent eye, a recorder of a story whose implications escape him. Sometimes he seems to be coarse: he mentions “old lady Wyatt, the crazy woman,” he talks easily of “niggers,” and he confesses that because he and other townspeople felt that Miss Emily’s family “held themselves a little too high for what they really were,” the townspeople “were not pleased exactly, but vindicated” when at thirty she was still unmarried. But if his feelings are those of common humanity (e.g., racist and smug), he at least knows what these feelings are and thus helps us to know ourselves. We therefore pay him respectful attention, and we notice that on the whole he is compassionate (note especially his sympathetic understanding of Miss Emily’s insistence for three days that her father is not dead). True, Miss Emily earns our respect by her aloofness and her strength of purpose (e.g., when she publicly appears in the buggy with Homer Barron, and when she crows the druggist and the alderman), but if we speak of her aloofness and strength of purpose rather than her arrogance and madness, it is because the narrator’s imaginative sympathy guides us. And the narrator is
the key to the apparently curious title: presumably the telling of this tale is itself
the rose, the community’s tribute (for the narrator insistently speaks of himself
as “we”) to the intelligible humanity in a woman whose unhappy life might
seem monstrous to less sympathetic observers. Another meaning, however, may
be offered (very tentatively) for the title. In the story Faulkner emphasizes Miss
Emily’s attempts to hold on to the past: her insistence, for example, that her
father is not dead, and that she has no taxes to pay. Is it possible that Homer
Barron’s corpse serves as a sort of pressed or preserved will, a reminder of a past
experience of love? If so, the title refers to him.

For a feminist reading, see Judith Fetterley, in The Resisting Reader: A
Feminist Approach to American Fiction (1978), reprinted in Literary Theories
in Praxis, edited by Shirley F. Staton (1987). Fetterley sees the story as reveal-
ing the “sexual conflict” within patriarchy (whether of the South or the North,
the old order or the new). Emily’s confinement by her father represents the con-
finement of women by patriarchy, and the remission of her taxes reveals the
dependence of women on men. Emily has been turned into a “Miss,” a lady, by
a chivalric attitude that is “simply a subtler and more dishonest version of her
father’s horsewhip.” The narrator represents a subtle form of this patriarchy.
According to Fetterley, the narrator sees her as “‘dear, inescapable, impervious,
tranquil, and perverse’; indeed, anything and everything but human.”

Fetterley—the “resisting reader” of her title, that is, the reader who refuses
to accept that text—argues that the story exposes “the violence done to a
woman by making her a lady; it also explains the particular form of power the
victim gains from this position and can use on those who enact their violence. . . .
Like Ellison’s invisible man, nobody sees Emily. And because nobody sees her,
she can literally get away with murder.”

We have enjoyed and learned from the biographies of Faulkner by David
Minter (1980), Joseph Blotner (the one-volume abridgement, 1984, of his three-
volume work), Joel Williamson (1993), and Richard J. Gray (1994). We have
also roamed around in the meticulously detailed biography written by Frederick
R. Karl (1989), but we confess that, at 1,200 pages, it feels long to us. A good
recent book is Philip Weinstein, Becoming Faulkner: The Art and Life of
William Faulkner (2010). There are far too many critical studies to mention
here. But we will say that two older books still strike us as good introductions
for undergraduate readers: Michael Millgate, The Achievement of William
Faulkner (1966), and Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study, 3rd ed.,
rev. and expanded (1975).
We confess we are not entirely sure that inexperienced readers should be encouraged to engage in “Arguing an Evaluation.” Maybe they should just read, read, read—presumably with enthusiasm and understanding—and not worry whether Story A is better than Poem B. The writer of this page recalls now—admittedly with a bit of embarrassment—his early enthusiasm for some poems by Poe (“The Bells,” “The Raven,” “Annabel Lee”) encountered in a high school textbook, but he remains grateful to them for the pleasure they once offered, and he thinks that perhaps such things were exactly the right things for him at the time. He would not have been grateful if some thoughtful elder had told him that Emerson labeled Poe “The Jingle Man.”

None of the three stories that we give at the beginning of this chapter is going to take its place among the world’s great short stories. We say this with some confidence, partly because the stories are so short—after all, it takes more than a handful of words to sketch a memorable character or to construct a memorable plot. But, having said this, we recall that in 1958 Randall Jarrell in The Anchor Book of Short Stories claims that a story can be as short as one sentence, and he illustrates his claim—proves it conclusively, we would argue—with this line by Bion:

The boys throw stones at the frogs in sport, but the frogs die not in sport but in earnest.

And one must search far before one can find stories that are better than the parables in the New Testament, or the narrative of the Woman Taken in Adultery, each of which occupies only a few sentences.
Still, we have had to go back to ancient times to find such gems. Again our point is this: Ordinarily it takes more than a few sentences to generate a story that is memorable rather than gimmicky, merely clever, cute, whatever. Nevertheless, we think that each of the three items in this unit is engaging and highly accomplished in its own way. Exactly what way(s)? Well, for starters let us say that Whitmore’s “Bedtime Story” offers convincing dialogue—and then a surprise twist in the plot that puts the story into the category of the trickster tricked, a formula that is inherently satisfying, even though here it deals with death.

The second story, Haskins’s “Hide and Seek,” also deals with death, but this story we find almost too painful to talk about, largely because this sort of death (a child inadvertently locks himself or herself in an abandoned refrigerator) does occasionally occur, despite laws that the doors of abandoned refrigerators must be removed. What disturbs us is that the story offers no release from the painful narrative. Perhaps one might argue that Bion’s story also offers no relief, though we might reply along this line: “Well, yes and no. One trusts that when Bion’s boys grow up, they—or at least most of them—will behave less cruelly.” We do not agree with the student who said about Haskins’s, “Frankly, I don’t think a story like this should be published,” but we do see her point—and we are impressed by the fact that the story has—well, has impressed her.

The third story, Plants’s “Equal Rites,” strikes us as a skillfully-told comic bit, beginning with the pun in the title (rites/rights). Readers understand and perhaps admire the conscientiousness of the priest (“wondered if she was doing the right thing”) even while they are amused by the irony of the fact that this priest can have these scruples.

Here is a slightly different way—a sort of overview—of looking at the three stories. The first two, like almost all of the other stories in the anthology in which they originally appeared, depend very heavily on a surprise ending—a last line that puts into a new light everything that precedes it. The third story also has a final line of this sort—not until the last sentence do readers learn that “the priest” is a woman—but we nevertheless think this story is rather different from the other two. Most obviously, the third story deals with contemporary issues—“issues” that really are issues, topics that are (at least for many people) hotly debated. It offers a lighthearted response to debates on same-sex marriage and women in the priesthood.

This third story, in short, seems to us to be of a different sort from the other two. For one thing, although the titles of all three stories are important—the student who commented on the first story, “Bedtime Story,” saw its significance—the title of the third story, with its pun on rites/rights, conveys the somewhat genial nature of the entire story. All three stories depend on irony, but only the third is somewhat comic. It offers, we might say (if we may use highly serious terms in speaking of such small works), a sort of Socratic irony as opposed to the Sophoclean or tragic irony of the other two.

In our view, all three stories are admirably crafted, and all three do give us a sense of particular characters in particular situations, but by the end of the
first two stories the plot—what happens—overshadows characterization, whereas in the third characterization overshadows the plot.

SARAH N. CLEGHORN

The Golf Links (p. 282)

Cleghorn’s poem uses no figures of speech. It is entirely literal. Offhand, it is the only poem we can think of in our book—though almost surely there must be a few others—that uses no similes, no metaphors, no apostrophes, no personifications. The only other poems in the book that we can think of, of which one might say the same, are Frost’s “The Pasture” and “The Span of Life,” but “The Pasture” is so clearly an invitation to visit the world of Frost’s poetry—not just the world of the literal pasture—and “The Span of Life” is so clearly not just a comment about a dog that almost all readers know, consciously or not, that the poems are metaphoric as a whole.

What there is in Cleghorn’s poem is plenty of irony: men are playing and children are laboring. There is a further irony, because the reader detects, or assumes, that although the speaker’s tone is matter-of-fact, he or she must be horrified and enraged.

Cleghorn was writing in an age when ten-year-old children worked ten- or even fifteen-hour days, six days a week, in mills, glass factories, canneries, and coal mines—and of course also in agricultural tasks, where they might work seven days a week.

We include “The Golf Links” in a chapter on “evaluation,” and it will be interesting to hear what students have to say about the poem’s merits. Our own feeling is that it is pretty good: for us, much of the merit is in the sharp juxtaposition of “laboring children” and “men at play,” and, second, the matter-of-fact tone that, given the context, must convey outrage.

In the text we ask if the poem is dated, given the fact that child labor is now outlawed in the United States. In our view, the poem is not dated, partly because child labor still exists elsewhere, and partly because the poem remains a reminder that in this very country—indeed, in the lifetime of today’s nonagenarians—this horror existed. It is the job of writers to tell us, in memorable words, things that must be known. We are reminded of a famous passage in Lady Murasaki’s The Tale of Genji, in which Genji sets forth his idea of why writers write:

Again and again something in the writer’s own life or in that around him will seem so important that he cannot bear to let it pass into oblivion. There must never come a time, he feels, when people do not know about it.

In our view, Cleghorn’s four lines give us a tiny glimpse of an aspect of American history that we would like not to know about, but that we must always remember.

There are plenty of comments about the horrors of war—for instance, Tacitus’s “They make a desert and call it peace,” and Sherman’s “War is Hell”—but even Tacitus and Sherman probably believed that war is necessary and can be heroic. It’s our guess that they would even have agreed with Horace: “Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori.”

Owen is asserting that modern war is so dehumanizing that Horace’s line—if it were ever true—is now certainly false. We say “dehumanizing” because even from the start Owen gives us images of ruined creatures: “Bent double,” “old beggars,” “hags.” There is nothing here of Tennyson’s Light Brigade charging manfully into the Valley of Death.

Death comes to a battered, knock-kneed, limping soldier who is seen as “flound’ring” rather than falling in some heroic pose. The speaker relives the sight of witnessing (through the eyepiece of his gas mask) his companion destroyed by what seemed to be a sea of poison gas, but equally horrible is the memory of the appearance of the dead body when it was carted away.

It’s probably true to say that as long as war was (for the most part) something executed by professionals in remote places, politicians and poets and even the mass of citizens comfortable at home could find it easy to praise war. Speaking of war as it was in the eighteenth century, the Swiss philosopher Emerich de Vattell (1714–1767) said, “The troops alone carry on war, while the rest of the nation is at peace.” But modern war—it is sometimes said that the Civil War was the first modern war—is quite another thing. First, an army can get its supplies from remote sources, which means from the civilians back home, who therefore become fair game for the enemy. Second, newspaper photography and television have brought the horrors of the battlefield into the home—and this, in effect, is what Owen does in the poem.

What of the structure of the poem? The first stanza (eight lines) consists of two quatrains (ababcdcd). Line 4 ends with a period, so why did Owen not begin a new stanza with line 5? Apparently he thought of the first two quatrains as an octave—possibly he even began by thinking he would write a sonnet. The next stanza is a sestet, rhyming efefgh. The fifth and sixth lines of this sestet will rhyme with the next two lines, so from the point of view of the rhyme scheme Owen has again written two quatrains, but he interrupted the second of these two, separating it from its last two lines by putting a space between lines 14 and 15. Surely this arrangement of lines has a meaning, and probably has an effect. Although the speaker uses “we” in line 2 and “our” in line 4, and thus identifies himself with the scene, until the last line of the sestet (i.e., until the second half of line 14) the impression is chiefly of a description of something out there, rather than a revelation of the self. But if for thirteen and a half lines the speaker seems chiefly to be an observer, the second half of the fourteenth line emphatically introduces the speaker’s response: “I saw him drowning.” In the next
stanza, which consists of only two lines (15–16), considerable emphasis is given to the dead man, but an even greater emphasis is given to the speaker’s response to the sight:

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

The final stanza (twelve lines—three quatrains, the third of which grimly rhymes “glory” with “mori”) begins by drawing the reader (“you”) into the nightmare world of the narrator and the dead soldier. The speaker insistently holds onto this “you,” addressing him (or her?) not only in line 17, but also in 21 and ironically (as “My friend”) in line 25. The poem ends with a noble Latin sentiment, but this ending is scarcely designed to provide a quiet or upbeat ending; rather, it is designed to keep the squirming reader squirming.

Wilfred Owen

Anthem for Doomed Youth (p. 284)

Here are our responses to the questions we put in the text:

1. An anthem is (a) a hymn of praise or loyalty or (b) a sacred composition set to words of the Bible. In Owen’s poem, “orisons,” “prayers,” “save,” “choirs,” “flowers,” “holy glimmers,” and even “die” and “pall” might be found in an anthem, but among the unexpected words and phrases are “die as cattle,” “stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle,” “mockeries,” “demented,” and perhaps “blinds.” (One might, or might not, want to talk about the onomatopoeia in “stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle.”)

2. We’d characterize the tone thus: The first line asks a pained question, but in “monstrous anger” (2) we begin to hear indignation, and in line 3 ("stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle") bitterness. In this poem the word "mockeries" is not unexpected; the speaker is not, of course, mocking the dead, but his pain and indignation seem to find an outlet in mockery. For instance, in calling his poem an “anthem” he mocks traditional praises of the glory of dying in war. (Owen’s "Dulce et Decorum Est" pretty decisively sums up Owen’s view not only of the First World War but of all wars. A different poet, however, might have mocked not war in general but only a specific war. That is, a satiric poet might have used the word “anthem” ironically, mocking a specific war precisely because it is ignoble in comparison with those wars for which anthems might fittingly be composed.) He finds some comfort, however, in the “holy glimmers of good-byes” which shine in the soldiers’ eyes, in the “pallor of girls’ brows,” which are the pall, and in the “tenderness of patient minds,” which serves as “flowers” (a floral tribute more worthy than
wreaths accompanied by conventional funeral oratory). What sad comfort there is, then, is provided by those who die and their loved ones, not by church and state. By the last line the indignation has quieted, though the sadness remains.

It is interesting to compare the final version with the first draft of the poem, printed in Owen’s *Collected Poems* (1964) and in John Stallworthy’s *Wilfred Owen*. The first version, untitled and chiefly unrhymed, goes thus:

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;  
Nor 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 [?] light them.  
Women’s wide-spreaded arms shall be their wreathes,  
Their flowers, the tenderness of all men’s minds,  
And every dusk, a drawing-down of blinds.

Owen showed the draft to Siegfried Sassoon, who suggested some changes and who also suggested a title, “Anthem for Dead Youth.” Owen accepted the changes and the title and wrote at least three more versions, facsimiles of which can be found in Stallworthy. When Owen showed the final version to Sassoon, Sassoon suggested changing the title to “Anthem for Doomed Youth.”


**Henry Reed**

*Naming of Parts* (p. 285)

Most students will immediately hear—if the poem is read aloud in class—two voices. One voice is that of a riflery instructor, who maddeningly uses—four times in the first four lines—what has been called the “Kindergarten
We”; and he uses it again in lines 6, 12, 20, 21, and 30. Recruits were required to know the names and supposedly to be able to assemble the parts of a rifle in darkness. But from the middle of the fourth line of each stanza to the end of the stanza there is a countervoice, or, rather, we hear the thoughts of the recruit, whose mind turns from the numbing lecture to thoughts of “the neighboring gardens” (5) and of spring, a world of which the drill instructor apparently is unaware. The first and most obvious irony, then, is the contrast between the earnest, oblivious instructor and the recruit who is thinking of other things.

Some of the instructor’s phrases (e.g., in 9–10, where he speaks about swivels, “Which in your case you have not got”) are echoed but given a different context by the student (“in our case we have not got,” in 12, the silence of the trees in spring).

The poem is delightfully comic, not least because of the boring talk of the instructor, because of the contrast between his talk and the recruit’s thoughts, with puns on “easing the spring” (22, 24, and 25) and “point of balance” (27–28), and with mildly dirty allusions, but we don’t think we are being hyper-subtle when we say that these sexual puns arise from a not-at-all-comic desperation in the recruit’s mind. Forced to listen to the droning instructor, who is talking about how to kill, the recruit mentally escapes to the abundant life going on around him. There is an assault in nature, too (“The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers,” 23), but that assault (in contrast to the instructor’s lesson) is life-producing.

Or put it this way: spring is associated with love (cf. Tennyson’s “In the spring a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love”). Immediately following the pun on “spring” we get a vision of the bees assaulting the flowers, in a kind of rape, and indeed it is easy to see sexual suggestions in other passages, such as “released / With an easy flick of the thumb,” “open the breech,” “We can slide it / Rapidly backwards and forwards,” “fumbling,” “cocking-piece,” and even in the word “parts” (in olden days, when this poem was written, and sex was rarely discussed publicly, genitals were spoken of as “private parts,” even by sergeants).

**KATHERINE MANSFIELD**

*Miss Brill* (p. 286)

Few students have any trouble perceiving that Miss Brill is a friendless older woman living in France, seeking out a living by such genteel activities as teaching English and reading the newspaper to an “old invalid gentleman” (who sleeps while she reads). She is “Miss Brill” to us because that is what she is, presumably, to her pupils, to the invalid gentleman, and to anyone else who has any dealings with her. In short, she has no intimate acquaintances.
Probably by the end of the first paragraph most readers have a pretty good idea of her emotionally starved life—though to put it this way is perhaps misleading, since Miss Brill herself seems quite content, delighting in the weather and in her shabby fox, as later she will delight in much of what she sees in the park. In the first paragraph most readers probably identify her with the fox—an identification that is insisted on in the final paragraph, when Miss Brill has returned to “the little dark room—her room like a cupboard”—and the fox is returned to its box.

Between the beginning and the end, of course, the unfeeling (or at least careless) boy and girl sitting on the bench jolt Miss Brill out of her comfortable role as delighted spectator at a play, and (in her view of things) as a performer, too. The third question following the story, asking if Miss Brill is “justly punished for her pride,” is the result of several uncomfortable experiences teaching the story. The first time that a student offered this view, we were surprised. It seems evident to us that during most of the story Miss Brill is a sympathetic figure, pitiful, yes, but admirable too, chiefly because she is not given to self-pity. She is a bit snobbish about the other regulars who attend the concert (“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!”), but she does no harm to anyone, and she is a person of good will.

Her pride in setting the scene around her is, if anything, pathetic rather than morally offensive. After her rude awakening, we pity her even more. However, students in several classes have argued that Miss Brill seeks to play God, to assign roles, to judge others (as when she says, “The Brute! The Brute!”), and at last she herself is judged by the boy and girl. A slightly less harsh version, also offered in class, goes like this: Miss Brill thinks she plays a significant part in the activities in the park, as a listener, as an appreciator of what is going on, and even as a performer. Stimulated by such thoughts, she seeks to arrange all that goes on, but when the “hero and heroine” (that’s the way she sees them) arrive, and Miss Brill is “prepared to listen,” reality breaks in, forcing Miss Brill to recognize what she is.

Again, it seems to us to be inappropriate to judge Miss Brill severely, but those students who do judge her severely have not been impressed by arguments to the contrary.

Students are not the only severe judges. In College English 23 (1962): 661–663 a university teacher judges her mercilessly. He begins by discussing the action:

What happens in the story is that with each main event Miss Brill’s mind moves higher and higher up the hierarchy of unrealities, until she has reached a point from which she can only fall with a thump back to the hard ground of the real world of her humdrum life. (p. 661)

According to this writer, the first “unreality” is her view of the fox as a “rogue.” We realize, he says, “that here is a character who is not averse to wandering in the realms of fancy.” He then goes on to assert that “her imaginative coloring
of what she sees next is a little more preposterous,” for she sees the musicians as (he says) “not a group of hired musicians, but rather a single, responsive and very sensitive creature.” This does not seem to us a preposterous way to regard a band of musicians, but the author—very stern with Miss Brill—goes on to assert that she is “ignorant of music.” The evidence: she doesn’t know whether the “flutey bit” will be repeated, and “the bit to her is ‘a little chain of bright drops,’ not music.” (Teachers who believe that metaphor is not a bad thing, and is indeed a way of conveying fresh perceptions, may be surprised at this condemnation of metaphor.)

The critic continues:

The episode of the “ermine toque and the gentleman in grey,” as it is interpreted by Miss Brill, is considerably more preposterous than her coloring of her fur and the orchestra. The woman in the ermine hat is obviously a prostitute who is propositioning the gentleman; but to the heroine she is merely a nice lady whose attempt to be friendly is rebuffed by a not-nice man. (p. 661)

There is a great deal more of this sort of thing. Instructors who take up the story in detail in class may want to invite students to express their opinions about the identity of the “ermine toque.” (Is she not more plausibly taken as a woman who formerly had a relationship with the gentleman?) More important, of course, is our attitude toward Miss Brill, and our sense of the author’s attitude. Although we should always trust the tale, not the teller, following D. H. Lawrence’s admirable advice, perhaps it is not utterly illegitimate to keep in mind some words Mansfield wrote in a letter to her husband. She had sent him this story, and in a letter he told her that he shared her enthusiasm for it. In response to his letter she wrote (quoted in Marvin Magalaner, The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield [1971], p. 17),

One writes (one reason why is) because one does care so passionately that one must show it—one must declare one’s love.

Finally, a word about the protagonist’s name. We have already mentioned that she is “Miss” because that presumably is the way all of her acquaintances know her, but why “Brill”? James W. Gargano pointed out (Explicator 19:2 [November 1960], Item 10) that the brill is a European flatfish, edible though not especially esteemed for its taste. The name certainly does not convey dignity, but whether it conveys ridicule or absurdity is another matter. (The American equivalent would be something like Miss Perch.) In fact, “Brill” is not an exceptionally uncommon name, as a glance at a large telephone directory will reveal. (There are a few dozen in the Boston area.) In any case, students might be invited to discuss the name. Does it fit the person? (Perhaps the important thing is that the name of a character not mislead the reader by inappropriate connotations, unless these are used for purposes of irony.)
You may want to discuss this short story partly in connection with some Aesop fables. (Most students can come up with one or two.) These fables, like a parable, obviously make no pretense at being history. They are clearly didactic; they seek to shape the behavior of auditors by setting forth some sort of truth. Invite students to consider an anecdote, such as George Washington and the cherry tree. In class we make the point that although one can easily moralize most anecdotes, the emphasis nevertheless is not on a truth to be contemplated but rather on an engaging story (how X led surprisingly but on reflection decisively and satisfyingly to Y). If the impulse behind the parable or fable is chiefly didactic (to improve people by telling them something true about the world), the impulse behind the anecdote is chiefly aesthetic (to entertain people by telling them a shapely story).

And if one can contrast parables (and fables) with anecdotes—that is, contrast moral tales with entertaining happenings—one can also contrast stories of resolution (e.g., anecdotes of the sort associated with Maugham and his teacher Maupassant) with stories of revelation (Chekhov, Joyce). At this point we confess that we uneasily recall Robert Benchley’s wry observation that the world can be divided into two groups: those who divide the world into two groups, and those who do not. And so we will retract a bit, and now will say that Maugham’s story is a fable in that it seeks to tell us something true about the world, and it is an anecdote in that it seeks to entertain, for instance, by its exotic setting and also by the symmetry asserted in the plot—the servant, fleeing Baghdad, unwittingly fulfills his allotted destiny. Samarra (now called Kuibyshev or Kuybyshev, in Russia, on the Volga) and Baghdad—especially Baghdad, city of the Arabian Nights—immediately take us out of the realm of our experience and into an exotic world, an aesthetic world, we might say. But the events in this exotic world, in which a servant sees Death in the marketplace and in which the servant’s master can engage in a conversation with Death, are easily interpreted with reference to our own world. The underlying idea, evidently, is not only that we cannot avoid death but also that the place and date of our death is determined.

This idea that destiny prevails has had a powerful hold on humanity. One thinks of karma, of the proverb che sarà sarà, of “Man proposes, God disposes,” of Laius’s unsuccessful attempt to avoid death at the hand of his son Oedipus, of the gravedigger in Hamlet who began to dig graves on the very day that Hamlet was born, of Hamlet’s reflection that “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow,” of “We also, as soon as we were born, ceased to be” (Wisdom of Solomon), of George Herbert’s “Death is still working like a mole, / And digs my grave at each remove,” of the youthful Alan Seeger’s poem, “I have a rendezvous with Death” (and indeed soon after writing the poem Seeger did die, in the Battle of the Somme), of the common idea that “When my time
comes, it will come” (with the soldiers’ variant, “The bullet will have my name on it”), of Mary Stuart’s “In my end is my beginning” (quoted by Eliot in “East Coker,” which uses not only Mary’s line but also an inversion, “In my beginning is my end”)—the idea is everywhere.

Why is Maugham’s story so powerful? Partly because the idea is all but universal. The gist of “The Appointment in Samarra” conforms to our sense of reality, our sense that in the final analysis we do not have control of our lives—witness the fact that we all die, whether we will or not. If the story confirms our intuition, it also confirms a famous remark of Hemingway’s, in *Death in the Afternoon*: “Madam, all stories, if continued far enough, end in death, and he is not a true-story teller who would keep that from you.”

But of course Maugham’s story is especially potent because it is so short. In *The Tales of a Wayside Inn* (through the mouth of the Spanish Jew), Longfellow tells substantially the same story, at somewhat greater length and to much less effect. (We had thought of including Longfellow’s version but, short though it is—thirty-six lines—it is no match for Maugham’s; Maugham wins, hands down.)

The story is, so to speak, all plot. One can, of course, talk a bit about character—the servant quite naturally trembles at the sight of Death, the master is sufficiently kind-hearted to let the servant take a horse and ride off for some two thousand miles, the servant “dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went,” the merchant somewhat huffily speaks to Death, and Death (perhaps this is the biggest surprise) courteously offers an explanation. But it would be perverse to say that characterization is important in this story; the interest is in the plot, in the ironic turn of events. Maugham briefly discusses his sort of fiction in an engaging book, *The Summing Up* (1938; Mentor, 1946), where he unattractively condescends to Chekhov (“Chekhov was a very good short story writer, but . . . he had no gift for devising a compact, dramatic story, such a story as you could tell with effect over the dinner-table,” p. 130) and then he comments on his own kind of writing:

As a writer of fiction I go back, through innumerable generations, to the teller of tales round the fire in the cavern that sheltered neolithic men. . . . It has been my misfortune that for some time now a story has been despised by the intelligent. I have read a good many books on the art of fiction and all ascribe very small value to the plot. . . . From these books you would judge that it is only a hindrance to the intelligent author and a concession that he makes to the stupid demands of the public. Indeed, sometimes you might think that the best novelist is the essayist, and that the only perfect short stories have been written by Charles Lamb and Hazlitt. . . .

. . . There are a number of clever writers who, with all sorts of good things in their heads to say and a gift for creating living people, do not know what on earth to do with them when they have created them. They cannot invent a plausible story. Like all writers (and in all writers there is a
certain amount of humbug) they make a merit of their limitations and either tell the reader that he can imagine for himself what happens or else berate him for wanting to know. They claim that in life stories are not finished, situations are not rounded off and loose ends are left hanging. This is not always true, for at least death finishes all our stories; but even if it were true it would not be a good argument. (p. 137)

A final ironic story, said to be true: When Lord Palmerston (1784–1865), twice elected Prime Minister, was told by his doctor that he was fatally ill, he scoffingly replied, “Die, my dear doctor! That’s the last thing I shall do!” Of course, dying is indeed the last thing that each of us does, but these were Palmerston’s last words.

AMBROSE BIERCE

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge (p. 290)

Some students will have read this story in high school. One can ask them if it retains its interest on a second reading even when they know the ending. Experience has shown that students like it as much (or more) on rereading. Their reasons for liking it can provide a valuable introduction to the topic of what makes a work of art enduring. Our own feeling, as will become apparent below, is that the story is chiefly a clever trick, but we either keep this opinion to ourselves, or raise it but don’t press it. We’ve never found it worthwhile to suggest strongly that students ought not to enjoy any work of literature. To let students express their enjoyment, and then to suggest that their tastes are low, is to seriously inhibit any further expression of opinion.

The opening paragraphs seem highly objective, reportorial (“A man stood upon a railroad bridge,” and so on), but in fact they contain another voice, a voice marked by mild cynicism or irony. We hear it, for example, near the end of the first paragraph (“It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the center of the bridge”), and again in the last two sentences of the second paragraph, in the somewhat portentous remarks about death, and yet again in such an expression as “The man who was engaged in being hanged” (opening of paragraph 3). (One can reasonably speak of being engaged in hanging someone, but to speak of being engaged in being hanged is to imply, wryly, that the victim is an active participant.

The seeming objectivity yields (in the latter part of paragraph 4) to an inner view of the victim, but even here, where “the arrangement commended itself to his judgment as simple and effective,” sometimes the tone and the perception are so cool as to seem ironic. The remainder of the first part, except for the last sentence, gets more openly into the victim’s mind, and we hear of his desperate hopes, but still it is fair to say that most of the section (until we get to Farquhar’s thoughts) is narrated from the point of view of a detached observer.
Notice, too, how literal the language is. True, we get a few metaphors (in paragraph 2 the soldiers stare “stonily”; they “might have been statues”), but these figures are scarcely imaginative. Similarly, the figurative language in Farquhar’s own thoughts in this part of the story (for instance, the ringing sound that is “as slow as the tolling of a death bell”) is, again, chiefly a matter of clichés. It is only in the third part, describing Farquhar’s hallucination, that we get fresh perceptions, such as the description of “the strokes of the water-spiders’ legs, like oars which had lifted their boat.”

Part Two, a flashback giving the antecedent action, is again chiefly objective, though its last, flat sentence (“He was a Federal scout”) sends a chill through the reader. The rest of the story (except, of course, the final paragraph, which again is objective and chilling), is in a different vein, for it seems to record in detail, from Farquhar’s point of view, Farquhar’s sensations and experiences. Some of this is in the Gothic vein of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” (notice, for instance, that Farquhar thinks that he hears a blacksmith’s hammer when he in fact hears the ticking of his own watch), but chiefly we get his desperate struggle to live, and (in the next-to-last paragraph) to rejoin his wife. By the way, many hints appear, at least when one rereads the story, suggesting that all is not what it seems to be. Even as early as the first part we get the passage about the ticking watch. Examples from Part Three include the following: “He looked at the forest on the bank of the stream, saw the individual trees, the leaves, and the veining of each leaf—saw the very insects upon them”; “A strange, roseate light shone through the spaces”; “He had not known he had lived in so wild a region”; “Whispers in an unknown tongue.” In contrast to Part One, the emphasis in this part is on the freshness of the sensations. On rereading, too, we notice that the story is rich in deception. Thus, the Confederate soldier who approaches Farquhar and his wife is not what he seems to be; he is a Federal scout. Like Farquhar, the reader is tricked.

The second part of this story, the summary of how Farquhar, prompted by the scout, came to try to destroy the bridge, most obviously gives us the picture of an individual seeking to fulfill his duty to society, an action that brings about his death. We are told that “Circumstances . . . had prevented him from taking service with the gallant army,” but circumstances now seem to provide him with an opportunity to perform a heroic action, and he does not hesitate. In the event, he accomplishes nothing (though presumably he does not regret his effort), and despite a tenacious will to live, he loses his life. We are told that Peyton “assented to at least a part of the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war.” How seriously are we to take the author’s judgement of the dictum? If we take it seriously, we may end up saying that Farquhar is justly punished for acting villainously, but surely Bierce’s interest here is less in justice than in the cruelty of war and the psychology of the dying man.

Woodruff, in his book entitled *The Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce* (1974), finds Farquhar “an attractive figure: brave, sensitive, highly intelligent” (p. 156). Assertions of this sort are easily made. The real question is, what evidence supports them? When evidence is adduced, the classroom discussions (and essays) are interesting.

It may be useful to compare this story with Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour”; both deal with prisoners (speaking metaphorically of Mrs. Mallard) who for a moment feel released from their bonds but who both die before they can live their newly imagined lives. Bierce’s story is certainly as clearly contrived as Chopin’s, but one can question whether it adds up to more than a good read (though that’s not a bad achievement in itself). One can admire the artistry, or, better, the artifice, but one can doubt the psychological plausibility (especially when compared also with Porter’s “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall,” which also deals with the thoughts of a dying person), and perhaps one may argue that even if a hanged person can experience such thoughts in an instant (we can never know), the story remains remote from life; to put it another way, it does not convince us, on reflection, that despite its ingenuity and elaborate detail, it is genuinely insightful.

Note: Robert Enrico’s effective film of this story (which won an Academy Award in 1963) was remarkably successful in finding cinematic ways of indicating states of mind. When Farquhar sees his wife, for instance, she moves toward him in slow motion, thus stimulating a viewer to question the reality of the episode.

**ISABEL ALLENDE**

*If You Touched My Heart* (p. 296)

“If You Touched My Heart” can generate lively class discussion. Students are unlikely to have read this strange story before, and it resists obvious interpretations. This is not a tale about “love conquering all”—Amadeo Peralta is in prison as the story ends, barely able to remember why he’s there; and while Hortensia brings him food, she doesn’t seem to do so out of undying love for him. (She’s apologetic about serving him—and the music she plays outside his cell seems part of his punishment for what he’s done to her and to others.) The story is also not—or not exactly—a story about a bad man who victimizes an innocent young woman: Hortensia seeks out Amadeo after their first sexual encounter; she does not attempt to leave when he puts her in the cellar; and she seems to derive pleasure from their relationship, at least for a while. How to make sense of all this? Our students have interpreted “If You Touched My Heart” in a range of ways, reading it as a political allegory (Peralta is seen as a kind of dictator, and the townspeople as passive participants in an oppressive regime); as a story about “battered wife syndrome”; as an examination of the way in which a silenced voice (Hortensia hardly speaks) can emerge through art (the psaltery music); as a cautionary tale about the destructive effects of ordi-
nary, romantic love. (In paragraph 12, the narrator says: “They should have made love to each other until they died of desire; they should have devoured one another or flamed like mirrored torches, but that was not to be. What happened instead was more predictable and ordinary, much less grandiose.”)


HELENA MARIA VIRAMONTES

*The Moths* (p. 302)

Like most other stories with fantastic elements, “The Moths” has a good deal of highly realistic detail. Thus, for instance, the narrator is very specific when she tells us that she planted flowers, grasses, and vines in “red Hills Brothers coffee cans.” Presumably humble details such as this help to establish the credibility of the narrator and thus serve to make the fantastic elements convincing.

Another way of making the fantastic acceptable is to cast doubt on it explicitly, i.e., to say what the reader presumably thinks, and then to confirm the fantastic; thus the girl tells us that she was skeptical of the powers of Abuelita’s potato slices, but they nevertheless seem to have cured her of scarlet fever: “You’re still alive, aren’t you?” Further, Viramontes begins with a relatively acceptable bit of fantasy, since most readers probably entertain the idea that folk medicines may (sometimes) work. Thus the improbable yet possible business about the potato slices helps to prepare us for the next (and much greater) improbability, Abuelita’s shaping of the girl’s hands by means of a balm of dried moth wings and Vicks. And this in turn helps to prepare us for the moths at the end of the story.

On the other hand, a skeptic can argue that the girl is an unreliable narrator: the death of her grandmother is so traumatic that the narrator imagines seeing the moths that her grandmother had told her “lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up.” It’s hard to argue against this view, though it seems excessively literal or materialistic in a story that is pretty clearly fantastic and symbolic.

Putting aside the moths, what are some of the other symbols? Perhaps the most obvious are the roots that “would burst out of the rusted coffee cans and search for a place to connect.” During a discussion in class, students can relate these searching roots to the girl, who is not “pretty or nice” like her older sisters, and who finds little sympathy at home, where (doubtless partly because she is not “respectful”) she is teased by her sisters and threatened by her father. She is also separated from the church, which she describes as cold and furnished with “frozen statues with blank eyes.” However, she is connected to her grandmother, Abuelita, whose house provides a refuge from the “quarrels and beatings” of her own house. In short, the narrator is isolated from her immediate
family, except for her grandmother, and from the religion of her family, with
which her harsh father is allied.

A second fairly obvious symbol is the sun, which in one paragraph is related
to death and rebirth:

. . . [T]here comes an illumination when the sun and earth meet, a final
burst of burning red orange fury reminding us that although endings are
inevitable, they are necessary for rebirths, and when that time came, just
when I switched on the light in the kitchen to open Abuelita’s can of soup,
it was probably then that she died.

The passage is fairly dense and complex; it’s worth asking a student to read it
aloud in class before discussing it.

Death and birth also meet in the bath, which is both a ritual cleansing of
the dead grandmother and a baptism or rebirth of the girl. (Notice that the
girl does not deposit the grandmother in the tub; rather, she enters the tub
holding the grandmother.) In the tub, the girl is mother to the old lady
(“There, there, Abuelita, I said, cradling her”); even as she sobs like a child
she becomes a woman.

Finally, there are the moths. There is possibly some connection here with
the butterfly, which in antiquity was a symbol of the soul leaving the body at
death, and in early Christian art was a symbol of the resurrected soul. However,
in the last paragraph we are explicitly informed that Abuelita had told the nar-
rator “about the moths that lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up.”
The appearance of the moths at the end thus suggests that Abuelita is at last free
(in death) from the pressures that consume the spirit of a human being (specif-
ically from the types of oppression that we have seen operate on the narrator,
an unconventional female in a highly traditional society that severely limits the
role of women). The loss of Abuelita reduces the narrator to tears and to
infancy (“I wanted to return to the waters of the womb with her”), but it also
serves to make clear that she is now, more than ever before, alone. We are not
told that the experience liberates her, but perhaps we can assume that this rebel-
lious girl, who knew how to use a brick in a sock, knows that her life will not
be easy.
This might be a good opportunity to say a few words about the problem of plagiarism—which, unfortunately, all of us are finding to be more widespread than it was a decade or two ago.

It is not an easy issue to bring up in the classroom. In fact, we have to confess that for a long time we said little or nothing about it. That was not right, but it resulted from our feeling that an instructor should take for granted a basic element of trust between himself or herself and the students. To put the point another way: it always seemed awkward and disconcerting to us to suggest to students, just as the course was getting underway, that we suspected that some or all of them might be prone to cheating.

To be sure, from time to time we did have to deal with instances of plagiarism, and when this happened, we wondered (and worried), “Would this student have plagiarized if I had talked about plagiarism during class-time?” But plagiarism, as far as we could tell, was infrequent, so we typed a few sentences about it on the syllabus and left matters at that.

In recent years, however, we and our colleagues have encountered more cases of plagiarized papers than in the past—far more. And we have heard or read about similar reports from faculty at other institutions.

The reason for this is obvious: the Internet. There is an almost infinite number of “open” WWW sites where students can find sources, essays, and related materials. And there seems to be an almost infinite number, too, of “closed” sites where students can locate papers for sale. The papers offered on such closed sites cannot be accessed by Google and other search engines—though software programs are now being developed that do allow for searching for keywords and phrases in these sites, and that will be a help if we are suspicious about a paper submitted in a course.

We might mention a story told to us by a colleague who recently read a first-year student’s paper on a topic in Hamlet—a paper that did not really “sound like” this student, or any first-year student. He did some keyword searching, and he was astounded to discover that dozens of papers on this very topic are available for purchase on various Internet sites. It would have taken him many long hours just to search the summaries and abstracts—and beyond that, he would have needed to buy copies of the essays, since the site was a closed one—in order to check in detail for correspondences between them and the work the student handed in.
What we now say to the students is something like this:

- As all of you know, the Internet era has brought along with it an increase, a dramatic increase, in plagiarism. Plagiarism sometimes can be accidental or inadvertent, and we will be talking about these serious kinds of errors and mistakes during our weeks on the writing of research papers. I urge you to read, very carefully, pages 314–315 in the textbook, where the editors pretty clearly indicate what constitutes plagiarism and what constitutes “fair use.” If you have the faintest doubt about this issue, please bring it up in class. Nearly always, a person who plagiarizes knows what he or she is doing—pretending that someone else’s work is his or her own work. That’s dishonest. It’s cheating. It’s a kind of stealing, and it violates a moral and ethical code that all of us should respect.

But we say something more:

- I wish I could somehow make students who copy someone else’s work realize why it is a waste for them to do that. They learn nothing—all they have done is copy someone else’s learning. The purpose of being in school is to think for yourself, to have a mind of your own. So it makes no sense to pass off as your own someone else’s thinking: you learn nothing that way. Yes, you may have fooled me, but, far more important, you have fooled yourself. What matters to me in this course is your work, your writing, your thinking. This is what, I am sure, matters to you as well, and that is why I feel confident that we’ll not have any cases of plagiarism in this course. In our experience, these words come across forcefully to students. Not a perfect deterrent: some students may still be led astray and may hand in a plagiarized paper—and we may never know it. But in general we believe that this statement to the students is effective, and we recommend that you follow a similar strategy. If you support it with conferences with your students, where you get to know them well and they see that you care about them and their intellectual development, you will be able to limit and control, if not eliminate, Internet plagiarism.

An additional tip: spend a little extra time on the paper topics you prepare. With so much to do, we sometimes may jot down a topic that is too broad or too common—in other words, a topic for which essays and papers for sale can easily be found on the Internet. Instead, devise topics that will interest and challenge students and formulate them in ways that will oblige even the most wayward students to do their own work.

Not so good: “Examine the opening scene of *Hamlet*.”

Better: “Imagine that you are directing a production of *Hamlet* and need to make cuts in the text to keep it under three hours. Do you think you could afford to cut the opening scene? If you did, how would you instead choose to begin the production? On the other hand, if you feel that this opening scene cannot possibly be cut, please explain why, and find some other passage of equal length that you would cut, and explain why this passage is more appropriately omitted.”
PART II

Up Close
Thinking Critically about
Literary Works and Literary Forms
The picture is discussed at some length in the text but we can add a few points, chiefly about Sitting Bull’s flowing feather war bonnet—but before we get there, we will talk about General Custer and about scalping.

On July 7, 1876, George Armstrong Custer, as part of a campaign against the Sioux, attacked a Sioux and Cheyenne encampment at the Little Bighorn valley in Montana. (Sitting Bull was a Sioux leader, but he did not participate in this battle.) Custer, who divided his regiment into three parts, lead one part (some 200 men) himself, but he had disastrously underestimated his foe; all of the men in his party were killed, and many were scalped. Curiously, Custer himself apparently was not scalped, a fact (if it is a fact) that has caused much comment. One explanation is that his foes left him unscalped as a tribute to his courage. Another explanation is that the man known as Long Hair was by now balding, and his scalp would scarcely have been worth exhibiting.

Buffalo Bill was some hundreds of miles away from the Little Bighorn at the time of the battle, but he inserted himself into his representation of the battle in his immensely popular Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. L. G. Moses, in Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians (1996), reports that in this spectacle Custer, played by a cowboy who was six feet, five inches tall, was the last to succumb to the Show Indians (that’s what they were called):

After a pause so the audience could ruminate upon the tableau made deafening by the silence, Cody would gallop into the arena at the head of his cowboy command, react to the carnage he beheld upon the battlefield, and sweep his hat from his head in respect for the fallen soldiers. As the garden’s [i.e., Madison Square Garden, in New York] lights dimmed, a spotlight
trained on Cody. The words Too Late were projected on the cyclorama behind him. Buffalo Bill, scouting for the Fifth Cavalry on June 25, 1876, was actually hundreds of miles away from the valley of the Little Bighorn. In the arena, however, he shamelessly created the impression that, with better timing, he could have saved the day. (pp. 34–35)

Moses, following several sources, in a note (p. 290) points out that in this reenactment of Custer’s last stand, at least Bill had stopped presenting himself as the avenger of Custer. Three weeks after Custer’s last stand, there occurred a less memorable fight, the Battle of War Bonnet Creek. In this encounter Buffalo Bill claimed—apparently truthfully, since eyewitnesses corroborated him—to have scalped an Indian, announcing that the scalp was “The First Scalp for Custer.” (Whether the Indian was Yellow Hand, a Cheyenne leader, as Bill claimed, is less certain.) In his Wild West he later displayed the scalp as well as Yellow Hand’s war bonnet, shield, gun, belt, and scabbard. A painting by Robert Lindneux, First Scalp for Custer (1928), now in the Buffalo Bill Historical Center and reproduced in many books on the West, has given the episode visual currency. Bill’s reenactment of Custer’s defeat, then, does seem elegiac rather than vengeful.

Susette La Flesche, a native of the Omaha tribe, seems to have been the first person reported as asserting that scalping was a white man’s practice later adopted by Indians. (We derive this information, and the other information in this paragraph, from James L. Roark, et al., The American Promise: A History of the United States [1998], pp. 664–665.) In 1879 La Flesche said that the whites in the eighteenth century introduced scalping, paying a bounty for each scalp, and the Indians ultimately retaliated in kind. Vine Deloria in Custer Died for Your Sins (1969) repeats the charge. But the evidence does not seem to support La Flesche and Deloria. The earliest reference to scalping is Jacques Cartier’s report (1535) of finding “skins of five men’s heads, stretched on hoops, like parchment.” In subsequent decades there are many comparable reports—all by whites, of course, since the Indians did not have a system of writing. But there are also archaeological excavations that, we are told, clearly indicate that scalping was practiced in Pre-Columbian times. By the eighteenth century, however, it is certain that some whites were offering bounties for Indian scalps.

Buffalo Bill apparently did dress in fancy attire (a vaquero suit of black velvet with scarlet trim) at the Battle of War Bonnet Creek, and so he probably was telling the truth when he appeared in the Wild West and claimed to be wearing the very clothes he wore when he scalped the Indian. But did Indians wear elaborate eagle feather bonnets with long feather trailers into battle? Some early nineteenth-century paintings do indeed show embattled Indians wearing such headdresses, but the paintings may not be entirely accurate. This type of bonnet was used by the Plains Indians, but only by the highest-ranking men, and only on ceremonial occasions or sometimes in battle. Today, however, when we think of Indians we almost inevitably think of these feathered headdresses. It
seems that Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was largely responsible for the popular idea that most Indians wore bonnets; his show established in the popular mind the stock images of Indian life (war bonnets, tipis), and other tribes found that they had to adopt Plains customs if they were to be accepted as Indians by the general white public.

A final comment on Buffalo Bill. Despite his reputation as an Indian fighter, he seems to have been well ahead of most whites when it came to racial tolerance. All of the evidence indicates that he was much concerned that the Indians with his Wild West be treated fairly. Further, he employed African Americans, notably in his re-creation of Teddy Roosevelt’s attack on San Juan Hill, an episode that he used in 1898 in place of “Custer’s Last Fight.” (That’s what he called the Custer episode; it was restored to the Wild West program in 1905.) The advertising spoke of the daring of “white, red, and black soldiers,” which is more than Roosevelt himself did, since Roosevelt spoke slightingly of the black regiments. Of course Buffalo Bill talked about “civilizing” Indians, and he assumed that Indian cultures could not survive in a competitive world, and thus by our standards he was racist, but Social Darwinism was virtually universal at the time.

Bibliographic note: There is plenty of material (much of it with wonderful pictures) for students to read, if you want to assign a research paper on Buffalo Bill or Sitting Bull or both. In addition to L. G. Moses’s Wild West Shows (1996), mentioned above, good places to begin are Louis S. Warren, Buffalo Bill’s America: William Cody and the Wild West Show (2005); Harry Blackman Sell and Victor Weybright, Buffalo Bill and the Wild West (1955); Don Russell, The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill (1960); Don Russell, The Wild West; or, A History of the Wild West Shows (1970); Buffalo Bill and the Wild West (1981); a well-illustrated exhibition catalog with essays by various hands, including Vine Deloria Jr. and Leslie A. Fiedler; Richard Slotkin, The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America (1992); Joseph A. Manziona, “I Am Looking to the North for My Life”: Sitting Bull, 1876–1881 (1991); and Robert M. Utley, The Life and Times of Sitting Bull (1993). Also of great interest is a longish essay by Jane Tompkins, “At the Buffalo Bill Museum—June 1888,” South Atlantic Quarterly 89:3 (Summer 1990). Tompkins’s essay, in a fairly colloquial style, is highly readable but it is long and subtle, and therefore we decided against including it in the present chapter. Briefly, it presents Buffalo Bill in a highly sympathetic light.

For a vivid, detailed account of the momentous battle at Little Bighorn, we recommend Evan S. Connell, Son of the Morning Star (1984). Two other recent books are also stimulating: Robert Marshall Utley, Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier (1988), and Brian W. Dippie, Custer’s Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth (1994). Through her lectures and writings, Custer’s widow played an important role in building up the story of Custer as a grand military hero; her activities are described in Shirley A. Leckie, Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth (1993).
E. E. CUMMINGS

Buffalo Bill’s (p. 320)

Here are responses to the questions that we pose in the text.

1. *The speaker's attitude.* We take the speaker to be an adult remembering his youthful enthusiasm for Buffalo Bill. The language is of course adult (“defunct,” “stallion,” “blueeyed boy”) but the enthusiasm seems boyish, especially in line 6 where the words for the six clay pigeons are run together and the line ends with “justlikethat.” Perhaps “Mister Death” (line 11) is also a boyish term. We do not find satire either in the speaker’s voice or in the poet, a point we will discuss in a moment.

2. *Run-on words in line 6.* We assume that by running the words together Cummings indicates the continuous rhythm of the shooting, i.e., Buffalo Bill’s action is uninterrupted. We might almost say that the word applied to the horse, “watersmooth,” applies also to Buffalo Bill. Oddly, however, when Cummings reads the poem (a 1976 Caedmon release, *Collected Poetry 1920–40 and Prose*) he does not read “onetwothree-four-five” rapidly.

3. *The spacing.* Cummings was certainly interested in the appearance of the poem on the page, and he probably also thought that the appearance would offer guidance to a reader. We do not take seriously the arrowhead that one reader has pointed out—we think the poem is about Buffalo Bill’s accomplishments, not about a weapon used by Indians—but we do find some aspects of the lineation significant. Buffalo Bill, Jesus, and Mister Death each get an entire line, and each of these lines is in a prominent place—the first line, the line set at the farthest right, and the last line. As we see it, by putting “defunct” on a line by itself, Cummings emphasizes the death; the poem then expands, in stages, to the long sixth line (“and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat”); “Jesus” might have been put flush left, but instead it is put at the right, giving it lots of space before it, perhaps indicating a hushed moment that culminates in an ejaculation. (We talk more about “Jesus” in our response to the sixth question.)

4. *Mister Death.* Perhaps the expression suggests that the speaker is a child; in any case, in its context (“how do you like your blueeyed boy?”) we think it indicates that the speaker feels he can talk easily, almost cheekily, with Death. What answer might Death give? Since we do not think Cummings is satirizing Buffalo Bill, we imagine that Death would reply along these lines: “He is terrific, isn’t he? I wish I had more people like him.”

5. *Defunct (line 2).* This fancy word for “dead” has engendered much comment, always to the effect that it debunks Buffalo Bill. For instance, Louis Budd writes, in *Explicator* 11 (1953), item 55: “Bill has not undergone a tragic crisis, he has not passed through a spiritual ordeal; he simply has
ceased operating, liquidated like a bank or a poorly-placed filling station.”
Since we don’t find other evidence that Cummings is debunking Bill, we reject this reading of the word. Our own view, which we offer only tentatively, is that Cummings is using, by way of tribute, the somewhat pretentious language of the showman. That is, the opening words might be spoken by a ringmaster (incidentally, in the program for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, the ringmaster is called “the Orator”), who might have said something like this: “Ladies and gentlemen, it is my sad duty to announce to this distinguished assembly that Buffalo Bill, who has so often amazed and astounded us with his unparalleled equestrian feats, is defunct.” Although the word consists of only two syllables, it is a “big” word in the sense that it is unusual, and it is derived from a Latin word de, an intensive, and fungi, to discharge. Probably its most famous use in literature is Othello’s assertion that “the young affects”—the passions—are in him “defunct” (1.3.259), in a speech that includes such terms as “proper satisfaction” and “speculative and officed instrument.” Conceivably, too, Cummings has in mind not only deceased but also discharged, like a gun that has fired its shot. But we realize that these positions cannot be demonstrated conclusively.

6. Jesus (line 7). The fact that Jesus, like Buffalo Bill and Mister Death, is given a line to himself has caused some readers to see Jesus as an important figure in the poem. Robert Wegner, in The Poetry and Prose of E. E. Cummings (1965), says that the word “Jesus . . . by reason of its position in the poem introduces a new subject as a correlative to that of Buffalo Bill” (p. 96). Wegner continues: “Christ [like Buffalo Bill] also is a figure embedded in myth and legend, also a type of hero, cherished as a symbol but unheeded in practice and hence for all practical purposes in disrepute” (p. 96). Earl J. Dias in CEA Critic 29:3 (Dec. 1966) sees a contrast between Jesus and Buffalo Bill: “Of the two types of individualism implied in the poem—the man of war and the man of peace—I submit that the latter is more akin to Cummings’s basic ideas revealed throughout the body of his writing” (p. 7). With some embarrassment—in our naiveté we had never conceived of such notions when we thought about the poem—we must say that these statements seem far fetched, wrongheaded. We take “Jesus” to be an expletive, an utterance indicating strong admiration for Buffalo Bill, and that’s all—and that’s a great deal. Having said this, we should go on to add that Jane Tompkins has an interesting comment in her essay, “At the Buffalo Bill Museum,” South Atlantic Quarterly (Summer 1990). Calling attention to a poster of Buffalo Bill that says “Je viens,” she says that these are the words of a “savior” (see her paragraph 48), and she goes on to say that Buffalo Bill “comes in the guise of a redeemer.” Here she might seem to be going too far, but in fact she clarifies this comment by saying that Buffalo Bill comes as “someone who will save us, who will through his own actions do something for us that we cannot. He will lift us above our lives, out
of the daily grind, into something larger than ourselves.” We don’t find this view excessive.

7. The manuscript. In our question we call attention to only one line omitted from the finished poem, but other passages are also worth discussion. Our own guess is that Cummings decided to drop this line because he decided to concentrate on Buffalo Bill’s amazing achievements, not on his appearance. What counts is not what his hair and face looked like but what he could do. Similarly, we imagine that the emphasis on Buffalo Bill caused Cummings to drop the “indian” and the “Comanche brave” from the final version. It’s a one-man show.

8. Is the poem satiric? We have already indicated that we think it shows admiration, and nothing but admiration, for Buffalo Bill’s skill. (We are reminded, perhaps irrelevantly, of Hopkins’s praise, in “The Windhover,” of “the achieve of, the mastery of the thing.”) We do not think that the poem in any way judges Bill’s personality or morality; it says nothing about his treatment of Indians—or, for that matter, his treatment of buffalo. Incidentally, notice that the final version omits the draft’s “Comanche” and “indian.” If these had remained in the poem, we suppose one might conceivably make a case (very weak, but a case) that in Bill’s world, Indians are reduced to “the Other,” but, again, this poem is about Bill’s ability, not about his use or abuse of others.

Among the astounding comments that we have encountered is Rushworth M. Kidder’s discussion, in his *E. E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1979). In the course of suggesting that the poem is concerned with “heroic deeds” reduced to “circus stunts” and “the glib and the fraudulent,” Kidder says, “This performer, after all, merely broke clay pigeons instead of Indians” (p. 28). Is it possible that we would regard Bill as a greater hero if Cummings showed him killing Indians? As for the expression “Mister Death,” which we have already glanced at, we do not think that it is intended to ridicule death (and most definitions of satire include the idea that the speaker ridicules the subject). Admittedly it takes the terror out of death—death here is no skeleton wielding a scythe—but it does not ridicule death. It domesticates him, makes him a part of daily life, but we don’t see satire here. In any case, how can one satirize death—as opposed to satirizing, say, a neurotic fear of death? There are poems, of course, that diminish death, notably John Donne’s “Death, be not proud,” and Shakespeare’s Sonnet 146 (“Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth”), but we would not say that these poems satirize death; rather, they mock persons who do not understand the limitations of death.

The two quotations that we give at the end: The first is from David Ray, in *College English* 23 (Jan. 1962): 289. In this article Ray also says (you may want to use this quotation as a topic for discussion) that the poet gives us “his adult’s awareness that Bill was, historically, a fraud” (p. 289). The second quotation is from Dias’s article in *CEA Critic* 29:3 (Dec. 1966): 7. Our preceding comments indicate that we strongly disagree with both interpretations.
Raymond Carver

Mine, Little Things (p. 324)

The usual characteristics of Minimalism are alleged to be:

- lower-middle-class characters, who are relatively inarticulate and out of touch with others and with themselves
- little if any setting
- little action of any apparent importance
- little if any authorial comment, i.e., little interpretation of motive
- a drab style—fairly simple sentences, with little or no use of figurative language or allusions

Almost no story perfectly exemplifies this textbook paradigm, but we think the term does fit Carver pretty well.

Let's look at this very short story—certainly minimal in terms of length—from beginning to end, though for the moment we'll skip the title. Here is the first paragraph:

Early that day the weather turned and the snow was melting into dirty water. Streaks of it ran down from the little shoulder-high window that faced the back yard. Cars slushed by on the street outside, where it was getting dark. But it was getting dark on the inside too.

If you read the paragraph aloud in class, students will easily see that Carver very briefly establishes an unpleasant setting (“dirty water,” “streaks,” “cars slushed by”), giving us not only a sense of what we see but also the time of day (“dark”). But of course Carver is not giving us mere landscape and chronology. When we read “But it was getting dark on the inside too,” we anticipate dark passions. A reader can’t be sure that such passions will materialize or how the story will turn out; the darkness may dissipate, but at this stage a reader is prepared for a story that fits the rotten weather. (Another way of putting it is to say that Carver is preparing the reader, i.e., is seeking to control our responses.) Perhaps, then, it is incorrect to say that minimalists do not use figurative language; surely the dark weather is figurative. And on rereading the story a reader may feel that the metamorphosis of snow into dirty water is an emblem of the history of this marriage.

Ask students to compare the opening paragraph with an earlier version. Perhaps the chief differences are the elimination of the sun from the revised version—there is no sunshine in this world—and the emphasis, in the last sentence of the revised paragraph, on the internal darkness. In the earlier version, “It was getting dark, outside and inside;” in the later version, the inside darkness gets a sentence to itself: “But it was getting dark on the inside too.” The real point of asking students to look at the revisions “to account for the changes” is to help them to look closely at what Carver has written, so that they will give his words a chance to shape their responses.
As we read the story, we never get inside the heads of the characters. The author tells us nothing about them, other than what they say and what they do. We don’t know why they behave as they do. We know very little about them, not even their names, since Carver calls them only “he” and “she.” The first line of dialogue is angry, and all of the remaining dialogue reveals the terrific hostility that exists between the two speakers. As the author presents them to us, the alienation of these characters does seem to fit the textbook description of minimalist writing.

The quarrel about the picture of the baby leads (because Carver is an artist, not a mere recorder) to the quarrel about the baby. (These people may hate each other, but apparently they both love the baby, although of course it is possible that each wants to possess the picture and the baby simply in order to hurt the other. Again, the author gives no clues.) The adults’ angry passions contaminate the baby, so to speak, for the baby begins to cry and soon is “red-faced and screaming.”

Even a little detail like the flowerpot is relevant. In the fight, the adults could have knocked over some other object, for example, a kitchen chair. But it is a flowerpot—a little touch of life and presumably a small attempt at beautifying the house—that is upset. Norman German and Jack Bedell, Critique 29 (1988): 257–260, make the interesting point that no plant is mentioned, only a pot. “The empty pot,” they suggest, “is like the house, a lifeless hull.” Carver isn’t just recording; he is choosing what he wishes to record because he wants to evoke certain responses.

We can’t tell what ultimately happened to the baby, but there is every reason to believe that he is physically harmed, possibly even killed, and this point gets back to the title. Why did Carver change the title from “Mine” to “Popular Mechanics” and then to “Little Things”? The second title summons to mind the magazine of that name, but the magazine is never mentioned. What, then, is the relevance of the title? First, it probably calls to mind the male blue-collar world, the chief readership of Popular Mechanics. Second, by the time one finishes the story and thinks about the title, one sees a sort of pun in “popular,” one of whose meanings is “Of or carried on by the common people” (Webster’s New World Dictionary). And in “mechanics” we see the forces at work—the physical forces operating on the baby as the two adults each pull him. We wish Carver had retained this title.

The last sentence surely is worth discussing in class: “In this manner, the issue was decided.” The language seems flat, unadorned, merely informative. But “decided” is monstrously inappropriate. The word suggests thought rather than sheer violence; even if, say, we decide an issue by tossing a coin, the decision to toss a coin is arrived at by thinking and by common consent. Perhaps the word “issue,” too, is significant; German and Bedell find in it a pun (offspring as well as argument). To find a parallel for Carver’s last sentence we probably have to turn to the world of Swiftian irony.

Invite students to compare the last line with Carver’s earlier version, “In this manner they decided the issue.” In the revision, by means of the passive, Carver makes the sentence even flatter; the narrator seems even more effaced.
But he is therefore, to the responsive reader, even more present. As Tobias Wolff puts it, in the introduction to *Matters of Life and Death* (1983), “Irony offers us a way of talking about the unspeakable. In the voices of Swift and Nabokov and Jane Austen we sometimes hear what would have been a scream if irony had not subdued it to eloquence.”

The circumstances and the word “decided” may remind the reader of another decision concerning a disputed child, the decision Solomon made (1 Kings 3:16–27) when confronted with two prostitutes who disputed over which was the true mother of the child. One woman, you’ll recall, was even willing to murder the child in order to settle the dispute.

In short, Carver’s language is not so drab as it sometimes appears to be, which disputes the contention that his stories—are “thin.” He developed as a writer, but in some ways the body of his work is consistent. Late in his life, in the preface to *The Best American Short Stories 1986*, he described his taste:

I’m drawn toward the traditional (some would call it old-fashioned) methods of story-telling: one layer of reality unfolding and giving way to another, perhaps richer layer; the gradual accretion of meaningful detail; dialogue that not only reveals something about character but advances the story.

In interviews shortly before his death he freely admitted that his view of life had changed; he was in love, and things didn’t seem as bleak as they had seemed earlier. But this does not mean that his early stories are less skillfully constructed than are his later, more tender stories.

Carver’s plain, pointed realism has proven very influential; many writers of short stories (e.g., Ann Beattie, Bobbie Ann Mason) learned from him and have said they were inspired by his example. Students can be directed to the following collections: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: The Stories of Raymond Carver* (1976); *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* (1981); *Cathedral* (1983); and *Where I’m Calling From* (1988). We should also mention *All of Us: The Collected Poems* (1998).

Like Chapter 1, this chapter was added at the suggestion of instructors who recommended that we offer some sort of overview. Yes, the students probably are using *Literature for Composition* in the second half of a year-long sequence of writing courses, which means that they have already completed one semester in which they used a rhetoric or a handbook.

In our comment on the first chapter we said that instructors might want to discuss some of the epigraphs, and we think a brief discussion of one or more of the epigraphs in Chapter 12 may also be useful. But we also might spend a bit of time discussing this business of “*Kinds of Writing*.” Even though most students taking this course will already have had a semester of composition they may not have internalized the fact that the *kind* of writing in large measure determines what gets said. If one is writing a summary one is doing something very different from what one does if one is writing an argument (of course in all likelihood the summary will play a part in an argument, for instance in an argument that evaluates a work of literature).

Even if you do not spend time in class on this chapter, you may want to mention that the chapter includes a “Checklist of Basic Matters.” We think that students who pay attention to this checklist will inevitably improve their essays.
Although Staples’s marvelous first sentence speaks of his “first victim,” and his second paragraph speaks of “that first encounter,” he doesn’t begin his essay with the chronologically earliest event of his narrative. Rather, he begins with an experience that revealed to him the fear he evokes in others and also revealed how that fear alienates and endangers him. He begins, in other words, with an account that dramatizes the focus of his essay. After recounting other incidents that revealed to him that a black male is an object of fear not only to white females but also (at least in some circumstances) to everyone “black, white, male, or female,” he goes back in time to explain why at the age of twenty-two he was unaware of the effect he would have on others and then forward again to explain how the “first” experiences altered his behavior. The structure of the essay, beginning in the middle of things and containing a flashback, works so well it may appear artless; it’s often useful in a composition class to ask some obvious questions to reveal the writer’s options, as well as his decisions and their effects: Where does Staples begin his essay? Why does he begin there? Why not begin with his account of “coming of age” in Chester, Pennsylvania? and so on.

In addition to admiring the effective organization of the essay, we admire the deftness of Staples’s language. We’ve already referred to the electrifying first sentence: “My first victim was a woman—white, well dressed, probably in her early twenties.” (The next sentences even heighten the suspense.) We admire too Staples’s rigor and his self-assurance as a writer, which enables him to describe himself as others might see him, as a “youngish black man—a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket.” There’s a touch of humor in that description, certainly no self-pity. The self-assurance also allows him to acknowledge that there is some basis in fact for pedestrians’ fear of black males (paragraph 6) while at the same time characterizing himself as “a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken” (paragraph 2) and as “timid, but a survivor” (paragraph 9). Other virtues of his prose: the vivid imagery (for example, the mem-
orable “thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk” of the car door locks in paragraph 3), the succinct summaries (“being perceived as dangerous is a hazard in itself” in paragraph 2), and the often wry humor (“bear country” in paragraph 12).

Perhaps most of all we admire Staples’s restraint. Given the topic and the experiences he recounts (including the loss of a brother to street violence), Staples does not pull out the organ stops of rage to which, we might think, he is entitled. He leaves us instead with the “bright, sunny” warbling of Vivaldi’s Four Seasons and a refreshing and important contribution to “New York mugging literature.”

Staples is the author of Parallel Time: Growing Up in Black and White (1994), a vivid, often disturbing memoir of his childhood, college and university studies, and successful career as a journalist, which has led to his membership on the editorial board of The New York Times.

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. Write an essay of approximately 1,000 words explaining how you learned that your behavior and intentions were being misinterpreted and what you did to alter others’ perceptions of you. (An example: a woman or girl whose behavior was being misread as sexually responsive or even aggressive.)

2. Write a narrative essay (approximately 1,000 words) on “coming of age,” focusing on a particular lesson you learned from encounters with others.

**LANGSTON HUGHES**

*Salvation* (p. 343)

Most instructors who used the earlier editions of this book taught several of the stories in Chapter 24, “Innocence and Experience.” Hughes’s essay can serve as an excellent introduction to that chapter.

Hughes, of course, is writing as an adult, but the simplicity of many of his sentences (“But not really saved. It happened like this”) and of much of his diction (“there was a big revival”) is appropriate to a boy not yet thirteen. This is not really the speech of a youngster (“escorted” in the first paragraph, “dire” in the third, “work-gnarled” in the fourth), but on the whole the style evokes the child’s state of mind; we might say that we are chiefly conscious of the youthful subject rather than of the mature writer. But a very artful and adult ironic writing pervades the piece. Notice, for instance, the deflating effect that the last, brief sentence of paragraph 3 has upon the slightly longer previous sentence: “And some of them jumped up and went to Jesus right away. But most of us just sat there.” And, of course, the contrast between the hypocritical, grinning Westley (who surely did not cry that night) and the narrator effectively emphasizes Hughes’s sense of isolation. If the story is, on the surface, amusing, it is also finally serious and moving.
Laura Vanderkam

*Hookups Starve the Soul* (p. 345)

Vanderkam announces her thesis in her title, a device common in writings published in newspapers or large-circulation magazines. In essays of this sort, the goal is to be as simple and direct—and challenging—as possible. Thus, although "starve" is metaphoric, it cannot puzzle even the most casual reader. Still, the essay is by no means artless. Vanderkam skillfully gives us dialogue and specific examples, and she is fully aware of her audience, as, for instance, in paragraph 5, which begins "Lest you think college students are all libertines," and paragraph 7, where she says, "I hear the traditionalists clucking."

She also knows the value of citing an authority and letting the reader hear another voice, so in paragraph 10 she quotes David Brooks. And she also knows that an occasional literary allusion can be helpful, so she mentions Scarlett O'Hara, Juliet, Lady Chatterley, and (more risky) Dmitry and Ivan Karamazov. In short, we think the essay is effectively written; instructors can go through it paragraph by paragraph, helping students to see that argumentative prose can be clear, simple, and engaging—qualities they should aim for in their own essays.
“All those ballsy American stories,” Grace Paley has said of much of the American canon, “had nothing to say to me.” Is she, then, a feminist writer? She denies it, insisting that she is something rather different, “a feminist and a writer.” Some instructors may wish to have a class consider in what ways, if any, “Samuel” is the work of a feminist.

There is a particularly female insight in the last two paragraphs of “Samuel,” which (though the second of these mentions Samuel’s father) focus on Samuel’s mother. The first of these paragraphs emphasizes the mother’s agony when she learns of her son’s death; the final paragraph, describing a later time, emphasizes a grief that is less visible or audible but that is perhaps even more painful, for this grief is stimulated by the sight of her newborn baby: “Never again will a boy exactly like Samuel be known.”

Interestingly, the narrator (can we say the female author?) conveys a good deal of enthusiasm for what some people might regard as offensive macho displays of jiggling on the subway, riding the tail of a speeding truck, and hopping on the tops of trucks. Paley makes these actions sympathetic partly by implying that they take real skill, partly by implying that the show-off performing kids usually turn out to be very decent guys (one daredevil has graduated from high school, is married, holds a responsible job, and is going to night school), and partly by mildly discrediting those who oppose them. Thus one lady who disapproves of the jiggers thinks, “Their mothers never know where they are,” but the narrator immediately assures us that the mothers of these boys did know where they were, and, moreover, the boys had been engaged in the thoroughly respectable activity of visiting a “missile exhibit on Fourteenth street.”

Like this woman, the man who pulls the alarm cord is somewhat discredited: he is “one of the men whose boyhood had been more watchful than brave.” Although it’s no disgrace for a boy to be “watchful,” the sentence probably guides most readers to feel some scorn for the man who (so to speak) was never
a boy. Many readers will feel that although the man “walked in a citizenly way” to pull the cord, he is motivated less by an impulse of good citizenship than (though probably he doesn’t know it) by resentment, by irritation that these children are experiencing a joy that he never experienced in his childhood. On the other hand, Paley does not present him as a villain, and the story is not chiefly concerned with his guilt. By the end of the story, readers are probably so taken up with the mother’s grief that they scarcely remember the man.

Although “Samuel” resembles a fable in that it is fairly brief, is narrated in an apparently simple manner, and concludes with a message, it differs significantly from a fable. Most obviously, it does not use the beasts, gods, and inanimate objects that fables commonly use. In fact, however, these are not essential in fables. More significantly, the characters in “Samuel” are more complicated, since the noisy boys are treated sympathetically and the apparently respectable adults are treated ironically. Finally, where the fable traditionally utters or implies a hard-headed, worldly wise (and often faintly cynical) message, the message uttered at the end of “Samuel” arouses the reader’s deepest sympathy.


Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. If you had been on the train, would you have pulled the emergency cord? Why, or why not?
2. Write a journalist’s account (250–300 words) of the accidental death of a boy named Samuel. Use whatever details Paley provides, but feel free to invent what you need for an authentic news story.

**DIANA CHANG**

*The Oriental Contingent* (p. 360)

The title comes from a remark in paragraph 15, when a voice—presumably belonging to Lisa’s Caucasian husband—refers to the two Asian-American women as “[t]he Oriental contingent.” Is the remark offensive? The man sees two Asian-Americans together, and he (quite naturally?) sees them as a unit.
The Asian-Americans, too, regard themselves (quite naturally?) as having something in common, although it turns out that Lisa, born in Buffalo, was not even brought up by Chinese parents.

It's hard to think of Lisa as Chinese in any significant way, other than that her biological parents were Chinese. And yet, of course, to Caucasians she will always be “Oriental,” and when two people like Lisa are chatting they will (in Caucasian eyes) be “the Oriental contingent.” And in their own eyes, too, they are not a hundred percent American; at one point Lisa thinks of her “American friends,” and then remembers that she too is American. But if an American with Asian features, or, for that matter, with Indian features or black African features is in some degree an outsider to a Caucasian, such an individual is also in some degree—indeed, probably to a much greater degree—an outsider to persons with those features who were born in Asia, India, or Africa. Connie feels inferior to Lisa, who she mistakenly thinks is a more “authentic” Chinese than Connie, but it turns out that Lisa is so fearful of being insufficiently Chinese that she avoids visiting Asia.

One way to talk about the story is to talk about the degree to which any American—even someone from an Anglo background—feels an identity with some ethnic subgroup and therefore sees others as the Other. Of course the old idea was that all who came to the United States were turned into Americans, which more or less meant Anglos, or, let’s say, Northern Europeans. America was a “melting pot,” a term invented or at least popularized by Israel Zangwill in a play, *The Melting Pot* (1914): “America is God’s crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming.” The idea was dominant in the late nineteenth century and survived almost unchallenged into the middle of the twentieth century, but today the image of the melting pot has been replaced by other images, including “the salad bowl” and “the mosaic.” These newer images emphasize the idea that each part retains its identity and also contributes to the whole. (You might ask students if they are familiar with other metaphors. In recent years we have noticed the occasional use of America as a kaleidoscope.)

Here are two relevant quotations:

Fortunately, the time has long passed when people liked to regard the United States as some kind of melting pot, taking men and women from every part of the world and converting them into standardized, homogenized Americans. . . . Just as we welcome a world of diversity, so we glory in an America of diversity—an America all the richer for the many different and distinctive strands of which it is woven. (Hubert H. Humphrey, 1967)

And:

The crucial thing about the melting pot was that it did not happen: American politics and American social life are still dominated by the existence of sharply-defined ethnic groups. (Charles E. Silberman, 1964)
It would be easy to find many quotations in which African Americans call attention to their sense of having two identities as Americans or to the inadequacy of the image of the melting pot. Here is an example of each:

One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (W.E.B. Du Bois, 1903)

And:

I hear that melting-pot stuff a lot, and all I can say is that we haven’t melted. (Jesse Jackson, 1969)

Perhaps in class you may want to examine the following hasty generalizations. How much truth is in any of them?

1. It is probably true that, until some thirty years ago, most people who immigrated to this country wanted to enter the melting pot, i.e., wanted to put “the old country” behind them and to become “Americans.”
2. Most African Americans, too, probably wanted to get into the pot, but they were excluded by whites.
3. Even immigrants who were or are eager to become 100 percent American probably retain a good deal of ethnic identity, perhaps unto the third and fourth generations (an idea implicit in Silberman’s quotation).
4. Many recent immigrants emphasize their desire to retain their ethnic identity, but they too—or, rather, their children and grandchildren—will retain very little of the older generation’s identity; they will, in fact, be like the Chinese Americans in Chang’s story.

“The Oriental Contingent” provides an excellent opportunity for students to write—in journals, and then in essays and in their own fiction—about their ethnic backgrounds or about what they have seen in the behavior of second- and third-generation people of other backgrounds. (You may also want to refer students to Pat Mora’s poem, “Immigrants,” in Chapter 1, and to Martín Espada’s poem, “Bully,” in Chapter 7.)

Note: In Chapter 26, “Identity in America,” we include several poems about the thoughts of non-Anglos in the United States.

GISH JEN

Who’s Irish? (p. 365)

Rather than say much about our own “reading” of this story, we’d like to take this opportunity to talk about the approach that we take to it—an approach that bears on the sorts of lessons about literature and literary study that we
highlight and hope to convey to our students. We take this approach most of the time, but especially at the introductory level.

When we teach Gish Jen’s story, we focus on the “voice” of its first-person narrator. In all of our classes, we urge students to “ask lots of questions” about what they read, questions large and small that will help them to become active rather than passive readers. “Who’s Irish?” is an excellent case study for this question-asking approach, because the voice in it that the author develops is so engaging and interesting to hear and think about.

Start with the title. Encourage the students to linger over it and to consider the kinds of questions it prompts (and it is a question itself, after all) and the expectations that it raises. We may wonder, for example, why Gish Jen, a daughter of Chinese immigrants (so the headnote mentions) would be writing a story that deals with the Irish in some way. And what is the answer to the title’s question? That’s something we assume we will learn more about as we continue to read.

Ask these and other questions about the title, and remind the students that the title is not only something that opens the story but, further, it is something to which the reader returns after his or her reading of the story is done. How do we respond to the title then, when we come back to it?

Once we have made this first foray into question-asking, we read aloud the first paragraph. After we are done, we ask a student to read it aloud. And then another student to do the same.

Sometimes, of course, when teaching a story or poem, we ask a student to do the first reading aloud. But that is both necessary and, on occasion, a little awkward, if it turns out that the student stumbles over an unfamiliar word or two (or three) or a twist of syntax. If you do the first reading, you can give the right pronunciation to words and enable everyone to hear how this or that phrase or sentence is meant to sound. Then, give a couple of the students a chance; it is valuable for them to have the experience of hearing well-written prose as well as silently reading it, and they’ll now feel more at ease.

We then work on the first paragraph carefully, asking lots of questions together about the speaker, her tones of voice, her clear and articulate but also somewhat rough relationship to the English language. We zero in on specifics (e.g., “I am work hard my whole life”) and on more general matters (e.g., Why might Gish Jen have chosen a first-person narrator? Why not present this character from a third-person point of view?).

Again, the goal is to help students realize that they need never feel at a loss for material for an in-class writing assignment or an essay they have been assigned. We seek to get them to understand that none of us can simply wait for something to pop out at us from the page; we have to do the creative and critical question-asking that generates the ideas, issues, puzzles, etc., that provide us with the material we need to sift through, develop, and organize.

In a way, this is what happens when a student comes to see us in conference about his or her paper on a poem or story or play. We ask lots of questions of them: So are you claiming that . . . ? Have you thought about how the scene
when . . . fits into your argument? What's your take on the bitter tone of the middle section of the story? All of us do this with and for our students—it's why conferences are so important for them. But ultimately the trick is to equip the student to carry on that conversation with himself or herself.

Once we have finished up with Gish Jen's first paragraph, we then move to the final paragraph. We want the students to be asking, How does the speaker sound here, and how is her voice the same and yet different from the voice when we encountered it in the first paragraph? More broadly: What has transpired between here and there? What occupies the large middle of the story, this story with this beginning and this ending?

Then we back away a bit from the analytical labors that we have performed. A final question we ask of the students: Did you enjoy this story? Perhaps we are not obliged to raise this question, but it is good, we think, to do so after an intense period of analysis and explication. Students often acknowledge that analytical work on a piece of literature will indeed make it more interesting, more stimulating, more enjoyable. But there will be some students in the room who feel, or believe that they should feel, that interpreting a story (and going on and on about it) spoils it, drains the pleasure from the experience. Keep in mind this possible objection (or, as it is with some of our students, this silently held but strong view), and see what you can do to circumvent (that is, to disprove) it.

You want the students to hear you saying, or sense that you are implying, all the time: “Yes, we are here in a literature classroom, studying this story or that poem in an academic setting. That means we will be treating it differently from a poem or story we might read on our own. But we still are looking for pleasure, for enjoyment, from literature, and in fact expect that the better interpreters (the better question-askers) we become, the richer our pleasure in literature will be.”

Students interested in Gish Jen might visit Voices from the Gaps: Women Writers of Color: Gish Jen (http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/jen_gish.html). This site includes biography, criticism, selected bibliography, and related links.

**RON WALLACE**

*Worry* (p. 372)

Perhaps the best point of departure is to ask, “What is the point of a short story that is this short?” For us, the point—or rather the chief interest—is in the entertainingly drawn characters and in the connection with the minimally sketched daughter. The truth is, the interest depends not only on character but also on the tiny plot. That is, as in most fiction, character and plot are inseparable.

“Worry” is an interesting experiment in seeing how much can be done with very little. But we find that students wonder why an author would condense
things to this degree. When students read this story, some of them having done creative writing themselves, they often are skeptical about it. It’s as if, to them, Wallace has gotten away with something, passing off a sketch as a short story.

We like to proceed through the story line by line in the usual way. We focus first on the story as Wallace has structured it. Then, we ask the students to discuss whether the story would be just as effective, or more or less effective, if the first sentence were subtracted from it. Next, we retain the first sentence but ask about cutting the following three, which consist of dialogue. There are lots of possibilities—that is, many possible choices other than those that Wallace made.

The nice advantage of this approach is that it helps the students to perceive that Wallace does what he does in relation to countless other things that, even in this short space, he could have done but did not. Students learn something valuable about the ways in which writing is the making of choices, a series of decisions to do this, not that.
Thinking Critically:
A Case Study
about Flannery O’Connor

In the early part of this story the grandmother is quite as hateful as the rest of the family—though students do not always see at first that her vapid comments, her moral clichés, and her desire to be thought “a lady” are offensive in their own way. Her comment, “People are certainly not nice like they used to be,” can be used to convince students of her mindlessness and lack of charity.

The Misfit, like Jesus, was “buried alive”; he believes that “Jesus thrown everything off balance,” and he finds no satisfaction in life (i.e., his life without grace). Life is either a meaningless thing in which all pleasure is lawful (and, ironically, all pleasure turns to ashes), or it derives its only meaning from following Jesus. The Misfit, though he does not follow Jesus, at least sees that the materialistic view of life is deficient. Confronted by the suffering of The Misfit, the nagging and shallow grandmother suddenly achieves a breakthrough and is moved by love. She had earlier recognized The Misfit (“‘You’re The Misfit!’ she said. ‘I recognized you at once’”), and now she has a further recognition of him as “one of her own children,” that is, a suffering fellow human. Faced with death, she suddenly becomes aware of her responsibility: her head clears for an instant and she says, “You’re one of my own children.” This statement is not merely an attempt to dissuade The Misfit from killing her; contrast it with her earlier attempts, when, for example, she says, “I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I’ll give you all the money I’ve got.” Rather, at last her head is “cleared.” This moment of grace transfigures her and causes her death. The Misfit is right when he says, “She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

(“her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky”) suggests that death has jolted the grandmother out of her mere secular decency into the truth of eternal reality. See also Martha Stephens, The Question of Flannery O’Connor (1973).

For Flannery O’Connor’s comments on this story, see our text. In her collected letters, entitled The Habit of Being (1979), O’Connor says (letter to John Gawkes, Dec. 26, 1959) that she is interested in “the moment when you know that Grace has been offered and accepted—such as the moment when the Grandmother realizes The Misfit is one of her own children” (p. 367).


Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. Explain the significance of the title.
2. Interpret and evaluate The Misfit’s comment on the grandmother: “She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”
3. O’Connor reported that once, when she read aloud “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” one of her hearers said that “it was a shame someone with so much talent should look on life as a horror story.” Two questions: What evidence of O’Connor’s “talent” do you see in the story, and does the story suggest that O’Connor looked on life as a horror story?
4. What are the values of the members of the family?
5. Flannery O’Connor, a Roman Catholic, wrote, “I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in relation to that.” In the light of this statement, and drawing on “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” explain what O’Connor saw in the world.

FLANNERY O’CONNOR

Revelation (p. 386)

This story, like “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” is concerned with a moment of grace, which most obviously begins when Mary Grace hurls a hook at Mrs. Turpin—an action somewhat parallel to The Misfit’s assault on the grand-
mother. The doctor's office contains a collection of wretched human beings whose physical illnesses mirror their spiritual condition. There is abundant comedy (“The nurse ran in, then out, then in again”), but these people are treated sympathetically too. Mrs. Turpin’s pitiful snobbery—especially her desperate effort to rank people in the eyes of God—is comic and horrible, but it at least reveals an uneasiness beneath her complacency, an uneasiness that finally compares well with the monumental hatred that characterizes Mary Grace. Yet Mary Grace, a pimply girl, is a messenger of grace. And so when the blow comes (from a book nicely called Human Development), it is not in vain. The girl’s accusation (“Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog”) strikes home, and later, among the pigs that Mrs. Turpin so solicitously cleans, the message produces a revelation, a revelation that forces upon her an awareness of the inadequacy of “virtue” (her horrible concept of respectability) as she has known it. Virtue is of as little value to fallen humanity as a hosing-down is to a pig; in her vision she sees that even virtue or respectability is burned away in the movement toward heaven.

On the one hand, some students have difficulty seeing that Mrs. Turpin is not simply a stuffy hypocrite; on the other, some students have difficulty seeing that her respectability is woefully inadequate and must be replaced by a deeper sympathy. But perhaps students have the greatest difficulty in reconciling the comic aspects of the story with its spiritual depth, and here the instructor can probably not do much more than read some passages and hope for the best.

In O’Connor’s writings the sun is a common symbol for God. Here, the light of the sun transforms the hogs, so that they appear to “pant with a secret life,” a parallel to the infusion of grace into Mrs. Turpin, which causes her to see the worthlessness of her earlier “respectable” values.

The story is deeply indebted to the Book of Revelation, traditionally attributed to St. John the Evangelist and probably written at the end of the first century A.D. (A revelation is, etymologically, an “unveiling,” just as an apocalypse is, in Greek, an unveiling. What is unveiled in the Book of Revelation is the future.) Numerous details in O’Connor’s story pick up details in the biblical account: O’Connor’s “red glow” in the sky echoes the fiery heaven of Revelation; the “watery snake” that briefly appears in the air echoes the water-spewing “serpent” of Revelation (12.15), and even the “seven long-snouted bristling shoats” echo the numerous references to seven (angels, churches, seals, stars) in Revelation. But the details should not be pressed too hard; what matters most is the apocalyptic vision of the oppressed rejoicing and shouting hallelujah at the throne of God.

The story is not difficult, and no published discussions of it are essential reading, though it is of course discussed in books on O’Connor and in general comments on her work, such as A. R. Coulthard, “From Sermon to Parable: Four Conversion Stories by Flannery O’Connor,” American Literature 55 (1983): 55–71. Two essays devoted entirely to “Revelation” are “Revelation’ and the Book of Job” by Diane Rolmedo, Renascence 30 (1978): 78–90, and

**Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing**

1. Why does Mary Grace attack Mrs. Turpin?
2. Characterize Mrs. Turpin before her revelation. Did your attitude toward her change at the end of the story?
3. The two chief settings are a doctor’s waiting room and a “pig parlor.” Can these settings reasonably be called “symbolic”? If so, symbolic of what?
4. When Mrs. Turpin goes toward the pig parlor, she has “the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle.” Once there, she dismisses Claud, uses the hose as a weapon against the pigs, and talks to herself “in a low fierce voice.” What is she battling, besides the pigs?
CHAPTER 16

Graphic Fiction

This is the first edition of Literature for Composition to include graphic fiction, a form that is now common in magazines (e.g., New York Times Magazine) but that until a very few years ago was not considered an adult form of literature. Picture books were for kids.

On the other hand, pictorial narrative is an ancient and a highly esteemed form: Egyptian tombs are decorated with narrative paintings of hunts and of battles, Trajan’s column (in Rome, second century CE) records Trajan’s exploit, the Bayeux Tapestry narrates the history of the Norman Conquest, medieval cathedrals tell stories (via stained-glass windows) of events in the life of Jesus, and many yards of medieval Japanese hand scrolls tell religious and secular stories.

Although contemporary narratologists—are we the only ones who find the word unattractive?—have been largely concerned with verbal (chiefly written, but sometimes oral) narratives, there are now a fair number of significant studies of visual narratives, such as Peter J. Holliday, ed., Narrative and Event in Ancient Art (1993), Jules Lubbock, Storytelling in Christian Art from Giotto to Donatello (2006), and—best of all—Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics (1993). We are not joking when we say that we recommend McCloud’s book very highly. It is in comic-book form, but in fact it is a serious, thoughtful, informative, and engaging study of the ways in which pictorial artists represent causal connections, motion, passage of time, and so forth.

As innumerable theorists have pointed out, pictorial narrative, like verbal narrative, has at least two important aspects (a third, if we add the receiver-responder): There is the raw material, the narrative, the happening, and there is also the way a given storyteller tells it. A story thus is a narrative told by someone, in a distinctive way. In the language of the French structuralists, there is the histoire (what the naive person thinks of as the story, the happenings), and there is also the discours or the récit (the telling of the events, the contribution of the narrator, the way the story is told). Earlier writers, the Russian Formalists of the second and third decades of the twentieth century, used the terms fabula (to indicate the raw material, the events) and syuzhet (the way the events were arranged, the plot, the writer’s handling of the fabula). In verbal narratives, whether written or oral, we are all familiar with the importance of point of view (a matter of discours, of récit, of syuzhet). Well, recent critics of the visual arts have been speaking similarly of the ways in which narratives are told: The gist is that the form of presentation is an important part of the meaning of the story.
What is the relevance of this to the graphic fictions that we present? For a start one might say that the *style* of the drawings for “A Hunger Artist” evoke the steel engravings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so they help to put Kafka’s *fabula* into an historical context. And what of the style of *Hamlet on a Rooftop*? We might start by saying that this comic book format (*presentation, discours, récit, syuzhet*) helps to suggest that *Hamlet*—Shakespeare's story, that is—was (like a comic book) a work aimed at a wide public. Discuss.

R. CRUMB AND DAVID ZANE MAIROWITZ

*A Hunger Artist* (p. 426)

First, a few words about the typography. The title of this story about a circus performer is given, appropriately, in a typeface known as Big Top, a typeface that belongs to the family known as circus. (The best-known of these highly ornamented attention-getting typefaces are Barnum and Wild West.) Because circus typefaces by virtue of their ornamentation are not highly legible, they are not suited for extended passages of text, and indeed, when it comes to the narrative text-blocks (here, rectangular) and the speech balloons (rounded) in “A Hunger Artist,” Crumb/Mairowitz use Big Top only for the *first letter* in the narrative blocks. That is, they revert to unornamented lettering, and they use different layouts in order to help readers to distinguish between the two kinds of prose.

What about the illustrations? What do they add to the text?

- First, we notice that they are black and white, not in color, adding austerity or coldness to the story.
- Second, we notice that the first page—two images—apparently is set at night; at least the sky is black, again establishing an austere setting. Later images show daylight, but the opening establishes the menacing tone.
- Third, the drawing apparently is done with a pen, thus giving a hard edge, rather than done with a softer medium such as pencil or crayon.
- Fourth, the style evokes the steel engravings of magazines of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, again a hard medium.
- Fifth, we are inclined to say that the drawings produce an edgy feeling—the settings and the figures they show are all unattractive. Only the panther in the final image is good to look at.

Let’s talk a bit more about this last point, the *unattractive* figures. Ordinarily the clothing of earlier eras is attractive, or at least engagingly quaint, and affords visual delight; but here the clothing seems heavy, burdensome, confining. Take the first image: The woman at the center is encased, with only her face exposed, and the little girl in the foreground also seems to be locked into her too-heavy outfit. The girl's head, instead of resting above her shoulders, seems
pushed forward, as though she has a spinal problem. Further, because the girl is shown in profile we make no eye contact with her; she is in some sort of remote, inaccessible world. The man nearest to us, hunched over, again is a figure with a spinal problem. In short, this is not a world that the viewer would willingly enter. We are scarcely exaggerating when we say that the only attractive image in all the pictures—the only thing that one enjoys looking at in all of the pictures—is the panther in the final drawing.

We digress for a moment from our announced theme, Crumb’s illustrations rather than Kafka’s story. Joseph Conrad famously said that he wanted to make his reader see; we imagine that Kafka would have gone one step further and would have said that he wanted to make us see something we did not want to see. In fact, his most famous comment about literature is pretty much along that line. He tells us that books should do violence to the reader:

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. . . . We need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into the forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us.

[Letter to Oscar Pollak, January 27, 1904]

Crumb’s illustrations have something of this effect: Showing a world that is painful to contemplate, they wound and stab.

The gaunt hunger artist, with dark rings around his eyes, is of course frightening to look at, but so too, though in different ways, are the elaborately dressed women who hold him in the third image, and so too is the smiling unctuous impresario in the fourth and fifth images. Again, in our view, not until the final panel, where we see the panther, close up, do we get an image that can reasonably be called attractive. Notice, also, in this last panel, that although of course the panther is in the cage and the spectators are outside, from the reader’s point of view the spectators are crowded behind bars—imprisoned, we might say, in their uncomprehending fascination with the monumental panther who disregards them.
CHAPTER 17

Reading and Writing about Plays

SUSAN GLASPELL

Trifles (p. 443)

Some students may know Glaspell's other version of this work, a short story entitled “A Jury of Her Peers.” Some good class discussion can focus on the interchangeability of the titles. “Trifles” could have been called “A Jury of Her Peers,” and vice versa. A peer is an equal, and the suggestion of the story’s title is that Mrs. Wright is judged by a jury of her equals—Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters. A male jury would not constitute her equals because—at least in the context of the story and the play—males simply don't have the experiences of women and therefore can't judge them fairly.

Murder is the stuff of TV dramas, and this play concerns a murder, but it’s worth asking students how the play differs from a whodunit. Discussion will soon establish that we learn, early in “Trifles,” who performed the murder, and we even know, fairly early, why Minnie killed her husband. (The women know what is what because they correctly interpret “trifles,” but the men are baffled since they are looking for obvious signs of anger.) Once we know who performed the murder, the interest shifts to the question of whether the women will cover up for Minnie.

The distinction between what the men and the women look for is paralleled in the distinction between the morality of the men and the women. The men stand for law and order, for dominance (they condescend to the women, and the murdered Wright can almost be taken as a symbol of male dominance), whereas the women stand for mutual support or nurturing. Students might be invited to discuss why the women protect Minnie. Is it because women are nurturing? Or because they feel guilt for their earlier neglect of Minnie? Or because, being women, they know what her sufferings must have been like and feel that she acted justly? All of the above?

The symbols will cause very little difficulty. (1) The “gloomy” kitchen suggests Minnie’s life with her husband; (2) the bird suggests Minnie (she sang “like a bird,” was lively, then became caged and was broken in spirit).
The title is a sort of symbol too, an ironic one, for the men think (in Mr. Hale’s words) that “Women are used to worrying over trifles.” The men in the play never come to know better, but the reader-viewer comes to understand that the trifles are significant and that the seemingly trivial women have outwitted the self-important men. The irony of the title is established by the ironic action of the play.

Does the play have a theme? In our experience, the first theme that students may propose is that “it’s a man’s world.” There is something to this view, but (1) a woman kills her husband, and (2) other women help her to escape from the (male) legal establishment. Do we want to reverse the first suggestion, then, and say that (in this play) it is really a woman’s world, that women run things? No, given the abuse that all of the women in the play take. Still, perhaps it is fair to suggest that one of the things the play implies is that overbearing male behavior gets what it deserves—at least sometimes. Of course, when put this way, the theme is ancient; it is at the root of the idea of *hubris*, which is said to govern much Greek tragedy. Glaspell gives it a very special twist by emphasizing the women’s role in restoring justice to society.


**DAVID IVES**

*Sure Thing* (p. 453)

Students enjoy this play, and for a change of pace you might ask them to perform it. The chief problem, though, is that it allows only two students to perform. This has led us to consider the idea of using different students for each mini-play, i.e., for each unit of dialogue that precedes the sound of the bell. Such a production would inevitably change the meaning of the play, but we think there is much to be said for it (it involves more students, and it therefore allows for different voices, different tones).

One way of talking about the play is to introduce Aristotle’s idea that a play has a beginning, a middle, and an end, i.e., a play begins with a situation that needs no preliminary explanation (here, a man and a woman in a cafe), moves into a middle (a complication that arises out of the beginning), and ends with an action that results from the encounter and that itself marks the completion of the encounter. That is, there is nothing more to be said. In Ives’s play, only the last episode does not have an end; rather, it seems to be leading to a new beginning.
But consider the first episode as a sort of tiny play:

*Bill.* Excuse me. Is this chair taken?
*Betty.* Excuse me?
*Bill.* Is this taken?
*Betty.* Yes it is.
*Bill.* Oh. Sorry.
*Betty.* Sure thing. (*A bell rings softly.*)

A static situation (Betty seated at a table—that’s the beginning) is disturbed by Bill’s question (the beginning of the middle), and the middle turns into another static situation, i.e., after Bill apologizes and Betty accepts the apology, we have an end, a situation in which there is nothing more to be said. This formula is repeated over and over until the last episode, when there is an ending that is both an ending (the two seem to hit it off) and a new beginning (together they call for the check, and presumably will pay and leave, and start a new beginning).

We use the term “formula,” which implies both the idea that propels the play and perhaps, too, its limitation. Students do enjoy *Sure Thing*: we want to allow them to keep this good feeling. But, still, when we discuss this work, we raise a question or two about both what it offers and what it does not. *Sure Thing* is a pleasing play. Is it a complex one? Does it deepen in its meanings each time we read it or see it performed? Or does our return to the play give us the same experience we had before?

Again, since it is important for students to feel they can enjoy literature, we would not press such questions too hard. But it’s worthwhile to raise them, which one hopes will prompt students to reflect on the limits as well as the rewards of their experience of Ives’s engaging work.

**Sophocles**

*Oedipus the King* (p. 463)

Though interpretations are innumerable, most fall into the following categories.

1. The gods are just; Oedipus is at fault. The gods are innocent because foreknowledge is not foreordaining. (Jesus predicted that Peter would thrice deny him, but this prediction does not mean that Jesus destined Peter to deny him.) The prophecy told what Oedipus would do, but Oedipus did it because of what he was, not because the gods ordained him to do it. As we watch the play, we see a man acting freely—pursuing a course that leads to the revelation of who he is. (See especially Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes* [1971, 33–41].) Though Oedipus is often praised for relentlessly pursuing a truth that ultimately destroys him, the fact is that—until very late in the play—he believes he is searching for someone other than himself,
and moreover, in this search he too easily assumes that other people are subversive. Oedipus is rash and even cruel in his dealings with Teiresias, Creon, and the shepherd. His rashness is his hamartia, and the gods punish him for it. Given the prophecy that was given to Oedipus, a man less rash would have made it his business never to have killed anyone, and never to have married. (But he thought Polybos and Merope were his parents, and he knew that the old man [Laios] was not Polybos and that the queen in Thebes [Iocaste] was not Merope.)

2. The gods are at fault; Oedipus is innocent. When Oedipus asked the oracle who his parents were, the god answered in such a way as to cause Oedipus to leave a place of safety and to go to a tragic destination. Oedipus is a puppet of the gods; his hamartia is not rashness (a moral fault) but simply a mistake: He unintentionally killed his father and married his mother. The oracle was not conditional (it did not say, “If you do such and such, then such and such will happen”). The play is a tragedy of destiny; notice that at the end of the play no one justifies the gods, that is, no one exonerates them from forcing evil on Oedipus.

3. Oedipus is on the whole admirable (he pities his suffering kingdom; he has a keen desire to know the truth), but he is not perfect. The matter of his intention is irrelevant because the deeds of patricide and incest (irrespective of motive) contain pollution. The gods are mysterious, and though they sometimes shape men’s lives terribly, they are not evil because they cannot be judged by human standards of justice or morality.

4. Sophocles is not concerned with justice; the play is an exciting story about a man finding out something about the greatness of humanity and about human limitations.

Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (1968), has a long discussion of *Oedipus the King*, in the course of which he finds five themes.

1. The play is about man’s radical insecurity (epitomized in Oedipus’s fall); Oedipus was the first of men, but he fell.
2. The play is about human blindness. Oedipus did not know who he was (i.e., he was ignorant of his parentage); moreover, he was blind to the honesty of Creon and Teiresias.
3. The play is about the curse of honesty. Oedipus’s relentless desire to know the truth brings him to suffering. (If one wants to hunt for a tragic “flaw,” one can see this trait as a flaw or vice, but a more reasonable way of looking at it is to see it as a virtue. Would we regard a less solicitous ruler as more virtuous?)
4. The play is about a tragic situation. If Oedipus abandons his quest, he fails his people; if he pursues his quest, he ruins himself.
5. The play is about justice or, more precisely, about injustice, that is, undeserved suffering. (Here we come back to Kaufmann’s third point: The reward of Oedipus’s quest for truth is suffering. It is not even clear that he is being justly punished for killing Laios, for Oedipus belongs to the old heroic world, where
killing an enemy is celebrated.) Another point about the play as a play about justice: Sophocles talks of human justice too. When Oedipus curses the unknown killer of Laios, he does not think that the killer may have acted in self-defense. And Oedipus's desire to punish Creon and Teiresias similarly shows how wide of the mark efforts at human justice may be.

The Norton critical edition of *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1970), ed. L. Berkowitz and T. F. Brunner, includes a translation, some relevant passages from Homer, Thucydides, and Euripides, and numerous religious, psychological, and critical studies, including Freud's, whose key suggestion, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1999), is that the play “moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one” because there is a “voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny [in the play]. . . . His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father.”

An instructor who uses this quotation in class may wish to call attention to the male chauvinism: Freud’s “all of us” really means “all males,” although he did make various efforts to account for the Oedipus complex in women. It may also be relevant to mention that if the Oedipus of the play did have an Oedipus complex, he would have wanted to go to bed with Merope (the “mother” who brought him up) rather than Iocaste. Note, too, that when he kills Laios, Laios is to him a stranger, not his father. Indeed, his flight from Corinth is a sign that he does not wish to sleep with his mother or to kill his father. But perhaps such a view is too literal. Perhaps this is a convenient place to mention that Oedipus’s solution of the riddle of the Sphinx (a human being is the creature who walks on four feet in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening) is especially applicable to Oedipus himself (the weakest of infants, the strongest of men in his maturity, and desperately in need of a staff in his blind old age), but of course it applies to all the spectators as well.


**Additional Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing**
By today’s standards, is Oedipus in any sense guilty, and if so, of what?
Chapter 18

Reading and Writing about Poems

Emily Dickinson

Wild Nights—Wild Nights (p. 508)

A reader tends to think of Emily Dickinson as the speaker of “Wild Nights” and therefore is perhaps shocked by the last stanza, in which a woman apparently takes on the phallic role of a ship mooring in a harbor. But perhaps the poem is spoken by a man. (In one of her poems the speaker says, “I am a rural man,” in another the speaker refers to “my brown cigar,” and in “A narrow fellow in the Grass” the speaker identifies himself as male in lines 11–12.)

Possibly we are superficial readers, but we don’t attach to “Might I but moor—Tonight— / In Thee!” the strong sexual associations that several critics have commented on. Some but not all assume that the image suggests male penetration. Albert Gelpi, in The Tenth Muse (1975), pp. 242–243, says that “the sexual roles are blurred.” He adds, “Something more subtle than an inversion of sexual roles is at work here, and the point is not that Emily Dickinson was homosexual, as Rebecca Patterson and John Cody have argued,” but he doesn’t clarify the point. (Patterson’s discussion is in The Riddle of Emily Dickinson [1951]; Cody’s is in After Great Pain [1971].) Paula Bennett, in My Life a Loaded Gun (1986), drawing on a discussion by L. Faderman, seems to reject the idea of a male speaker. She says that “the imagery of the poem, with its emphasis on entering rather than being entered, is . . . far more appropriate for one woman’s experience of another than for a woman’s experience with a man” (p. 61). Christine Miller too insists that the speaker is a woman. In Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson, ed. Suzanne Juhasz (1983), Miller says that the speaker is a woman but she adds that “The woman is the ship that seeks to ‘moor—Tonight— / In Thee!’—an activity more representative of male than of female social behavior” (p. 137). Our own simple view: a reader need not find an image of penetration in “moor”; rather, we think that in this poem the word suggests a longed-for security.

Is the poem sentimental? We don’t think so, chiefly because it is brief, controlled, and (in “Tonight”) it does not claim too much.

writes, “Dying is a wild Night and a new road.” Looking at the poem in the light of this letter, Connelly concludes that “to die is to experience a wild night on a turbulent, surging sea. Only by plunging into this uncharted sea of Death can one at last reach the port of rest and calm. The poem, thus considered, is an apparent death wish: a personification and apostrophe to Death whose presence and company are paradoxically exhilarating luxury.” We are unconvinced, partly because the poem speaks not of “a wild night” but of “Wild Nights,” and we cannot see how the plural form lends itself to this reading.

When we teach a poem by Dickinson, we always start with two books by Joseph Duchac: The Poems of Emily Dickinson: An Annotated Guide to Commentary Published in English, 1890–1977 (1979), and The Poems of Emily Dickinson: An Annotated Guide to Commentary Published in English, 1978–1989 (1993). Duchac skillfully summarizes and quotes from a wide range of critical discussions of each of the poems, and he thereby provides students with a feeling for the variety of critical approaches to Dickinson that scholars have taken. Another book that we regularly consult is Helen Vendler, Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries (2010).

Dozens of books focus in whole or in part on Dickinson. The standard biography is Richard B. Sewall, The Life of Emily Dickinson, 2 vols. (1974). In our view, the best critical study (which includes a good deal of biographical and cultural context) has been written by Cynthia Griffin Wolff: Emily Dickinson (1986). The problem for students is that both of these studies are very long and densely detailed. They might do better with a brief overview: Helen McNeil, Emily Dickinson (1986). And some might benefit as well from consulting An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia (1998).

We need to report that in general our students have not gained much from perusing lengthy critical and scholarly discussions of Dickinson. They seem to get better results when they read and think carefully about the poems on their own, without the confusion that being exposed to many over-ingenious, unduly ideological, or highly theoretical analyses all too easily produces. Remember, too, that even as you focus on specific words, phrases, and images, you should also highlight the effect on the reader of the poem as a whole. As our comments in this manual make clear, we are great believers in the value of attending to local details. But for Dickinson, one must be wary of turning each poem into a series of puzzles. If you take the poem apart, fine: this is an important part of the critical process. But then put it back together. Ask the students, for example:

- What’s it like to read this poem?
- How did you feel about this poem when you were in the midst of it, and then when you were done?
- What makes reading Dickinson so different from reading other poets you know?

Give the students a chance to say and explain what’s on their minds. An open and honest discussion and debate about Dickinson will do much to make...
her seem vivid, accessible, immediate, rather than a remote author who designed impossibly “hard” poems that we must pry into until at last (if we are lucky) we discover their secrets.

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

*Sonnet 146 (Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth)* (p. 510)


See also an article by Charles A. Huttar, “The Christian Basis of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 146,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 19 (Autumn 1968): 355–365, which rejects a reading that the poem ironically argues that spiritual health is achieved by bodily subjugation. The rejected reading holds that the advice that the soul exploit the body must be ironic, since if it were not ironic, the soul would be guilty of simony, the sin of buying (or attempting to buy) salvation. According to this ironic reading, the poet really is pleading for the life of the body against a rigorous asceticism which glorifies the spirit at the expense of the body. But Huttar argues (by citing biblical sources and Christian commentaries) that the poem argues on behalf of the traditional Christian doctrine that the soul should be the master of the body; the body (which must in any case die) should not be allowed to cause the soul to “pine.” The poem, Huttar says, is close to Jesus’s words in Matthew 6:20: “Lay up for yourself treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust cloth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal.”

**ROBERT FROST**

*The Telephone* (p. 511)

A student of ours, Jane Takayanagi, wrote an entry in a journal that we think is worth reprinting. In our opinion she is right in seeing that a quarrel has precipitated the speaker’s walk (“When I was just as far as I could walk / From here today”), but it is hard to convince someone who doesn’t sense it. In any case, here is the entry from her journal:

As the poem goes on, we learn that the man wants to be with the woman, but it starts by telling us that he walked as far away from her as he could. He doesn’t say why, but I think from the way the woman speaks later in the poem, they had a fight and he walked out. Then, when he stopped to rest, he thought he heard her voice. He really means that he was thinking of her and he was hoping she was thinking of him. So he returns, and he tells her
he heard her calling him, but he pretends he heard her call him through a flower on their window sill. He can’t admit that he was thinking about her.

This seems very realistic to me; when someone feels a bit ashamed, it’s sometimes hard to admit that you were wrong, and you want the other person to tell you that things are OK anyhow. And judging from line 7, when he says “Don’t say I didn’t,” it seems that she is going to interrupt him by denying it. She is still angry, or maybe she doesn’t want to make up too quickly. But he wants to pretend that she called him back so when he says, “Do you remember what it was you said?” she won’t admit that she was thinking of him, and she says, “First tell me what it was you thought you heard.” She’s testing him a little. So he goes on, with the business about flowers as telephones, and he says “someone” called him. He understands that she doesn’t want to be pushed into forgiving him, so he backs off. Then she is willing to admit that she did think about him, but still she doesn’t quite admit it. She is too proud to say openly that she wants him back but does say, “I may have thought as much.” And then, since they both have preserved their dignity and also have admitted that they care about the other, he can say, “Well, so I came.”

Two other (small) points: (1) Why in line 11 does Frost speak of having “driven a bee away”? We think that maybe in a tiny way it shows the speaker’s willingness to exert himself and to face danger. It’s a miniature ordeal, a test of his mettle. (2) In line 17 the speaker says, “I heard it as I bowed.” Of course “bowed” rhymes with “aloud,” but putting aside the need for a rhyme, surely the phrase is better than, say, “I heard it as I stood,” since it conveys a gesture of humility.

Students always enjoy the time we spend on Frost’s poetry, in part because most of them are already familiar with a number of Frost poems from their high school English courses. Perhaps for this reason, students seem able to respond well to, and make good use of, critical writing on Frost. The students have responses of their own to begin with; they can work with a new idea or insight, or reject it, and they do not see the criticism as preventing them from knowing their own views about the poem.

We don’t think it is a good idea simply to assign critical essays to students. Even when they are reading about a poet whom they know a little about, students at an introductory level need some guidance from you. We therefore explain to them first why it is both helpful and important to read criticism—that it sharpens our knowledge, gives us (at its best) examples of attentive reading, and provides us with responses, ideas, and arguments against which we can test our own. In a word, we suggest to students that they use criticism not in order to learn what to think, but, rather, how to think more clearly and complicately themselves. “When you read criticism,” we say to our students, “you enter into the ongoing critical conversation about (for example) Frost.” “As in any conversation,” we add, “you are not obliged to agree with all or any of the voices that you hear: you listen, learn, respond, and work your way toward your own conclusions.”

Students will gain even more from criticism if you give them some exercises and writing assignments. When you are studying Frost, or Blake, or Dickinson, or some other poet whom critics have written about well, select one or two critical selections—perhaps, for instance, one of Poirier’s explications of a Frost poem. Ask the class to answer these questions:

- What is the critic’s main argument about this poem?
- Which details in the poem’s language does the critic cite and examine to support his or her argument?
- Which aspects of the poem does this critic help you to understand more clearly?
- Do you interpret the poem differently? Do you think that this critic misreads the poem as a whole or misunderstands parts of it?

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

*Sonnet 130 (My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun)* (p. 516)

Students enjoy what seems to be Shakespeare’s genial dismissal of metaphoric poetry in favor of reality, but of course Shakespeare uses comparable metaphors in his other writing. Although here he says (to take only the first line) that his “mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” in Sonnet 18 he speaks of the sun as “the eye of heaven,” and in Sonnet 49 he speaks of “that sun, thine eye.” All this is only to say that Shakespeare can satirize himself as well as other poets, and that the house of poetry has many mansions, including not only the Petrarchan sonnet but also satires of Petrarchan sonnets, or, to put the matter slightly differently, poetry can include love poetry (this poem is an example) and satires of love poetry (this poem is an example).

In the Oxford Shakespeare’s *Complete Sonnets and Poems* (2002), Colin Burrow makes the nice point that the first word of the sonnet, “My,” is “given a proud emphasis to distinguish the poet’s mistress from the majority of Elizabethan sonnetteer’s mistresses” (p. 640). And the interest and pleasure of the
poem as a whole develop from the speaker’s comparisons and contrasts. Some critics have said that Sonnet 130 should not be taken too seriously. Stephen Booth, for example, in Shakespeare’s Sonnets (1977), finds it “a winsome trifle,” “easily distorted into a solemn critical statement about sonnet conventions.” Booth agrees that the poem “does gently mock the thoughtless, mechanical application of the standard Petrarchan metaphors,” but he adds “the speaker’s clown act in taking hyperbolic metaphors literally appears to have no target and no aim” (pp. 452, 454). Helen Vendler, in The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets (1997), offers in our view a more balanced, supple response (see pp. 556–558). She observes about the final lines: “His beloved, the speaker ends by saying, is as rare as anyone else’s, the more so since the other women are actively misrepresented (belied) in their sycophants’ verses” (p. 557).

It’s our guess that only two terms may be unfamiliar to most of your students, “rhino” (money), a term that is chiefly British and whose origin is unknown, and “Ginnie Maes,” the plural of Ginnie Mae, the nickname of the Government National Mortgage Association.

The pleasure that we take in this poem is partly the pleasure one takes in catalogs—an old device, at least as old as the catalog of ships in Homer—and partly the pleasure of reveling in variety. Who would have thought there were so many terms for money?

But of course there is a further pleasure; even in this short, playful poem there is a sort of plot, or at least a mild shift in the speaking tone of voice. The poem begins merely by enunciating nouns that mean money ("Money, the long green, / cash, stash, rhino, jack / or just plain dough"). That is, the first stanza simply gives us nouns; it simply names something, though in an entertaining way (notice the rhyme in the second line). In the second stanza we get verbs and sentences ("Chock it up, fork it over"). In the third stanza the voice gets more excited ("To be made of it! To have it / to burn!"), and in the fourth and fifth stanzas the voice becomes more meditative, reflective, philosophic ("It greases the palm, feathers a nest"). The final stanza continues the philosophizing, and rather wittily brings together the idea of filthy lucre ("You don’t know where it’s been") with the idea that money is nevertheless something we hold dearly ("you put it where your mouth is"), and it then picks up the idea of “mouth” by ending with the grand truth about money: “it talks.”

Here are two additional wise remarks about money:

“Money is like muck; not good except it be spread” (Francis Bacon, Essays)

“You can be young without money but you can’t be old without it” (Tennessee Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof)
ROBERT FROST

The Hardship of Accounting (p. 518)

We don’t want to put too much weight on this small bit of light verse, but we do think it is engaging, and we think it sneaks under the wire and counts as poetry, whereas “Thirty days hath September” is verse, not poetry. Our point is this: Anything that rhymes is verse (as opposed to prose); poetry may rhyme or it may not (blank verse, free verse), but—as a work of literature—poetry brings us into an imagined world, taking us up (at least for a moment) into its own world. “Thirty days” has the grand virtues of being true, being memorable, and being very useful, but it doesn’t take us into a new world, it doesn’t enlarge our horizons. Frost’s little poem, in our view, does enlarge our minds.

“The Hardship of Accounting” begins with a dry, unpromising title, but almost immediately we hear an engaging voice. The avuncular speaker, commanding our attention, seems to be pointing his finger at us: “Never ask of money spent / Where the spender thinks it went.” Probably most of us are ready to agree even now; we have been asked the question more than once, and we squirmed while thinking of an answer. The speaker now amplifies his position, explaining why we should not demand to know where the money went:

Nobody was ever meant
To remember or invent
What he did with every cent.

The wonderful moment in the poem comes with the word “invent,” where Frost mercifully tells us that we should not have to invent an explanation (as in this sad world we sometimes do) that accounts for the missing money. OK, OK, so I am a stamp collector (or an orchid breeder, or the buyer of a new pair of shoes, or whatever) and I spent a lot more on this stamp (or orchid, or shoes, or whatever) than I should have, but, well, do I have to tell you that, do I have to justify my extravagance? In our view, the little drama or confrontation that is conjured up by the line about remembering—or inventing!—the little glimpse of imagined domestic conflict, is what makes these lines not merely verse but poetry.

EDMUND WALLER

Song (Go, lovely rose) (p. 519)

Students may already have encountered Herrick’s “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” in Chapter 6, and if they read the poem that immediately follows Waller’s they will encounter Blake’s “The Sick Rose.” In combination, these offer plenty of opportunity to discuss symbolism—though we hasten to add that the real point of assigning these poems is not to talk about symbolism but to read some wonderful poems.
In line 2, “wastes” is perhaps more potent than many students at first find it, for the word implies not simply squandering but destroying as in, for example, “to lay waste a city,” and “cancer wasted her body.” The modern slang usage, “to kill,” conveys the old meaning.

WILLIAM BLAKE

The Sick Rose (p. 520)

“The Sick Rose” has been much interpreted, usually along the lines given in the text. (See Reuben Brower, The Fields of Light [1962] and Rosenthal and Smith, Exploring Poetry [1955].) But E. D. Hirsch Jr., in Innocence and Experience (1975), argues that “The rose is being satirized by Blake as well as being infected by the worm. Part of the rose’s sickness is her ignorance of her disease. Her ignorance is her spiritual disease because in accepting ‘dark secret love’ she has unknowingly repressed and perverted her instinctive life, her ‘bed of crimson joy.’” Hirsch argues his point for a couple of pages.

We especially like Helen Vendler’s comment on this poem in her introduction to The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry (1985):

The world of the poem is analogous to the existential world, but not identical with it. In a famous created world of Blake’s, for instance, there is a rose doomed to mortal illness by the love of a flying worm who is invisible. We do not experience such a poem by moving it piecemeal into our world deciding what the rose “symbolizes” and what the worm “stands for.” On the contrary, we must move ourselves in to its ambience, into a world in which a dismayed man can converse with his beloved rose and thrust upon her, in his anguished jealousy, diagnosis and fatal prognosis in one sentence. . . . After living in Blake’s world for the space of eight lines, we return to our own world, haunted and accused.

Allen Ginsberg has “tuned” the poem (MGM Records FTS-3083).

ROBERT HERRICK

Upon Julia’s Clothes (p. 521)

A good deal has been published on this tiny poem. Much of what has been published seems odd to us, for instance, an argument that in the first stanza Julia is clothed but in the second is imagined as nude (“free” is alleged to describe her body, not her clothes), or that the first stanza describes her from the front, the second from the rear.
One of our students, Stan Wylie, seems to us to have written a far better discussion of the poem. We print it in the book.

Other things, of course, might be said about this poem. For instance, Wylie says nothing about the changes in the meter and their contributions to the poem. Nor does he say anything about the sounds of any of the words (he might have commented on the long vowels in “sweetly flows” and shown how the effect would have been different if instead of “sweetly flows” Herrick had written “sweetly flits,” and he might have commented on the spondees in “Then, then” and “O, how” and the almost-spondees in “Next, when,” “each way free,” and “that glittering”), but such topics might be material for another essay.

**Billy Collins**

**Sonnet** (p. 535)

This poem will cause students no difficulty, and we think they will greatly enjoy it. Collins does introduce talk about the difficulties of writing a sonnet—he even dares to compare the poet’s burden to Christ’s via dolorosa—but the tone is easy-going from start to finish. In our view, the comparison of the fourteen stages in Christ’s journey to the fourteen lines of the sonnet is a bit of self-mockery rather than blasphemy, though of course other readers may disagree with our easy assessment.

We especially like the ninth line, where the Petrarchan sonnet regularly takes a “turn”; Collins’s language suggests that the “little ship” of line 3 has become a speeding car, and the rhetorical “turn” becomes physical: “But hang on here while we make the turn.” In line 10 he assures us that “all will be resolved” (we are confident that indeed it will be, as it is in any successful sonnet), and by the end of the poem Laura invites Petrarch into bed. Presumably the “crazy medieval tights” are removed, along with the eccentric behavior, just as the “storm-tossed seas” of line 3 have been weathered, and we are in the comfortable, ordinary world where people “at last [go] to bed.”

The amazing thing about this sonnet—often overlooked by students—is that it does not employ rhyme. Surely Collins is playing a little joke on his readers.

Collins is very popular—sales of his books have broken all records for poetry—and many critics and poets have spoken highly about his work.

Billy Collins writes lovely poems—lovely in a way almost nobody’s since Roethke’s are. Limpid, gently and consistently startling, more serious than they seem, they describe all the worlds that are and were and some others besides.

—John Updike

Billy Collins is an American original—a metaphysical poet with a funny bone and a sly, questioning intelligence. He is an ironist of the void, and his
poems—witty, playful and beautifully formed—bump up against the deepest human mysteries.

—Edward Hirsch

Billy Collins’s poems are graceful, ironic, smart, and full of feeling. Sometimes wrongfully described as a defense against feeling, irony is, in fact, a deeply mixed feeling. In poems as good as Collins’s, it is a mirror in which we see ourselves not by reflecting in lazy categories, but perhaps as experience sees us, and certainly as we imagine ourselves.

—William Matthews


Some critics, and some of his fellow poets, however, find his style and approach unchallenging. Consider, for example, this passage from an essay on Collins by the poet-critic Jeredith Merrin, “Art Over Easy,” The Southern Review 38:1 (Winter 2002):

The big draw here, for both writers and readers, is that Collins makes it all look more than easy; a breeze. Collins might be dubbed, in fact, Our Laureate of Easiness. . . . The problem, though, with an esthetic of easiness—though it might at first seem the right homespun riposte to Continentally influenced modernist difficulty—is that it condescends to readers and tries to pass off as unhighbutin’ honesty what are in fact downright untruths. This is a writer who takes you for a walk on the mild side. What you already know on earth, he assures you, is all you need to know.

Students, especially in an introductory course, often find poetry “hard,” and we think it is a good idea to raise this issue with them and explore it. And it helps if you can key the discussion to a specific literary work, like this poem (which we admire) by Collins. Is the poem easy? Is it too easy? What makes one poem easier than another? Should poetry be “hard,” and what exactly does this term mean? What are some examples of “hard” poems in other chapters of this book? Is the hardness a matter of the language, or of the thoughts and feelings that the poet describes, or both?

Here are two more quotations to keep in mind as the discussion proceeds. Gerard Manley Hopkins says that poetry is “speech framed . . . to be heard for its own sake and interest even and above its interest of meaning.” For his part, T. S. Eliot suggests that “poetry communicates before it is understood.”

ROBERT BROWNING

My Last Duchess (p. 539)

Robert Langbaum has an old but still good analysis of “My Last Duchess” in The Poetry of Experience (1957). On this poem, see also Laurence Perrine, PMLA 74
March 1959): 157–159. W. J. T. Mitchell, in “Representation,” in Critical Terms for Literary Study (1969), ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, discusses the poem at some length. One of his points: “Just as the duke seems to hypnotize the envoy, Browning seems to paralyze the reader’s normal judgment by his virtuosic representation of villainy. His poem holds us in its grip, condemning in advance all our attempts to control it by interpretation. . . .”

It may be mentioned here that although every poem has a “voice,” not every poem needs to be a Browningesque dramatic monologue giving the reader a strong sense of place and audience. No one would criticize Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” on the grounds that the “lady” addressed in line 2 gives place (in at least some degree) to a larger audience—let us say, a general audience—when we get to “But at my back I always hear / Time’s winged chariot hurrying near.”

Biographies include William Irvine and Park Honan, The Book, the Ring, and the Poet (1974), and Clyde de L. Ryals, The Life of Robert Browning: A Critical Biography (1993). The best critical discussion of “My Last Duchess” is still, we think, the one by Robert Langbaum. Though there are many books and articles on Browning, we have found few that have proven rewarding to us, and students likely will find even these hard to benefit from. Of the other studies we are familiar with, the most helpful are Herbert F. Tucker, Browning’s Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure (1980), and Loy Martin, Browning’s Dramatic Monologues and the Post-Romantic Subject (1985). When you teach Browning, be sure to read the poems aloud in class—it would not hurt if you practiced beforehand, in order to sense where the emphasis and pacing fall. The students need to hear the sharp, subtle, self-revealing turns of voice in these poems.

E. E. CUMMINGS

anyone lived in a pretty how town (p. 541)

It can be useful to ask students to put into the usual order (so far as one can) the words of the first two stanzas and then to ask students why Cummings’s version is more effective. Here are a few rough glosses: line 4: “danced his did” = lived intensely (versus the “someones” who in line 18 “did their dance,” that is, unenthusiastically went through motions that might have been ecstatic); line 7: “they sowed their isn’t they reaped their same” gives us the little-minded or small-minded who, unlike “anyone,” are unloving and therefore receiving nothing; line 8: “sun moon stars rain” = day after day; line 10: “down they forgot as up they grew” implies a mental diminution that accompanies growing up; line 17: “someones,” that is, adults, people who think they are somebody; line 25: “anyone died,” that is, the child matured and stopped loving (and became dead as the other adults). The last two stanzas imply that although children grow into “Women and men” (line 33), the seasons continue the same. (This reading is heavily indebted to R. C. Walsh,
Explicator 22 no. 9 [May 1964], Item 72. For a more complicated reading, see D. L. Clark, *Lyric Resonance* (1972), pp. 187–194.)

Like Robert Frost, E. E. Cummings is frequently read in high school English courses, and his work gets a lively response from students in our introductory literature and composition courses.

**Sylvia Plath**

*Daddy* (p. 542)

C. B. Cox and A. R. Jones point out, in *Critical Quarterly* 6 (Summer 1964): 107–122, that literature has always been interested in perverse states of mind (Greek and Roman interest in the irrational; Elizabethan interest in melancholy, jealousy, madness, etc., and Browning’s dramatic monologues). The “fine frenzy” of the poet himself (in the words of Shakespeare’s Theseus), once associated with inspiration and even divinity, in the twentieth century links the poet with the psychotic personality. And apparently a sensitive (poetic) mind can make only a deranged response in a deranged world. Plath’s “Daddy” begins with simple repetitions that evoke the world of the nursery rhyme (and yet also of the witches in *Macbeth*, who say, “I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do”). The opening line also connects with the suggestion of the marriage service (“And I said I do”) in line 67. The speaker sees herself as tormented yet also as desiring the pain inflicted by her father/love (“Every woman adores a Fascist”). She recognizes that by accepting the need for love she exposes herself to violence. The speaker’s identification of herself with Jews and the evocation of “Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” suggest some identity between the heroine’s tortured mind and the age’s. Death, Cox and Jones go on to say, is the only release from a world that denies love and life. The “Daddy” of the poem is father, Germany, fatherland, and—life itself, which surrounds the speaker and which the speaker rejects.

In *Commentary* (July 1974 and October 1974), there is an exchange of letters on the appropriateness of Plath’s use of Nazi imagery in a poem about her father. Roger Hoffman, in the July issue, argues that the imagery is valid because in a child’s mind an authoritarian father is fearsome. Irving Howe, in October (pp. 9–12), replies that this argument is inadequate ground “for invoking the father as a Nazi.” The speaker of the poem is not a child, Howe says, but “the grown-up writer, Sylvia Plath.” He goes on: the “unwarranted fusion of child’s response and grown-ups’ references makes for either melodrama or self-pity.” Howe also rejects Carole Stone’s argument (July) that the images are acceptable because “one individual’s psyche [can] approximate the suffering of a people.” Howe replies that the victims of the concentration camps didn’t merely “suffer”; they were methodically destroyed. He questions the appropriateness of using images of the camps to evoke personal traumas. There is, he says, a lack of “congruence” between the object and the image, “a failure in judgement.”


**Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing**

The speaker expresses her hatred for her father by identifying him with the Nazis, herself with the Jews. Is it irresponsible for a poet to compare her sense of torment with that of Jews who were gassed in Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen?

**Gwendolyn Brooks**

*We Real Cool* (p. 545)

The unusual arrangement of the lines, putting what ordinarily would be the first syllable of the second line at the end of the first line, and so on, of course emphasizes the “we”—and therefore emphasizes the absence of “we” in the final line, which consists only of “Die soon,” the “we” having been extinguished. The disappearance of the “we” is especially striking in a poem in which the “we” is so pleased with itself.

By emphasis we don’t necessarily mean a heavy stress on the word. An emphasis can be gained by the slightest of pauses (even though the word is not followed by a comma or a shift in tone). In *Report from Part One* (1972), Brooks comments on this poem:

The ending WEs in “We Real Cool” are tiny, wispy, weakly argumentative “Kilroy-is-here” announcements. The boys have no accented sense of themselves, yet they are aware of a semidefined personal importance. Say the “we” softly. (p. 185)

“We” presumably refers to a gang of seven confident pool players, but if seven is traditionally a lucky number, it brings these people no luck. The subtitle allows one to infer that at the Golden Shovel they are digging their own graves.

**Etheridge Knight**

*For Malcolm, a Year After* (p. 546)

We like to remind students that careful reading is the result of being attentive—of paying attention to the meanings, movements, and rhythms of the words on
the page. And we often add that everything in a poem is worth paying attention to, from the title to the final line.

Knight’s poem is a good case in point, for its interest begins with the title. The title states the occasion, the purpose: this poem is written for Malcolm, for the African-American leader assassinated in 1965. But more than that: it is a poem written a year after the event, which leads the reader to believe that this poem will be more reflective, more deliberative, than a poem that had been written in the immediate aftermath of Malcolm’s killing. Possibly, the reader might assume, it will not be a bitter or angry poem, or, if it is in part, that those feelings will be blended with others that are more measured, more controlled.

The title also raises questions: Has the speaker written about Malcolm before, making this new poem another installment in his exploration of Malcolm’s life and death? Or has he waited until now to write, and if so, what kind of special burden or opportunity becomes available to him, having waited as he has for a year to pass?

Stanzas 1 and 2 both begin with a verb about art and writing—“compose.” The poem as a whole is both about Malcolm and, as much or more, about the act of writing a poem about him. At first hearing, the opening line might seem directed to the reader—“this is your task to perform; do it this way.” But quickly it is made clear that the speaker is addressing himself: “this is what you should do.” The poem is in a sense a prelude to a poem for Malcolm.

Notice, too, that the title says “For Malcolm,” while the first line says “for Red,” Malcolm’s nickname during his earlier years as a criminal and prisoner. A small-seeming detail, perhaps, but you might ask the students what are the differences between the two names, and why Knight makes the shift from one to another that he does.

The verbs in the poem are noteworthy in, for example, the lines:

Or they might boil and break the dam.
Or they might boil and overflow
And drench me, drown me, drive me mad.

Here, Knight may be echoing some well-known lines from one of John Donne’s Holy Sonnets:

BATTER my heart, three person’d God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow mee, and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.

See also Shakespeare’s Sonnet XV:

When I consider every thing that grows
Holds in perfection but a little moment,
That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;

When I perceive that men as plants increase,
Cheered and check’d e’en by the self-same sky,
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
And wear their brave state out of memory;
Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,
Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay,
To change your day of youth to sullied night;
And, all in war with Time for love of you,
As he takes from you, I engraft you new.

Knight is, in a sense, making the opposite claim from Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s writing will keep alive the beloved, fighting against the decay that time causes, whereas Knight states that the verse he (or anyone else) will compose for Malcolm “will die.” Poems die, just as all men die. “But not the memory of him,” Knight affirms.

These final lines, however, are a bit of a puzzle. Everything will pass away, but not the “memory” of Malcolm X. No, that’s not quite right: it is not the memory, but the “anger” that will endure. The memory is the anger. But the tone of the final lines does not sound angry; the tone is more that of resignation, almost of defeat. It is conceivable that the use of the term “anger” could carry a potent charge, akin to Langston Hughes’s final word in his poem “Dream Deferred.” But the force and fear and threat that Hughes puts into the tone is not there (not for us at any rate) in Knight’s poem. You might ask the students how they “hear” these final lines, and how they would characterize the tone.

Of course the key turn in the poem that Knight intends is that the “anger” referred to in the final line reaches back to the “angry words” described in the first stanza: Knight, ultimately, concludes that no poem for Malcolm is possible: no poem could hope to channel and contain the anger felt on the day of his death and that lingers a year after.

Because Knight himself spent a number of years in prison and in rehab programs, it is tempting to associate the fact of imprisonment in his life, and the many images of and references to prison in his poetry, to the thrust of this poem, which is about trying to give a kind of imprisoning form to angry feelings. But this formal prison will not work, the speaker suggests: the feelings are too strong to be held in check, kept back; they demand release, they break free and always will.

Knight is less familiar to contemporary readers than are, for example, Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, but in the 1960s and 1970s he was a powerful voice and influence. “His work was hailed by black writers and critics as another excellent example of the powerful truth of blackness in art,” comments Shirley Lumpkin in The Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 41: Afro-American Poets Since 1955 (1985). “His work became important in Afro-American poetry and poetics and in the strain of Anglo-American poetry descended from Walt Whitman.”
Much of Knight's prison poetry, according to Patricia Liggins Hill in “The Violent Space: The Function of the New Black Aesthetic in Etheridge Knight's Prison Poetry,” Black American Literature Forum 14:3 (Autumn 1980): 115–121, “focuses on imprisonment as a form of contemporary enslavement and looks for ways in which one can be free despite incarceration.” And, again, this impulse toward freedom is implied in “For Malcolm, a Year After,” when the speaker contends that no verse form or structure can control “the anger of that day.”

For more on Knight, we recommend “Etheridge Knight—Portrait,” a special feature in the journal Callaloo 19:4 (1996).

Included in this issue is a good essay by Jean Anaporte-Easton, “Etheridge Knight, Poet and Prisoner: An Introduction.” She notes, in a passage that might spur students to read more of this poet's disturbing work:

Much of Knight's finished writing seems to have taken place while he was in prison or during stays in jail or rehabilitation centers. Furthermore, it was in prison that he first defined himself as a poet. From the poems available to us now, over half of those Knight published, and the majority of his best poems, were written by 1973. He had been out of prison only five years and had spent at least a year of that time in jail and drug and alcohol rehab programs. Just as a prison with ribbon wire and chain-link fences might be easier to deal with than the invisible prison of cultural assumptions and values, so might it be easier to confront and cope with the finite emptiness of solitary confinement than an infinite interior emptiness. (pp. 941–942)

**Anne Sexton**

*Her Kind* (p. 547)

We learn from Diane Middlebrook’s *Anne Sexton* (1991) that the first draft of the poem was entitled “Night Voice on a Broomstick,” and a later version was entitled “Witch.” Sexton's final title is less explicit, but in the first line the speaker identifies herself: “I have gone out, a possessed witch,” so students should not have much trouble seeing at least the boldest outline of the speaker. Sexton regularly began her public readings with this poem, letting the audience know what they were in for, or at least letting them know what sort of persona she wished to present to them.

A witch is a female in league with the devil and other evil spirits, endowed with magic powers (the male equivalent is a “warlock”) and estranged from decent society. No doubt Sexton’s deep mental problems made her feel alienated from much of society, and no doubt, too, she recognized that her gift as a poet also separated her from ordinary people. In this respect she takes a place in the Romantic tradition of the poet as one who voyages through “strange seas of thought, alone” (Wordsworth's phrase, though Wordsworth was speaking not of poets but of Isaac Newton). That the poetic gift, the gift of imagination, can
become a curse that estranges the bearer is evident in the term le poète maudit. Such an idea may be new to your students, but if they have already read Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” they have encountered the powerful but alienated creator-poet at the end of the poem:

. . . with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome, those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there.
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Sexton’s persona, in the first stanza “a possessed witch” whose mental deviation is given a physical equivalent in her twelve fingers (line 5), has engaged in “dreaming evil,” but the second stanza modifies this persona: The witch in the second stanza is a sort of nourishing housewife who fills the skillets, fixes suppers. In this aspect, she is a benevolent witch, or at least in one mood she sees herself as such. But the final stanza returns to the witch as the person at odds with society: Here she is riding in a cart, on her way to be burned at the stake (“your flames still bite my thigh”). There also is a reference, in line 19, to the instrument of torture known as the rack: the victim’s body was stretched out on a sort of table, with his or her arms and legs extended and tied. A wheel at each end was rotated, winding up the rope and thereby causing the limbs to be pulled out of their sockets. Sexton sees herself as being tortured to death because of her difference from society, but she is unrepentant:

A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.

The question, we suppose, is whether this sort of self-dramatization is brave and refreshingly honest and makes readers confront their own selves and their views of outsiders, or whether it is melodramatic and self-indulgent.

JAMES WRIGHT

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota (p. 548)

It seems to us that the title is somewhat paradoxical, in its implication of utter relaxation and apartness—lying in a hammock, at someone’s farm, on an
island—and (on the other hand) the almost pedantic or fussy specification of the locale. And we find the rest of the poem paradoxical too.

The speaker’s eye ranges. He takes in the view above (a natural starting place for someone lying in a hammock), then looks “Down the ravine,” then “to my right,” and then, at the end, up again (“I lean back”), when he observes the chicken hawk. In a sense he ends where he began, but meanwhile he has explored (or at least surveyed) a good deal. He has, from his sleep-like condition in the hammock, begun by seeing a bronze-colored butterfly “Asleep,” then has heard the distant cowbells, and has seen “The droppings of last year’s horses” (so we get some extension into time as well as into space), and then glances again at the skies. This exploration—all from the hammock—is marked by keen yet imaginative observations.

Let’s go back a moment, to the first perception, the “bronze butterfly / Asleep.” The poet is describing the color, but the effect is paradoxical, giving the reader a fragile insect made of an enduring material. From perceptions of colors (“bronze,” “black,” “green”) we go to aural perceptions (“the cowbells follow one another”) and then back to visual perceptions (the horse droppings, now “golden stones”). In all of this beauty there is a keen sense of isolation—the cows and horses are not present, and even the chicken hawk is looking for home. Now, “as the evening darkens,” the speaker has an epiphany, uttered in the final line.

The final line probably comes to the reader as a shock, and perhaps the reader is uncertain about how to take it. Is the speaker kidding? Or is he saying, in dead seriousness, all creatures except me seem to have their place in a marvelously beautiful, peaceful nature, whereas I am not even in my own home? Our own impression is that, whatever he says, we feel that he has not wasted his life, since he has so interestingly recorded his perceptions.

Chapter 19

Thinking Critically about Poems: Two Case Studies

A CASE STUDY ABOUT EMILY DICKINSON


Note: Elsewhere in the text we include other poems by Dickinson (“I felt a Cleaving,” “I felt a Funeral,” “I’m Nobody,” “The Dust behind,” “Wild Nights”), and these are discussed in this manual at the appropriate places, except for “I’m Nobody” which is extensively discussed in the text.

EMILY DICKINSON

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died— (p. 552)

Dickinson’s poem juxtaposes some conventional religious images (“that last Onset,” “the King,” “What portion of me be / Assignable”) with the buzz of a fly, rather than with, say, choirs of angels, and so, as Charles R. Anderson suggests in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry (1960), “The King witnessed in his power is physical death, not God.” Should one go further and suggest that Death-as-fly equals putrefaction?

The last line of the poem (“I could not see to see”) especially has attracted attention. Gerhard Friedrich (Explicator 13 [April 1955], Item 35) paraphrases it thus: “Waylaid by irrelevant, tangible, finite objects of little importance, I was no longer capable of that deeper perception which would clearly reveal to me the infinite spiritual reality.” The fall into skepticism, Friedrich says, demonstrates the inadequacy of the earlier pseudostoicism. John Ciardi took issue with this interpretation and suggested (Explicator 14 [January 1956], Item 22) that the fly is “the last kiss of the world, the last buzz from
life,” reflecting “Emily’s tremendous attachment to the physical world”; the final line, in his view, simply means, “And then there was no more of me, and nothing to see with.”

The Todd-Higginson editions gave “round my form” for “in the Room” (line 2), “The eyes beside” for “The Eyes around” (line 5), “sure” for “firm” (line 6), “witnessed in his power” for “witnessed—in the Room” (line 8), and “What portion of me I / Could make assignable—and then” for “What portion of me be / Assignable—and then it was” (lines 10–11). It is worth discussing with students the differences these changes make.

**EMILY DICKINSON**

*The Soul selects her own Society* (p. 553)

Richard Sewall, in *Voices and Visions* (1987), ed. Helen Vendler, calls this poem Dickinson’s “most famous ‘choice’ poem” (p. 72), and indeed he leaves the choice of its subject to the reader; it may be read as concerned with the choice of a lover, or a friend, or a kind of spiritual life. Even without being certain of the subject of this poem, one can sense how the form contributes to meaning. The even-numbered lines are shorter than the odd-numbered lines that precede them, and each even-numbered line ends emphatically with a monosyllable, thus contrasting with the previous lines’ feminine endings. And in the final stanza the short lines are even shorter (a mere two syllables each); the tight-lipped speaker leaves no doubt about the determination of the soul which has made a choice and now rejects all other suppliants, however noble. But details remain uncertain, and critics have not been so tight-lipped.

W. C. Jumper, in *Explicator* 29 (September 1970), Item 5, suggests that the soul (feminine because Latin *anima* is feminine) has a “divine Majority” because Thoreau had said in *The Duty of Civil Disobedience* that “any man more right than his neighbors, constitutes a majority of one.” Jumper points out that the second stanza makes ironic use of two folktales, “The Querulous Princess” and “The King and the Beggar Maid.” In the first of these tales, the wooers arrive in chariots, but the winner of her hand is he who will bow his head to enter through a low gate; in the second tale, the king kneels before a beggar maid and wins her. In “The Soul selects” the soul rejects two such humble wooers, having already made her choice.

The word “Valves” in the penultimate line has especially disconcerted critics. *Explicator* 25 (April 1967), Item 8, suggests that it is connected with “Door” in line 2 via two old meanings: (1) the leaves of a double or folding door and (2) the halves of the shell of a bivalve such as an oyster, which closes its valve when disturbed and thus remains “like Stone.” Sewall takes “Valves” to refer to a double door and says that “the line simply dramatizes further the action of line two” (p. 73).
EMILY DICKINSON

These are the days when Birds come back (p. 553)

The time is Indian summer, that is, a day that seems summery but is late, hence it is a sort of sophistry of mistake or fraud. (By the way, it is not true that birds, deceived by Indian summer, return.) Lines 10–11 introduce religious imagery (“ranks of seed their witness bear,” and the pun on alter-altar, which suggests a communion scene), anticipating the more overt religious images in the next two stanzas.

Some readers take the poem to suggest that just as the season can be deceptive, communion too can be deceptive or illusory. Other readers see the poem moving the other way: from the illusory season, which evokes nostalgic thoughts, to the real or firm joys of Christian immortality. Charles Anderson, in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry (1960), gives a substantive analysis. He suggests that the season’s ambiguity provokes the question, “Does it symbolize death or immortality?” and he answers that Dickinson does not give an answer but gives us “warring images poised in ironic tension.”

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. What season or weather is being talked about? Why does Dickinson use the words “mistake” (line 6) and “fraud” and “cheat” (line 7)?
2. Explain the pun on “altered” in line 11.
3. Take the first three stanzas as a group and summarize them in a sentence or two. Do the same for the last three. Then, in a sentence or two, state the relationship between these two halves of the poem.
4. Why “a child” in line 15?

EMILY DICKINSON

Papa above! (p. 554)

At one extreme, we have encountered readers who find the poem a bitter protest masquerading as a prayer, a scathing attack on the anthropomorphic God of Judaism and Christianity; at the other extreme we have encountered readers who find nothing but piety in the poem, albeit piety in a very Dickinsonian idiom, a piety rooted in affection for God’s creatures, even the mouse or rat. Our own view is somewhere in the middle; we hear genial—even affectionate—satire of anthropomorphism, and we also hear acceptance of the strange government of the world. Chiefly, we think, the poem expresses—again, in a characteristically Dickinsonian way—the “primal sense of awe” that Charles R. Anderson commented on.

“Papa above” begins with a domesticated version of the beginning of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6.9–13, “Our Father who art in heaven”; Luke 11.2–4, “Father”). In “Regard a Mouse / O’erpowered by the Cat” we hear a solemn (and perhaps a wondering) voice, although we grant that one might hear some
comedy in the let-down. That is, a reader who expects, after the invocation of
the deity, something like “Regard the sufferings of mortals,” or some such
thing, is surprised to find that the speaker calls attention to a mouse. Or if the
reader expects something that continues the idea of the Lord’s Prayer, the shift
from the expected “Give us this day our daily bread” to a picture of a mouse
overpowered by the claws or jaws of a cat is indeed shocking, first because of
the implied violence, and second because of the ironic contrasts between the
meal Jesus spoke of and the meal Dickinson shows.

In the next two lines (“Reserve within thy kingdom / A ‘Mansion’ for the
Rat!”) we hear primarily a serious if not a solemn voice, though others hear
mockery in the juxtaposition of “Mansion” and “Rat.” In any case, there is
surely a reference to the comforting words Jesus offered to his disciples (John
14.2) when he assured them of reunion in heaven: “In my Father’s house are
many mansions.” But a heavenly mansion (dwelling place) for a rat? We are by
no means convinced that Dickinson must have abhorred mice and rats, and that
therefore “A ‘Mansion’ for the Rat” must be ironic. As we see it, the poem thus
suggests that the mouse (or rat), destroyed at the moment, has its place in the
enduring heavenly scheme. Again, some readers take this to be so evidently
absurd or so disgusting that they believe Dickinson is satirizing the idea of a
divinely governed universe; others find a tolerant pantheism.

The first two lines of the second stanza get us almost into a Walt Disney
world of cute animals—here the mouse is “Snug” and it is able to “nibble all
the day”—but in the final two lines the camera draws sharply back from the
domestic scene and gives us a world of immense space and time, a world indif-
ferent to (“unsuspecting” of) the mouse (and by implication indifferent to all of
us). If there is any satire here, we think it is of persons who believe the “Cycles”
are concerned with their existence, but we do not take these lines to be the fierce
condemnation of the Judeo-Christian God that some readers take them to be.

The poem raises enough difficulties in itself, but you may want to ask stu-
dents to compare it with Frost’s “Design” (also in the text). Is Frost’s “Design”
a sort of restatement of Dickinson’s “Papa above”? Or is Frost’s poem some-
thing of a reply?

EMILY DICKINSON

There’s a certain Slant of light (p. 554)

The poem seems difficult to us, and any questions about it therefore lead to diffi-
culties, but perhaps our fifth question, below, on the rhyme scheme is fairly
straightforward. Some students may recognize that metrically the poem is close to
the “common meter” or “common measure” (abbreviated C. M. in hymnals) of
a hymn. (C. M. can be defined thus: stanzas of four lines, the first and third in
iambic tetrameter, the second and fourth in iambic trimeter, rhyming abcb or
abab.) In fact, no two stanzas in the poem are metrically identical (if we count the

syllables of the first line of each stanza, we find seven, six or seven, six, and eight), but despite such variations, the meter and especially the rhyme scheme (abab) seem regular. The second and fourth lines of each stanza have five syllables, and these lines end with exact rhymes, though the first and third lines of each stanza rely less on rhyme than on consonance. The regularity of the rhyme scheme, especially in such short lines, is something of a tour de force, and (because it suggests a highly ordered world) it might seem more suited to a neat little poem with a comforting theme than to the poem Dickinson has given us. Further, since the meter and some of the rhymes might occur in a hymn (“Despair,” “Air”; “breath,” “Death”), there is an ironic contrast between the form (a hymn, that is, a poem celebrating God’s goodness) and the content of the poem.

But what, in fact, is the content? And what is the “certain Slant of light” that, perceived on “Winter Afternoons,” makes “Shadows—hold their breath”? No two readers seem to agree on the details, but perhaps we can offer a few inoffensive comments. Like Hopkins, Dickinson sees a divinity behind phenomena, but her nature-suffused-with-divinity differed greatly from his. “There’s a certain Slant of light” begins with “light,” which might suggest life and eternal happiness (think of Newman’s “Lead, kindly light”), but it soon becomes darker and ends with “the look of Death.” The ending is not really a surprise, however, since the “certain Slant of light” is seen on “Winter Afternoons,” that is, a season when the year may be said to be dying and when light is relatively scarce and a time of day when light will soon disappear.

This “Slant of light,” we are told, “Oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes.” Surely “Oppresses” comes as a surprise. Probably most of us think that cathedral tunes (even funeral music) exalt the spirit rather than oppress it, and so most of us might have written something like, “That elevates, like the Lift / Of Cathedral Tunes.” But of course most of us couldn’t have written even this, since we would not have had the imagination to think of light in aural terms (“Tunes”) and in terms of weight (“Heft”).

In any case, a certain appearance in nature induces in the poet a sensation that requires such words as “Oppresses,” “Hurt,” “Despair,” “affliction,” “Shadows,” and “Death.” These words might appear in a traditional hymn, but, if so, the hymn would move toward the idea that God helps us to triumph over these adversities. Dickinson, however, apparently is saying that on these wintry afternoons the slant of light shining in the air gives us a “Heavenly Hurt,” that is, it moves us to a painful consciousness of God and nature, and to a sense of isolation. In the final stanza presumably we are back to the “Winter Afternoons” of the first. Projecting herself into the surrounding world, the speaker personifies nature: “the Landscape listens”—but hears nothing further. (By the way, “listens” to or for what? A “Slant of light”? Again, as in the earlier comparison of light to “Cathedral Tunes,” Dickinson uses synesthesia.) If during the moment when one perceives the light or “listens” there is no further insight, and certainly no amelioration of the “Heavenly Hurt,” when “it goes” there is an intensification of despair, since one is left with “the look of Death.” Is Dickinson evoking an image of the remote stare of a corpse? And is she sug-
gesting that this stare corresponds to the paralyzed mental condition of those who have perceived the “Slant of light”?

Earlier in this brief discussion we contrasted Hopkins with Dickinson. But, as Charles R. Anderson points out in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry (1960), there is a connection between the two. The perception in this poem resembles Margaret’s perception in “Spring and Fall,” where the child senses “the blight man was born for.”

**Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing**

1. In the first stanza, what kind or kinds of music does “Cathedral Tunes” suggest? In what ways might they (and the light to which they are compared) be oppressive?
2. In the second stanza, the effect on us of the light is further described. Try to paraphrase Dickinson’s lines or interpret them. Compare your paraphrase or interpretation with that of a classmate or someone else who has read the poem. Are your interpretations similar? If not, can you account for some of the differences?
3. In the third stanza, how would you interpret “None may teach it”? Is the idea “No one can instruct (or tame) the light to be different”? Or “No one can teach us what we learn from the light”? Or do you have a different reading of this line?
4. “Death” is the last word of the poem. Rereading the poem, how early (and in what words or images) is a “death” suggested or foreshadowed?
5. Describe the rhyme scheme. Then, a more difficult business, try to describe the effect of the rhyme scheme. Does it work with or against the theme, or meaning, of the poem?
6. What is the relationship in the poem between the light as one might experience it in New England on a winter afternoon and the experience of despair? To put it crudely, does the light itself cause despair, or does Dickinson see the light as an image or metaphor for human despair? And how is despair related to death?
7. Overall, how would you describe the tone of the poem? Anguished? Serene? Resigned?

**EMILY DICKINSON**

*This World is not Conclusion* (p. 554)

First, a brief comment about Dickinson and religion. She clearly was not fond of the patriarchal deity of the Hebrew Bible. “Burglar! Banker—Father,” she wrote of this deity, and in a note to Thomas Wentworth Higginson she says that the members of her family, except for herself, “address an Eclipse every morning—whom they call their Father.” She seems to have been amused by preach-
ers. She said, of one, that “the subject of perdition seemed to please him somehow.” Still, in the words of Charles R. Anderson, in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry (1960), no reader can doubt that she “faced creation with a primal sense of awe” (p. 17). And, as Anderson and everyone else points out, the Bible was “one of her chief sources of imagery” (p. 18).

Now for “This World is not Conclusion.” The first two lines sound like the beginning of a hymn (“Conclusion” presumably means “ending,” not “inference drawn”). The poem is not divided into stanzas by white spaces, but clearly it moves in units of four lines. The first four lines assert that although a world beyond our own is (like music) invisible, we strongly sense it. “Positive” in line 4 perhaps refers both to our conviction that it exists and also to its goodness.

Line 5 introduces a complication: “It beckons, and it baffles.” Although the rest of the stanza (i.e., lines 6–8) seems to affirm the initial confident (positive) assertion, it also raises doubts in the reader, since it dismisses “Philosophy” and “Sagacity,” and it characterizes life (or is it death?) as a “Riddle.”

Lines 9–12 seem more positive. They remind us that although human experience “puzzles Scholars,” martyrs have given their lives to affirm religious faith, to affirm (in the words of the first line) that “This World is not Conclusion.”

Lines 13–16, however, present “Faith” in a somewhat less heroic light: “Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—Blushes, if any see.” Surely this is in a much lower key than “Men have borne / Contempt of Generations,” a couple of lines earlier. The enduring power of Faith is still affirmed (Faith “rallies”), but in “slips” and “Blushes, if any see” we seem to be presented with a rather adolescent world. Further, the last two lines of the stanza (15–16) similarly diminish Faith, showing it clutching after “a twig of Evidence,” and inquiring of a “Vane” (a weathervane, a most unstable thing). Perhaps, too, “Vane” hints at emptiness, insubstantiality (Latin, vanitas).

The final four lines at first seem more affirmative. They begin with a strong assertion that calls up a picture of a vigorously gesticulating preacher, and they reintroduce imagery of music (now “Strong Hallelujahs roll”), but these lines at the same time are unconvincing or, rather, almost comic. A reader may find in the preacher’s abundant gestures a lack of genuine conviction. (One thinks of the marginal note in the politician’s speech: “Argument weak; shout here.”) The “Strong Hallelujahs” may strike a reader as less potent than the “Music” that was “positive” in lines 3–4. Are the gestures and the hallelujahs “Narcotics” that don’t quite work, that is, that don’t quite convince us of the pious forthright assertion that “This World is not Conclusion”? Yet the poem ends with the word “soul”; if “Much Gesture, from the Pulpit” reveals a preacher who is not wholly convincing, we nevertheless cannot therefore lapse into the belief that this world is conclusion. Something “nibbles at the soul.”

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. Given the context of the first two lines, what do you think “Conclusion” means in the first line?
2. Although white spaces here are not used to divide the poem into stanzas, the poem seems to be constructed in units of four lines each. Summarize each four-line unit in a sentence or two.

3. Compare your summaries with those of a classmate. If you substantially disagree, reread the poem to see if, on reflection, one or the other of you seems in closer touch with the poem. Or does the poem (or some part of it) allow for two very different interpretations?

4. In the first four lines the speaker seems (to use a word from line 4) quite "positive." Do some or all of the following stanzas seem less positive? If so, which—and what makes you say so?

5. How do you understand “Much Gesture, from the Pulpit” (line 17)? Would you agree with a reader who said that the line suggests a lack of deep conviction? Explain.

**EMILY DICKINSON**

*I got so I could hear his name—* (p. 555)

This poem is not as well known as others, but we think it is one of Dickinson’s best, and it is one that students find very powerful. They respond to it and are especially eager to probe its complexities because they feel the immediacy of its subject. It is something that has happened to them—or that they fear might happen. One of our students in an American literature class said, “This is exactly what it feels like to have your heart broken.”

The poem does express that, but it is also about somehow trying to recover from the pain. What measures might be taken to overcome a devastating loss? Dickinson is stunningly effective, we believe, in noting the physical closeness that the persons in her poem shared, and the wrenching experience of their separation—“all our Sinews tore.” The detail about the letters is very powerful as well, for it describes precisely the terrible way we return to memories, to signs of the beloved’s presence, when what we want is to get beyond them.

This is, then, a poem about feeling and confronting pain and seeking a means of self-control. In the final three stanzas, the speaker turns to God—though notice the distancing effect of “I think, they call it ‘God.’” Perhaps this higher force, outside the wounded self, might be able to heal it. Students find the last stanza somewhat obscure, and we agree. But the main thrust is clear enough: the speaker is uncertain whether any power exists that might aid her, and, if there is, whether this power would ever care about the pain felt by just one person. A good question to ask is how much or how little closure takes place in the final line. Does the speaker reconstitute, at least partially, her shattered self through the process of articulating and working through, cathartically, her pain? Or is the poem the record of a pain that persists, that the speaker cannot find a remedy for?

Dickinson has legions of admirers, but in our experience, many students have trouble with her intense, gnomic, highly condensed verse. This, again, is a poem

to which students do feel connected, and it is valuable as a point of entry into the study of Dickinson’s life and work. See Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (2 vols., 1974), and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (1986).

Two charged, self-dramatizing comments by Dickinson on herself, both from undated letters to the critic, editor, and journalist, Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren, and my Hair is bold, like the chesnut Bur, and my eyes, like the Sherry in the Glass, that the guest leaves”; and “I had no monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself; and when I try to organize, my little force explodes and leaves me bare and charred.”

EMILY DICKINSON

*Those—dying, then* (p. 556)

The faith of her ancestors is, Dickinson apparently feels, no longer possible, but it serves to enrich behavior. An *ignis fatuus* (a phosphorescent light—caused by gases emitted by rotting organic matter—that hovers over a swamp) presumably resembles, however weakly, the beautiful flames of heaven and the demonic flames of hell. It is only a will-o’-the-wisp, but at least it is *something*. The image of amputation is shocking, but it can be paralleled in the Bible, for example, by “and if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee. . . . and if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee” (Matthew 5.29–30).

**Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing**

1. In a sentence or two, state the point of the poem.
2. Is the image in line 4 in poor taste? Explain.
3. What is an *ignis fatuus*? In what ways does it connect visually with traditional images of hell and heaven?

EMILY DICKINSON

*Apparently with no surprise* (p. 556)

As in most nature poems, nature is humanized—but with a difference. If a flower is Wordsworthian in being at “play,” the frost is not: it is a “blonde Assassin”; blonde because it is white, and the fact that this color is usually associated with innocence makes the personification the more shocking. (See Frost’s white spider in “Design,” in our text). Note, too, that “at its play” can go with the frost as well as with the flower, in which case the frost is only playing but happens to play too vigorously with a destructive (but unlamented) result. And still more shocking, at least on first reading, is the fact that God (like the sun) approves. God stands behind the world, approving of the accidental destruction.
of beauty and joy. One could, by agile philosophizing, justify the necessary destruction of beauty and joy—but the “accidental” destruction? The sun, as usual, measured off the days, but mysteriously withheld its warmth and allowed the frost to do its work. The flower, the sun, God, all seem indifferent; only human beings are shocked.

“Apparently,” of course, has two almost opposed meanings: (1) evidently, clearly; (2) seemingly (but not really), as in “The magician apparently vanished into thin air.” So the lack of surprise and the impassivity of the sun and the approval of God may be unreal; maybe this is just the way things look or seem, not the way things really are. After all, it is only apparent (seemingly), not real, that flowers are “happy” and that they “play.”

**Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing**

1. What is the implication of the action described in lines 1–3?
2. Why is the frost’s power called “accidental”?
3. Why is the assassin called “blonde”? What does this word contribute to the poem?
4. Is the last line shocking? Explain.

**EMILY DICKINSON**

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant* (p. 556)

A student once brought up, by way of comparison, Polonius’s words:

And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
With windlasses and with assays of bias,
By indirections find directions out. (*Hamlet* 2.1.64–66)

The last line especially seems to have affinities with Dickinson’s first line, but the thrust of the two passages is fundamentally different. Polonius, worried about the behavior of his son Laertes, is sending Reynaldo to find out if Laertes has been misbehaving. He tells Reynaldo to slander Laertes, to see if Reynaldo’s hearers deny the charges. Polonius thus is advocating deceit, whereas Dickinson is saying that because truth is too bright for our “infirm Delight,” if we want to communicate, we must use indirection.

For Dickinson, the truth is splendid—it does “dazzle”—but we can perceive this splendor only after we have become accustomed to it, and we arrive at this condition “gradually.”

The word “slant” nicely plays against “Circuit,” and on rereading it may be taken to anticipate the word “lightning,” which is often represented by a diagonal line. In any case, one of the charms of the poem is the homely comparison in lines 5–6, where the need to tell the truth “slant” is compared to offering “explanation
kind” to children who presumably have been frightened by lightning. Telling the truth “slant” or “in Circuit” is not an attempt to deceive but to be “kind.”

An extant draft of the poem shows that Dickinson contemplated two possible changes, “bold” for “bright” in line 3, and “moderately” for “gradually” in line 7.

A CASE STUDY ON COMPARING POEMS AND PICTURES

JANE FLANDERS

Van Gogh’s Bed (p. 562)

Ms. Flanders kindly furnished us with some remarks about her poem. She writes:

The desire for simplicity [expressed in van Gogh’s letters] would seem to be at the heart of the painting. Likewise the poem is “simple,” even crude, especially the stubby first line of each stanza with its list of rudimentary adjectives. But what we are given, in both instances, is, of course, the illusion of simplicity. In the painting the room ought to seem restful. Actually it excites the eye with its bright colors, bold strokes, and odd angles. Even the bed itself looks as if it might levitate or drive off like some magical conveyance. A childlike playfulness invites the poet’s reverie.

By what wonderful process was it made? What did he dream about when he slept in it? The artist’s absence (the empty bed) which may at first seem innocuous or self-evident (he’s busy painting the picture, isn’t he?) also reminds us that he would have his first mental crisis a few months later and his suicide at the age of thirty-seven was little more than a year away. Likewise, in the poem’s final stanza, concrete details give way to something more elusive—light, fragrance, and not happiness itself, but the memory of happiness, with its hint of loss and melancholy.

We hope we are not being presumptuous if we add a few remarks of our own.

1. Using the title as the beginning—the reader more or less has to go back and repeat the title at the start of each stanza—is unusual, interesting, and witty.
2. The bed is orange, “like Cinderella’s coach.” The coach, of course, was a transformed pumpkin (hence orange), and transforming things is what artists do.
3. The coach-pumpkin-sun image continues into the second stanza, where van Gogh is conceived as being carried “bumpily to the ball.” Possibly the idea is that the pumpkin-coach carries him also toward the sun, i.e., he is brought violently toward one of his chief subjects.
4. Although we get some violence in the second stanza (“slept alone, tossing,” “bumpily”), in the third stanza we get a glimpse of the “friendly . . . peasant” world that he moved in. If there is violence here (“beat”) it is for good domestic purposes (“beat his mattress till it rose like meringue”).

5. The last stanza begins a bit desolately (“empty”) but immediately is filled with nature (“Morning light pours in”), nature transformed by human beings (“wine”), nature and humanity (“fragrance”), and humanity (“the memory of happiness”).

William Carlos Williams

The Great Figure (p. 564)

The biographical headnote in the text gives Williams’s account of the origin of the poem.

When one first encounters the poem, perhaps one takes the title—“The Great Figure”—to be a notable person. Certainly the first two lines, taken in conjunction with the title, allow us to assume that the speaker met someone on a rainy night (“Among the rain / and lights”), but beginning with the third line we adjust this impression and learn that the encounter is not with a notable person but with a notable, even heroic, thing, the number 5, in gold, on a red fire engine. The third line, the line that introduces the fire engine’s number, is the longest in the poem (six syllables), suggesting its importance. On the other hand, the very short lines, especially “in gold” and “on a red,” are emphatic because of their brevity as well as because of the strong colors.

“Fire truck” appears in the sixth line, just above the middle of the thirteen-line poem. The central line consists of only one word, “moving,” and from here on the truck apparently has moved out of sight because the remaining lines about the truck are about its sound (“clangs,” “howls”), not its appearance, though the sentence (and the poem) ends with a visual image, but not of the truck; the speaker now sees not the truck but “the dark city.”

The poem has been much praised. Dare one say that two lines, each consisting of a single word, are perhaps weak spots? We have in mind “tense / unheeded,” words that strike us as weak. The “gong clangs” and the “siren howls” make “tense” unneeded, and we can’t quite imagine how anyone, even the most jaded New Yorker, can let a screaming fire engine go by “unheeded.” And if New Yorkers do let fire engines go by unheeded, well, perhaps it is not for Dr. Williams to announce his superiority to them by saying in effect that he is heeding the engine, witness this poem. In fact, “unheeded” seems to shift attention away from the engine, which we take to be the real subject, and to an irrelevant audience.

Now for a brief comment on Demuth’s painting. In our headnote we mention that Demuth is sometimes called a cubist-realist, a term that more or less fits this atypical painting; more typically Demuth’s work is (like the work of Charles
Sheeler) characterized as precisionist, with reference to the almost sterile way in which he delineated architecture. In I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold the realism is evident chiefly in the lack of distortion of the number 5; the cubism—of a very tame sort—is a bit more evident, in the diagonals and the planes, and especially in what we take to be the simultaneous treatment of the front (the headlights) and the side (the number 5) of the fire engine.

The three concentric 5s presumably give a violent in-and-out sensation, imitating (with the assistance of the converging diagonals) the onrushing engine. Incidentally, although one often reads, in students’ discussions of pictures, that “the eye first sees . . . , and then moves to . . . .” experiments have shown that all such discussions are misguided. The eye does not travel along a path, but rather jumps back and forth all over the place.

A few more words about the figure 5. John Malcolm Brinnin, in William Carlos Williams (1963), said that “the possibility that the figure 5, or any other figure, on a fire engine might be ‘tense’ is absurd” (p. 28). This remark distressed Bram Dijkstra, who, in The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Steiglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams (1969), replied:

One look at Charles Demuth’s visual interpretation of the poem, executed in close association with Williams, should suffice to indicate the appropriateness and accuracy of Williams’ use of the word “tense.” Demuth’s figure 5 strains and pulls, receding and projecting itself again onto the canvas, its original movement in time transformed into visual tensions, caught within the warring pressure lines of darkness and lamplight, a golden object held suspended on the red fires of sound. (p. 78)

You may want to ask students if this is a useful way to talk about the picture—and if it indeed shows that (to go back to Brinnin’s point) a digit on a fire engine can be “tense.”

The fact that the picture was a sort of portrait of a friend accounts for the inscription of Williams’s first name at the top (the letters are partly cut off) and middle name (without the final s) in barely discernable letters just below the top of the figure 5. (Conceivably the trimmed names may correspond to the fragmentary glimpses of the moving engine.) The friendly personal connection between Demuth and Williams also accounts for the whimsical “Art Co” at the right, written on what probably is a representation of a storefront. At the bottom left, in small letters, Demuth has written his own initials, and in the bottom center, again in small letters, Williams’s initials.

Edwin Romanzo Elmer’s painting has something of the stiffness that one associates with Sunday painters, who until the 1970s were called primitive painters. These painters lacked formal training in art, and as a consequence they were likely to be unskilled in linear perspective and in other ways of suggesting gradual recession in space. They were, however, usually deeply concerned with their own sort of realism, with (for instance) depicting all four legs of a cow because, after all, most cows do have four legs—even though in fact in certain positions a leg or two might be invisible. Another characteristic of the work of Sunday painters is that the figures seem posed, as though a photographer using a slow film had arranged his subjects and then told them to be sure not to move.

In fact, Elmer, a native of rural Massachusetts, did receive some formal training in New York at the Academy of Design, but this undated painting probably antedates his stay in New York.

Rich’s poem seems to us to have something of the painting’s almost unnatural specificity. For instance, the first line is careful to tell us—in a rather flat, unemotional and yet rather solemn tone—that the chair is mahogany and that the rocker is cane: “They have carried the mahogany chair and the cane rocker / out under the lilac bush. . . .” But if the speaker’s voice is akin to the world of the painting, matter-of-fact and yet hyper-keen (unblinking, one might say) and otherworldly, these qualities are especially appropriate, since the speaker is the dead girl. That is, the speaker sees things as, in a way, they are but in a way that is not quite natural. For instance, she speaks of “the map of every lilac leaf.” When you think of it, leaves do resemble maps because of their veins, but the perception seems unnatural, a sort of perception through a magnifying glass. (By the way, another of Elmer’s paintings shows a landscape as seen not simply through a window but through a magnifying glass perched on a vase on a table.)

We don’t want to overemphasize the strangeness of the voice, however; the perception of the maplike leaf leads to a more usual perception, “the net of veins on my father’s / grief-tranced hand.” This chain continues in lines 25–26 with the image of silk thread, which in 27 becomes “a web in the dew.” But what exactly do we make of line 25, “the silk-spool will run bare”? These words constitute the end of a sentence about the grieving mother; we might have thought that the silk spool would remain unconsumed, that is, the mother might have put away her domestic work when the child died. But Rich tells us, on the contrary, that the “silk-spool will run bare,” possibly suggesting the three fates, who spin, measure, and cut a thread, thereby ending a person’s life.

After writing the preceding paragraph, with its conjecture about the silk-spool, we came across an article about Elmer, written by his niece, Maud Valona Elmer (Massachusetts Review 6 [1964–1965]: 121–144). She mentions that as a boy Elmer worked in a spool-silk factory (presumably a factory that wound silk thread on spools, or perhaps a factory that prepared silk to be
wound on spools). She also mentions that after the death of their daughter, Elmer and his wife left the house shown in the picture and went to live with the wife’s mother, in Baptist Corner (cf. line 24). Since other information about Edwin Romanzo Elmer is virtually nonexistent, one can safely say that the article in Massachusetts Review—and of course the painting, which the niece sold to the Smith College Museum of Art—inspired Rich to write the poem.

The veins of the leaf become, in line 30, the “skeleton” of the leaf, thereby continuing the death imagery and continuing, too, the somewhat strange quality of the imagery. This strangeness is evident, too, in the “shadowless” house (line 32), shadowless because the time is noonday (line 31), when the sun is directly above us, but also shadowless because death and sadness have not yet come to the house. At the end of the poem the speaker (we think, but we are far from certain) says that if she re-created the world she—having experienced death—could not leave out death from what had seemed an idyllic world, a world of loving parents, placid sheep, and a doll to be cared for.

One other point: we learn from Maud Valona Elmer’s article that the lamb in the picture indicates that the child is dead. In old New England cemeteries the tombstones of children are sometimes adorned with a lamb, suggesting that the deceased was “a Lamb of God.”

Having said all this, we still remain unsure about the poem, but here are the main lines of our thought:

1. In “Mourning Picture,” Effie describes Elmer’s picture. In the first stanza she sees that “they” (probably the parents, possibly servants, but it doesn’t matter) have carried out the chair and the rocker, that the parents “darkly sit there,” the house “stands fast,” the doll lies in her pram. She sees the mourning, but interestingly she does not see herself, with the lamb, the largest figures in the picture. Effie believes that she could remake (like the artist) every particle of that world (“I could remake . . . [I could] draw out”) but does not.

2. The second stanza describes Effie’s present self, which we are inclined to think means in the hours after death, while she (the shade of the dead) still inhabits the house. What she experiences is that “the dream condenses.” (Life here, as at the poem’s end, is a dream.) It doesn’t vanish yet. During this period, while the family mourns, she is “visible and invisible / remembering and remembered.”

3. In the last stanza she foresees her parents’ future. She imagines making the world “again” (line 29) but will not. Her death (“this”) is part of her life. She remains “Effie”; “you” (meaning her parents, the painter, the reader?) are her dream.

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

When Ms. Rich gives permission for the reprinting of her poems, she stipulates that they be presented in the book itself without questions or topics for writing assignments. Thus we offer our suggested topics here.
1. When you first looked at this painting, what was your response to it? As you examined it further, did your response change?

2. Why do you think that Rich chose to make the “dead girl” the speaker? Is this the choice you would have made?

3. A scholar has praised Rich’s “eye for significant detail.” Please identify key details in this poem and explain why they are significant.

4. This poem has been admired for its “beauty.” How can a poem about “mourning” be a “beautiful” poem? Is that a confusing idea to you? Or does it make good sense?

5. After you studied Rich’s poem carefully, did you have a new understanding of Elmer’s painting? Would you recommend that a copy of Rich’s poem be placed nearby Elmer’s painting (which is displayed at the Smith College Museum of Art)? Please argue first that it should, and then that it should not.

CATHY SONG

**Beauty and Sadness** (p. 568)

The poem concerns the unhappy artist who creates enduring beauty. In some versions, the artist creates beauty because he or she is unhappy, as the oyster creates a pearl out of its discomfort, and this apparently is what Song is suggesting when she says that the “inconsolable” Utamaro—inconsolable presumably because the women were “indifferent” (line 42)—“graced these women with immortality” (line 50). We can go a little further and say that when she speaks of “the dwarfed and bespectacled painter” (line 53) Song implies the Freudian idea of the artist who, suffering from unsatisfied longings, engages in fantasy wish-fulfillment—in this case, making pictures of the beauties he cannot in reality win. Speaking more generally, we can say that Song’s poem touches on the venerable theme of *ars longa, vita brevis*.

A few notes: the term *ukiyo* originally was a Buddhist term for “the world of suffering,” i.e., the fleeting, transient world of incarnation, but in Japan in the late seventeenth century, by means of a pun, it became “the floating world,” i.e., the world of transient pleasure. (The pronunciation is the same, but the initial character is different.) Pictures of the floating world—e.g., of women and of actors—are called *ukiyo-e*. In Song’s poem notice “floating world” in line 26 and “fleeting loveliness” in line 13. In line 12, “transfer” probably alludes on the literal level to the thin paper on which the artist drew his design. This paper, placed on the block, provided the carver with a guide for cutting.

Song’s books of poetry include *Picture Bride* (1983); *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light* (1988); and *School Figures* (1994). She is eloquent in describing and exploring the relationships between Korean and Chinese cultures and traditions (Song’s mother is Chinese, and her father is Korean) and in evoking the history and setting of Hawaii, where she was born.

Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (which we will discuss in a moment) is one of the most frequently reproduced paintings in the world. And it does indeed seem to be a favorite of sidewalk artists; we have on several occasions seen the face of Venus done in chalk on the street.

In line 3 Salter mentions chalk, an almost comically inappropriate medium for this goddess who was born in the sea, who is depicted as standing on a floating shell, and who is associated with life-giving fluids. Salter wittily compounds the irony by saying, in her first line, that the artist has “knelt to fish her face up from the sidewalk.”

In the text we ask students what Salter may mean (lines 6–8) when she refers to “that woman men divined / ages before a painter let them look / into the eyes their eyes had had in mind.” We take it that Salter is saying that in this picture of Venus the painter gives form (“an earthly habitation, and a name,” to quote Hippolyta, from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) to what we vaguely intuit or “divine.” Perhaps the idea is close to a point that the painter Paul Klee made when he said, “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it renders visible.”

A query: in lines 5–6, which immediately precede the passage we have just discussed, is Salter getting at the Platonic notion that a work of art is a copy of a copy, i.e., a copy of something on earth, and the something-on-earth is itself only a copy of a heavenly (Platonic) ideal? That is, is Salter saying that the sidewalk artist is copying a reproduction in a book, which itself is a copy of Botticelli’s work, and Botticelli’s work is the copy of an ideal? (As we will mention in a moment, scholars agree that Botticelli was influenced by Neo-Platonism, and it is likely that Salter knew this.)

In “let there be light” (line 21), we take Salter to be expressing the hope that the afternoon will last long enough for this earnest artist to complete his chalk drawing on the sidewalk, although it is clear that rain is impending and that Venus therefore will soon be returned to her watery element. The tone is genial, even wry (“it’s clear enough the rain / will swamp her like a tide”) but the poet clearly respects this painstaking artist (“he won’t rush”) who is constantly “envisioning faces.”

A few words about *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1482), by Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), may be relevant. It is a Renaissance painting, of course, but the nude Venus has little of the obvious voluptuousness—the sense of a ripe, weighty, physical body, we might almost say—that one finds in other Renaissance paintings, especially the Venetian paintings. (Botticelli was a Florentine.) Similarly, there is surprisingly little sense of depth in this picture; aside from the shell, almost everything seems to be at the front. That is, Botticelli has treated his material in a highly decorative manner (the waves are indicated by little V-shaped squiggles on a flat surface) and has produced a painting of a Venus who has a somewhat etherealized or spiritual quality.
According to a simple, brutal, ancient legend, Saturn (Greek: Cronus) castrated his father, Uranus, and threw the severed genitals into the sea. From the organs, as they gathered foam (aphros), was born Venus (Greek: Aphrodite), goddess of love. Botticelli’s contemporaries, the Neo-Platonists, in particular Marsilio Ficino, interpreted this myth as an elaborate allegory concerning the birth of beauty in the human soul or mind: when we create or generate some work of beauty, we experience pleasure because we have been fertilized by divinity.

Putting aside allegorical interpretations of the picture—and all scholars agree that Botticelli painted in a Neo-Platonic climate—we can say that the picture shows, at the left, two embracing wind gods (flying Zephyrs) who are blowing Venus (standing on a cockle shell) to her sacred island of Cyprus. At the right a female figure, variously interpreted as representing the Hours or as the nymph Pomona (descended from the ancient goddess of fruit trees), extends to the naked goddess a flower-embroidered cloak.

In the middle of the painting, between these energetic figures and under a shower of roses, stands Venus herself, modestly posed (the posture is called Venus pudica, i.e., modest Venus). Although the pose is classic, the rhythmic curve of her body is not, since her weight does not really rest on her feet. As Kenneth Clark puts it, in *The Nude* (1956), “She is not standing, but floating” (p. 102). The figure is also unclassical—that is, it is Gothic (medieval)—in the steeply sloping shoulders and the elongated body. On the other hand, the nudity of course is a sign of classical influence; in the Middle Ages the only nude figures were Adam and Eve, or damned souls. The nudity here, as we have already suggested, is perhaps more ethereal than voluptuous; she looks virginal, and indeed Kenneth Clark has pointed out that Botticelli used the same head for his Madonnas. Clark characterizes her expression as “wistful” (p. 102).


**Anne Sexton**

*The Starry Night* (p. 572)

We think that one can reasonably call some of the language of this poem surrealistic—particularly the description of a “black-haired tree” that “slips up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.” (A tree presented as having hair, and a woman drowning upward seem to us to qualify; and so does the passage, in the second stanza, about the moon pushing children from its eye.)

Surrealism is characterized by dreamlike, fantastic imagery, often presented in finicky detail and therefore (because the realism seems to be at odds with the subject matter) the more disconcerting. Surrealism is quite different from Expressionism. Expressionistic painting—and van Gogh is considered to be the...
father of Expressionism—does not seek to offer the surreal world of dreams and fantasies, nor does it seek to offer the world as perceived by traditional painters, who aimed at reproducing nature. Rather, Expressionist painting, as is evident in many of van Gogh’s pictures, seeks to present the artist’s emotions or emotional response to the ostensible subject matter. (Sexton, as a “confessional poet,” quite naturally found van Gogh’s work of special interest.) Thus, as van Gogh’s letters indicate, his picture of his bed (see the text and this manual) was supposed to convey the artist’s sense of rest. In *The Starry Night* van Gogh gives us not the dark sky with a thousand points of light that all of us can and do see but a blazing heaven that expresses his ecstatic feelings about eternity. (Stars are a traditional symbol of eternity.) Also expressive of his feelings, no doubt, is the writhing cypress. In a letter to his brother, van Gogh says that he sees the sunflower and the cypress as both opposite and equivalent. Bright yellow sunflowers embody the life force, but they go to seed and die; dark cypresses are associated with death, but they energetically rise toward heaven. (See Vojtech Jirst-Wasiutynski on van Gogh’s cypresses, in *Art Bulletin* 75 [1993]: 647–670, especially 657–660.) Also expressive is the little town, which is so slight when compared to the grandeur of nature.

But if Sexton’s imagery is surrealistic, her poem is nevertheless tightly ordered. (There is no contradiction here. Surrealists such as Dali and Magritte often use conspicuously formal compositions.) The first two stanzas closely resemble each other, most obviously in the number of lines and of course in the identity of the last two lines of each of these stanzas, but in other ways too; for instance, the first line of each of these stanzas is conspicuously shorter than the second line. Doubtless Sexton counted on the reader perceiving the formal connection between the first two stanzas because much of the force of the poem depends on the fact that the last stanza is truncated—five lines instead of six, and only two syllables in the final line, instead of four. That is, “I want to die” (the ending of the first and second stanzas) is diminished to “no cry,” a silent ending to an unheroic extinction of the flesh (“no flag,” “no belly”).

Having said that the poet imagines an unheroic extinction, we are uncomfortably aware that in the first two stanzas she seems to want to go off in a blaze of light (“Oh starry starry night! This is how / I want to die”). Still, our sense is that the third stanza makes a reader see the first two stanzas in a new light.

Two other points: (1) van Gogh’s painting, as his letter suggests, is a religious painting, or, rather, an expression of the artist’s sense of the divinity of nature, whereas Sexton’s poem seems to us to have nothing to do with religion. (2) The poem comes from *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), a book of poems much concerned with death. (The book takes its title from *Macbeth* 4.3.216, where Macduff is speaking of the children whom Macbeth slaughtered. Both of Sexton’s parents had died within a few months of each other in 1959, and her father-in-law, of whom she was very fond, had died a few months later.)


A note on the first assignment in the text: If you use this assignment, which asks students to discuss in what ways the poem does and does not describe the painting, you may want to follow this procedure: Divide the class into two groups. One group, after conferring for 15–20 minutes, would then report on the ways the poem does not reproduce the picture; the other on the ways it does.

W. H. AUDEN

Musée des Beaux Arts (p. 574)

Useful pieces on “Musée” are in College English 24 (April 1963): 529–531; Modern Language Notes 76 (April 1961): 331–336; Textual Analysis (1986), ed. Mary Ann Caws (a relatively difficult essay by Michael Riffaterre); and Art Journal 32 (Winter 1972–1973): 157–162—the last useful primarily because it includes reproductions of Brueghel’s work and it reprints other poems relating to his pictures. We reproduce Brueghel’s picture of Icarus (in the Brussels Museum of Fine Arts, hence Auden’s title); for a larger color reproduction see Timothy Foote, The World of Brueghel (1968). Auden glances at some of Brueghel’s other paintings (the children skating in The Numbering of Bethlehem are indifferent to Joseph and Mary, who are almost lost in a crowd; the dogs and the horses in The Massacre of the Innocents), and his poem accurately catches Brueghel’s sense of nature undisturbed by what rarely happens to the individual.

As Otto Benesch points out (The Art of the Renaissance in Northern Europe [1945], p. 99), in Icarus Brueghel gives us a sense of cosmic landscape. Plowman, shepherd, and fisherman go about their business, unaware of Icarus, who is represented in the lower right-hand corner simply by his lower legs and feet, the rest of him being submerged in the sea. Daedalus is nowhere represented; the yellow sun sets in the west, and the sea, coasts, and islands are transfigured with a silvery light. It should be noted that in Ovid’s account in Metamorphoses 8, lines 183–235, the plowman, shepherd, and fisherman beheld Icarus and Daedalus with amazement, taking the two for gods. Given Brueghel’s diminution of Icarus—legs and feet, unnoticed by the other figures in the picture—it is fair to say that Brueghel is offering a comment on the pride of scientists. James Snyder, who makes this point in Northern Renaissance Art (1985), p. 510, also calls attention to the shiny pate of a recumbent man, a dead man, at the left margin, halfway up and all but invisible even in the original painting. This image, Snyder says, “assuredly is meant to express the old Netherlandish saying, ‘No plow stops over the death of any man,’ or over Brueghel’s Everyman, a clever footnote that reveals, after all, that peasant wisdom can be as profound as that of the ancients.”

Students are first inclined to see Auden’s poem as an indictment of indifference; our own view is that Auden gives the daily world its due, especially in...
such phrases as “doggie life” and “innocent behind”; that is, he helps us see that all of creation cannot and need not suffer along with heroes. Auden’s poem evoked a pleasant reply by Randall Jarrell, “The Old and the New Masters,” Collected Poems (1959), pp. 332–333. It begins, “About suffering, about adoration, the old masters / Disagree. . . .”

Collected Poems (1976) and The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927–1939 (1977), both edited by Edward Mendelson, are full of interesting work, but they give more than most undergraduates will be able to absorb. We tend to direct students to the selections by Auden that are included in the Norton and Oxford anthologies of English literature and in the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry (1988). The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays (1968) and Forewords and Afterwords (1973) collect many of Auden’s best literary essays and reviews.


**X. J. KENNEDY**

*Nude Descending a Staircase* (p. 576)

Duchamp’s picture was exhibited at the famous Armory Show in 1913. This exhibition was chiefly devoted to contemporary American art—quite traditional stuff as we now look at it—but it also included material from the School of Paris. Predictably, the European material provoked indignation, ridicule, and passionate defense. Today the Armory Show is regarded as marking the introduction of contemporary European art to America.

Part of Duchamp’s joke in *Nude Descending a Staircase* is that the picture is so unsensual, so disappointing to anyone who has expectations of looking at a nude. This is entirely in keeping with Duchamp’s interest in the movements of the human body as akin to the movements of a machine. He was influenced by the chronophotographs of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904), who superimposed sequential photographs of a figure in motion. For examples of Marey’s work, see Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (1968), and Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography*, 5th ed. (1999), or, in fact, almost any history of photography. In Duchamp’s painting, the curved lines—some made out of dots—derive from Marey, who used such lines to indicate what he called “lines of force.” (Duchamp also knew the somewhat comparable photographs of figures in motion made by Eadweard Muybridge.) Photographs of bodies in movement were of considerable interest to scientists. For instance, Dr. Oliver

Wendell Holmes used photographic studies of men walking in his work in designing artificial limbs for soldiers wounded in the Civil War. Photographs, he reported, are

a new source. . . . We have selected a number of instantaneous stereoscopic views of the streets and public places of Paris and New York, each of them showing walking figures, among which some may be found in every stage of the complex act we are studying. (qtd. in Newhall, p. 117)

Duchamp’s interest in the mechanics of motion continued throughout his life; in his later years, he amused himself by devising complex machines that performed no useful function.

He painted Nude not in flesh colors but in the color of wood precisely because he did not want it to be seductive; the picture was to be a sort of scientific study of the machine-like aspects of the body.

When we consider the motion of form through space in a given time, we enter the world of geometry and mathematics, just as we do when we build a machine for that purpose. Now if I show the ascent of an airplane, I try to show what it does. I do not make a still-life picture of it. When the vision of the Nude flashed upon me, I knew that it would break forever the enslaving chains of Naturalism.

(qtd. in Ian Crofton, *A Dictionary of Art Quotations* [1988], p. 57)

For a longer comment by Duchamp, see *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel Chipp (1968), pp. 393–395.

What is especially interesting in Kennedy’s poem is the engaging sensuous—even sensual—content, evident in such words as “flesh,” “A gold of lemon,” “She sifts in sunlight,” “With nothing on,” “We spy,” “thigh on thigh,” “lips,” and “her parts.” Surely Kennedy is having a little joke, putting the missing nude back into the picture. In its day, in the Armory Show, the picture provoked not only wrath from conventional art critics but also genial humor from those simple souls who wanted a sexy picture of a woman. The most famous quip that came out of all this is that the picture shows not a nude but an explosion in a shingle factory. Where was the nude? *The American Art News* offered a $10 prize. Here is the winning solution:

You've tried to find her,
And you've looked in vain
Up the picture and down again,
You've tried to fashion her of broken bits,
And you've worked yourself into seventeen fits.
The reason you've failed to tell you I can,
It isn't a lady but only a man.

(qtd. in Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* [1963], p. 136)
Our point: Kennedy is not simply describing the picture as (dare one say it?) the naked eye sees it. Rather, he is re-creating it, turning it into (indeed) a picture of a nude descending a staircase. At the same time, he does catch Duchamp’s mechanistic view (“the swinging air / That parts to let her parts go by,” “Collects her motions into shape”) and he does effectively use metaphors to describe what we see (“One-woman waterfall,” “she wears / Her slow descent like a long cape”).

GREG PAPE

American Flamingo (p. 578)

Greg Pape’s poem is a response to “American Flamingo,” one of the beautiful hand-colored plates in John James Audubon’s Birds of America, published in four enormous volumes (each plate is about forty inches tall and thirty inches wide) between 1827 and 1838. Each bird is shown life-size; hence, the flamingo (in order to fit on the page) had to be shown with its head down. Audubon ingeniously shows the bird in other poses in the flamingos in the distance.

The illegitimate son of a French merchant and slave trader and a Creole woman of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) in the West Indies, and a failure in several business ventures, Audubon had a dream, to which he came to devote his life: he wanted to paint every species of bird in North America. With courage and persistence, Audubon traveled throughout the United States and Canada, seeking always to draw the birds in their natural habitat. The American scientific community failed to recognize the brilliance of his work—his depiction of birds in action, so to speak, as living creatures within a particular environment rather than as inert specimens—and therefore in 1826 he left the United States for England. He found support and collaborators in England, and his work soon went into production and moved forward, even as Audubon himself made return visits to the United States for further research and drawing and painting for the volumes.

Audubon was a passionate writer as well as an artist; with William MacGillivray, he wrote the Ornithological Biography (5 vols., 1831–1839) to accompany Birds of America. Over the years he has been criticized for sacrificing scientific accuracy for dramatic effect, and there is some truth to this charge. But it is also the case that on occasion Audubon drew birds in strained, near-to-impossible poses because that was, for him, the best means for showing something new and noteworthy—for example, a feature of a bird’s coloring that might be hard to glimpse. Remember, he studied the birds in their setting, not in a museum or laboratory.

The force and romantic glamour of Audubon’s pioneering personality helps to clarify the quotation from the Southern poet-critic Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989) that Pape gives toward the middle of his poem. It is taken from Warren’s long poem Audubon: A Vision, published in 1969. (Warren was born
in Guthrie, Kentucky, the state where Audubon lived as a young man and tried to make a success of himself in business.) Section I, titled “Was Not the Lost Dauphin,” begins with this stanza in part A:

Was not the lost dauphin, though handsome was only
Base-born and not even able
To make a decent living, was only
Himself, Jean Jacques, and his passion—what
Is man but his passion?

Referring to Audubon by his baptismal name “Jean Jacques,” Warren sets aside the familiar but false story that Audubon was the Dauphin, the son of the dethroned Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Interestingly, in the next stanzas, Warren describes Audubon in quest of the Great White Heron, which in *Birds of America* comes just a few plates before the American Flamingo that Pape focuses on. Perhaps the vivid color of the flamingo seized Pape’s attention. Or, more simply but importantly, perhaps for this poem of his own, Pape needed to select a different bird from the one that Warren chose: it would hardly do to write about the same one.

Curiously enough—and this point may bear on the solemn, evocative tone of the second half of the poem—the American flamingo is now an infrequent visitor to Florida, and so it would be relatively unusual today to find these birds in Hialeah, the city (and site of the famous race track) in the southeast part of the state to which Pape refers. The birds at the race track are in fact imported captives. According to the Audubon Society’s *Encyclopedia of North American Birds* (1995 ed.), the American flamingo “wandered formerly in large numbers to Florida, but now rarely”; to see these brightly hued, long-legged, and long-necked birds in large numbers, one must travel to the West Indies and the Bahamas or to the northern coast of South America.

The *Encyclopedia* also notes that the American flamingo is shy, vigilant, hard to approach, and this may suggest why Pape shows such steady, absorbed interest in the flamingo’s watchful eyes. Pape admires and highly values the work that Audubon has done; in line 23, he says that the movements of the flamingos in the background are “stunning”—a tribute to the painter’s craftsmanship. And the deliberate pace of Pape’s lines itself functions as a more general form of praise, with the passionate care of the poem serving to illuminate Audubon’s own passion for detail.

For us, and for students, the challenge of the poem is describing what it all adds up to. Pape’s images are striking, especially in the second half, as when he depicts “the satin figures of the jockeys / perched like bright beetles on the backs / of horses. . . .” Here he nicely makes good work of the verb “perched,” which we associate for a moment with the posture of a bird only to find that in this instance Pape is attaching it to the beetles on the horses’ backs. Still, though they respond to such details, our students have wondered about the broader “point” of the poem, and we find ourselves wondering about the same issue. It could be that this is a mistake on our part—the wrong kind of question to ask.

The point of the poem may not be an easily statable theme but, rather, may lie precisely in the exercise of the poet’s craft, which, again, is meant richly to compliment the passionate ornithologist Audubon.

But we suspect that there is, after all, a thematic point that Pape seeks to draw in this poem, and it is one that explores the ambiguities of past and present. Many decades ago, Audubon performed his dogged, extraordinary work, and it has eternalized the American flamingo and the other birds upon whom he lavished such care. For Pape, the American flamingo still lives—he saw them. Yet we must be more exact; they live in his memory—he saw them once, in a time now past, and even then part of the reason they awed Pape and the spectators is because they came, it seemed, from “the old world.” Seeing them was unforgettable, and Pape records this memory in his poem, as his companion piece to the unforgettable drawing that Audubon has given us.

Note: Students may puzzle a bit over the first lines of the poem: Was this lover of birds a hunter? Audubon was; he hunted all his life and even admitted that when he was a young man he sometimes shot wild animals and birds for the sheer fun of it. Hence Pape may be kinder to him—saying that he shot the birds to study them—than the truth warrants.


**CARL PHILLIPS**

*Luncheon on the Grass* (p. 580)

We’ll begin with a few comments about the painting. According to a contemporary, Manet said, “I’m told that I must do a nude. All right. I will. Back in our studio days, I copied Georgione’s women. . . . I’m going to do it over.” (The picture that he copied in the Louvre, *The Concert*, is now attributed to Titian.) Manet, regarded as “a painter of modern life” (a term Baudelaire used for slightly earlier realists such as Daumier), chose to do a nude in a modern setting, not in a classical or renaissance setting. Further, it is impossible to give to Manet’s naked woman the allegorical implications (ideal beauty, truth, nature, etc.) that customarily were attributed to the nudes of earlier painters. But what is one to make of a nude who cannot be regarded as a part of secular or sacred history (e.g., Bathsheba) or mythology (e.g., Venus) or allegory (e.g., Beauty, or Virtue, or whatever)? A nude of the older sort is acceptable to a bourgeois audi-
ence because of its “higher meaning”; on the other hand, a nude who is only a naked woman, a woman stripped in the presence of clothed males, is a problem for the viewer who claims he or she (but it is usually a he) is engaging in a lofty aesthetic experience, looking at art, not at pornography.

We don’t want to spend much more space on the painting; pretty much all that needs to be known about it is admirably set forth in Robert L. Herbert’s *Impressionism* (1988). The three figures at the left are unquestionably derived from an engraving (where they appear as two nude sea gods and a nude nymph) by Marcantonio Raimondi, based on a lost painting by Raphael of *The Judgment of Paris* (c. 1520). (The engraving, like the Georgione or Titian, is reproduced in Herbert’s book.) There is an important point here: artists (and we include poets in this word) like to take earlier works and reinterpret them, partly out of a sense of fun—Manet’s painting is almost a parody of his sources—but partly also in order, in Ezra Pound’s famous words, to “Make It New.” Thus, Shakespeare reworked Plautus in several comedies, and he reworked (and thereby reinterpreted) several earlier English plays, including *King Lear* and a lost *Hamlet*.

To return to Manet: yes, he will do a nude, but he will not disguise the erotic interest in it by claiming that it is a lofty allegory or even history. Rather, he will insist that the viewer recognize the sexual content of the scene. He will “Make It New.” The result, of course, was a scandal.

Now for the poem. Phillips begins by recognizing that the picture caused a scandal (“Manet’s scandalous / lunch partners”). As a poet, he need not cause a scandal, but his job is to “Make It New,” partly by using language in fresh, interesting ways. For a start we can look at a passage in the second and third lines:

The two men, lost
in cant and full dress. . . .

Here we get an example of zeugma, since the word “lost” governs two words but in different ways. In “lost in cant” (incidentally, we might have expected the more flattering “lost in thought”), “lost” suggests some sort of mental failure; in “lost in full dress” the word is used differently, for it now acquires the meaning of being overwhelmed by some sort of physical paraphernalia. Our explanation is clumsy, but the point is evident if you recall some of Alexander Pope’s examples of zeugma:

. . . stain her honor, or her new brocade,

and:

. . . lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball.

But of course Phillips does not rely only on zeugma in his effort to make it new. By saying that these pastoral loungers are spreading their legs “subway-style,” he
makes the picture (1863) new, makes it something of our “modern life” rather than only something of Manet’s. In fact, this is very much what Ezra Pound was getting at. He did not mean that the poet should turn away from the art of the past but, rather, that the poet should rediscover its vitality and present it in contemporary forms.

And so Phillips says, in his last lines,

My dear, 
this is not art, we’re not anywhere close to Arcadia.

This is probably close to what Manet was doing, when he painted his nude in a modern style, i.e., when he painted a scene that (unlike a Renaissance painting) could not possibly be sanitized by being interpreted as an allegory or as an image of a lost pastoral world. Manet in effect said, “Look, this is what a nude is—a naked woman, not an allegorical representation of beauty, not a nymph, and if the scene suggests sex, well, why not?”

Phillips sees this in the painting. He imagines his nude as an earthy person, someone who asks, “where’s / the real party?” Further, he puts himself and a companion into the scene, or, rather, he brings the scene to mind as he contemplates his present condition, nude, with a partner who has removed one boot in order to scratch an itch—and who knows what this will lead to? If Manet’s picture is remote from the traditional nude, say, the Renaissance nude by Georgione (or Titian) that he copied, so Phillips’s scene is remote from Manet. Manet’s picture, in part because the landscape is painted flatly rather than illusionistically, still has something of the artificial world, the “shape of romance” that earlier paintings of nudes had. On the other hand, the details of Phillips’s reality—a partner scratching an itchy foot in line 17, a “rusted green dumpster” in line 23, some unwanted chicken salad in line 31, a bottle of beer (not wine) in lines 32–33—take us utterly out of the timeless world of Arcadia. Arcadia endures only in art; in the speaker’s world a lover forgets that the speaker dislikes chicken salad, and beer goes flat, and the speaker acts “fitfully.” All is not well in this realm:

My dear, 
this is not art, we’re not anywhere close to Arcadia.

But of course this is art, since it is all set forth in a poem. Phillips is taking the old motif of Arcadia, the old motif of pastoral poetry, and, true to Pound, is making it new.

A publicity release for Phillips’s books says that Phillips is a gay African American, so we decided to add this information in one of our questions in the text. In what sense, if any, is this a gay poem? It seemed to us even before we
received the publicity release that the partner is male. Why did we have that impression? We aren’t sure, but perhaps the reference to boots and athletic socks (lines 16–17) gave us this idea, though women can wear boots and athletic socks. Perhaps we were influenced by the words, “We are two to Manet’s main group / of three”; if the first big change is that Manet’s female nude is replaced by a male nude, the second, it seems, is that Manet’s two clothed males are reduced to one. Or maybe we felt as we did because there is no praise of any aspect of the woman’s appearance, whereas heterosexual poems concerned with love usually include such praise.

JOHN UPDIKE

_Before the Mirror_ (p. 582)

Updike’s poem, we believe, is at least as much about himself as it is about the painting. And many critics today would say that _all_ comments about works of art—even allegedly objective accounts—are about the speakers, not the works of art. Works of art say nothing, we often hear; critics are ventriloquists who put words (meanings) into the works that they purportedly describe. We cannot hold such a view—we are pretty sure that _our_ comments about works of literature are rooted in the works themselves—but we are uneasily aware, as we read the words of some earlier critics, that _they_ certainly made the authors over into their own image.

In an essay called “What MoMA Done Tole Me,” written for the magazine _Art and Antiques_ and republished in Updike’s collection of essays entitled _Just Looking_ (1989), Updike anticipated some of the ideas of “Before the Mirror.” Of his visits to the museum in 1955–1957, when he lived in New York, he wrote:

For me the Museum of Modern Art was a temple where I might refresh my own sense of artistic purpose, though my medium had become words. What made this impudent array of color and form Art was the mystery; what made it Modern was obvious, and was the same force that made me modern: time. Indeed, some of the works that arrested me—Picasso’s _Girl Before a Mirror_, its ice-creamy colors and fat satisfied black outlines posed in those days at the turning of the main stairs; _Rouault’s Christ Mocked by Soldiers_, with its outlines of a coarser sort . . . —dated from 1932 and were thus just my age, which seems to me now very young. (pp. 8–9)

Here is the germ of the poem, the identity of the viewer with the work that is viewed. And so in 1996, when Updike again saw the picture in the great exhibition “Picasso and Portraiture” at the Museum of Modern Art, he returned to the topic, noting with satisfaction that the picture is holding up just fine:
And yet... One need not be a deconstructionist, committed to the idea that texts are inherently contradictory, to be a bit unnerved by these last lines. The final words, “to lay it on,” suggest vigorous action (“lay on, Macduff”) but they also undermine the suggestion by implying insincerity (as in, “to lay it on with a trowel”). Or go back to the penultimate line: “Fresh as paint.” A chirpy idiom, and witty here, since the speaker is talking about literal paint, but, alas, a cliche; the words (and also others, especially “I note with satisfaction” in line 21) call to mind some oldster cheering himself up.

Updike—do we have to say “the speaker,” when the speaker so clearly is the author?—is looking at the picture and seeing himself. He is using the picture as, so to speak, a mirror, most appropriately since the picture itself shows a girl looking into the mirror. But mirrors as symbols have several meanings: the mirror can symbolize truth (“The mirror doesn’t lie,” “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, / Who is fairest of them all?”); or it can symbolize vanity (again, the wicked stepmother’s question, since she believes the mirror will tell her that she is the fairest); or (and Updike, who knows a lot about art, must know this) it can symbolize the passage of time and the coming of death (as in paintings of a young girl looking into a mirror and seeing an ancient crone or a skull). Picasso glances at this last interpretation in Girl Before a Mirror, since the girl herself—she is at the left, with her face shown both in profile and frontally—surely is more youthful than the mirror-image (at the right), which seems to reveal a witch-like figure.

The girl’s profile has a pale, virginal look; the front view, with lipstick and rouge, suggests a more sexually aware woman; and the face in the mirror suggests advancing years. (The standard comment is that in the frontal view of the girl’s face we see the energetic sun, in the mirror-image we see the darkening moon.) Further, the boundary lines of the elongated oval mirror can be seen as suggesting a coffin that contains the image.

If the poem ends with an explicitly cheerful note, this ending only barely conceals intimations of mortality. The painting shows “No sag, no wrinkle,” but that is because it is a painting; the viewer, who tells us he is in his sixties, must be showing some sag, some wrinkle. In fact, early in the poem he tells us that he belongs to “a dwindling population.” And in lines 9–10 he echoes the line that greets the new arrivals as they enter Hell: “Abandon Hope, ye who enter here.” True, Updike’s line (“Enter here / and abandon preconception”) implies new life, bestowed by a new kind of art, a new way of seeing, but in conjunction with “dwindling population” the line nevertheless casts a shadow over the poem.

Still, he is of a piece with the picture; he goes back to a day when “they knew just how to lay it on.” Reading this poem about a man looking at a picture of
a woman looking in a mirror—a man looking at a picture which, mirror-like, shows him what he takes to be his own image—we perceive a bit of vanity, we sense the approach of death, and perhaps we even think (though this is nowhere explicit in the poem) that Updike's own works are still "uncracked" and full of "juice." Lookers-into-mirrors will go, images in mirrors will go, viewers of pictures will go, but the pictures, the works of art, remain fresh.

What about the girl's gesture toward the mirror? Our guess is that just as the viewer mentally reaches out to the picture, so the girl reaches out to her own image, seeking to make contact with what she knows is an illusion. Perhaps, too, she is (so to speak) saying, "No, this image of decay can't be true," and she reaches out to prove that the image is an illusion. Or perhaps she is moved by sympathy: "There, there, I know how you must feel." Or maybe Picasso simply felt that it was not enough for the two halves of the picture to echo each other, and that they ought to be tied together.

**WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA**

*Brueghel’s Two Monkeys* (p. 584)

The directness of the first line suggests a matter-of-fact speaker, but of course as soon as one talks about dreams one enters a mysterious world. (Perhaps that is why the sky "flutters" and "the sea is taking its bath." ) The speaker gives us no clues about his or her identity, but we may assume that the speaker is a person of some education (perhaps a member of a profession), since dreams about final examinations are said to be fairly common among people with academic credentials. (In such dreams the dreamers are usually baffled and humiliated; the customary analysis suggests that these dreamers believe they are frauds, undeserving of their credentials.)

In the poem, since the examination is History of Mankind, the dreamer can be taken as standing for all of us. We all wonder where we came from (and where we are going), and perhaps most of us are familiar with the experience of talking earnestly about mysterious subjects and then perceiving (or thinking) that our hearer "listens with mocking disdain." In the poem, the second monkey, who "seems to be dreaming away"—i.e., who seems to be a kindred spirit to the dreamer—offers help, but of a terrifying sort: "he prompts me with a gentle / clinking of his chain."

*Brueghel's* painting shows two chained monkeys, and in the poem the chain is the monkey's, not the dreamer's, but it is easy enough for a reader to think of the dreamer as chained, partly because the dreamer in the poem is unable to escape from the dream and partly because monkeys resemble human beings. Monkeys or apes have been common symbols of humanity, but different artists have put different emphases on the symbolism. In early Christian art the ape symbolizes the devil (a creature who mimics God's concern for humanity but who really is wicked); in later art the ape often symbolizes (usually satirically)
the artist, i.e., the maker of imitations. But the ape can also symbolize lechery, pride, folly, and—as perhaps in Brueghel’s painting and in Szymborska’s poem—baffled humanity. In Art Bulletin 63 (1981): 114–126, Margaret A. Sullivan takes issue with earlier political interpretations of Brueghel’s painting and argues that the monkey at the left symbolizes avarice and the monkey at the right (seated among scattered empty nutshells) symbolizes prodigality. Not relevant to the poem, but we thought you might like to know, even if the interpretation is unconvincing.

To return to the poem: What is the significance of the monkey prompting the poet “with a gentle / clinking of his chain”? If there is one thing we can say with some certainty, it is that there is no one right answer to this question. Still, we take the passage to mean (perhaps among other things) something along these lines: the monkey, clinking his chain, “prompts” or reminds the speaker that all of us are fettered, that is, severely restricted in what we can do (and know). This isn’t much of an answer, but it is something, and the rhyme at the end of the poem (it is the only rhyme in the poem) provides a note of closure, as if to say, “Well, we know only that we are fettered, but at least we know something.”

A good point of departure for further reading of Szymborska’s work is Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems, translated and introduced by Magnus J. Krynski and Robert A. Maguire (1981).
PART III

Standing Back
A Thematic Anthology
LOUISE ERDRICH

Ringo’s Gold (p. 589)

First, some words about gardens, which may be useful if in class you discuss the third question that we give in the text. The gist of this question is, “Are gardeners better people than non-gardeners?” The writer of the comment you are now reading is a non-gardener, someone who has never raised anything other than questions, and he is puzzled by the awe that some folks feel for gardeners. Take, for instance, Francis Bacon’s famous comment,

God Almighty first planted a garden. And indeed, it is the purest of human pleasures.

It will be interesting to find out, in the classroom, why some people come close to revering gardeners.

Erdrich’s essay is partly concerned with strange foods—she begins with raccoon, served as “ragout, of course.” For some of us even the venison and head cheese that she mentions are dishes we have happily avoided, but “Ringo’s Gold” is perhaps not so much about food as about the appearances of things in her garden, for instance the puffball, and especially the strange mushrooms that make her garden look “like a male-genital-disease Web site” (3). This comment brings us to her title, “Ringo’s Gold,” which (we learn after we are halfway through the essay) refers to the “harmless, alfalfa crap” that her daughter’s guinea pig produces. In short, the essay emphasizes the earthiness of this business of enjoying one’s garden. And certainly the final paragraph, with its depiction of a drunken woodchuck, is about as unromantic as one can get. But not quite. The final paragraph dispels any possible romantic associations we may have concerning gardens and food: Eating the woodchuck “would have been like eating the genial town wino.”

BILL MCKIBBEN

Now or Never (p. 590)

We have taught McKibben’s article once, and it worked well in the classroom. We assigned the article along with a writing assignment that took as its point of
departure a statement that McKibben makes in his opening: “Fifteen years into our understanding of climate change, we have yet to figure out how we’re going to tackle it.” (McKibben wrote the article in 2001.) We asked the students, in an essay of no more than a page, to summarize McKibben’s recommendation for how at last we should tackle the problem of climate change.

The purpose of this assignment was two-fold. First, we wanted the students to think about the way in which a writer states a problem or issue and then proceeds, effectively or not, to deal with and answer it. A good writer writes with a purpose and does the job well, effectively, convincingly. Second, we sought to encourage the students to heed the virtues of clarity and conciseness in writing; we limited the page length so that they would have to get to the point—get, that is, to McKibben’s point—directly and cogently.

McKibben takes on a tough task here because, as he recognizes, climate change is a public policy matter that is very hard to get people (and their governments) to do something about. On the one hand, it is urgent and must be addressed. On the other hand, it does not seem to be an immediate concern; it feels like something that we will one day need to face, but not right now, and all the more so not now when the consequence of facing it will mean making changes in our lives we would prefer not to make. That’s a big challenge for McKibben to overcome as a writer—the fact that most people somewhat care about, yet do not want to pay attention to, the issue about which he has such intense feelings.

He starts by stressing “the science is sound.” He wants to make sure that readers cannot take refuge in doubts about the severity of the problem. It’s a nice turn that McKibben makes in his argument when, after outlining the research undertaken by scientists, he says that “the planet itself,” in its change upward in temperature, has been “peer-reviewing their work.” The effects, he observes, are extraordinary: “There’s never been anything like this.”

Yet, McKibben acknowledges, the United States has done next to nothing in recent years and, indeed, has allowed the situation to worsen. Why is that?

One of the reasons, which McKibben may not attend to enough, is the relative “invisibility” of his examples. The disappearance of snow on Mt. Kilimanjaro and the melting of the Arctic ice cap are, to be sure, manifestly visible, but only to those who see them. These sights are far removed from the daily, monthly, and even yearly experiences of the vast majority of Americans. Such examples are, simultaneously, compelling and ineffectual.

McKibben senses this himself when he concedes, “By the time the magnitude of the change is truly in our faces, it will be too late to do much about it.” So he maintains that it’s time to shift ground to making the survival of the planet a “moral question.” His hope is that changing the terms of the debate from science to morality may produce the desire and demand for action that are missing now.

But it is striking that here again McKibben is obliged to argue against himself, or, at least, to admit the difficult (“no easy task”) prospect of converting people to the moral crusade that he feels is imperative. He fastens on an example of the “symbols” we need to get us started—SUVs. (Later, he mentions...
“solar homes,” but it’s the SUV that is his main target.) And he makes some sharp observations about the bad impacts of these mega-vehicles on the environment, vehicles, he contends, that are “simply unnecessary.”

We agree. But we wonder whether McKibben has made enough effort to get inside the minds of the people he would like to rally to his side. He says that an SUV does not keep its occupants safer. But the mothers who drive these vehicles believe that SUVs do keep the kids safer. SUVs are bigger and heavier; they feel safer to the people who own them. And McKibben goes further astray when he jabs at people who have fallen for the false marketing claim that SUVs allow us “to commune with nature.” No doubt there are exceptions, but in the suburbs where we live, no one we know who owns an SUV has said anything to us about the “nature” angle. They like the SUVs because they have lots of space and, again, because people feel safer in bigger, heavier cars than in smaller ones.

We respect McKibben’s commitments, and we admire the brisk, self-aware essay he has written. But one of its fascinations, to us, is that there’s a certain futility about a piece of this kind. McKibben is disturbed that few people are paying attention; he says that the evidence for why they should pay attention is overwhelming; and he proposes a new strategy for provoking them to begin, finally, to pay attention. Good. But will McKibben’s work in this essay succeed in making this attention happen? We think that the interesting answer is, no.

You might ask your students whether they agree and what the implications of their responses might be.

AESOP

The Ant and the Grasshopper (p. 595)

Here are a few thoughts relevant to the two questions that we ask in the text.

1. The last line of the translation, in the text, is

“Well,” said the ant, “since you sang all summer, now dance all winter.”

In the clumsy revision we offer

“Well, since you spent the whole summer singing, I guess you’ll dance now in the winter.”

The revision loses the parallel between “sang all summer” and “dance all winter.” It also adds the unnecessary “I guess.” In short, the punchline has no punch.

2. Our second question in the text raises the issue of whether nature can teach us lessons. (As some answer-books to questions say, “Answers will vary.”)

Let’s begin by looking at another famous moralizing passage about ants. But can we learn from the ants, or from other non-human creatures around us?

Some of your students may be familiar with a passage in the Hebrew Bible, a moralization drawn from an even briefer depiction of the ant:

Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: which, having no guide, overseer, or rule, Provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep.

(Proverbs 6:6–9)

The ant returns, a bit later in Proverbs, where the listener is to draw a moral by observing the behavior of four tiny but wise creatures:

There be four things which are little upon the earth, but they are exceeding wise:
The ants are a people not strong yet they prepare their meat in the summer;
The conies are but a feeble folk yet make they their houses in the rocks;
The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands;
The spider taketh hold with her hands, and is in kings’ palaces.

(Proverbs 30:24–28)

But one obvious response is—if we model our behavior on the creatures around us, should we not behave ruthlessly? Does not Nature, as Tennyson said in “In Memoriam, show us a world that is “red in tooth and claw”? Thoreau’s report of a battle between ants, which we give in this chapter immediately after Aesop’s fable, gets into this issue.

But before thinking about the violence in nature, let’s look at the early Romantic view, formulated by Wordsworth in “The Tables Turned”:

One impulse from the vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good
Than all the sages can. (1798)

Consider also a line from Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abby” (1798):

Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her.

Against these sentiments we can place Matthew Arnold’s bitter “In Harmony with Nature: To a Preacher,” which we give in the text on page 613. Some students may have heard of Social Darwinism, the doctrine that (to put it crudely) we ought to imitate Darwinian nature, in which we see a process of “natural selection,” a struggle to survive—in Herbert Spencer’s famous formulation, “survival of the fittest.” In this view, we are going against nature when we extend help to (say) the mentally deficient, or, when it comes down to
it, folks who just can't seem to take care of themselves. Nature's Way, so to
speak, is to let them go, and therefore our attempts to save the "unfit" are con-
trary to nature, and wrong. This view in fact predates Darwin's writings, but
that's another story.

We will return to Aesop's fable in a moment, but we want to add one other
famous comment comparing—or, rather, contrasting—human society with the
society of ants, Lyndon Johnson's observation in his Inaugural Address:

I do not believe the Great Society is the ordered, changeless, and sterile bat-
talion of the ants. It is the excitement of becoming, trying, probing, falling,
resting and trying again.

Students who argue that Aesop's ant is speaking good sense might be asked
how they feel about the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.30–37). Of
course there are differences in the stories: In the biblical story, the man who is
in difficulties was assaulted by thieves, whereas in Aesop the grasshopper is
responsible for his own plight. Still, . . .

What is the appeal of animal fables? In our view, much of the appeal is in
the fun of hearing animals speak, but also partly in the vague sense that, yes,
there is something of the beast in us. Fables show us the beast in human beings,
show us (for the most part) the unpleasant animal qualities in us, but they do
it in a highly entertaining way. (We hasten to add that we do not believe that
the qualities mentioned are found in animals: We don't really think that pigs are
hoggish, etc.)

Fables are not the only way of calling attention to negative qualities associ-
ated with beasts. Think of expressions such as "to monkey around," "monkey
business," "a bull in a china shop," "a snake in the grass," "a dog in the
manger" (an Aesop fable is behind this expression), "a wolf in sheep's clothing"
(another fable here). Something is "fishy," "Joe is a rat," "Jack is a loan shark,"
"Mary and Jane had a cat fight," people are "foxy," "mousey," "currish," "pig-
gish," "pig-headed, "mulish," "eagle-eyed." Almost all of these terms are neg-
ative; even "eagle-eyed" usually suggests an unpleasant swooping down upon
some small error.

Additional Suggested Topic for Writing
In a search engine such as Google enter “Ant grasshopper libertarian” and you
will probably find at least one version of the fable as narrated by a libertarian.
(Definitions of libertarianism vary, but most people agree that libertarians
regard constraints imposed by the states as violations of human liberty, except
for penalties imposed on those who infringe on the rights of someone else. Thus,
the only government necessary is government whose sole purpose is the protect
individuals and their property. What sorts of laws do libertarians regard as
infractions on liberty? Examples include laws that compel parents to send chil-

dren to school, and laws that compel drivers to use seat belts.) The libertarian
parodies of the fable of the ant and grasshopper show various Democrats (the
Clinton, Barack Obama, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, Senator Harry Reid)
protesting on the CBS Evening News, and in interviews with Larry King and
Oprah Winfrey that it is disgraceful that in our prosperous United States a
groshopper is shivering and starving. The hard-working ants are therefore
taxed in order to provide free housing for the grasshopper, who ultimately lets
the house run down, whereupon it is taken over by a gang of spiders who ter-
rorize what was formerly a peaceful neighborhood. The Question: Is the piece
in fact a parody by libertarians—a spoof of those people (notably Democrats)
who would tax hard-working people in order to support loafers—or is it per-
haps by Democrats, who are spoofing the libertarians position? Set forth your
response in an argumentative essay of 250 words.

Comment on this assignment: When we first read the parody, we thought it
was indeed a libertarian satire on the Democrats, but on rereading it we came to
think that it probably is a Democratic parody of libertarian over-the-top thinking.
The point: There is always the danger that a satire or parody will be misinterpreted.
(It is said that Swift’s “Modest Proposal” was taken seriously by some of its first
readers.) In short, we are not certain whether the object of satire is tax-and-spend
Democrats or, on the other hand, libertarians. The point of our question is to get
students to read the piece and then to offer reasons for their interpretation.

**AESOP**

*The North Wind and the Sun* (p. 595)

This story does not use animals—and it seems to us to be notably weaker than
most of the Aesopian stories that do use animals. (In our discussion of “The Ant
and the Grasshopper,” in this manual, we very briefly try to explain the appeal
of animal fables.) There is a further difficulty here: Although in ordinary speech
we talk of “a sunny smile,” the sun in fact can be dreadfully unpleasant, which
is why people in some locales air-condition their homes. In the fable, we read
“The sun smiled, sending beams of light that drove away the fog and the mist,”
and then the sun “smiled a bit more, and the man unbuttoned his coat. . . .”
Now, despite the moral of the story (“Gentleness is more persuasive than
violence”), the sun’s greater smile in fact is, from the man’s point of view, not
an act of gentleness. Rather, it is violence by other means. (An autobiographi-
cal note: The most unpleasant weeks that the writer of this note ever spent were
in July at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where even the lightest clothing became
drenched with sweat. Give me the ski slopes any time.)

But to get back to Aesop: Whether the moral is or is not true is worth dis-
cussing. Violence certainly can be effective in getting what it wants—though
surely it is stretching language to say that violence is “persuasive.” It can
accomplish its goals, for instance ethnic cleansing, but does violence persuade?
(Al Capone is reported to have said that a kind word supported by a gun is more persuasive than a kind word by itself, but he was a great kidder.) On the other hand, we all have seen the power of non-violent resistance, and (to end on a literary note) there is probably a good deal of truth in Samuel Butler’s assertion that “We are not won by arguments that we can analyze but by tone and temper, by the manner which is the man himself.”

**JACK LONDON**

*To Build a Fire* (p. 596)

London wrote an earlier story with this same title for a boys’ magazine called *The Youth’s Companion* (1902). Earle Labor and King Hendricks reprint it as an appendix to an article on the two stories [Studies in Short Fiction 4 (1966–67): 334–47]. The first version, in which the man succeeds in building a fire but carries lifelong scars of frostbite, has two strong morals: “Never travel alone” and “Pay attention to the advice of your elders.” Labor and Hendricks characterize this version as an *exemplum*, a story that subordinates atmosphere and characterization to didactic explicitness.

The revision of 1907 (published in 1908), more than twice the length of the earlier version, is really a new story. It not only changes the ending but drops the explicit moralizing, or at least alters the emphasis, turning from the simple point that one needs a companion to the more subtle point that one needs “imagination.” We are told that the man “was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances.” Thus the extreme cold “did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man’s frailty in general.”

The story, using only one character and one setting, is something of a tour de force; the dog serves as a sort of second character, for the dog (which instinctively knows that this is not the time to travel) lets us see how a creature should behave when confronted with this aspect of nature. (Nature, by the way, is not hostile here, only unyielding. The man dies not because nature toys with him, or because existence is absurd, but because he does not take the proper precautions.) Then, too, at the end when the dog trots off to find some other provider of food and fire, we get a glimpse of life going on, indifferent to any one person.

Labor and Hendricks, saying that the use of the dog as a “reflector” (Henry James’s term) is “the masterpiece of London’s revised version,” make the obvious point that the dog serves as a foil to the man. The dog’s “natural wisdom of conduct is juxtaposed against the foolish rationality of his master’s behavior.” More controversial is their claim that the man’s dealings with the dog show that the man has no sense of “true comradeship.” Labor and Hendricks go so far as to say that the man’s “inner coldness correlates with the enveloping outer cold. And there is a grim but poetic justice in his fate.”


It is a representation of an action that is serious, whole, complete, and of a certain magnitude. . . . The protagonist, neither an especially good man nor an especially bad man, falls into misfortune because of a tragic flaw, notably hubris: an overweening confidence in the efficacy of his own rational faculties. . . . The narrator [when commenting on the man’s failure to think about the meaning of fifty degrees below zero] functions as the chorus, who mediates between the action and the reader and who provides moral commentary upon the action.

Labor goes on to argue that “also in keeping with the tragic mode is the sense of inevitability in the catastrophe,” and that there is irony in the man’s premature self-congratulation when he thinks, “Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them. . . . All a man had to do was to keep his head, and he was all right.” And when the fire in effect extinguishes itself by precipitating an avalanche from the snow-laden tree, there is a reversal (Aristotle’s peripeteia) and a discovery (anagnorisis). London writes,

The man was shocked. It was as though he had just heard his own sentence of death. For a moment he sat and stared at the spot where the fire had been. Then he grew very calm. Perhaps the old-timer on Sulphur Creek was right. If he had only had a trail mate he would have been in no danger now. The trail mate could have built the fire.

Labor concludes his discussion of the Aristotelian qualities in the story by saying that “the man achieves true heroic stature; and his tragic action inspires both pity and fear in leading his audience toward the cathartic relief prescribed by Aristotle.”

London of course drew in part on his firsthand knowledge of the Klondike, but he also drew on a book, Jeremiah Lynch’s *Three Years in the Klondike* (1904). Lynch’s account of a man who dies because he cannot build a fire is reprinted in Franklin Walker, *Jack London and the Klondike* (1966).

**Sarah Orne Jewett**

*A White Heron* (p. 606)

Elizabeth Ammons’s “The Shape of Violence in Jewett’s ‘A White Heron,’” *Colby Library Quarterly* 22:1 (March 1986): 6–16, is an exceptionally important essay. Since not all libraries will have this journal, a brief summary (often in Ammons’s words, though not here indicated by quotation marks) may be welcome. However, readers who have access to the original are encouraged to read the article rather than the following summary.

On one level the story is about opposing values: urban/rural; scientific/intu-181
itional; civilized/natural; masculine/feminine. On a deeper level it is a challenge
to heterosexual ideology. Sylvia (Latin for “woods”) lives in an entirely female
world, a rural paradise. She is nature’s child. The whimsical yet serious symbol
of this “natural” place is a cow—bountiful female nurturer, a walking udder, a
warm mobile milky mother. Sylvia and the cow (and Sylvia’s grandmother) live
together in fertile self-sufficiency, much as Jewett lived with a circle of sisters
and female friends in a satisfying network of female support. The hunter, a tem-
porary intruder into this world, invites Sylvia to participate in the world of men.
(In the nineteenth century, women were beginning to move out of the home and
into the world of male institutions, for instance as typists or mill workers.)
Sylvia resists the world of men; she feels erotic stirrings but denies them, resist-
ing the institution of heterosexuality itself. The story is a rite-of-passage story
in which the heroine refuses to make the rite of passage that everyone (hunter,
grandmother) expects her to make.

Heterosexuality (Ammons continues) requires the female to offer up the
body itself as prey—here, the body of the heron. (The heron symbolizes Sylvia.)
If she offers the body, she will receive money, social approval, and the affection
of man. Sylvia moves to the brink of heterosexuality (the journey into the wood,
the experience with the phallic pine which seems “to lengthen itself out” as she
climbs, the view of new worlds), but finally she refuses and instead chooses the
world of her grandmother.

Ammons then turns to the sex of the heron. If it is a symbol of Sylvia, why
is the heron male? Ammons suggests that (1) a female heron might be too obvi-
ous a symbol; (2) the maleness of the heron calls attention to the fact that the
heterosexual contest as defined by the human male is not, finally, between male
and female but between male and male, i.e., male aggresses on male, with the
female as bait, weapon, spy. In this male-dominated world, the “good” woman
helps her man assault other men. Further, in this story the question is: Which
male will win Sylvia, the heron or the hunter?

Ammons makes yet another point. Jewett usually did not write stories with
the conventional ladderlike plot of exposition, conflict, climax, and denoue-
ment, but in “A White Heron” she did use such a plot. However, she uses this
sort of “masculine” plot (i.e., the traditional plot in a male-dominated culture)
only to a point: Sylvia rejects the anticipated denouement, and returns to the
earthbound world of the cow.

Another article of considerable interest is Theodore Hovet’s “‘Once Upon a
Time’: Sarah Orne Jewett’s ‘A White Heron’ as a Fairy Tale,” Studies in Short
Fiction 15 (1978): 63–68. Hovet points out that this story follows the patterns
of the fairy tale. Sylvia leaves her grandmother’s house and enters a dark wood,
where she meets a figure who, since he kills birds and will offer a bribe, can be
called a villain. The villain, however, is innocently received in the house of the
grandmother. The heroine sets out on a quest (for the heron’s nest), enters a new
world (she moves from the familiar oak to the previously unclimbed pine), is
afflicted (by the dry twigs of the pine tree), persists and is rewarded with a view
of “the vast and awesome world,” in which she sees the heron flying to a green marsh. She knows the heron’s secret now. She resists the bribe (withstands a further test), refusing to “tell the heron’s secret and give its life away,” though for withholding the information she suffers “a sharp pang” (the hero—or heroine—of a fairy tale is often left with a mark). The villain is thus defeated and leaves, and the heroine returns to the safety of her home, enriched by the “gifts,” “graces,” and “secrets” of nature.

Taking a cue from Bettleheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment*, which argues that fairy tales provide children with an opportunity to confront in sublimated form important themes in their lives, Hovet points out that Sylvia thus escapes from masculine control (the dead stuffed birds are regarded as symbols of domestic women on a pedestal). Hovet finds yet another veiled meaning, consistent with Bettleheim’s view that fairy tales allow for multiple levels of interpretation, suitable for children of various ages: the heroine rejects the industrial America (the gun and the money) which would transform nature into dead objects, and instead chooses (in Hovet’s words) “the nurturing power of nature.”

To this we can add the obvious points that the heroine’s name, Sylvia, suggests woodlands, and that in her choice of nature she gives up the young man whom she loves. That is, her choice is not simply between money and nature, but between love of a man (at least this man) and love of nature. Jewett at the end expresses the hope that nature will compensate her for the loss—but we cannot be sure that nature will.

By the way, in *The Uses of Enchantment* Bettleheim argues that although “each fairy tale . . . reflects some aspects of our inner world, and of the steps required by our evolution from immaturity to maturity,” it is the strength of fairy tales, as opposed to fables, that fairy tales are relatively ambiguous and do not require children to identify themselves fully with one character. For Bettleheim, the fable, with its narrow moral (cf. his discussion of “The Ant and the Grasshopper”), can cause disharmony between the child and the story. Jewett’s final paragraph fits Bettleheim’s argument about fairy tales, for it does not settle Sylvia’s fate unequivocally. If this story, like a fairy tale, enchants, one will read it again and again, and at different ages will find different significances.

Other articles of interest can be found in *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett* (Gwen Nagel, ed., 1984). See especially the essays by George Held and Gayle L. Smith. There is also a book on the story by Louis A. Renza, *A White Heron* and the Questions of Minor Literature. If you like expressions such as “the text’s unregenerate desire for literary finitude,” you’ll like this book. But even if you find such turgid expressions exasperating, you may find some interesting ideas in the book.

Additional secondary sources: Josephine Donovan, *Sarah Orne Jewett* (1980); and Sarah Way Sherman, *Sarah Orne Jewett: An American Persephone* (1989). See also *Colby Library Quarterly* 22 (March 1986), a special issue devoted to Jewett, which includes the essay by Ammons we mentioned earlier.
Butterflies (p. 612)

Because this story is very short and very engaging, it can be used as a way of introducing students to fiction. One can, for instance, discuss the effectiveness of the objective point of view. Much of the charm of the story, we think, is that we do not get inside any of the characters’ minds. We don’t need to hear what the grandparents think. We know all we need to know from the few things that they say: They are respectful of knowledge and authority (the teacher), they are proud of their granddaughter, and they want her to succeed. In fact, the delightful suspense evoked by the last paragraph, in which the grandparents “were quiet for a long time,” would be destroyed if we were brought inside their minds. In its present form, the reader waits, wondering what the oldsters will say, and then we get exactly the right statement. (You might ask students to come up with some lines reporting the unspoken thoughts of the grandparents, and we imagine that the students will ultimately agree that it probably is better to leave these thoughts unreported.)

The story is largely a story about contrasting human views of the natural world. And it is a story—like most other stories—about the movement from innocence to experience. In this tiny tale there are really two stories of such a change—the story of the child’s initiation (through the grandparents) to a natural world that is not merely pretty, and there is also the rather unusual story of the adults learning, in this instance that the teacher, the learned person whom they respect, may have a very incomplete view of life. Nevertheless, in this second story, when it comes to important things, we continue to see the grandparents as wise. They have learned that book-learning has its limitations.

In Harmony with Nature (p. 613)

It is clear enough that Arnold rejects the idea that one can be or should be “in harmony with nature.” His point (especially evident in lines 5–7) is that human beings have a moral sense that is not evident in the rest of creation:

Know, man hath all which Nature hath, but more,
And in that more lies all his hopes of good.
Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood. . . .

Here at least Arnold’s view of nature resembles Tennyson’s horrified view that nature is not a joyous realm of Wordsworthian daffodils fluttering in the breeze but rather is a world that is “red in tooth and claw.” The final stanza begins, “Man must begin, know this, where Nature ends.”
Exactly where must human beings “begin” their moral thinking? Perhaps, to go back a bit in the poem, the distinction between man (i.e., human beings) and Nature is sharpened by line 10, with “Nature forgives no debt,” words that probably remind us of Jesus’s injunction that we should forgive our debtors. In any case, it is clear that (at least in this poem) Arnold has no patience with those who see in the non-human world some sort of moral guidance. The writings of, say, John Muir (1838–1914) would astound him. Here are a few samples of Muir:

Rocks and waters, etc., are works of God and so are men. We all flow from one fountain Soul. All are expressions of one Love. (letter of June 9, 1872)

In God’s wilderness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness.” (from *Alaska Fragment*, 1890)

Let children walk with nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory, for it never fights. All is divine harmony” (*A Thousand-Mile Walk in the Gulf* [posthumous, 1916])

To get back to Arnold: The poem seems pretty clear to us, but we do find one puzzling ambiguity, in the first stanza:

“In harmony with Nature?” Restless fool,
Who with such heat dost preach what were to thee,
When true, the last impossibility——
To be like Nature strong, like Nature cool.

In the last two lines of this verse Arnold seems to say that Nature is “strong” and “cool,” and he contrasts these qualities with with “heat” of the preacher. That is, in this passage Arnold sees Nature as admirable, though admittedly also as rather remote. But the poem goes on to shift from this idea that Nature is “strong” and “cool” to the idea that Nature is “cruel,” “stubborn,” and characterized by “blood.” The only way that the writer of this comment can avoid the ambiguity is to claim that perhaps in line 4 (“To be like Nature strong, like Nature cool”) the poet is not giving his own view but is in effect quoting the preacher. That is, maybe the preacher has said that man should be, like Nature, strong and cool, but Arnold sees that the misguided preacher himself speaks with “heat.”

In any case, the poem does bring up the issue of whether the world around us can offer us any sort of moral guidance, a topic that we believe students will gladly talk about.

THOMAS HARDY
Transformations (p. 614)

The poem moves from quiet observation and meditation to ecstasy. Donald Hall has a fine analysis of “Transformations” in The Pleasures of Poetry. Among his points: an old man (he knew the girl “long ago”) is walking in a graveyard and—presumably because he recognizes the name on a gravestone next to a yew (though this is not stated in the poem)—asserts that a particular man is part of the yew. Since husbands and wives are commonly buried next to each other, a branch “may be his wife.” Some nearby grasses, bending in the breeze, suggest a humble, praying woman. And a fair girl whom he “tried to know” is entering a rose; presumably we are put in mind of rosy cheeks, but even more important is what Hall terms the “small nostalgic romantic story” packed into these three lines about the speaker and the girl. Speaking of the first stanza Hall mentions that “a tree or bush without leaves, against the sky, can look like an anatomical diagram of human nerves and veins.” So a visual resemblance “gives . . . weight to Hardy’s fantastic assertion that these people live again, even in their feelings.” (We have given only a rough idea of Hall’s excellent essay.)

JOHN KEATS
To Autumn (p. 615)

The poem is discussed in books on Keats by Walter Jackson Bate, Douglas Bush, and Helen Vendler, and also in Reuben Brower, The Fields of Light (1951), and in Geoffrey Hartman, The Fate of Reading, and Other Essays (1975).

Some gleanings: One can see, in the three stanzas, the progress of autumn from the energetic first stanza (note “load,” “bless,” “bend,” “fill,” “swell,” “set budding”) with its “apples” and “mellow fruitfulness” before the harvest to the more languid second stanza with its “half-reaped furrow” and its cider press with “last oozings,” and then the “stubble plains” in the third. We move from richness and fruition in the first stanza, to a sense of loss and also of drowsiness in the second, and finally to a full awareness of death in the third (“soft dying,” “mourn,” “wailful”), though death is seen in the context of fulfillment. Thus the images of death are in various ways modified. If the day is dying, it is “soft-dying,” and if we get stubble rather than swaying grain, the stubble is “rosy.”

One can also see the progress of a single day. The “maturing sun” of the first stanza may suggest noon, the resting figure of the second suggests mid-afternoon, and then “the last oozings hours by hours” suggest late afternoon; and of course the third stanza explicitly indicates the end of the day, by “soft-dying day” and “gathering swallows.” There is also a movement from the cottage garden with its fruit trees and flowers in the first stanza, to the granary,
cider press, and fields of a farm in the second, and then to the hills and skies (though including the “garden-croft”) of the third.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

God’s Grandeur (p. 617)

The world (including the human world) has divinely created beauty in its charge (care), but “charged” in line 1 is also a scientific term (referring to electricity), leading to “flame out” in the next line; “foil” in line 2, Hopkins explained in a letter, refers to “foil in its sense of leaf or tinsel.” Most of the first quatrain asserts the grandeur of God, whose divine energy may be manifested either suddenly (“flame out”) or slowly (“ooze of oil / Crushed”). “Crushed,” at the beginning of line 4, is part of this celebration (probably alluding to olives or seeds), but this word itself of course also suggests destruction, and the rest of the octave is about human corruption of the self and of nature. “Man’s smudge” in line 7 probably alludes to original sin as well as to the destruction wreaked on the countryside by factories. The octave thus moves from an excited or urgent proclamation of God’s grandeur to a melancholy reflection on our insensitivity to this grandeur.

The sestet reintroduces a joyous affirmation of God’s grandeur. Lines 13 and 14 allude to the traditional representation of the Holy Ghost as a dove, but Christ is here seen also as the dawning sun, giving warmth and light, and thus we go back to the reference to light in line 2; “bent world” probably evokes the curvature of the horizon, the world distorted by sin, and perhaps backbreaking labor.

Paul L. Mariani, in his excellent Commentary on the Complete Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1970), suggests that the last lines are connected with the first quatrain: “If we can picture the dawning sun before it breaks over the horizon, we may recall how the rich light seems precisely to ‘gather to a greatness’ in density and brightness . . . until the orb of the sun itself seems to spring forth, and then the sun flames out in strong rays like wings from its center.” W. H. Gardner, in Gerard Manley Hopkins (1948), vol. II, 230, suggests that the obvious meaning of the poem is that the world is a reservoir of divine power, love, and beauty, and that the deeper meaning is that life must be jarred before the presence of God can be felt. On “verbal resonance” and other sound effects in the poem, see Brooks and Warren, Understanding Poetry, 4th ed. (1976), 538–40. See also Terry Eagleton in Essays in Criticism 23 (1973): 68–75. Students might be invited to compare the poem with this entry (Dec. 8, 1881) from one of Hopkins’s notebooks, reprinted in The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, ed. Christopher Devlin (1959), 95: “All things therefore are charged with love; are charged with God and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him.”

A few words about ecology and the Bible. We were surprised, though we probably should not have been, when a class discussion of the poem slipped into a
discussion of conflicting views between certain kinds of ecologists and certain kinds of devout Jews and Christians. The gist, as we recall it, was this: Some students began by pointing out that in contrast to ancient pagan thought, which included numerous nature gods such as river gods and thunder gods, Hebrew thinking (as revealed in Genesis) sees only one God. This God exists apart from nature, and nature is “divine” only in the sense that God created it. Human beings—but no other parts of the creation—have divine souls. We were familiar with this idea, but we were not prepared for a related idea: Animal Rights activists mistakenly elevate animals to a status equivalent to human beings, and thus activists are implicitly (and wrongly) regarding nature as sacred. Some students, in short, were extremely distressed by some ecologically minded students who talk about the “rights” and the “sacredness” of nature.

The students who were upset by what we can call the “ecological view,” we must emphasize, were not suggesting that nature is mere chaos. Far from it: They made a point of quoting two famous lines from Genesis: “God saw that it was good” (1:10), and “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (1:31). Further, at least one student argued that because human beings are created in God’s image, we too must delight in wild nature, just as God did. This view brought us back to Hopkins who certainly delighted in nature, not only in “God’s Grandeur” but in many other poems such as “The Windhover,” “Pied Beauty,” and “Binsey Poplars,” to mention only three. But we were not prepared for another twist in the discussion: Human beings must not sentimentalize nature; rather, they must firmly rule over it, because humans (unlike the rest of the creation) have within us a Godlike quality. Genesis 1.28 says, speaking of Adam and Eve, “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” (Thus the King James version. The New Jerusalem version—Roman Catholic—says, “And God blessed them saying to them, ‘Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, and all the living creatures that move on earth.’”) The issue became this: To a Christian or to an observant Jew who is an environmentalist, What does “subdue” mean? Some students argued that human beings have no moral obligation to take into consideration ecological concerns, but one student reminded us that in Genesis 9 God orders Noah to save the lives of every species. The argument, thus, was that an environmental ethic is part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and that Hopkins’s celebration of the world of nature is not at all heretical.

Speaking broadly, evangelical Christians tend to be right-wing, more evidently concerned with moral issues of sexuality than with the issues concerning environment, whereas environmentalists tend to be left-wing, but we have noticed, in various newspaper accounts, that some evangelical Christians have spoken out forcefully about environmental issues. Thus, in October 2005 the leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals issued a statement that included the following passage:

We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part. (Washington Post, February 6, 2005, page A1)

The statement was criticized by some fellow evangelicals, who were reluctant to find themselves associated with the left, but it also gained support by other evangelicals. The term “creation care” seems to be getting some use in evangelical circles.

Finally, it should be mentioned that there is no shortage of folks who argue that the rape of the earth is due not to the Bible’s injunction to subdue it, but to Godless views engendered in the Enlightenment, i.e., to views that lack religious restraint.

WALT WHITMAN

A Noiseless Patient Spider (p. 618)

Whitman’s “A Noiseless Patient Spider” is in free verse, though in fact the poem is not terribly “free”; each stanza has five lines, helping to establish the similitude of spider and soul, and the first line of each stanza is relatively short, the other lines being longer, helping to establish the idea of “venturing, throwing.” The near-rhyme at the end helps to tie up the poem, as though finally the bridge is at least tentatively “form’d,” the “anchor” holding, but the fact is that the action is not yet complete, the soul is not yet anchored. A discussion of this poem will also necessarily get into Whitman’s use of figurative language. Implicitly, the speaker’s soul is a noiseless, patient spider, “ceaselessly musing, ceaselessly venturing,” building a “bridge” in the vastness (i.e., uniting the present with eternity—or are the filaments that the soul flings poems that unite mankind?).


Another excellent resource is Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia, J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (1998).

Additional Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. In about 250 words describe some animal, plant, or object that can be taken as a symbol of some aspect of your personality or experience.

2. The text gives Whitman’s final version (1871) of “A Noiseless Patient Spider.” Here is Whitman’s draft, written some ten years earlier. You may
want to distribute this version and ask students to compare the two poems and evaluate them.

The Soul, Reaching, Throwing Out for Love

The soul, reaching, throwing out for love,
As the spider, from some little promontory, throwing out filament after filament, tirelessly out of itself, that one at least may catch and form a link, a bridge, a connection
O I saw one passing along, saying hardly a word—yet full of love I detected him, by certain signs
O eyes wishfully turning! O silent eyes!
For then I thought of you o’er the world,
O latent oceans, fathomless oceans of love!
O waiting oceans of love! yearning and fervid! and of you sweet souls perhaps in the future delicious and long:
But Death, unknown on the earth—ungiven, dark here, unspoken, never born:
You fathomless latent souls of love—you pent and unknown oceans of love!

EMILY DICKINSON

“Nature” is what we see (p. 619)

The first thing we do, when we teach this poem is to ask: What is a bobolink?

- An American migratory songbird (Dolichonyx oryzivorus), the male of which has black, white, and yellowish plumage. Also called reebird; regional, ricebird; also called regionally maybird.

It is almost certain that few, if any, students will be able to answer this question. Our hope is that some of them, at least, will be embarrassed that they did not bother to look up the word in the dictionary. A little chastisement, gently applied, is useful about such things, we believe. Students need to be encouraged to widen and extend their vocabulary; they should be pressed a bit to use the kinds of resources that are everywhere on the Internet, just a click or two away.

When we last taught Dickinson’s poem, we tried an experiment, and it worked pretty well. We displayed the poem on a large screen, hooked up to a computer in the classroom, and we isolated the first line, moving the rest of the poem down and out of sight.

All that the students saw on the screen, was:

“Nature” is what we see—
We prompted the class to talk about the difference between Nature, and “Nature” (in quotation marks), and then about the meaning of the simple-seem ing line as a whole.

Next, we showed on the screen:

Nature is what we hear—

We asked, why no quotation marks, and what is the difference between seeing Nature and hearing Nature?

Next, another line:

Nature is what we know—

What the students now were viewing, was a three-line poem—three statements, three assertions.

Keeping this three-line poem intact, but moving it down the screen and out of sight, we paused, and began again. This time, we showed:

Nature is what we know—
Yet have no art to say—

Do these two lines function as a poem? Could they stand alone, and, if so, what would this poem convey to the reader?

Then we added the two lines that conclude Dickinson’s text:

So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity.

We want the students to be thinking about the contrast between Wisdom and Simplicity, though we also make sure that “impotent” is defined and lingered over as well.

- Impotent: 1. Lacking physical strength or vigor; weak. 2. Lacking in power, as to act effectively; helpless: “Technology without morality is barbarous; morality without technology is impotent” (Freeman J. Dyson). 3a. Incapable of sexual intercourse often because of an inability to achieve or sustain an erection. b. Sterile. Used of males. 4. Obsolete Lacking self-restraint. (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed. 2000.)

We are not done yet. Another two-line poem:

Nature is Heaven—
Nature is Harmony—

How are the words “Heaven” and “Harmony” related to one another?

Now, it is time to examine the poem as Dickinson wrote it—her choices for its organization. We start with the first line, again keeping everything else out of sight. Then we add a line, inviting the students to comment on what this second line adds to and does for the meanings of the first. Next, what is happening, being done, in the third line? And so on to the end.

The point is to illuminate for students how Dickinson’s poem is structured, and to make vivid for them what we mean when we speak of the “action” of a poem. What are the sources of this action, in the case of this poem by Dickinson? What does it mean to say that through careful study and reflection, we can make a poem “come alive”?

There are many books on Dickinson, but we confess that few of them strike as immediately helpful to students, or to us as teachers of introductory courses. The best book on Dickinson is Alfred Habegger’s *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (2001). Habegger significantly adds to, elaborates upon, and in many cases corrects the work of previous scholars, editors, and biographers, bringing us as close to this extraordinary poet and reclusive, self-dramatizing, and profoundly perplexing person as we are likely ever to get.

**EMILY DICKINSON**

*A narrow Fellow in the Grass* (p. 619)

“Fellow” (and the pronouns “Him” and “His,” rather than “it” and “its”) and “rides” in the first stanza help to assimilate the snake to the human world, as does “comb” in the second stanza. In these two stanzas there is some emphasis on the unexpectedness of the snake. He is “sudden” but not menacing. And in the beginning of the third stanza he seems almost an eccentric neighbor: “He likes a Boggy Acre.” In the fourth stanza the reference to a whiplash introduces a more threatening note; “Nature’s People” in the next stanza seems to bring us back to the comfortable world of the first stanza, but with the last line of the poem (“Zero at the Bone”) there is communicated a terror that indicates a response to the snake as supremely hostile. (The snake is, after all, a traditional image of our satanic enemy.) The contrast between “a transport / Of cordiality” (which carries a sense of warmth, that is, warm-heartedness, via *cor*, heart) and the coldness of “Zero at the Bone” could hardly be greater.

Karl Keller, in a provocative book about Emily Dickinson, *The Only Kangaroo among the Beauty* (1979), says (p. 268) that the poem “manages to make Freud trite.” Keller says that Dickinson’s “tighter breathing / And Zero at the Bone” indicate that “she finds her genitals alarmed,” and that “she is shocked and attracted by the male erection (‘His notice sudden is’).” Keller patently misreads the poem when he says, “Her own sexual desires are she says..."
very strongly aroused: she feels ‘a transport / Of cordiality.’” Not so; the poem says that for “Several of Nature’s People” she feels that transport “but” for this fellow she feels “Zero at the Bone.”

Dickinson complained when the third line was printed with a question mark at its end. Apparently “did you not” is less a question than a tagged-on conversational filler like “don’t you know” and a question mark causes too long and too strong a pause. Yet another point about the punctuation: Lines 11–16 describing the boy (the speaker is a boy, not Emily Dickinson) stooping to pick up what he thinks is a whiplash but what is in fact a snake that disappears are unpunctuated (until the end of 16) and thus suggestive of the speed of the event.

JOY HARJO

Vision (p. 621)

The view that the earth is sacred is found in many societies, but it is apparently especially strong in the thought of Native Americans.

Some students—not necessarily only those who are Native Americans—may know something about Native American beliefs, and they may provide a way of entry to the poem. It may also happen that some students may know that according to Genesis 9.12-17, God established the rainbow as a token of a covenant with Noah and his descendants. If this concept comes up, you may want to contrast it with Harjo’s poem and to compare Harjo’s poem with Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up”:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
    Or let me die!
The Child is father to the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
    Bound each to each by natural piety.

For Wordsworth, “piety” is “natural piety,” something rooted in the human being’s perception of (responsiveness to) nature, rather than something based on Scripture. We take it that Harjo’s vision is close to Wordsworth’s.

We are not saying, of course, that the visions are the same, but we do find a close resemblance in the emphasis on the perception of nature as animating the human. For Harjo, the rainbow animates the earth, giving “horses / of color” to humans, “horses that were within us all of this time / but we didn’t see them. . . .”
MARY OLIVER

*The Black Walnut Tree* (p. 622)

The poem presents students with few or no difficulties. Further, they will all be familiar with the experience of talking about doing something practical and then not doing it, because of the tug of sentiment, or, more generally, simply because one *feels* that the rational course of action is not always the right course.

KAY RYAN

*Turtle* (p. 623)

Notice that Ryan begins with a question, and her poem might be understood as an answer, or set of answers, to this question, unfolding through witty, vivid, playful metaphors. The turtle is a “roll”—and a hard one at that. Then, it is a helmet, but a curious kind of helmet that also has four oars (the turtle’s four feet), a metaphor that Ryan extends by saying that the turtle rows toward the grass that it eats. But then, in line 6, she depicts the turtle as a heavy packing case that is hard to move. And so on, to the ending—an ending that implies the way in which the turtle is itself a metaphor, suggesting the important lesson of patience for all of us.

Perhaps the turtle, then, for all of its limitations that Ryan illustrates through engaging metaphors, possesses a virtue that many of us do not. Turtles and human beings might (or could) have something in common after all—something we come to see and think about through the metaphors that Ryan presents in her poem.

Incidentally, although metaphor is essential to “Turtle,” we cannot resist pointing out that Ryan is also exploiting other aspects of the poet’s craft, notably rhyme. Notice that some rhymes occur at the ends of lines—“wings” in 13 and “things” in 15—but some rhymes, or near-rhymes (also called “off-rhymes”), occur within lines: “oared” in line 2 and “afford” in line 3; “graceless” in 5, “packing-case places” in 6; “practical” in 7 and “axle” in 8; “slope” in 6, “hopes” in 7; “ditch” and “which” in 10; “lottery” in 12 and “pottery” in 13. The effect, we think, is to communicate something of the lumbering quality of this beast whose patience Ryan is celebrating largely through metaphors.

Some critics and journalists have described “Turtle” as an affirmative poem that extols the virtue of patience and human progress, whereas others contend it teaches a gloomy lesson. Indeed, when Ryan “wrote the concluding lines of ‘Turtle,’” according to Bob Thompson, she “evoked a deeply pessimistic vision of her life’s work.” (*The Washington Post*, July 17, 2008)

The poet and editor J. D. McClatchy has said about Ryan: “Her poems are compact, exhilarating, strange affairs, like Erik Satie miniatures or Joseph Cornell boxes. She is an anomaly in today’s literary culture: as intense and elliptical as Dickinson, as buoyant and rueful as Frost.”
Another critic, Laura Miller, writing for salon.com, has observed: “With aplomb and wit, Ryan sallies forth against quandaries as immense as the nature of nothingness and as petite as the mechanics of dewdrops rolling off a leaf.”

Ryan herself offers this intriguing remark about her intentions: Kay Ryan explained, “Clarity is an ideal we can aspire toward because there are so many things that conspire against it.” Clarity, she acknowledges, risks making a poem limited, two-dimensional, without depth and complexity: “If it’s just surface and then it’s not a poem.”

ROBERT FROST

_The Pasture_ (p. 624)

Frost wrote “The Pasture” in 1913, and beginning in 1930 he used it as the first poem—a sort of prologue—to all editions of his _Collected Poems_.

There isn’t a word here that is unusual, not a word that any of us might not say, except perhaps the word “shan’t,” but even this word doesn’t cause a reader any difficulty.

In many ways this short poem is typical of Frost. First of all, the language—the diction that he uses—is drawn from ordinary life. Second, the poem is a kind of miniature drama, a little play in which there is not only a speaker but also another character, here an unidentified “you,” someone who is obviously dear to the speaker. Third, and this may be a bit less obvious to students in an introductory course in literature, the poem is about more than it seems to be.

There is always the danger, of course, that students will hunt too avidly for symbols in a poem, especially if they have to write a paper about it. In one lecture, for instance, he warned students, “You just don’t chew a poem, take it all to pieces.” On the other hand, Frost at least as often assured his audiences that poems have multiple meanings, are symbolic, and he on several occasions used the somewhat odd word “ulteriority” to talk about a quality in poems. For instance, in an essay in the _Atlantic Monthly_ in 1946 (“The Constant Symbol,” much reprinted) he says:

> There are many . . . things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority.

Still, before getting into Frost’s “ulteriority,” we suggest that you first help students to enjoy the miniature drama enacted in the “The Pasture.”

This little dramatic monologue consists of two stanzas, and these divisions alert us to something; they are, so to speak, part of the meaning. After all, Frost didn’t have to put that break between the fourth line and the fifth. He wants to tell us that there are two phases to this drama. This sounds strange, since the last line of the poem merely repeats the last line of the first stanza, but students will easily
see that there is a development in the poem. Ask them if they agree that if the second stanza came first, the poem would be less effective, less interesting; almost all students will see that there is a development, a point we will get into in a moment.

The first line, “I’m going out to clean the pasture spring,” is a simple enough assertion, yet the idea of “clearing” something, of cleaning up or clarifying something, can obviously have big implications, especially if we are talking about “the pasture spring.” A spring is a source of life, a vitalizing power. Frost can be hinting at being witness to a new beginning. Next we get,

I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):

That “wait to watch the water clear, I may” comes as a bit of a surprise. We thought he was just going out to complete a chore, and now we find that he is going to enjoy the job, he is going to loaf a bit, and enjoy the spectacle. There are additional little surprises, and it is worth reminding students that almost all poetry—almost all writing of any sort that is interesting, including each essay that students will write in your courses—should offer the reader small pleasant surprises as it progresses. That is, each line takes us to a place that we had not quite anticipated, but once we are there, we mentally say, “of course, that’s exactly right.”

Students will probably agree that we find this speaker an engaging fellow; he begins by announcing, in simple terms, that he is setting out to do what sounds like a routine job, but then he confesses—though he doesn’t come out and say it directly—that this is a job that has its pleasures, it will afford him the opportunity to see the water clear up, a visual experience that for whatever reason is fascinating—we like to see the darkness yield to clarity, and, as we have already suggested, there is a hint here—since we are talking about a spring in a pasture—of a new beginning, a renewal, a freshening of life.

The first stanza ends, “I shan’t be gone long.—You come too.” That’s a surprise, a big one—the speaker wants the listener to join him. So, even though the speaker is saying that he is leaving the person whom he is addressing, by this stage of the poem—just the fourth line—he indicates that, no, he doesn’t really want to go and watch the water clear just by himself; he wants his companion to share the experience. He doesn’t come out and say so, in so many words—we might say that his natural modesty prevents him from doing that—but it is evident that he values companionship, human society, just as much as he values enjoying the sight of watching the water clear. He wants to share the enjoyment, he wants his companion to experience it also.

Everything we are saying, we hasten to add, is something that students will easily see for themselves, if you just get them thinking and talking about the lines.

Now for the second stanza. We see the lines set off as a stanza on the page, so there is no surprise in its mere presence. And the rhyme scheme is the same, no surprise there.

I’m going out to fetch the little calf
That’s standing by the mother.
We don’t want to press this tiny poem too hard, but we think that with the introduction of the cow and the calf, Frost provides the reader with another surprise, the introduction of relationships, of family. Certainly there is nothing unnatural about finding a cow and a calf in a pasture, but the reader hadn’t quite expected them. Frost is complicating the poem, giving us an additional pleasure and an additional view of life.

It’s so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.

And of course the calf itself is new life, a sort of parallel or analog to the pasture spring, the spring that, after raking, will be clear, a sort of new spring.

I shan’t be gone long.—You come too.

So the division of the poem into two stanzas marks the division between watching the spring clear, and watching the mother cow care for its offspring. And you can help students to find other dualities in the poem: the speaker and the listener; solitude—which is what the speaker first talks about—and society (“You come too”); work (raking the pasture spring) and pleasure or meditation (“wait to watch the water clear, I may”). The poem, despite its evident simplicity and its lucidity, is interestingly complex.

We don’t want to say—by any means—that the spring is “a symbol of new life,” or that the cow and the calf are “symbols of society”—but we do want to say that this spring, this pasture, this cow and calf—are loaded with what Frost called “ulteriority.”

We want to mention again that Frost put this little poem at the beginning of every edition of his Collected Poems. The poem itself does not contain a single metaphor, and yet the entire poem can reasonably be called a metaphor, or a symbol. Surely Frost was addressing the reader, not just an imagined partner on the farm. Surely he was inviting the reader into his pasture, his world of poems; and surely he was saying to the reader, “Here, in these poems, are the clear springs, the clarifications, that I have produced by raking away the muck—the usual incoherent thoughts that are in my mind or anyone’s mind. The water is clear now. I took pleasure in writing these poems, and now, well, they are out there, in the pages ahead. Join me in the world that I see: ‘You come too.’”

**ROBERT FROST**

*Mowing* (p. 625)

“Mowing,” according to *The Robert Frost Encyclopedia* (2001),

was Frost’s favorite poem in *A Boy’s Will* (1913), one that he often read, mentioned in correspondence, and discussed as a part of his poetic theory.
First published in the 1913 volume, the poem was probably written while Frost lived on the Derry Farm [in New Hampshire], one of a number of framework poems that are central to Frost’s philosophical and aesthetic principles. Early critics and friends recognized the accomplishment of the poem, and Frost despaired of equaling its accomplishment. (p. 216)

True, “Mowing” is important, but it also is difficult, perhaps extremely difficult, for most readers and certainly for most students. It is difficult from the first line. “Beside the wood”: we can understand this phrase, but it is not what we would expect, it is perplexing. We do not usually say that a sound is “beside” something but, rather, that something is beside something else; it signifies how two things are located in relation to one another. The line itself first promises a strong assertion, “there was never a sound,” yet at the end it posits an exception, “but one.”

The scythe does not whisper to the speaker. Instead, it whispers to the ground. Why is that? Notice too that the speaker knows that the scythe whispers but not what it whispers. He speculates; he might be right, he might be wrong.

Line seven is decisive-sounding, but in a negative form, and it is here that students will start to become lost. We cannot say we blame them. Frost is one of the greatest modern poets, and, we think, one of the hardest: his meanings are highly elusive, and his tones are almost impossibly subtle and sly.

George W. Nitchie, in Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of a Poet’s Convictions (1960), says about “Mowing” that it shows how “prudential man gets by, with a minimum of pain and unhappiness” (p. 50). But it is not clear what leads Nitchie from the text to such a claim about it. The same holds for nearly all of the critical responses to “Mowing.”

Sometimes we suspect that Frost intends “Mowing” to be a poem that excludes the reader. Or, to put the point another way: it is not a poem about “mowing,” but a poem about poetry, or at least about the poems that Frost writes. Something is communicated, but it is a sound, a tone; it is not to be captured or formulated in our words. No paraphrase will do. No narrative of what is going on, or might be going on, could be proven from the text, which hints, suggests, evades, puzzles, and, deliberately, frustrates us—even as the sonnet structure, simple scene, pleasing sound, plain vocabulary, nature imagery, and witty wordplay would seem to welcome our sense making.

The many commentaries on “Mowing” that we have read feel reductive and clumsy to us—allegories that proceed at a distance from the swaying, tantalizing rhythms of Frost’s lines. We can imagine that an instructor might shy away from this poem, but for us it is very useful to assign and work on in the classroom. Students perceive something is being said, or whispered, and some acknowledge that, somehow, the poem moves and stirs them. Yet it is not easy to say why. In this way we realize that Frost indeed has composed a poem; he has said something in it that could not be said any other way.

For proof of this, ask your students to state in a paragraph what Frost is saying in the next to the last line.

**ROBERT FROST**

*The Wood-Pile* (p. 626)

The poem contrasts a human being who “can forget his handiwork” because he lives for “turning to fresh tasks” with nature, a “frozen swamp” that is “Too much alike to mark or name a place by”; the swamp is not even a “here,” but only something that tells the speaker he is “far from home.” Nature is nothing in itself—or rather, nothing meaningful to humans—until a human gives it meaning; in this poem, meaning is imposed on it by the person who built the woodpile. And even though the wood is not burning in the fireplace, it nevertheless has been made into something coherent, and it shows the mark of a human as it rots and “warm[s] the frozen swamp as best it could.” Nature, then, needs a human’s collaboration, and, conversely, a human needs nature’s collaboration, for nature completes what a human has abandoned. On this last point, notice that “Clematis / Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle”—though the line also suggests that nature is reclaiming from humans what is hers. For an excellent discussion of the poem, see Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost*.

**ROBERT FROST**

*The Oven Bird* (p. 627)

Whether or not one has ever heard an ovenbird, the idea that its song is exceptionally unmelodious is clearly suggested in lines 4, 6, and 10, where we get “he says” rather than “he sings.” In case a reader missed the point while reading the first ten lines, Frost makes it explicit in line 12: “he knows in singing not to sing.” Notice, too, other ways in which Frost deemphasizes the bird as a singer: the ovenbird “makes the solid tree trunks sound again,” “he knows,” and “he frames” a question.

Although Frost says in the opening line that everyone has heard the ovenbird, he carefully educates the reader who has not heard it, explaining that it is heard in the interval between “the early petal-fall / When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers” and “that other fall we name the fall.” It is midsummer when leaves are abundant, but they are “old,” and “the highway dust is over all.” This time of stasis is no time for the usual sort of birdsong.

Ask your students how many of them have ever heard an ovenbird. (In some parts of the country few, if any, students will have heard it. By the way, the North American ovenbird is not a true ovenbird; i.e., it does not belong to the family Furnariidae, which contains birds that build elaborate domed nests of clay or who dig tunnels in the ground. The North American ovenbird is a wood warbler [Parulidae] which looks like a miniature thrush.) You might ask your students, too, after some discussion of “The Oven Bird,” if they believe that in order to enjoy the poem one must have heard an ovenbird. It’s our guess that Frost adequately conveys the bird’s song, partly in that stressed, unexpected “Loud” at the beginning of line 2 (it gains an even greater weight by being followed by a comma), and partly in the repetition of “mid” in this line (“mid-summer,” “mid-wood”) there is a suggestion of the repetition in a bird’s song. Notice, too, that this line almost defies scansion; certainly it can’t be called predominantly iambic. The poet, like the ovenbird, “knows in singing not to sing.” Line 9 (“And comes that other fall we name the fall”) sounds flat, and one isn’t certain about how much stress to put on “we,” “name,” and “fall.”

ROBERT FROST

The Need of Being Versed in Country Things (p. 627)

Our thoughts about the questions in the text may be of some interest.

1. Why “a sunset glow” in line 2, instead of say, “a burst of flame”? Frost’s metaphor introduces, early in the poem, the motif that things are not what they seem. (Later his point will be that the birds seem to weep, but are not weeping.) The same might be said for the simile of the chimney as a pistil, in line 4, with the additional implication that the house is absorbed into nature.

2. The personifications in the fifth stanza suggest that the human perceiver of nature insists on finding human qualities in nature—a tendency that will be debunked (though that’s too strong a word) by the end of the poem, where the speaker without figurative language states the facts. Other personifications in the poem are “the will of the wind” (7) and the “murmur” (15) of the birds.

3. Although at the end of the poem the speaker claims to be telling it as it is—that is, insisting that nature is not lamenting the catastrophe—a reader probably feels that the speaker regrets that this is so. After all, much of the poem is devoted to evoking a highly sympathetic image of a busy farm that has been destroyed and turned almost into a part of nature itself. In our reading we hear some confidence in the assertion that the phoebes are not weeping, but this confidence is undercut by or at least suffused with deep regret. Put it this way: Observers should understand that nature does not weep for human losses, but (and this is not explicitly said but we think it is evident in the tone) this is a pity.

5. Our own feeling is that the poem is neither sentimental (maudlin, and influenced more by emotion than by reason) nor cynical (sneering). As we indicated in the preceding paragraph, we hear objectivity tinged with regret. Obviously other responses are possible.

6. This suggestion for writing calls for a parody. If you assign this topic and receive some work of special interest, we hope that (after getting the student’s permission) you will send it to us, with the student’s name and address. If we think we can use it in the next edition of the book, we will get in touch with the student.

ROBERT FROST

*The Most of It* (p. 628)

The “he” of the poem is not the speaker, of course; we are totally dependent on the speaker for our impression of this person, and we don’t get even a single phrase of reported speech. Judging from what the speaker tells us, the “he” is a rather unimaginative person, someone who (at least in the first half of the poem) finds nothing of significance outside of himself. The world around him offers “but the mocking echo” of his own voice. As Richard Poirier suggests, in his shrewd analysis in *Robert Frost* (1977), 165, this is someone who cannot “make the most of it,” someone, we might say, who is not a poet. But the reader, as distinct from the “he,” perceives the grandeur of the surroundings—and this grandeur is so presented that as we read it we more or less project ourselves into the mind of the spectator, who stands in this landscape “bathed in a mythological heroism” (Poirier 165), and we feel we are experiencing his experience. What we and the spectator get is not what the spectator wanted at the start, but is (again in Poirier’s words) “a vision of some fabulousness beyond domestication” (p. 165).

ROBERT FROST

*Design* (p. 629)

do. . . ') sounds like ordinary annoyance at a fact that doesn’t fit in.” The next question brings in a new note, and irony in “kindred.” For Brower, with the last question ironic puzzlement turns into vision: “What but design of darkness to appall?” And then Brower says that in the final line, “The natural theologian pauses—he is only asking, not asserting—and takes a backward step.”

The title echoes the “Argument from Design,” the argument that the universe is designed (each creature fits perfectly into its environment: the whale is equipped for the sea; the camel for the desert), so there must be a designer, God. Notice that the word—“design”—has two meanings: (1) pattern and (2) intention, plan. Frost certainly means us to have both meanings in mind: there seems to be a pattern and also an intention behind it, but this intention is quite different from the intention discerned by those who in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries argued for the existence of a benevolent God from the “Argument from Design.”

“Design” was published in 1922; below is an early 1912 version of the poem, entitled “In White”:

A dented spider like a snow drop white
   On a white Heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of lifeless satin cloth—
   Saw ever curious eye so strange a sight?—
Portent in little, assorted death and blight
   Like the ingredients of a witches’ broth?—
The beady spider, the flower like a froth,
   And the moth carried like a paper kite.

   What had that flower to do with being white?
The blue prunella every child’s delight.
What brought the kindred spider to that height?
   (Make we no thesis of the miller’s plight.)
What but design of darkness and of night?
Design, design! Do I use the word aright?

The changes, obvious enough, are discussed by George Monteiro, in Frost: Centennial Essays (1974), published by the Committee on the Frost Centennial of the University of Southern Mississippi, pp. 35–38.

By the way, an ingenious student mentioned that the first stanza has eight lines, corresponding to the eight legs of a spider. And the second stanza has six, corresponding to the six legs of a moth. What to do? We tried to talk about the traditional structure of the sonnet, and about relevant and irrelevant conjectures, and about the broad overlapping area. About as good a criterion as any is, does the conjecture make the poem better?

In a typical Freshman English class, made up of seventeen- to nineteen-year-olds, some students reading Didion will find her style heady and her topic compelling for their own writing. Others will be irritated, some without knowing why. Still others will be indifferent. Typically, whatever their intellectual range, students at this age vary markedly in emotional maturity. Some, we find, are not ready for the confrontation with their own ambivalence toward their families that a serious engagement with Didion’s essay demands. So, although we would assign the essay and discuss it in class, we wouldn’t require essays written about it. We don’t want to read the vague or sentimental essays some would submit; and with so much else to write about, there’s no reason to put students on a collision course with failure. For students who can and will use them, the questions following the piece provide some sample essay topics.

Students who admire Didion might be directed to her *Political Fictions* (2001), which includes essays on Newt Gingrich, Bill Clinton, and other political figures and topics, and to *Where I Was From* (2003), which describes her upbringing and experiences in California. The *New York Times* noted of this second book that it is “a reassessment and reappraisal of her thinking about her home state, a love song to the place where her family has lived for generations, but a love song full of questions and doubts.” See also *Joan Didion: Essays and Conversations*, ed. Ellen G. Friedman (1984).

**Montesquieu (Charles de Secondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu)**

*Persian Letters* (p. 638)

A Plea: We begin by begging you to give this selection a chance, i.e., to teach it and to ask students to write a Persian letter of their own. Very few users of the previous edition of our book assigned Montesquieu, but we have decided to retain it—to give it a second chance—because we know that students enjoy writing an imitation.
As we say in our headnote, Montesquieu’s basic device is the innocent eye, the fairly straightforward reporting of the irrationalities that characterize a society. Thus, according to him, the King of France is immensely wealthy although he possesses no gold mines. Where does his money come from?

The vanity of his subjects. . . . He has been known to undertake and wage great wars with no other funds than honorary titles to sell, and by reason of this miracle of human pride, his troops are paid, his fortresses armed, and his navies fitted out.

Some students may not already be familiar with the fact that in Europe titles were sold, but the context makes the practice pretty clear, and few students will be puzzled by anything in the letter. (Most students will be aware that in the United States certain kinds of ambassadorships are given to persons who have donated substantial sums to the party in power.)

Some students will be familiar with *Gulliver’s Travels*, a book that often uses Gulliver as an innocent eye but that also uses other characters similarly. Thus, Swift’s Lilliputians comment on Gulliver’s pocket watch—a device unfamiliar to them—in order to satirize our enslavement to time:

[Gulliver] put this engine to our ears, which made an incessant noise like that of a watermill. And we conjecture it is either some unknown animal, or the god that he worships: but we are more inclined to the latter opinion, because he assured us (if we understood him right, for he expressed himself very imperfectly), that he seldom did anything without consulting it. He called it his oracle, and said it pointed out the time for every action of his life.

Yes, there is some satire here of the self-satisfied Lilliputians who are convinced that Gulliver “expressed himself very imperfectly,” but chiefly the satire is directed against Europeans, persons who let their timepieces run their lives.

We include Montesquieu chiefly in order to give students an idea of how they might write their own Persian letter. They may want to talk about such national matters as war, political campaigns and elections, the death penalty, gay marriage, abortion, and public safety, or they may want to talk about more local matters such as applying to college, college courses and requirements, and family customs. The satire may be directed against any of these (e.g., it may call attention to the irrationality of what we normally accept), or on the other hand the letter may satirize the letter-writer, who sees and who speaks reasonably but who utterly fails to understand what he or she sees.

**NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE**  
*Young Goodman Brown* (p. 640)

Lea B. V. Newman’s *A Reader’s Guide to the Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (1979) provides a valuable survey of the immense body of criticism that “Young Goodman Brown” has engendered. (By 1979 it had been dis-
cussed in print at least five hundred times.) We can begin by quoting Newman’s remark that the three chief questions are these: “Why does Brown go into the forest? What happens to him there? Why does he emerge a permanently embittered man?”

Newman grants that there is a good deal of “ambivalence” in the story, but she finds most convincing the view that Brown is a victim, a man who “is deluded into accepting spectral evidence as conclusive proof of his neighbors’ depravity.” Newman also finds convincing another version of the “victim” theory, this one offered by psychologists who hold that “Brown is a sick man with a diseased mind who cannot help what he sees in the forest or his reaction to it.” But her survey of course also includes references (pp. 342–344) to critics who see Brown “as an evil man who is solely responsible for all that happens to him.”

Various critics—it almost goes without saying—press various details very hard. For instance, one critic says that Faith’s pink ribbons symbolize Brown’s “insubstantial, pastel-like faith.” (Instructors expect to encounter this sort of reductive reading in essays by first-year students, but it is disappointing to find it in print.) How detailed, one might ask, is the allegory? Probably most readers will agree on some aspects: the village—a world of daylight and community—stands (or seems to stand) for good, whereas the forest—a dark, threatening place—stands (or seems to stand) for evil. The old man—“he of the serpent”—is the devil. But, again, as Newman’s survey of criticism shows, even these interpretations have been debated.

The journey into the forest at night (away from the town and away from the daylight) suggests, of course, a journey into the dark regions of the self. The many ambiguities have engendered much comment in learned journals, some of which has been reprinted in a casebook of the story, Nathaniel Hawthorne: Young Goodman Brown, ed. Thomas E. Connolly. Is the story—as David Levin argues in American Literature 34 (1962): 344–352—one about a man who is tricked by the devil, who conjures up specters who look like Brown’s neighbors in order to win him a damnable melancholy? Does Faith resist the tempter? Does Goodman (i.e., Mister) Brown make a journey or does he only dream that he makes a journey? Is the story about awareness of evil, or is it about the crushing weight of needlessly assumed guilt? That is, is the story about a loss of faith (Austin Warren, in his Rage for Order, says it is about “the devastating effect of moral skepticism”), or is it about a religious faith that kills one’s joy in life? And, of course, the story may be about loss of faith not in Christ but in human beings; young Goodman Brown perceives his own corruption and loses faith in mankind.

With a little warning the student can be helped to see that the characters and experiences cannot be neatly pigeonholed. For example, it is not certain whether or not Faith yields to “the wicked one”; indeed, it is not certain that Brown actually journeyed into the woods. Richard H. Fogle points out in Hawthorne’s Fiction (1964) that “ambiguity is the very essence of Hawthorne’s tale.” Among other interesting critical pieces on the story are Marius Bewley, The Complex Fate (1967); Thomas Connolly, “Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman
Connolly argues that Brown does not lose his faith, but rather that his faith is purified by his loss of belief that he is of the elect. Before the journey into the woods, he believes that man is depraved, but that he himself is of the elect and will be saved. In the forest he sees “a black mass of cloud” hide “the brightening stars,” and (according to Connolly) his faith is purified, for he comes to see that he is not different from the rest of the congregation.

On the other hand, one can point out (as J. L. Capps does, in Explicator, Spring 1982), that only once in the story does Hawthorne use the word “hope” (“But where is Faith?’ thought Goodman Brown; and as hope came into his heart, he trembled”), and the word “charity” never appears, indicating that Brown lacks the quality that would have enabled him to survive despair.

Speaking a bit broadly, we can say that critics fall into two camps: those who believe that Goodman Brown falls into delusion (i.e., misled by the devil, he destroys himself morally by falling into misanthropy), and those who believe that he is initiated into reality. Thus, for readers who hold the first view, Brown’s guide into the forest is the devil, who calls up “figures” or “forms” of Brown’s acquaintances, and it is Brown (not the narrator) who mistakenly takes the figures for real people. Even what Brown takes to be Faith’s pink ribbon is for the narrator merely “something [that] fluttered lightly down through the air, and caught on the branch of a tree.” In this view, (1) the fact that Faith later wears the ribbon is proof that Brown has yielded to a delusion, and (2) we are to judge Brown by recalling the narrator’s objective perceptions. For instance, Brown’s guide says that “evil is the nature of mankind,” and Brown believes him, but the narrator (who is to be trusted) speaks of “the good old minister” and of “that excellent Christian,” Goody Cloyse. There is much to be said for this view (indeed much has been said in journals), but against it one can recall some words by Frederick Crews: “The richness of Hawthorne’s irony is such that, when Brown turns to a Gulliver-like misanthropy and spends the rest of his days shrinking from wife and neighbors, we cannot quite dismiss his attitude as unfounded” (The Sins of the Fathers, p. 106).

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. What ambiguities do you find in “Young Goodman Brown”?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the view that Brown is tricked by the devil, who stages a show of specters impersonating Brown’s neighbors, in order to destroy Brown’s religious faith?
3. Brown’s guide says, “Evil is the nature of mankind,” but does the story say it?
4. Is the story sexist, showing Brown more horrified by his wife’s sexuality than his own?
5. Retell the story using a modern setting. Make whatever changes you wish, but retain the motif of the temptation of a man and a woman by evil.
Eudora Welty

A Worn Path (p. 648)

In an essay in the Georgia Review (Winter 1979), Eudora Welty (speaking mainly of her first story, “The Death of a Traveling Salesman”) says that her characters “rise most often from the present,” but her plots are indebted to “the myths and fairy tales I steeped myself in as a young reader. . . . By the time I was writing stories I drew on them as casually as I drew on the daily newspaper or the remarks of my neighbors.”

Clearly “A Worn Path” draws on the myth of the phoenix, the golden bird that periodically consumes itself in flames so that it, rising from the ashes, may be renewed. Phoenix Jackson renews her ancient body on each visit to the doctor’s remote office. The chief clues: the woman’s name (“Phoenix”), the story’s early description of her (her stick makes a sound “like the chirping of a solitary little bird”; “a golden color ran underneath, and the two knobs of her cheeks were illuminated by a yellow burning under the dark”), a reference to cyclic time (“I bound to go to town, mister. The time come around”—and the time is Christmas, i.e., a time of renewal), her “ceremonial stiffness” in the doctor’s office, and finally, the words “Phoenix rose carefully.”

The myth is wonderfully supported by details, details that are strictly irrelevant (e.g., Phoenix’s deception of the hunter, which nets her a nickel, and her cadging of a nickel’s worth of pennies from the nurse) but that make the character unsentimental and thoroughly convincing.

A writer in Studies in Short Fiction 14 (1977): 288–290, assuming that the boy is dead, argues: “The journey to Natchez . . . becomes a psychological necessity for Phoenix, her only way of coping with her loss and her isolation. . . . Having at first made the journey to save the life of her grandson, she now follows the worn path each Christmas season to save herself” (p. 289). On the other hand, not all of the criticism of the story is on this level. For a good discussion, see Alfred Appel, A Season of Dreams: The Fiction of Eudora Welty (1965).

Because Welty is one of our favorite writers, we have often used The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty (1980) as the basis for an introduction to writing a research paper. We work together in class on one or two stories—for example, “A Worn Path”—and then each student selects a story of his or her own for study and some library research. We place two copies of the Collected Stories on reserve for this purpose, along with the Welty volumes in the Library of America series: Stories, Essays, and Memoir (1998) and Complete Novels (1998).

Of the books devoted to Welty’s stories, we recommend Peter Schmidt, The Heart of the Story: Eudora Welty’s Short Fiction (1991); Carol Ann Johnston, Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction (1997); and Suzanne Marrs, Eudora Welty: A Biography (2005).

For a wider range of secondary materials, you and your students can profit from these resources:

The Eudora Welty Newsletter (published twice a year, beginning in Winter 1977). Stays up-to-date with coverage of primary and secondary sources.


Some students, we have found, are already familiar with Welty’s evocative memoir *One Writer’s Beginnings* (1984). *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, ed. Peggy W. Prenshaw (1984), and Welty’s *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* (1978) are also illuminating about her artistic aims, techniques, and influences.

**Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing**

1. Is the story sentimental? (We’d say no, for several reasons: Phoenix, though old and—at moments—mentally failing, is dignified and never self-pitying; the writer, letting Phoenix tell her own story, never asks us to pity Phoenix; Phoenix exhibits both a sense of humor and a sense of self-reliance, and on those occasions when she needs help she exhibits no embarrassment. Her theft of the nickel and her shrewdness in getting the nurse to give her another nickel instead of “a few pennies” also, as mentioned a moment ago, help to keep her from being the sentimental old lady of Norman Rockwell pictures.)

2. Write a character sketch (250–300 words) of some old person whom you know. If possible, reveal the personality by showing him or her engaged in some characteristic activity.

**Toni Cade Bambara**

*The Lesson* (p. 654)

It would be hard to find a less strident or more delightful story preaching revolution. At its heart, “The Lesson” calls attention to the enormous inequity in the distribution of wealth in America, and it suggests that black people ought to start thinking about “what kind of society it is in which some people can spend..."
on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven” for a year. That the young narrator does not quite get the point of Miss Moore’s lesson—and indeed steals Miss Moore’s money—is no sure sign that the lesson has failed. (Presumably, Miss Moore doesn’t much care about the loss of her money; the money is well lost if it helps the narrator, who plans to spend it, to see the power of money.) In any case, the narrator has been made sufficiently uneasy (“I sure want to punch somebody in the mouth”) so that we sense she will later get the point: “I’m goin . . . to think this day through.” The last line of the story seems to refer to her race to a bakery, but it has larger implications: “Ain’t nobody gonna beat me at nuthin.”

The difference between Sylvia’s response and Sugar’s response to Miss Moore’s lesson is worth discussing in class. As Malcolm Clark, of Solano Community College, puts it in a letter to us, “The obvious question of the story is, ‘What is the lesson?’ . . . It’s clear that Miss Moore is trying to teach these children a lesson in economic inequity. . . . Sugar learns this lesson, as her comments to Miss Moore indicate. However, Sylvia has also learned this lesson, though she does not reveal her understanding to Miss Moore.” As Clark goes on to point out, Miss Moore’s lesson is not simply that some people are rich and others are not. She wants to bring the children to a state where they will demand their share of the pie. And it is in learning this part of the lesson that Sylvia and Sugar part company. Despite Sugar’s obvious understanding of the lesson and her momentary flash of anger—strong enough to make her push Sylvia away—her condition is only temporary.

“At the end of the story she is unchanged from the little girl she was at the beginning. It is she who wants to go to Hascomb’s bakery and spend the money on food, essentially the same thing they intended to do with the money before the lesson began. . . . Sylvia, however, is greatly changed. She does not intend to spend the money with Sugar; instead, she plans to go over to the river and reflect upon the lesson further.”


Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. Let’s suppose Bambara had decided to tell the story through the eyes of Miss Moore. Write the first 250 words of such a story.

2. Miss Moore says, “Imagine for a minute what kind of society it is in which some people can spend on a toy what it would cost to feed a family of six or seven. What do you think?” In an essay of 500 words, tell a reader what you think about this issue.

AMY HEMPEL

Today Will Be a Quiet Day (p. 659)

The first question following the story in the text, asking the reader to consider the ominous talk in the first page, seems to me to get at the heart of traditional storytelling. What is the connection between the beginning and the end of a story? What does it mean to speak of unity, or to say that a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end? Why, one may ask, do experienced readers simply know that this story will turn out well? Why don’t we take the talk of disaster as foreshadowing? For that matter, why don’t we take the title as a hint of imminent death? (Later the reader learns that the father has jokingly suggested that he wants his tombstone to say, “Today will be a quiet day.”)

Probably the simple answer is that (putting aside the title) the story begins playfully—the boy is teasing—and then continues with a cozy domestic image comparing the children to dogs carrying their own leashes. Only the bit about the suicide, and the father’s comment that “You think you’re safe . . . but it’s thinking you’re invisible because you closed your eyes” disturb the reader’s sense of comfort. But the next thing we hear about is “Petaluma—the chicken, egg, and arm-wrestling capital of the nation.” This can’t be a story that will end unhappily (although, if Flannery O’Connor were writing it, it could). Robert Louis Stevenson, speaking of the inappropriateness of an unhappy ending in a work by Barrie, offers a relevant observation: “If you are going to make a book end badly [i.e., unhappily], it must end badly from the beginning.” Somehow “Today Will Be a Quiet Day” lets us know, from the brother’s teasing remark about the bridge collapsing, that nothing will collapse in this story. The tone is simply too genial, too good-natured, for it to turn out badly. Again, in Stevenson’s words, if a story is going to end badly, it should end badly from the beginning.

We see, almost from the start, that despite the absence of the mother this family is OK. The teasing reveals affection, not aggression. Only once does the boy inflict pain on his sister—when he reveals that the dog was killed rather than sent to a ranch—but his remark is inadvertent rather than malicious.

Where is the mother, or, better, why is the mother never mentioned? Is she dead, divorced, away on vacation, hospitalized, or locked up? The narrator gives us no clues, though surely we can infer that she is not away temporarily; if she were, the others would mention her. Similarly, we can infer that her absence is not of recent origin. But we need not worry about her absence. Judging from the absence of comment about her, we probably can say that she plays no role in their lives—and plays no role in our view of their lives.
Students sometimes grumble to us that “nothing really happens” in Joyce’s story—a response that we try to preempt, but also take account of, when class begins. We say, “Let’s start with the basics: what happens in ‘Eveline’?” We like, slyly, thereby to suggest through our tone that of course there is a good, clear answer to this question. But we know that students are likely to struggle with it somewhat. We are seeking to lead them to a next question, “OK, what, then, is the story about?”

It is one thing to state what happens in a story, and another to inquire into what it is about. In the case of “Eveline,” what the story is about, is indeed what happens in it—the thoughts and feelings of a young woman, confronting a choice, in Ireland around the year 1900.

What happens in the story? What is it about? How and why does it interest us? How does this story reveal to us the conditions of life in Ireland 100 years ago? What might it lead us to see and understand about the lives that we lead?

About Joyce’s representation of Dublin, Desmond Harding, in Writing the City: Urban Visions & Literary Modernism (2003), remarks: “It is an entropic landscape: terribly boring and terribly dull” (p. 36). Students like hearing about a strange new term. Entropy: deriving from a Greek word that signifies “transformation,” the meanings of entropy include: the tendency for all matter and energy in the universe to evolve toward a state of inert uniformity; inevitable and steady deterioration of a system or society. (Joyce himself said in a letter that his collection of short stories described the “paralysis” of Dublin.) Where in the story is there evidence for this claim that Dublin is “entropic”? Why is it so boring and dull? Where do we see the indications of that?

It is worth telling students that in its original publication in the collection called Dubliners “Eveline” appears immediately after “Araby.” The boy in “Araby” takes a journey: “I took my seat in a third-class carriage of a deserted train. . . . The train moved out of the station slowly,” “It crept onward among ruinous houses and over the twinkling river [Liffey],” and so on. The journey will end in disappointment, disillusionment, but there is a strong perception—an epiphany, a recognition, an anagnorisis—at the end: “I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity. . . .” By way of contrast, Eveline is unable to make her journey despite Frank’s encouragement. The last paragraph runs thus:

He rushed beyond the barrier and called to her to follow. He was shouted at to go on but he still called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition.

“a paradigm of ‘femininity’ as domestic confinement. . . . The reader is forced to confront in Eveline an imprisoned and finally immobilized woman, an Irish Andromeda, chained to the rock of her father’s house and patriarchy, unwilling to shed her familiar chains when her Perseus arrives to rescue her” (p. 56). One of the nice features of this is that it links the story to classical myth, the structures and themes of which Joyce drew upon throughout his career—something you can note and flesh out a bit for your students. Encourage them to think about why a writer would find classical myth such a rich and rewarding resource. Why would he wish to go there? Why would he want to take us as readers there?

There is some interest, too, in the following reflection on the story, by Gerald Doherty, in *Dubliners’ Dozen: The Games Narrators Play* (2004). In “Eveline,” he says, there is “a stark contrast” between “Eveline’s own hyperactive visual projections of others and her underactive visual representation as figure in the text. Virtually written out of the text as a pictorial icon (we never see what she looks like), she neither visualizes herself as physical presence, nor does the narrator present her as such. Where there should be a body, there is only a blank” (p. 138).

Scholarship on Joyce includes Marxist interpretations, e.g., Trevor L. Williams, *Reading Joyce Politically* (1997): “In story after story one petit-bourgeois character after another is brought to the mirror to apprehend his or her situation, but (and Eveline is the prime example) they see no way to act, no way to transcend the limits of their present consciousness and class position. With apparently no way forward, they accept their entrapment in the present social reality, and *faute de mieux* [for lack of something better] they thus help to reinforce the prevailing ideology handed down by church and state” (p. 54).

Sean P. Murphy, *James Joyce and Victims: Reading the Logic of Exclusion* (2003): “Asking an external authority (none other than God, here) to communicate her duty indicates the extent to which Eveline has already submitted to the idea of duty. In a final commonplace sacrifice of her agency to the totality, Eveline ironically rejects escape and turns herself over to the same duties and discourses of Church, State, and family which produced her mother’s nonsensical mantra “Derevaun Seraun!” (p. 50)

It can help to do some simple things. Invite your students to look with you at the first paragraph. Ask one of them to read it aloud, and then another, and another: it is good to hear different voices in the room. Why does Joyce use the word “invade”? What does this word imply? What other words might we have encountered—that is, expected to find—here instead? And does it seem a bit odd, or surprising, to meet the phrase “was leaned,” as opposed to “leaned” or “was leaning”? You can make your way through the story in this manner, or pick your favorite spots.

Hemingway greatly admired Joyce, learning important lessons from *Dubliners*, and, like Hemingway’s, Joyce’s art in his stories can be underestimated. It is highly deliberate, beautifully crafted, and supremely subtle: it is important for students to feel the pleasure of Joyce’s choices of words, sharp descriptions, and masterful tones—and also the relationship of the narrator to his characters, which is one of both intimacy and detachment.

**JOHN KEATS**

*On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer* (p. 668)

In “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” Keats uses figures to communicate to the reader the poet’s state of mind. Figures of traveling (appropriate to a poem about the author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and also, via “realms of gold” or El Dorado, to the Elizabethans) give way in the sestet to figures of more breathtaking exploration and discovery. (By the way, it is not quite right to say that at line 9 we pass from the octave’s images of land to the sestet’s images of discovery. An important shift occurs in line 7, with “Yet” no less important than line 9’s “Then.” “Breathe” in line 7 is probably transitional, linked to the octave’s idea of foreign travel and also to the sestet’s early reference to the skies.)

It is probably fair to say that the octave (or at least its first six lines as compared with the sestet) has a somewhat mechanical, academic quality. “Realms of gold,” “goodly states,” “bards in fealty to Apollo,” “demesne,” etc., all suggest something less than passionate utterance, a tone reinforced by the rather mechanical four pairs of lines, each pair ending with a substantial pause. But in the sestet the language is more concrete, the lines more fluid (it can be argued that only line 10 concludes with a pause), and the meter less regular, giving a sense of new excitement that of course corresponds to the meaning of the poem.

Almost all critics agree that Keats erred in giving Cortez for Balboa, but C. V. Wicker argues in *College English* 17 (April 1956): 383–387 that Keats meant Cortez, for the point is not the first discovery of something previously unknown, but an individual’s discovery for himself of what others have earlier discovered for themselves. Still, it seems evident that Keats slipped, and instructors may want to spend some class time discussing the problem of whether such a factual error weakens the poem.

In line with much contemporary criticism that sees poetry as being reflective discourse concerned with itself, Lawrence Lipking, in *The Life of the Poet* (1981), sees this poem as being about Keats’s discovery of Keats. Well, yes, in a way, but surely the poem is also about the discovery of the world’s literature, a world other than the self. See also P. McNally, in *JEGP* 79 (1980): 530–540.

James Reeves, in *The Critical Sense*, does a hatchet job on Shelley’s “Ozymandias.” (Ozymandias, incidentally, was the Greek version of the name User-ma-Ra, better known as Ramses II, the name the Greeks used for the thirteenth century B.C. pharaoh who, like other pharaohs, built monuments to celebrate his own greatness. One such monument was a colossus sixty feet tall, carved in stone by Memnon. Diodorus, a Sicilian Greek historian of the first century, saw the statue and wrote that it was inscribed, “I am Ozymandias, King of kings; if any would know how great I am, and where I lie, let him excel me in any of my works.” At some later date, the statue tumbled, leaving only fragments.) Reeves’s objections include: “vast” (2) means “of great extent,” but the legs would be tall rather than vast; “on the sand” (3) is hardly necessary after “in the desert”; if the visage is “shattered” (which Reeves takes to mean “broken to pieces”), it would be difficult to recognize the facial expression; the speaker says that the sculptor “well . . . read” the subject’s passions, but we cannot know if this is true, since we have no other information about the subject; if it is argued that the inscription is evidence of cold-hearted tyranny, the sestet should begin “For,” not “And”; to speak of “the decay” of a “wreck” is tautological; in lines 13–14 “boundless” makes unnecessary “stretch far away,” and “bare” makes “lone” unnecessary. Some of Reeves’s objections are telling, some are niggling; in any case, the power of the poem is chiefly in the essential irony and the almost surrealistic scene of legs arising in the desert, the face on the ground nearby, and no trunk anywhere.

A small point: lines 4–8 are unclear, for it is not certain if “the hand . . . and the heart” belong to the sculptor, in which case the idea is that the sculptor “mocked” (“mimicked,” “imitated in stone”) the passions and “fed” them by creating them in stone, or if the hand and the heart belong to Ozymandias, whose hand mocked the passions of his foes and whose heart fed his own passions.

Shelley’s friend, Horace Smith, a banker with a taste for literature, wrote a sonnet on Ozymandias at the same time that Shelley did. You may want to ask students to compare the two poems:

**On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Desert 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,” said the stone,
“The King of kings; this mighty city shows
The wonders of my hand.” The city’s gone!
Naught but the leg remaining to disclose
The sight 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 wonderful, but unrecorded, race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.


There are excellent biographies by Richard Holmes (1974) and Kenneth Neill Cameron (2 vols., 1950, 1974), and many critical studies, including those by Carlos Baker (1948), Harold Bloom (1959), Earl Wasserman (1971), and William Keach (1984). The scholarship on Shelley, because of its engagement with the poet’s dense ideas and passionate, but often obscure, social and philosophical views, can prove daunting to undergraduates. It might be preferable to recommend instead two books that combine primary texts with extensive annotations and contextual materials: *The Lyrics of Shelley*, ed. Judith Chernaik (1972), and *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (1977).

**ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON**

*Ulysses* (p. 669)

Robert Langbaum, in *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), and Christopher Ricks, in *Tennyson* (2nd ed. 1989), offer some good remarks; Paul Baum, in *Tennyson Sixty Years After* (1948), assaults the poem. Henry Kozicki, in *Tennyson and Clio* (1979; a book on Tennyson’s philosophy of history), argues that “Ulysses” reveals Tennyson’s optimism about historical progress and his despair about the role of a hero. For a review of much that should not have been written, see L. K. Hughes in *Victorian Poetry* 17 (Autumn 1979): 192–203. By the way, it is worth mentioning to students that Homer’s hero wanted to get home, Sophocles’s (in *Philoctetes*) is a shifty politician (as is Shakespeare’s), and Dante’s Ulysses (*Inferno* XXVI) is an inspiring but deceitful talker whose ardent search is for forbidden things.

The first five lines emphasize, mostly with monosyllables, the dull world Ulysses is leaving. With line 6 (“I cannot rest from travel”) we see a rather romantic hero, questing for experience, and indeed “experience” is mentioned in line 19, but it must be added that something is done in the poem to give “experience” a social context: Ulysses has fought for Troy (17), he wishes to be of “use” (23), and he wishes to do “some work of notable note” (52). Lines 22–23 apparently say the same thing four times over, but readers are not likely to wish
that Tennyson had deleted the superbly appropriate metaphor of the rusting sword. “Gray spirit” (30) and “sinking star” (31) help (along with the heavy pauses and monosyllables in 55–56) to define the poem as a piece about dying, though students on first reading are likely to see only the affirmations. Even the strong affirmations in 57 ff. are undercut by “sunset” (60), “western” (61), etc. But the last line, with its regular accents on the meaningful words, affords a strong ending; perhaps the line is so strong and regular that it is a bit too easy. In line 45 Ulysses directly addresses the mariners, yet we hardly sense an audience as we do in Browning’s dramatic monologues. If he is addressing the mariners, who are aboard, where is he when he refers to “this still hearth” (2) and when he says, “This is my son” (33)? (Some critics claim that lines 1–32 are a soliloquy: Ulysses supposedly would not speak publicly of Ithaca as stagnant and savage, or of his wife as “aged.” Lines 33–43 are his farewell to the Ithacans, and the remainder is an address to his mariners.)

Probably the reader ought to see the poem not as a muddled attempt at a Browningesque dramatic monologue but as a somewhat different type of poem—a poem in which the poet uses a fairly transparent mask in order to express his state of mind and to persuade his readers to share that state of mind. The poem thus is closer to, say, “Prufrock” than it is to “My Last Duchess.”

**COUNTEE CULLEN**

*Incident (p. 671)*

The poem seems to be of the utmost simplicity: twelve lines without any figures of speech and without any obscure words. But it has its complexities, beginning with the title.

Our first question in the text asks students to think about the word “incident.” It’s our impression that an “incident” is usually a minor affair—something detached from what comes before and after, and of little consequence. For instance: “During the banquet a waiter dropped a tray full of dishes, but apart from this incident the affair was a great success.” There are of course plenty of exceptions, such as the famous “Incident at Harpers Ferry,” but we think that on the whole an incident is (1) minor and (2) a distinct occurrence.

Cullen’s title therefore is ironic; the episode might seem to be minor, but in fact it has left an indelible mark on the speaker’s mind (and on the minds of countless readers). And since it continues to have its effect, it is not something separate and done with. The apparent simplicity, then, of the title and of the entire poem, is deceptive, since this seemingly trivial and unconnected episode stands for, or embodies, an enormous force in American life.

It’s a good idea to ask a student to read the poem aloud in class (true for all poems, of course), so that students can hear the rhythms. On the whole, “Incident” sounds like a happy jingle, but of course that is part of the irony. Two details that strike us as especially effective are the enjambments in lines 7 and 11.
Of the other ten lines, nine end with some mark of punctuation, and the other one ("I saw the whole of Baltimore") could be complete in itself. But in the seventh line we are propelled into the horrible event of the eighth line ("And so I smiled, but he poked out / His tongue, and called me 'Nigger'"); and in the eleventh line we are propelled into the final line, the line that tells us that this whole “incident” was by no means trivial ("Of all the things that happened there / That’s all that I remember").


Instructors will find these secondary sources to be helpful, but none of them offers help on one issue that will be in the air when Cullen’s poem is discussed. “Nigger,” in line 8, is an ugly, offensive word—which is central to Cullen’s point in the poem, but which is nonetheless a hard word for the teacher and for students to say aloud and to analyze.

We know some instructors who press hard on the word “Nigger” in class; they want the students to feel very vividly the crude bigotry and shock of the term. This approach, we confess, does not work for us, and so we follow a different path. Often, after we have read the poem and begun to examine it with students, we have paused to say outright that it’s hard to use and talk about offensive racial and ethnic slurs and epithets. Yes, one of them is in Cullen’s poem, and thus it has to be considered as essential to its meaning. But, still, we tell and teach ourselves that such words are wrong—that they should not be used, ever, because they are offensive—and thus it cuts against our principles and (we hope) our practice to hear ourselves voicing them.

This may or may not be the best approach, but at the least it acknowledges for students that *something* is awry and uncomfortable in the room when the instructor and students start using the word “nigger” or other words like it. Keep in mind what the students are or might be thinking and feeling. Be aware of and talk about it. The tone of the class will be better, we believe, if you are sensitive to this issue and seek as best you can to address it carefully. The mistake would be to assume that, in a classroom context, ugly, offensive words will be heard by students neutrally, dispassionately.

**William Stafford**

*Traveling Through the Dark* (p. 672)

The speaker is matter-of-fact, but by the end of the poem we realize that he is not only thoughtful in the sense of considerate of others (unlike the motorist who killed the deer, he pushes the deer off the road so that others won’t have
an accident) but also thoughtful in the sense of meditative. Although he realizes that he cannot possibly save the unborn fawn, he cannot dispose of the doe casually, knowing that he will also be killing its fawn.

We take it, then, that when he says “I thought hard for us all” (line 17) he means not only “our group” (line 10), but everything including the fawn. He briefly hesitates—his “only swerving”—but he does what he has to do, lest a motorist “swerve [and . . . make more dead” (line 4).

In teaching this poem we usually try to reserve comment on the title until late in the discussion. If the poem has been talked about for a while, students can usually see that the title implies something about the human condition. All of us are “traveling through the dark,” moving through a difficult, demanding world, sometimes swerving a bit, but by and large guided by principles. The resonance of Stafford’s title will become especially clear if you ask students how it compares with some invented title, such as “The Dead Deer,” or “On the Edge of the Wilson River.”

A postscript. Is it absurd to compare the poem to Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”? We have in mind especially Frost’s contrast between the speaker and the little horse that, being only a horse, can’t share the speaker’s values. In Stafford’s poem, the automobile serves somewhat as the horse; its parking lights are on, and its engine purrs steadily. No swerving here, no decisions to make. But unlike machines, human beings have to make hard decisions in a world of danger (the tail-light turns the exhaust red).


ADRIENNE RICH

Diving into the Wreck (p. 673)

Most responses identify the wreck as either (1) the speaker’s life (persons familiar with Rich’s biography may identify it specifically as her unhappy marriage to a man who committed suicide in 1970, about three years before the poem was published), or (2) more broadly, our male-dominated society. Another way of putting it is to say that the poem is about sexual politics. The poem is discussed by Wendy Martin and by Erica Jong in Adrienne Rich’s Poetry (1975), ed. Barbara C. Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. Part of the following comment is indebted to their discussions.

Armed with a book of myths (an understanding of the lies society has created?) and a camera and a knife (an instrument of vision and an instrument of power?) she goes, alone, in contrast to Cousteau assisted by a team, to explore the wreck. (This sort of exploration can be done only by the individual. One might add, by the way, that it is a new sort of exploration, an exploration for which Rich had no
maps. Before the second half of the twentieth century, there was virtually no poetry about what it was like to be a wife or a woman living in a male-dominated society. The earlier poetry written by women was chiefly about children, love, and God.) More exactly, she is there, exploring the wreck (“I came to explore the wreck” implies that she is speaking from the site itself). She has immersed herself in the primal, life-giving element and has now arrived in order “to see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail,” that is, to see not only what is ruined but also what is salvageable. Her object is to find truth, not myth (62–63).

Lines 72–73, in which she is both mermaid and merman, and line 77, in which “I am she; I am he,” suggest that she has achieved an androgynous nature and thus has become the sort of new woman who will tell the truth. According to lines 92–94, the names of such true persons, or androgynes, persons who may rescue civilization, do not appear in the book of myths.

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

When Ms. Rich gives permission for the reprinting of her poems, she stipulates that they be presented in the book itself without questions or topics for writing assignments. Thus we offer our suggested topics here.

1. What was your response to the title when you first encountered it? Did your response change after you read and studied the poem?
2. Do some of the details in this poem strike you as symbolic? How do you know that they are?
3. Are there other details that, in your view, are not symbolic but are there for other reasons? Please explain, pointing to specific examples.
4. Do you feel that it is illuminating, or misleading, to identify “Diving into the Wreck” as a feminist poem?
5. In “Diving into the Wreck,” do you perceive an argument? From your study of it, do you sense that Rich would or would not like this term to be used about her work? What might be the limitations of using such a term about a poem?

Derek Walcott

A Far Cry from Africa (p. 676)

Many students—partly because they think that puns are always comic and that literature is always serious—will not see the double meaning in the title: (1) the poem is a lament from Africa, violated by colonialism and also by Africans themselves, and (2) the poet—a West Indian who lives part of the year in the West Indies and part in the United States—is a very considerable distance away from Africa.

Walcott, a black, sees not only the wickedness of British colonial rule but also the wickedness that Africans visit upon other Africans. Further, Walcott’s tongue is English; he utters his cry (to use a word from the title of the poem) in
English, not in an African language. In short, the two meanings of the title embody the themes of the poem—the pain that Africa is experiencing (inflicted not only by colonialists but also by Africans), and the dilemma of the English-speaking poet, who is black but who lives thousands of miles from Africa and who feels a loyalty to (and a love for) “the English tongue.”


**SHERMAN ALEXIE**

*On the Amtrak from Boston to New York City* (p. 677)

This piece takes the Anglo reader deep into the heart of “the Other.” On the surface, the speaker is an affable guy—in a conversation with a stranger he nods his head acquiescently, he does not embarrass the woman by telling her she is talking foolishly, and he even brings her an orange juice from the food car. But we feel his rage at her superficiality and at Don Henley’s show of concern for Walden. We also intensely feel his impotence as he makes plans (34–37), which of course he will not act on, for the next occurrence of the same situation. The last line makes it explicit that whites are his enemy, but the reader knows that the whites who meet him on the train will never know it.

The woman’s idea that “history” has been made only by whites is presented here in such a way that it is obviously absurd. But it is an idea that almost all whites have held until very recently. For instance, Robert Frost in “The Gift Outright” speaks, without any irony, of the pre-white world as “unstoried, artless, unenhanced.”


included in a special issue on the topic “American Poetry.” “Sherman Alexie: The Official Site” can be found at www.fallsapart.com.

**WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS**

*Sailing to Byzantium* (p. 678)

It is worth showing students a few images from Byzantium, especially mosaics since Yeats speaks of “the gold mosaic of a wall” (line 18). In these mosaics, showing holy figures, the background does not depict a landscape, or even a heaven with clouds; rather, the background is uniformly gold, in order to symbolize the uniform, unchanging nature of God. And the gold itself of course symbolizes preciousness. The standard college histories of the survey of art, such as H. W. Janson’s *History of Art*, Marilyn Stokstad’s *Art History*, or Hugh Honour and John Fleming’s *The Visual Arts*, include a few appropriate reproductions. We suggest that the day before you teach the poem you ask your students if any of them are taking a survey course in art, and if some are, ask them to bring the text to class. This way you can have several books circulating among students, as opposed to a single copy that you might yourself bring. But you may also want to bring a copy of *The Glory of Byzantium*, the catalog of a great exhibition that was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Most of the objects illustrated in this catalog of course are not mosaics, but even smaller works such as ivories and the covers of Bibles will convey a good idea of Byzantine art.

Byzantium, originally a Greek trading station, was rebuilt by Constantine, who in 330 renamed it Constantinople and dedicated it to the Christian God. The most important city of the Roman empire in the East, Constantinople became the cultural center of the Christianized Roman world. But in the early Renaissance, Byzantine art—because of its lack of interest in naturalism—fell into disrepute: Byzantine figures, swathed in heavy drapery, reveal almost nothing of the body (except for representations of Christ on the cross), and their postures are usually static. An important medium, mosaic—lightweight squares of colored glass set into cement—hardly lends itself to naturalism.

In short, Byzantine figures seem (to the unsympathetic eye) lifeless, unable to move or to feel. But for the aging Yeats (he wrote the poem when he was sixty-one), seeking an alternative for a failing body, Byzantine art, with its other-worldly images, provided intimations of immortality. He had seen Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna in 1907, but not until his visit to Palermo in 1924 did Byzantine culture come to have great meaning for him.

The poem: Students will not have much difficulty in drawing up lists of contrasts between (to put it bluntly), youth and age, transience and permanence, the body and the mind, the flesh and the soul. Examples:

“birds in the trees”

a bird of “hammered gold” on

“a golden bough”
"fish, flesh, or fowl"  "sages standing in God's holy fire"
"those dying generations"  "once out of nature"
"whatever is begotten, born, and dies"  "monuments of unaging intellect"
"that sensual music"  "singing-masters of my soul"
"dying animal"  "artifice of eternity"
"the young in one another's arms"  "an aged man"
"That is no country"  "Byzantium"

That is, Yeats establishes a contrast between, on the one hand, Ireland (with its "salmon falls," line 4), which stands for the natural world, the cycle of birth and death, and, on the other hand, Byzantium, which stands for permanence.

The first stanza is largely devoted to presenting a memorable image of the natural world, the world of youth and of fertility. This world will be disparaged, but Yeats also lets us see its appeal, as in "The young in one another’s arms, birds in the trees,” “The salmon falls, the mackerel-crowded seas.” But even as he shows us the attractive sensuous world, he reminds us of its transience: “birds in the trees / —Those dying generations at their song. . . .” And the stanza ends with a sharp put-down:

Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect.

The second stanza, devoted to the intellectual and spiritual life, contrasts the physical world—now concisely symbolized as “an aged man,” who is a mere “tattered coat upon a stick” (a scarecrow)—with the “monuments” that were introduced at the end of the first stanza. We are now told that the aged man, or, more precisely, his “soul,” must “sing” (a contrast with the song of the dying birds of the first stanza), and that the soul learns to sing by “studying / Monuments of its own magnificence.” And, the speaker tells us, this is why he has come to “the holy city of Byzantium.” The poet was, so to speak, trying to prepare himself for his final examination. In A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats (1984), Norman A. Jeffares quotes a statement Yeats composed in 1931 for a broadcast of his poems:

Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts upon that subject I have put into a poem called “Sailing to Byzantium.” When Irishmen were illuminating the Book of Kells [in the eighth century] and making the jewelled croziers in the National Museum, Byzantium was the centre of European civilisation and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolise the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city. (p. 213)

The third stanza introduces art and associates it with the wisdom that the soul acquires. Notice, however, that the mosaic is introduced merely as a comparison: The sages are “standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall.”
The fourth stanza combines the permanence of art (the golden bird on a golden bough) with the transient stuff of “nature” (25), which is in fact the subject of most art. And whereas the first stanza showed “Fish, flesh, or fowl” caught up in the richness of the present, this final stanza takes us into a fuller world, a world of what is “past, or passing, or to come.” Are we wrong in thinking that this poem, about human weakness, human blindness, also celebrates human achievements—and that one of these achievements is the poem itself?


For further background and context, students might type into a search engine “The Glory of Byzantium.” This will bring up a link to a catalog published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with many images available on the site.

**Additional Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing**

1. What place is “That” (the first word of the poem)? What does it come to stand for? By the end of the poem, what does Byzantium stand for?
2. We are, all of us, in this transient world, this world of flux, this world of birth and death. Would you say that Yeats despises it? Or does he reveal its attractions even while he seeks to turn his back on it?
3. Have you ever visited any place—perhaps the place where you or your parents or grandparents were born, or perhaps a house of worship, or perhaps a college campus—which you have come to see symbolically, standing for a way of life or for some aspect of life? If so, describe the place and the significance that you give it.

**CHRISTINA ROSETTI**

_Uphill_ (p. 680)

How can one be sure that the poem is metaphorical? This is part of what we are getting at in our first question, in which we ask the student to respond to a reader who assumes the speaker is making inquiries preparatory to a bit of touring.

The question is not meant to be frivolous. Instructors know that this is a poem about larger matters, but that’s because instructors are used to reading poems and are therefore used to figurative language. Most students are unfamil-
Our second question asks, Who is the questioner? The poem is not a Browningesque dramatic monologue, and we think it is enough to say that the questioner is the poet, or the poet as a universal spokesperson. By the way, we don’t know exactly what to make of the suggestion of a student that the answerer in “Uphill” is a ghost, that is, someone who has made the journey and who therefore answers authoritatively.

As for our final question in the text, we do find the answers (with their dry understatement, as in “You cannot miss that inn,” i.e., “Don’t worry, you will certainly die”) chilling as well as comforting, but we are unconvinced that a reader is supposed to imagine a dialogue between the poet and a revenant. Rather, we believe (guided by Jerome J. McGann’s essay on Christina Rossetti in his The Beauty of Inflections) that the poet is speaking with what McGann calls “her divine interlocutor” (p. 242). McGann points out that the ending of “Uphill” is easily misinterpreted. Rossetti is not saying that the pilgrimage of the Christian soul ends with an eternal sleep. Rather, she is alluding to the Anabaptist doctrine known as “Soul Sleep” (technically, psychopannychism), which holds that at death the soul is put into a condition of sleep until the millennium. On the Last Day the soul awakens and goes to its final reward. McGann fully discusses the point in his essay.

From time to time, we have taught students who have become very interested in Rossetti’s verse. For specialized work, we can recommend The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti, ed. R. W. Crump, 3 vols. (1979–1990). But students might profit even more from reading Rossetti in the midst of other Victorian women poets; see Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology, ed. Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (1995). See also Dolores Rosenblum, Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance (1986); Antony H. Harrison, Christina Rossetti in Context (1988); and Angela Leighton, Victorian Women Poets (1992), 118–163.

**EMILY DICKINSON**

*Because I could not stop for Death* (p. 681)

In Dickinson’s “Because I could not stop for Death,” the fact that a grave is suggested in lines 17–20 eludes many students; the reference to the grave contributes to toughening the poem. This stanza, by the way, is a good example of the closeness of some metaphors to riddles, a point worth discussing in class. Allen Tate, in a famous essay, praised the poem because “we are not told what to think.” J. J. McGann, rightly taking issue with Tate, points out that “the message about the benevolence of Death is plain enough.” McGann also takes issue with the widespread idea that in this poem death is a “gentlemanly suitor.” He argues, on the contrary, that since the penultimate line speaks of “horses,” Dickinson is talking not about a suitor—who would drive only one horse—but about an
undertaker, who is driving a hearse. (McGann’s essay originally appeared in New Literary History, 12 [1981], and is reprinted in Literary Theories in Praxis [1987], ed. Shirley F. Staton.) For other commentaries, see the suggested readings in this manual, page 140.

A. E. HOUSMAN

To an Athlete Dying Young (p. 682)

The poem presents no difficulties to readers, we think, except possibly the word “lintel” in line 23, the horizontal beam that spans an opening, in this instance the upper member of a door frame. Interesting, at least to pedants, is the fact that lintel ultimately comes from the Latin limen, “threshold”—this English word appears in the poem in line 7—and limen comes from limes, “limit.” Death is largely a matter of crossing a threshold, of reaching a limit and going beyond it.

While we are fretting about lintel we should mention that Housman’s manuscripts show that before he wrote “And hold to the low lintel up” he wrote And hold to the dark lintel up.

“Dark” is obvious enough for the realm of death, probably too obvious; surely “low” is far superior. The poem celebrates the athlete’s latest triumph (he holds “the still-defended challenge-cup”) but it also indicates that he carries it into a constricting realm. When we encounter the word “low” here, we almost feel our knees bend and our head lower—i.e., we feel the stooping involved.

While we are talking about the small but important change from “dark” to “low,” we will mention another change: Housman first wrote “Wise lad” and then changed it to “Smart lad” in line 9. In our view, “Smart” is more colloquial, more suited to the speaker (a fellow townsman of the athlete), though we certainly do not want to insist heavily on a distinction between the speaker and the poet. That is, Housman clearly is not going to any great effort to create a country lad who is distinct from the professor-poet, in the way that (say) Browning’s duke is distinct from Browning. We suppose that Housman himself, the Professor of Latin, might well have spoken of one of his students as a “smart lad,” but, again, we think the word is more suited to the situation—townsman speaking about a local athlete—than is “wise.”

The motif—early death as a sort of triumph—is not rare in literature, but we can’t think of any other poem on this motif that students are likely to know. Still, you may want to quote a famous passage from Ben Jonson’s “To the Immortal Memory and Friendship of That Noble Pair, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison” (each was about twenty when he died):

It is not growing like a tree
In bulk, doth make man better be,
Or standing long an oak, three hundred year,
To fall a log at last, dry, bald, and sere:
A lily of a day
Is fairer far in May
Although it fall and die that night;
It was the plant and flower of light.
In small proportions we just beauties see,
And in short measures life may perfect be.

Here the note of triumph dominates unambiguously. We can contrast it with the last lines of Dryden’s “To the Memory of Mr. Oldham” (Oldham, a poet, died at the age of thirty):

Once more, hail and farewell; farewell thou young,
But ah too short, Marcellus of our tongue;
Thy brows with ivy, and with laurel bound,
But Fate and gloomy Night encompass thee around.

The young man is compared to Marcellus (the nephew of Augustus), whose early death is memorialized in the Aeneid, and he is said to wear crowns of ivy (an evergreen, and therefore symbol of enduring strength) and of laurel (awarded to athletes, emperors, and poets)—but despite the young man’s association with Marcellus and with strength and triumph, the poem ends by emphasizing his weakness, his subjugation by fate and darkness.

Housman’s poem, we have already suggested, seems to us far more celebratory. Yes, there are ominous touches—“townsman of a stiller town,” “shady night,” “earth has stopped the ears,” “low lintel”—but on the whole we think the emphasis is on victory. Certainly the final stanza does what it can (in contrast to Dryden’s final lines) to emphasize the athlete’s enduring triumph:

And round that early laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl’s.

So far as subject matter goes, the obvious poem with which to compare—really, to contrast—“To an Athlete Dying Young” is Updike’s “Ex-Basketball Player,” where the emphasis is on a man who is a shell of his former self. (We include Updike’s poem on page 1040, in a thematic chapter called “All in a Day’s Work.”) Housman’s fifth quatrain pretty much contrasts the dead youth with Updike’s survivor:

Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads that wore their honors out,
Runners whom renown outran
And the name died before the man.
At the risk of moving away from the poem—the specific artifact—to a general idea, we want to quote a remark that Boswell attributes to Samuel Johnson: “It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time.” As we say, the danger with introducing such a comment is that the discussion in class then shifts from the poem to a heated argument about—well, about other things, such as life. Still, although we firmly believe that in literature what is important is how things are said, i.e., the precise ways in which meanings are generated by exceptional uses of language, we do recognize that literature is connected with life, and we think it is sometimes appropriate to discuss the “idea” as well as the work itself. Discussion of “To an Athlete Dying Young” will, rightly and inevitably, go beyond Housman’s words and will engage—how shall we put it?—a larger issue.

**Anonymous**

*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* (p. 684) and *Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel* (p. 685)

One of the chief themes in spirituals is the desire for release, and this theme is often set forth with imagery from the Hebrew Bible. Some additional points should be mentioned. Most of what follows here is derived from Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (1978).

Although the passages about release undoubtedly refer to the release from slavery, the songs should not be taken only as disguised statements about secular life. Many slaves—like at least some of their masters—believed that the Bible was the book of the acts of God, which is to say that they “believed that the supernatural continually impinged on the natural, that divine action constantly took place within the lives of men, in the past, present, and future” (Raboteau, 250).

Raboteau makes a second very important point:

Identification with the children of Israel was, of course, a significant theme for white Americans, too. From the beginnings of colonization, white Christians had identified the journey across the Atlantic to the New World as the exodus of a new Israel from the bondage of Europe into the promised land of milk and honey. For the black Christian, as Vincent Harding has observed [in *The Religious Situation*, ed. Donald R. Cutter], the imagery was reversed: the Middle Passage had brought his people to Egypt land, where they suffered bondage under Pharaoh. White Christians saw themselves as a new Israel; slaves identified themselves as the old. (250–51)

Instructors who have time for some additional reading may wish to consult—for a survey of scholarship on the topic—John White, “Veiled Testimony: Negro Spirituals and the Slave Experience,” in *Journal of American Studies* 17 (1983): 251–63. White is especially concerned with adjudicating between those who see spirituals (of the type that we reprint) as highly revolutionary and, on the other
hand, those who see the songs as in effect serving the cause of the masters, since
the songs seem to suggest that suffering in this world is transient, and that God
will later reward the sufferers. (As an example of this second view, White quotes
E. Franklin Frazier, an African-American scholar who in The Negro Church in
America [1964] rejected “the efforts of Negro intellectuals . . . encouraged by
white radicals, to invest the spirituals with a revolutionary meaning.”)

Other recommended works (in addition to Raboteau and White): John Lovell,
Black Song: The Forge and the Flame (1972); James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the
Blues (1972); and Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness (1977).

Obviously this song (like all oral literature) really ought to be heard, not
simply read. Many excellent recordings are available, but if you are lucky you
may find a student who will give a live performance in class.

Dena J. Epstein, in a fascinating book called Sinful Tunes and Spirituals
(1977), offers extremely interesting information about “Go Down, Moses.”
According to Epstein, the earliest written report of the song is by the Reverend
Lewis C. Lockwood, who visited Fort Monroe, a Virginia fort at the entrance
to the Chesapeake Bay. Lockwood arrived there on September 3, 1861, and
commented on his first experience of African-American singers. In his report,
published under the title of National Anti-Slavery Standard 22 (Oct. 12, 1861):
3, and reprinted by Epstein (244), he wrote:

Last evening . . . on the piazza of the hotel, I overheard music, and directed
my footsteps thither, and in a long building, just outside the entrance of the
Fortress, I found a number of colored people assembled for a prayer-meet-
ing. The brother who led in the concluding prayer had a sing-song manner,
but his sentiments and expressions were very scriptural and impressive. He
prayed that He who brought Israel out of Egypt, Jonah out of the mouth of
the whale, and Daniel out of the den of lions, might bring them out into full
deliverance, spiritually and temporally.

I told my mission in few words, and the message was received with
deep, half-uttered expressions of gladness and gratitude. They assured me
that this was what they had been praying for; and now that “the good
Lord” had answered their prayers, they felt assured that some great thing
was in store for them and their people. There are some peculiarities in their
prayer-meetings. Their responses are not boisterous; but in the gentle,
chanted style. . . . The themes are generally devotional; but they have a
prime deliverance melody, that runs in this style

“Go down to Egypt—Tell Pharoah
Thus saith my servant, Moses
Let my people go.”

Accent on the last syllable, with repetition of the chorus, that seems every
hour to ring like a warning note in the ear of despotism.

Epstein’s account includes (246) another version of the song.
C H A P T E R  2 2

Love and Hate

JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

*I Fell in Love, or My Hormones Awakened* (p. 689)

Our first question in the text asks about the humor in the essay. Almost every paragraph provides examples. For instance, in the first paragraph there is (in the first sentence) the comic drop from “I fell in love” to “my hormones awakened”; later in the paragraph we hear that she fell in love with “an older man”—a senior, when she was a first-year student. But the humor does not consist entirely in defeating the reader’s expectations; much of it is in the author’s genial presentation of her silly, romantic—and very human—self, for instance in the second paragraph the revelation that she drank milk, which she hated, so that she would have an excuse to go to the store to see the boy who worked there.

Nothing in the essay will cause readers any difficulty, we think, and it lends itself very well to writing assignments, some of which we suggest in the text.

We recommend Cofer’s *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry* (1995), which includes poetry, personal essays, and short stories about the lives of Puerto Ricans in a New Jersey barrio.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

*Cat in the Rain* (p. 693)

The best published discussion is David Lodge’s “Analysis and Interpretation of the Realist Text,” *Poetics Today* 1 (1980): 5–19, conveniently reprinted in Lodge’s *Working with Structuralism* (1981). Lodge begins by summarizing Carlos Baker’s discussion, in which Baker (in *Ernest Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* [1952]) assumed that the cat at the end is the cat at the beginning. As Lodge puts it, in this reading

[T]he appearance of the maid with a cat is the main reversal in Aristotelian terms in the narrative. If it is indeed the cat she went to look for, then the reversal is a happy one for her, and confirms her sense that the hotel keeper appreciated her as a woman more than her husband.
On the other hand, Lodge points out, if the cat is not the same cat,

We might infer that the padrone, trying to humour a client, sends up the first cat he can lay hands on, which is in fact quite inappropriate to the wife's needs. This would make the reversal an ironic one at the wife's expense, emphasizing the social and cultural abyss that separates her from the padrone, and revealing her quasi-erotic response to his professional attentiveness as a delusion.

Lodge goes on to discuss a very different interpretation by John Hagopian, published in *College English* 24 (Dec. 1962): 220–222, in which Hagopian argued that the story is about “a crisis in the marriage . . . involving the lack of fertility, which is symbolically foreshadowed by the public garden (fertility) dominated by the war monument (death).” For Hagopian, the rubber cape worn by the man in the rain “is a protection from rain, and rain is a fundamental necessity for fertility and fertility is precisely what is lacking in the American wife's marriage.” Put bluntly, Hagopian sees the rubber cape as a condom. Lodge correctly points out that although rain often stands for fertility, in this story the rainy weather is contrasted with “good weather.” What the rubber cape does is emphasize the bad weather, and thus it emphasizes the padrone’s thoughtfulness (and the husband’s indifference).

Lodge’s careful and profound article can’t be adequately summarized, but we’ll give a few more of his points. Near the end of the story, when we read that “George shifted his position in the bed,” a reader may feel that George will put down the book and make love to his wife, but this possibility disappears when George says, “Oh, shut up and get something to read.”

Taking Seymour Chatman’s distinction between stories of *resolution* (we get the answer to “What happened next?”) and stories of *revelation* (events are not resolved, but a state of affairs is revealed), Lodge suggests that this story seems to share characteristics of both: it is, one might say, a plot of revelation (the relationship between husband and wife) disguised as a plot of resolution (the quest for the cat). The ambiguity of the ending is therefore crucial. By refusing to resolve the issue of whether the wife gets the cat she wants, the implied author indicates that this is not the point of the story.

On point of view, Lodge demonstrates that Hemingway’s story is written from the point of view of the American couple, and from the wife’s point of view rather than the husband’s. (Of course, he doesn’t mean that the entire story is seen from her point of view. He means only that we get into her mind to a greater degree—e.g., “The cat would be round to the right. Perhaps she could go along under the eaves”—than into the minds of any of the other characters.) Lodge’s argument is this: at the end, when the maid appears, “the narration adopts the husband’s perspective at this crucial point,” and so that’s why we are told that the maid held *a* cat rather than *the* cat. After all, the man had not seen the cat in the rain, so he can’t know if the maid’s cat is the same cat.

Finally, another discussion of interest is Warren Bennett, “The Poor Kitty . . . in ‘Cat in the Rain,’” *Hemingway Review* 8 (Fall 1988): 26–36. Bennett reviews
Lodge's discussion of Baker and Hagopian and insists that the wife is not pregnant (Lodge had suggested, in arguing against Hagopian, that the wife may be pregnant). Bennett says that

\[T\]he girl's feelings as she thinks of the padrone pass through three stages, tight inside, important, and of momentary supreme importance, and these stages reflect a correspondence to the sensations of desire, intercourse, and orgasm.

Not all readers will agree, though probably we can all agree with Bennett when he says that “The wife's recognition of the padrone's extraordinary character suggests that her husband, George, lacks the qualities which the wife finds so attractive in the padrone. George has neither dignity, nor will, nor commitment.”

In any case, Bennett suggests that when the wife returns to the room “her sexual feelings are transferred to George. She goes over to George and tries to express her desire for closeness by sitting down 'on the bed.'”

Bennett's article makes too many points to be summarized here, but one other point should be mentioned. He says that female tortoise-shell cats do not reproduce tortoise-shells and that males are sterile. Since he identifies the woman with the cat, he says that the woman's “destiny is that of a barren wandering soul with no place and no purpose in the futility of the wasteland In Our Time.”


\textbf{ZORA NEALE HURSTON}

\textit{Sweat} (p. 705)

Zora Neale Hurston was not simply a black writer or a woman writer; she was a black woman writer, and much of her fiction comes from this perspective. (bell hooks, in \textit{Ain't I a Woman}, interestingly discusses black women and feminism."

The contrast between the two chief characters is boldly drawn—clearly Delia is good and Sykes is bad—but it is not without complexity. After all, Delia does allow Sykes to die, and Sykes, though a brute, obviously suffers (despite his boasting and his bullying) from a sense of inferiority which apparently is heightened by the sight of his wife engaged in a menial task for white people: “Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house.” Though Hurston does not explicitly make the point that black men had a harder time than black women in finding employment, a reader presumably is aware of the fact that an oppressive white society made black men feel unmanly and that they sometimes compensated by brutal expressions of what they took to be manliness. When Sykes deliberately steps on the white clothes,
we understand that he is expressing not only a cruel contempt for his wife but also hostility toward white society.

Still, that Sykes is a brute cannot be doubted; the other black men in the story testify to this effect. This is the intent of question 2 in the text. Notice especially the longish speech to the effect that some men abuse women simply because the men are bad:

Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in ‘im. . . . Dey knows whut dey is doin’ while dey is at it, an’ hates theirselves fuh it but they keeps on hangin’ after huh tell she’s empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein’ a cane-chew an’ in de way.

Further, even before Sykes came to hate his wife, he never loved her but only lusted after her.

She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing for the flesh.

In this respect, however, he apparently is not much different from the other men in the story, who seem to regard an attractive woman only as a commodity, not as a person with ideas and feelings. Thus one of them, commenting on Delia’s good looks in her earlier days, says, “Ah’d uh mah’ied huh mahself if he hadn’ter beat me to it.” It does not occur to him that she might have had a say in the choice of her husband.

Classroom discussion will probably focus on Delia, especially on the question of whether a woman as devout as Delia would stand by and allow even the worst of husbands to die. (Question 3 approaches this point.) But “stand by” is misleading, since Hurston takes pains to emphasize not only the suffering that Delia has undergone at Sykes’s hands but also the helplessness she experiences when the snake bites him. She becomes “ill,” and we are told that “Delia could not move—her legs were gone flabby.” Seeing him in agony, she experiences “a surge of pity,” but “Orlando with its doctors was too far.” All of these statements extenuate—indeed, eliminate—any blame that otherwise a reader might conceivably attach to Delia.

Further, Sykes is responsible for his own death since he malevolently introduces the snake into the house, and it is presumably Sykes who has transferred the snake from the box to the laundry basket, in an effort to murder Delia. He is thus justly punished, undone by his own hand. Interestingly, a passage in Ecclesiastes (10:8–9) uses the image of a snake:

He that diggith a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.

Whoso removeth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood shall be endangered thereby.

We are thus in a world of tragedy, where a person aiming at good (doubtless in his brutal mind Sykes thinks that it will be good—for him—to eliminate Delia)
destroys himself. With the passage from Ecclesiastes in mind, one can almost speak of the physics of the world: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Delia, one notices, tells Sykes that she now hates him as much as she used to love him, and he counters that his hatred for her equals her hatred for him. At the start of the story he torments Delia by terrifying her with what seems to be a snake, and at the end of the story he is terrified by a snake. He puts the snake in her laundry basket, but the snake crawls into his bed—where Sykes is bitten. A final comment on the reciprocal structure or geometry of the story: “Sweat” begins late at night and ends with “the red dawn,” which gradually changes into full light, as “the sun crept on up.” The image of daylight implies a new day, a new life for Delia, though of course nothing can bring back her youth or her love.


Hurston is best known for her novel Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937)—which, according to recent surveys, is the most widely taught book in U.S. colleges and universities. But Hurston is also the author of an interesting autobiography, first published in 1942; see Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography, edited and with an introduction by Robert Hemenway (1970; 2nd ed., 1984). Her writings have been collected in a two-volume set in the Library of America series (1995).


RAYMOND CARVER

Cathedral (p. 713)

Reminder: In Chapter 11 we print two very short stories by Carver, “Mine” and “Little Things.”

You might begin by asking students to indicate what sort of impression the narrator makes on them in the first paragraphs. (You may want to assign a short writing requirement of this sort along with the story. If students come to class with a paragraph or two on the topic, the discussion is usually good.)

Probably no single word adequately describes the narrator at this stage, but among the words that students have suggested in their paragraphs are “mean,” “cynical,” “bitter,” “sullen” (this seems especially apt), “unfeeling,” “cold,” and
“cruel”; all of these words are relevant. He is also (though fewer students see this at first) jealous, jealous both of the blind man and of the officer who was his wife’s first husband. His jealousy of the officer emerges in his wry reference to “this man who’d first enjoyed her favors.” (Later in the story his hostility to the officer is more open, for instance, in this passage: “Her officer—why should he have a name? he was the childhood sweetheart, and what more does he want?—came home from somewhere, found her, and called the ambulance.”)

With the blind man, too, the narrator’s characteristic form of aggression is the ironic or mocking comment, as when he tells his wife that he will take the blind man bowling. His jealousy of the affectionate relationship between his wife and Robert is understandable if unattractive, and equally unattractive is the way in which he at last reveals that he does not fear this intruder into his house, when he flips open her robe, thus “exposing a juicy thigh.” Still, this action is a step toward his accepting Robert and ultimately responding to Robert’s influence. One other characteristically aggressive response also should be mentioned: only rarely does he call Robert by his name. In speaking about him, as early as the first sentence of the story but pretty much throughout the story, he usually calls him “the blind man,” a way of keeping him at a distance. (Not surprisingly, we soon learn that the narrator has no friends.) Late in the story, when Robert asks the narrator if he is “in any way religious,” the narrator replies, “I guess I don’t believe in it. In anything.” This reply is not surprising; all of his behavior has shown that he doesn’t believe “in anything.”

The narrator seems to us, until near the end, to be a thoroughly unattractive figure. His irony is scarcely witty enough to make us deeply interested in him, so why do we continue reading the story after we have read the first few paragraphs? Mark A. R. Facknitz interestingly suggests in Studies in Short Fiction (Summer 1986) that “perhaps what pushes one into the story is a fear of the harm [the narrator] may do to his wife and her blind friend” (p. 293).

Despite the narrator’s evident aggressiveness, fairly early in the story he does profess some sympathy for Robert and especially for Robert’s late wife, who died without her husband having ever seen what the goddamned woman looked like. It was beyond my understanding. Hearing this, I felt sorry for the blind man for a little bit. And then I found myself thinking what a pitiful life this woman must have led. A woman whose husband could never read the expression on her face, be it misery or something better. Someone who could wear makeup or not—what difference to him? . . . And then to slip off into death, the blind man’s hand on her hand, his blind eyes streaming tears—I’m imagining now—her last thought maybe this: that he never even knew what she looked like, and she on the express to the grave. Robert was left with a small insurance policy and half of a twenty-peso Mexican coin. The other half of the coin went into the box with her. Pathetic.

But to say that the narrator displays “sympathy” here is, obviously, to use the word too loosely. What is displayed, again, is his bitterness, cynicism, and (despite
his “imagining”) his utter inability to understand the feelings of others. (Later, when the blind man’s hand rests on the narrator’s as the narrator draws a box—like his house—that turns into a cathedral, he will presumably come close to the experience that here he so ineptly imagines.)

Almost by chance the blind man enters into the narrator’s life and thaws the ice frozen around his heart, or better, the blind man enables the narrator to see. As Facknitz puts it,

Carver redeems the narrator by releasing him from the figurative blindness that results in a lack of insight into his own condition and which leads him to trivialize human feelings and needs. Indeed, so complete is his misperception that the blind man gives him a faculty of sight that he is not even aware that he lacks. (p. 293)

The narrator so dominates the story that there is a danger in class that no other matters will get considered, but it’s worth asking students to characterize the wife and also Robert. Carver has taken care not to make Robert too saintly a fellow, full of wisdom and goodness and all that. True, Robert does have an uncanny sense of the difference between a black-and-white television set and a color set, but Carver nicely does not dwell on this; he just sort of lets it drop. Further, Robert’s use of “bub” is maddening, and his confidence that he has “a lot of friends” in “Guam, in the Philippines, in Alaska, and even in Tahiti” suggests that he takes quite a bit for granted. It is easy, in fact, to imagine that one wouldn’t much like Robert. The man who brings the narrator to a new consciousness is not sentimentalized or etherealized.

The story also invites comparison with Flannery O’Connor’s “Revelation,” which is about unearned grace, although the word “grace” should be used metaphorically when talking about Carver, whereas O’Connor was literally concerned with the working of the Holy Spirit. Talking of several of Carver’s stories (including “Cathedral”), Facknitz puts the matter thus:

Grace, Carver says, is bestowed upon us by other mortals, and it comes suddenly, arising in circumstances as mundane as a visit to the barber shop, and in the midst of feelings as ignoble or quotidian as jealousy, anger, loneliness, and grief. It can be represented in incidental physical contact, and the deliverer is not necessarily aware of his role. Not Grace in the Christian sense at all, it is what grace becomes in a godless world—a deep and creative connection between humans that reveals to Carver’s alienated and diminished creatures that there can be contact in a world they supposed was empty of sense or love. Calm is given in a touch, a small, good thing is the food we get from others, and in the cathedrals we draw together, we create large spaces for the spirit. (pp. 295–296)

One last point: obviously a cathedral is a more appropriate and richer symbol for what Carver is getting at than is, say, a gas station or shopping mall. Notice, too, that in the television program about cathedrals there is an episode in which
devils attack monks; that is, an assault is made on the soul. Presumably the narrator is unaware of morality plays, but some readers will understand that this scene introduces the possibility of a sort of spiritual change. A little later the inner change is further prepared for by the narrator’s comments about a change in physical sensation. When he goes upstairs to get a pen so that he can draw a cathedral, he says, “My legs felt like they didn’t have any strength in them. They felt like they did after I’d done some running.”

ANONYMOUS

Western Wind (p. 723)

“Western Wind” has been much discussed. Probably most readers will find acceptable R. P. Warren’s suggestion (Kenyon Review, 1943, p. 5) that the grieving lover seeks relief for the absence of his beloved in “the sympathetic manifestation of nature.” But how do you feel about Patric M. Sweeney’s view (Explicator, October 1955) that the speaker asserts that “he will come to life only when the dead woman returns, and her love, like rain, renews him”? In short, in this view the speaker “cries out to the one person who conquered death, who knows that the dead, returning to life, give life to those who loved them.” We find this reading of the poem hard to take, but (like many readings) it is virtually impossible to disprove.

One other point: some readers have asked why other readers assume that the speaker is a male. A hard question to answer.

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love (p. 724)

SIR WALTER RALEIGH

The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd (p. 725)

JOHN DONNE

The Bait (p. 726)

Marlowe’s poem will probably cause no problems. We hope, however, that students do not reject it because it depicts an idealized, idyllic, pastoral world. It gives us, of course, not the real world but a world that we might sometimes dream of.

Raleigh’s bitter (but engaging) response does not quite say that Marlowe’s world is utterly fanciful. Raleigh seems to grant the truth of Marlowe’s springtime world, but he points out that there is a further truth—the truth of change.
Spring becomes fall and winter. (Topic 2 in the text asks about line 12. We hear puns in spring [the season, and also the watery source] and fall [the season, and a downfall].)

We find the last stanza of Raleigh’s poem especially interesting. The poem does not cynically glory in debunking Marlowe’s poem; rather, the final stanza expresses a poignant wish that Marlowe’s vision were true.

Donne’s “The Bait” begins with Marlowe’s words, and the shift to “golden sands, and crystal brooks” hardly seems to change the landscape, though of course it does in fact get us into the world of fisherfolk. The idealized motif is continued in the second stanza, though “betray” in line 8 introduces a dark note. Still, the next stanza (lines 9–12) seems chiefly to continue the motif of a golden world, but in lines 13–16 we get two additional words that cause unease, “loath” and “darknest.” The next two stanzas vigorously introduce the real world of hardships; fishing is no longer a delightful sport, but something that requires people to “freeze,” and it will “cut” their legs. Further, we now hear of “poor fish,” and the fisherfolk behave “treacherously.” This is a bit odd, since at the start the speaker invited the beloved to fish in a world of “golden sands” and “crystal brooks,” with “silken lines” and “silver hooks.” That is, as the poem continues, the act of fishing is seen as less pleasant (to those who fish and to the fish themselves). In fact, where the speaker was a fisherman in the first stanza, in the last stanza he is a victimized fish, taken by the bait (attractiveness?) of the beloved. The beloved, therefore, is (at the start) a fellow-fisher or a companion and (at the end) is also a deceiver who snares the speaker. On the other hand, although the speaker seems to lament his lot, he also evidently enjoys it. The idea that lovers enjoy suffering, enjoy thralldom, is of course commonplace.

When we teach sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry, we try always to find time to mention two books that we greatly valued when we were beginning our own efforts to become literary critics: William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930; 3rd ed., rev. 1953), and F. R. Leavis, Revaluation: Tradition & Development in English Poetry (1936; rpt. 1975). For us, the virtue of both Empson and Leavis lies in their keen attentiveness to the poet’s uses of language; Empson is adroit in showing the rich and mind-testing complexities of specific words, images, and lines, while Leavis excels in evoking the tone and movement of the poet’s voice and in making forthright judgments about when a poem is effective and when it is not.

Not all readers share our esteem for Empson and Leavis. But our point here has less to do with the particular critics we grew up on than it does with the lesson or example that you can communicate to the students. Take a few moments to tell them about the critics who have been important to you. Who were the critics who have taught you in illuminating and inspiring ways, and who have enabled you to understand what it means to study and teach literature?

To most students, there you stand at the front of the room, speaking in an informed and confident (well, at least much of the time!) voice about a wide
range of poems, plays, and stories. It is something of a mystery, and you can help to solve it for them: How did you become the critic and teacher that you are? Who were the critics who made you?

Don’t underestimate the power of your own example. Your best students—those with a real love for the subject—will be looking to you for guidance about how to become a serious reader of literature. If you name the critics and books that you found crucial to your own literary education, you can be certain that some of your students will seize the tips you give them. Not all of them will, of course. But we need to offer something from time to time for the best students in the room, the students who want more. They are eager for a push, a challenge, a new path to follow. Keep them in mind.

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

*Sonnet 29 (When, in disgrace with Fortune and men’s eyes)*

(see page 727)

Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets were published in 1609, although it is thought that most of them were composed in the middle 1590s, around the time *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* were written. Francis Meres spoke of Shakespeare’s “sugared sonnets” in 1598, and two were published in an anthology in 1599. The order of the sonnets is probably not Shakespeare’s, but there are two large divisions (with some inconsistent interruptions). Sonnets 1–126 seem to be addressed to, or concerned with, a handsome, aristocratic young man who is urged to marry and thus to propagate his beauty and become immortal. Sonnets 127–152 are chiefly concerned with a promiscuous dark woman who seduces a friend, at least for a while.


The rhyme scheme of Sonnet 29 is that of the usual Shakespearean sonnet, but the thought is organized more or less into an octave and a sestet, the transition being emphasized by the trochee at the beginning of line 9. The sense of energy is also communicated by the trochee that begins line 10 and yet another that introduces line 11, this last being especially important because by consonance and alliteration it communicates its own energy to the new image of joy (“Like to the lark”). As in most of Shakespeare’s sonnets, the couplet is more or less a summary of what has preceded, but not in the same order: line 13 summarizes the third quatrain; line 14 looks back to (but now rejects) the earlier quatrains.

The first line surely glances at Shakespeare’s unimpressive social position, and line 8 presumably refers to his work. Possibly the idea is that he most enjoyed his work before it became the source of his present discomfort. Edward Hubler, in *The Sense of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1952), notes that “the release
from depression is expressed through the image of the lark, a remembrance of earlier days when the cares of his London career were unknown.”

To this it can be added that although the poem employs numerous figures of speech from the start (e.g., personification with “Fortune,” synecdoche with “eyes” in line 1, metonymy with “heaven” in line 3), line 11, with the image of the lark, introduces the poem’s first readily evident figure of speech, and it is also the most emphatic run-on line in the poem. Moreover, though heaven was “deaf” in line 3, in line 12 it presumably hears the lark singing “hymns at heaven’s gate.” “Sullen” in line 12 perhaps deserves some special comment too: (1) the earth is still somber in color, though the sky is bright, and (2) applied to human beings, it suggests the moody people who inhabit earth.

**Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing**

Disregarding for the moment the last two lines (or couplet), where does the sharpest turn or shift occur? In a sentence, summarize the speaker’s state of mind before this turn and, in another sentence, the state of mind after it.

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

*Sonnet 116 (Let me not to the marriage of true minds)*

(p. 728)

Although the poem is almost certainly addressed to a man, because it is a celebration of the permanence of love it can apply equally well to a woman or, in fact, to a parent or child.

The first words, “Let me not,” are almost a vow, and “admit impediments” in the second line faintly hints at the marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer, which says, “If any of you know just cause or impediment . . .” In line 2 “admit” can mean both “acknowledge, grant the existence of” and “allow to enter.”

The first quatrain is a negative definition of love (“love is not . . .”), but the second quatrain is an affirmative definition (“O no, it is . . .”). The third begins as another negative definition, recognizing that “rosy lips and cheeks” will indeed decay, but denying that they are the essence of love; this quatrain then ends affirmatively, making a contrast to transience: “bears it out even to the edge of doom.” Then, having clinched his case, the speaker adopts a genial and personal tone in the couplet, where for the first time he introduces the word “I.”

Speaking of couplets, we can’t resist quoting Robert Frost on the topic. Once, in conversation with Frost, the boxer Gene Tunney said something about the price of a poem. Frost replied: “One thousand dollars a line. Four thousand for a quatrain, but for a sonnet, $12,000. The last two lines of a sonnet don’t mean anything anyway.” Students might be invited to test the sonnets against this playful remark.

JOHN DONNE

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning (p. 729)

Instructors may be so familiar with this poem that they may not recognize the difficulties it presents to students. The title itself leads many students to think (quite plausibly) that it is about death, an idea reinforced by the first simile. But this simile is introduced to make the point that just as virtuous men can die quietly because they are confident of a happy future, so the two lovers can part quietly—that is, the speaker can go on a journey—because they are confident of each other.

The hysterics that accompany the separation of less confident lovers are ridiculed (“sigh-tempests,” “tear-floods”); such agitation would be a “profanation” of the relationship of the speaker and his beloved and would betray them to the “laity.”

Thus the speaker and the beloved are implicitly priests of spiritual love.

The poem goes on to contrast the harmful movement of the earth (an earthquake) with the harmless (“innocent”) movement of heavenly bodies, thereby again associating the speaker and the beloved with heavenly matters. (The cosmology, of course, is the geocentric Ptolemaic system.) The fourth stanza continues the contrast: other lovers are “sublunary,” changeable, and subject to the changing moon. Such earthbound lovers depend on the physical things that “elemented” their love (“eyes, lips, and hands”), but the love of the speaker and his partner is “refined” and does not depend on such stuff. Moreover, if their love is like something physical, it is “like gold to airy thinness beat.”

The three last stanzas introduce the image of a draftsman’s (not an explorer’s) compass, and they also introduce the circle as a symbol of perfection.

See Theodore Redpath’s edition of The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne (1983), and see especially Clay Hunt, Donne’s Poetry (1969), and Patricia Spacks, College English 29 (1968): 594–595. Louis Martz, The Wit of Love (1969), p. 48, says of line 20: “‘Care less,’ but is it so? The very rigor and intricacy of the famous image of the compass at the end may be taken to suggest rather desperate dialectical effort to control by logic and reason a situation almost beyond control.”

For students, there is plenty to learn from and profitably argue with in these two books: Wilbur Sanders, John Donne’s Poetry (1971), and John Carey, John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art (1980).

ANDREW MARVELL

To His Coy Mistress (p. 730)

Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” is well discussed by J. V. Cunningham, Modern Philology 51 (August 1953): 33–41; by Francis Berry, Poets’ Grammar; by Joan Hartwig, College English 25 (May 1964): 572–575; by Bruce King, Southern Review 5 (1969): 689–703; and by Richard Crider, College Literature 12 (Spring
Incidentally, “dew” in line 35 is an editor’s emendation for “glew” in the first edition (1681). Grierson suggests “glew” means a shining gum found on some trees. Other editors conjecture “lew”—that is, warmth.

Naturally none of the early discussions of the poem consider whether it is outrageously sexist—and, if it is, whether it should be taught. Such a discussion is probably inevitable in the classroom today, and no reader of this manual can be in need of our opinion on this topic. We will therefore comment only on some formal matters.

The poem consists of three parts, developing an argument along these lines: “If . . . But . . . Therefore.” The first of these three parts is playful, the second wry or even scornful or bitter, and the third passionate. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, the poem is an argument, spoken (as the title indicates) by a male suitor to a reluctant woman. It begins with a hypothetical situation (“Had we but world enough and time”) in which the speaker playfully caricatures Petrarchan conventions (fantastic promises, incredible patience). Then (lines 21–32), with “But at my back,” he offers a very different version of life, a wry, almost scornful speech describing a world in which beauty is fleeting. Finally (lines 33–46) he offers a passionate conclusion (“Now therefore”).

The conclusion, and especially the final couplet, perhaps require further comment. The “amorous birds of prey” of line 38 replace the doves of Venus found in more traditional love poetry. The destructiveness suggested by the birds is continued in the image of a “ball,” which is chiefly a cannonball hurtling “through the iron gates of life” but is also the united lovers—that is, the ball is made up of their “strength” (chiefly his?) and “sweetness” (chiefly hers?). Some commentators find in “Tear” a suggestion of a hymen destroyed by “rough strife.” The violence and the suggestions of warfare are somewhat diminished in the final couplet, but they are not absent, for the sun, though advancing, is partly imagined as an enemy that is being routed (“yet we will make him run”).

We have some small uncertainties about the metrics of lines 21–22, “But at my back I always hear / Time’s winged chariot hurrying near.” Are “chariot” and “hurrying” disyllabic or trisyllabic? If they are trisyllabic the line contains two extra syllables, forcing the reader to hurry through the line. But of course different readers will read almost any line differently. For instance, in the first of these lines some readers will put relatively heavy stresses on the first four syllables (“But at my back”); others may rush through the first three words and put an especially heavy stress on “back,” compensating for the lack of an earlier stress. In any case, these two lines surely are spoken differently from the earlier lines. Similarly, the third section, beginning with line 33, starts by sounding different. In this case almost everyone would agree that “Now therefore” gets two consecutive stresses.

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

_Love Is Not All: It Is Not Meat nor Drink_ (p. 732)

Late in the poem a phrase in line 12 ("the memory of this night") identifies the speaker (a lover), the audience (the beloved), and the time (a night of love), but the poem begins drily, even rather pedantically. A somewhat professorial voice delivers a lecture on love, beginning authoritatively with four almost equally stressed monosyllables ("Love is not all"). Then, warming to the subject, the speaker becomes more expansive, with "It is not . . . nor . . . Nor . . . nor . . . And . . . and . . . and . . . and . . . can not . . . Nor . . . nor," all in the octave. Of course, in saying that love cannot do this and that we sense, paradoxically, a praise of love; if we have read a fair amount of love poetry, perhaps we expect the octave to yield to a sestet that will say what love can do. But this sestet too begins with apparent objectivity, as if making a concession ("It well may be"). Then, like the octave, the sestet introduces a romantic note while nominally proclaiming realism, although its images are somewhat less exotic (there is nothing like the "floating spar" of line 3, for instance) than the images of the octave. On the other hand, insofar as it introduces a more personal or a more intense note ("the memory of this night") and reveals that the poem is addressed to the beloved, it is more romantic. In any case the sestet comes down to earth and at the same time reaches a romantic height, in its last line, which consists of two sentences: "It may well be. I do not think I would." The brevity of these two sentences, and the lack of imagery, presumably convey a dry humor that the octave lacks, and at the same time they make an extremely romantic claim. (Surely "I do not think I would" is an understatement; in effect, it is a passionate declaration.) Put it this way: although the octave asserts, for example, that love is not meat and drink and cannot heal the sick, and the first part of the sestet asserts that the speaker "might" give up the beloved’s love in certain extreme circumstances, the understated passion of the conclusion serves to dismiss these assertions as unlikely—indeed, a reader feels, as untrue. Although to the rational mind "love is not all," to the lover it is "all," and a lover here is doing the talking.

ROBERT FROST

_The Silken Tent_ (p. 733)

The idea of comparing a woman to a silken tent in the summer breeze seems fresh enough to us (probably swaying silken tents have been compared to young women, but did anyone before Frost see it the other way around?), and given this idea, one would expect passages about gentle swaying. If one knew the piece were going to be an allegory worked out in some detail, one might expect...
the tent pole to be the soul. But who could have expected the brilliant connection between the cords and “ties of love and thought,” and the brilliant suggestion that only rarely are we made aware—by “capriciousness”—of our “bondage”? The paradoxical idea that we are (so to speak) kept upright—are what we are—by things that would seem to pull us down is new to most students, who think that one “must be oneself.” With a little discussion they come to see that what a person is depends largely on relationships. We are parents, or students, or teachers, or—something; our complex relationships give us our identity. Sometimes, in trying to make clear this idea that our relationships contribute to (rather than diminish) our identities, we mention the scene in Ibsen’s Peer Gynt where, in an effort to get at his essential self, Peer peels an onion, each removed layer being a relationship that he has stripped himself of. He ends with nothing, of course.

In short, we think this poem embodies a profound idea, and we spend a fair amount of our class time talking about that idea. But we also try to look at the poem closely. Students might be invited to discuss what sort of woman “she” is. What, for instance, do “midday” and “summer” in line 2 contribute? Frost could, after all, have written “In morning when a sunny April breeze” but he probably wanted to suggest—we don’t say a mature woman—someone who is no longer girlish, someone who is of sufficient age to have established responsibilities and to have experienced, on occasion, a sense of slight bondage. Among the traits that we think can be reasonably inferred from the comparison are these: beauty, poise, delicacy (in lines 1–4), and sweetness and firmness of soul (in lines 5–7).

ROBERT PACK

The Frog Prince (p. 735)

The tale recorded by the Grimm Brothers is not quite as we remembered it. In our memory—and we think that perhaps most people share this view—a handsome young prince has been turned into a frog by a witch, and he cannot regain his human shape until a beautiful woman kisses him, i.e., loves him, or at least pities him. It all works out all right, and the implicit moral is (as in the story of “Beauty and the Beast”) that love is so powerful that it can transform the beloved, or that those who pity the unfortunate will themselves be rewarded, or something along those lines.

In fact, the Grimm story is rather different. The trouble is, even the earliest English translation of Grimm, German Popular Tales (1823), changed the story considerably. (The version given in this first English translation is reprinted in Iona and Peter Opie, The Classic Fairy Tales [1974].) The Grimm version is, however, readily available in The Juniper Tree (1973), trans. Lore Segal. In the original story (i.e., the German version printed by the Grimm Brothers), the girl does not love the frog; she promises him that she will let him live with her if he retrieves a golden ball. She makes the promise lightly, assuming that the frog can-
not get out of the well. Her father, however, insists that she keep the promise. In a fit of anger, she throws the frog against a wall, and it becomes the human being that it earlier was. Folklorists believe that the Grimm Brothers probably added the bit about the father insisting that the girl keep her promise, in order to make the story suitably instructive for children, but even with this added bit of moralizing the story as a whole remains morally chaotic. As Maria Tatar says, in *Off with Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* (1992),

> Although the princess of “The Frog King” is selfish, greedy, ungrateful, and cruel, in the end she does as well for herself as all the modest, obedient, magnanimous, and compassionate Beauties of “The Search for the Lost Husband.” Much as the Grimms tried to rewrite the tale with paternal prompts about the importance of keeping promises and showing gratitude, they could not succeed in camouflaging the way in which the tale rewards indignant rage. (p. 154)

This is not really surprising. Nineteenth-century versions of fairy tales *don’t* usually have nice morals; on the contrary, they are often nightmarish things, especially nightmarish because their arbitrariness seems meaningless. We should mention, however, that in Freudian thought the meaning is evident: the slimy frog who seeks to get into the princess’s bed is a scarcely veiled phallic symbol; the penis attains completeness only when accepted by a partner.

It may be useful to ask students if they have encountered the story of the prince who, transformed into a frog, can regain his human shape only when accepted by a beautiful woman. Probably some will report a saying popular among young women, “You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find a prince.”

We don’t know what version of the story Robert Pack started from, but since he does not mention the startling episode of the princess hurling the frog against the wall, we suspect that he may have drawn on a moralized version of the sort we mentioned at the outset, where the princess out of love or tenderness or sympathy accepts the frog. Pack’s first quatrain deals chiefly with the princess’s surprise at the change in the frog; in the second quatrain and in the first part of the third quatrain her thoughts turn from the frog to herself—first, to the thought that she has transformed him, and then to the thought that in turn she has been transformed by the sexual act. The second half of the third quatrain and the final two lines of the poem (we can’t quite call them a couplet since they don’t rhyme with each other, and in fact the fourteenth line rhymes with the twelfth) bring us down to earth when the mother sees the girl with the prince: “What was it that her mother said?” Obviously Pack is making a little joke: he takes a myth (a puzzling one, if he is working from the original version, or a pretty one, if he is working from the moralized version) and he subjects it to a common-sense mentality. But the joke is also serious; the poem forces the reader to think of the gap between the mother and the transformed girl. In line 6 the word “wonder”—in the sense of “marvelous thing”—explicitly refers to the transformation of the frog, but we can apply it also to the transformation of the girl. Of course the
mother once was similarly transformed, but in the poem the contrast is between
the girl, who has suddenly entered into a marvelous new world, made by love,
and the mother, whose remarks, though not given, can easily be imagined.

Pack is not only an accomplished poet—see Waking to My Name: New
and Selected Poems (1980)—but he is also a stimulating critic and essayist, as
the work in Affirming Limits: Essays on Mortality, Choice, and Poetic Form
(1985) and The Long View: Essays on the Discipline of Hope and Poetic Craft

NIKKI GIOVANNI

Love in Place (p. 736)

Although (we think) the title of the poem—see question 5—is not immediately
self-evident, by the end of the poem the title is clear. “In place” has the sense of
“in the same place,” “unchanging,” as in “The soldiers marched in place,”
meaning that they did not move forward. Here, then, the speaker finds that
although the years have passed, she is (because she sees herself through the eyes
of her lover) “still young and slim and very much committed to the / love we
still have.” Her love is still “in place,” fixed where it was. There is thus some-
thing of a pun on “still”—“continually,” and “without moving.”

Our sixth question invites students to talk about the idea of “falling in love.”
They might discuss it in the context of another familiar phrase, “Love is blind”
(an idea that goes back to Theocritus and is found later in Plautus, Chaucer, and
Shakespeare).

Students might begin with Giovanni’s Selected Poems (1996) and then
turn to Virginia C. Fowler, Nikki Giovanni (1992), a good overview of the
writer’s life and literary career. Also recommended: Giovanni, Gemini: An
Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being
a Black Poet (1971); and Conversations with Nikki Giovanni, ed. Virginia

TERRENCE McNALLY

Andre’s Mother (p. 737)

Andre’s Mother says nothing, so it is difficult for us (or any reader or spectator)
to offer evidence in support of any characterization that we might propose. Still,
the fact that she says nothing says something. Her refusal to join in the conver-
sation—her insistence on isolating herself from the three other characters—tells
us she is deeply hurt, but it does not tell us what she is hurt by. By her son’s
immorality (as she sees it)? By Cal, who may, in her view, have corrupted her
son and then killed him (again, in her view)?

We learn that Andre had two reasons for not telling his mother that he had AIDS: he was “afraid of hurting [her] and [he was afraid] of [her] disapproval.” The mother’s continued silence, even near the end of the play, causes Cal to say, “I’m beginning to feel your disapproval and it’s making me ill,” and a moment later he leaves the stage, without a comforting word from the mother. She presumably cannot accept her son’s homosexuality—or if she can accept it, she probably blames it and his death on Cal, although Cal tells her that he himself “tested negative.”

We know nothing of Andre’s Mother other than that she probably lived in a rural society (Cal says that Andre was “a country boy”), but even this information is a bit soft: a New Yorker such as Cal might jokingly say that someone from, oh, maybe Kansas City, is a country boy. Probably it is enough for us to say that the mother is hostile toward homosexuality and quite understandably is grieved by the death of her son and that she in some degree blames the boy’s partner.

What do we make of the ending, when the mother finally let go of the balloon? Cal gives a rather constricted interpretation of the balloons:

They represent the soul. When you let go, it means you’re letting his soul ascend to Heaven. That you’re willing to let go. Breaking the last earthly ties.

Surely other people, even at this very graveside, might offer a different interpretation. One might reasonably say that one is not and should not be willing to “let go,” i.e., one will treasure the memory and perhaps will daily or at least often engage in actions that are motivated by the enduring connection with the dead partner, but one lets the balloon sail into the air as a sort of emblem of the deceased’s new kind of existence.

In any case, the final stage direction tells us several things about Andre’s Mother:

Her lips tremble. She looks on the verge of breaking down. She is about to let go of the balloon when she pulls it down to her. She looks at it awhile before she gently kisses it. She lets go of the balloon. She follows it with her eyes as it rises and rises. The lights are beginning to fade. Andre’s Mother’s eyes are still on the balloon. The lights fade.

It would be absurd for us to speak dogmatically about the thoughts of Andre’s Mother. For one thing, she is a fictional character—she has no existence other than the words that her author puts into her mouth. But even if she were a historical figure, in which case we might more reasonably speak of her personality, we would have to be cautious lest we project our own views onto the subject.

Still, perhaps we can say something of use. First of all, we can assume that Cal’s view of the symbolism may have had some effect on her. That is, her reluctance to let go of the balloon may suggest her reluctance to let go of her ideas.
about her son—that he couldn’t have been gay, or if he was gay, that he was somehow seduced from his natural heterosexuality by Cal and that Cal is responsible for Andre’s death. Perhaps when she lets go of the balloon she is letting go of some or all of these mistaken, destructive ideas.

McNally tells us in the stage direction that Andre’s Mother “follows [the balloon] with her eyes” and that when the lights fade, at the very end, “Andre’s Mother’s eyes are still on the balloon.” This does not sound to us as though she is “willing to let go,” and indeed we—the writers of this page—don’t think she should “let go” her love for and memory of her son. On the other hand, yes, she should “let go” whatever false ideas she had about him, and she should “let go” whatever anger she feels toward his lover.

She does let go—literally—of the balloon, so in a way she lets go of this symbol of her son, or, rather, this symbol of her son’s soul. We take the white balloon to be a fairly obvious symbol of the soul. The sphere, a sort of three-dimensional circle, is a common emblem of endlessness and perfection. White is a common symbol of purity and of rebirth, even (we are told) in Black Africa, where young men after circumcision may cover their faces with white chalk, indicating that they are now “reborn” as responsible adults. In Japan the white lotus is associated with the Buddha’s perfect knowledge. For all of these reasons, then, and because the helium-filled balloon rises into the heavens, the white balloon seems to us to be a pretty clear symbol of the soul released from the body.

One final point about the play, and then we will say something about McNally’s video version of his play. As far as readers and an audience are concerned, the play ends with Andre’s Mother releasing the balloon after Penny and Arthur and (a bit later) Cal have left. Nothing indicates that these others know her final action. Cal’s last words to her are, as we said a moment ago, “I’m beginning to feel your disapproval and it’s making me ill. . . . Goodbye, Andre’s Mother.” If at the very end the Mother undergoes some change, however small, viewers must find it painful—can we say tragic?—that Cal does not know of the change. Although it is commonplace to say that in a tragedy the tragic hero experiences an anagnorisis, a recognition, a final illumination, in fact tragic heroes often do not know the whole truth, do not fundamentally change. For example, in Oedipus the King, the self-confident protagonist is, at the end of the play, still being bossy; in the next-to-last speech of the play (except for the final words of the Chorus), Oedipus tries to hold on to his children, and in the last speech (again, except for the Chorus) Creon quite reasonably tells Oedipus that he is no longer in a position to give orders. In King Lear, almost surely Lear dies with the mistaken belief that Cordelia is alive. Romeo unquestionably dies thinking Juliet is dead. Many other instances might be given. Our point simply is that tragedy usually deals with mistakes, with mistakes that contain an element of irony—Lear banishes the daughter who loves him most—and sometimes the mistakes, the ironies, persist even unto death. In Andre’s Mother surely our sympathy is chiefly with Cal but probably it finally extends to Andre’s Mother, and perhaps we feel a twinge that Cal, a bit too self-satisfied at the end, does not see that she is not beyond redemption.
McNally’s video, *Andre’s Mother* (starring Richard Thomas and Sada Thompson), done for American Playhouse, runs fifty-eight minutes, obviously far longer than the original play takes. The opening shot shows Andre’s Mother, then her son, then we hear the narrator’s voice, and then the mother says, “You took my son from me.” We next get shots of a street, a vendor with white balloons, a released balloon, the interior of a church, the funeral service complete with white lilies and a singer rendering Mozart’s *Shepherd King* (“I love him, I will be constant”), shots of people in pews, another shot of Andre’s Mother in a pew, a scene at an airport in which Cal meets Andre’s Mother and explains that Andre has just left for Hartford to try out for a role. Andre’s Mother and Cal go to Cal’s apartment and we learn that Cal is writing a book about a gay composer, Samuel Barber. On the wall of the apartment is a poster of Hamlet: remember, Andre is an actor, and in the printed version Cal pays tribute to Andre by reciting a line that Horatio addresses to the dead Hamlet, “Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to rest.”

The Mother—we are still talking about the television version—says “Maybe there’s some things I’d just as soon not know,” and then there is a cut back to the church which is the site of the funeral service. There is a scene in a museum with Andre’s Mother and her own garrulous mother, then a scene in a restaurant with Cal, the two women, and an evidently gay waiter. In the cemetery, Cal denounces Andre’s Mother but embraces her, and he lets his balloon slip away. Cut to a scene of a young mother with a small boy on the beach—this is presumably Andre and his mother in happier days—and then we go back to Andre’s Mother in the cemetery, where we see her release the balloon. You get the idea; the play is “opened up,” with lots of scenes that are not in the original. This is not a bad thing, and indeed we think the video is quite effective—but it is different from (much more explicit than) the original text.

Although this essay is three decades old, we find that it still works well in the classroom.

Before you begin, you might give students some help with a few references. Most of them will not know the film *Tootsie* (1982), starring Dustin Hoffman, which depicts an obnoxious, unemployed actor in New York City who becomes a better person after he disguises himself as a woman to land a job. *Gentleman’s Quarterly*, with the motto “Look Sharp/Live Smart,” is a magazine of style, advice, and commentary for men; as one of its promotions says, it offers “fashion, sports, women, journalism, fitness, and more for the modern man. It’s about fashion. It’s about style. It’s about guy stuff.” “Mr. Hyde” is one of the characters in Robert Louis Stevenson’s mystery novel, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886); the physician Jekyll is transformed into the evil figure Hyde. The Ford Foundation is a major international grant-making and funding agency, dedicated to a four-fold mission: “Strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement.”

This is one of those occasions when the blackboard comes in handy. We make two columns and ask students to list the activities that the women-as-men performed, and then the activities that the men-as-women performed, according to Doloff’s article. Once we have the lists, we then ask the class to comment on how accurate these seem: Do the students find that this account rings true to their own experiences and speculations?

The next step we take is obvious enough: we invite the students to comment on whether such a list would be different today. Have things changed a lot, a little, or not at all since 1983?

Before we leave “The Opposite Sex,” we make sure to prompt students to think about it—its strengths, its limitations—as a piece of writing. In particular we press the class to identify what, in their view, is its purpose. It is jaunty, engaging, fun to read and debate. But what, if anything, does it offer beyond that? Is the article itself a little like the results that Doloff describes—“both entertaining and annoying in its predictability?” This draws us, in turn, to remind the students that “The Opposite Sex” was published in a newspaper, as a kind of “opinion” piece.
Here are some questions for the class: Why would *The Washington Post* select for publication “The Opposite Sex” from the many submissions it receives each week? Would you have accepted it if you were in charge of the op-ed page? If it were submitted today just as it is (maybe with one or two of the references updated) would you accept it, or not? Would you conclude that it needed revision, or that it could go straight into print exactly as it stands?

**Gretel Ehrlich**

*About Men* (p. 743)

This essay will cause readers no difficulty, but it may provoke some lively discussion, especially in states where students may know something (perhaps firsthand, maybe even secondhand, or perhaps merely from movies and advertisements) about the life of a cowboy. Does Ehrlich go too far in debunking the stereotype? Does she replace the familiar strong-but-silent macho guy (from the Mexican-Spanish *macho*, “showing a strong sense of masculinity, given to aggressiveness”) with a tender-hearted androgyne? (She says he is “androgyous” in her fourth paragraph. This is almost the only word in the essay that may puzzle some students, but you may also want to talk about “*macho*,” which appears in her first paragraph. You might ask students how they define it. Dictionaries vary slightly, but among the traits listed are, usually, “courage, aggressiveness, and domination of women.”)

Ehrlich offers plenty of generalizations; you may want to ask students (a) if she supports them adequately, and then, pressing a bit further, (b) how she supports them. They will see, when they look again at the essay, that many of her generalizations are supported, presumably, by her close observation of what is going on around her—she tells us how many hours a cowboy works, what the wage is, what a cowboy has to do when a calf is stuck in a boghole, etc.—but she also offers quotations (e.g., “one old-timer told me” in paragraph 1, “My friend Ted Hoagland wrote,” in paragraph 8). In effect, then, she sometimes cites authorities—not necessarily erudite sources but people who have lived the life of a cowboy and who therefore are presumed to be trustworthy authorities on this subject.

In her fifth paragraph Ehrlich says, “So many of the men who came to the West were Southerners . . . that chivalrousness and strict codes of honor were soon thought of as western traits.”

**Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

*The Yellow Wallpaper* (p. 746)

In this story the wife apparently is suffering from postpartum depression, and her physician-husband prescribes as a cure the things that apparently have caused her depression: isolation and inactivity. Victorian medical theory held
that women—more emotional, more nervous, more fanciful than men—needed special protection if they were to combat lunacy. As Gilman tells us in her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935), the story (published in 1892) is rooted in the author’s experience: after the birth of her child, Gilman became depressed and consulted Dr. S. Weir Mitchell (physician and novelist, named in the story), who prescribed a rest cure: “Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live.” Gilman in fact tried this routine for a month, then took a trip to California, where she began writing and recovered nicely. Thinking about Mitchell’s plan later, Gilman concluded that such a way of life would have driven her crazy.

Although the prescribed treatment in the story is not exactly Mitchell’s, it does seem clear enough that the smug husband’s well-intended treatment is responsible for the wife’s hallucinations of a woman struggling behind the wallpaper. The narrator is mad (to this degree the story resembles some of Poe’s), but she is remarkably sane compared to her well-meaning husband and the others who care for her. Elaine R. Hedges, in the afterword to the edition of *The Yellow Wallpaper* published by the Feminist Press (1973), comments on the narrator:

> At the end of the story the narrator both does and does not identify with the creeping women who surround her in her hallucinations. The women creep through the arbors and lanes along the roads outside the house. Women must creep. The narrator knows this. She has fought as best she could against creeping. In her perceptivity and in her resistance lie her heroism (or heroineism). But at the end of the story, on her last day in the house, as she peels off yards and yards of wallpaper and creeps around the floor, she has been defeated. She is totally mad. But in her mad sane way she has seen the situation of women for what it is. (p. 53)

Judith Fetterley offers a thoughtful interpretation of Gilman’s story in “Reading about Reading” in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, edited by Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schwieckart (1986), pp. 147–164. Here (in direct quotation) are some of Fetterley’s points, but the entire essay should be consulted:

> Forced to read men’s texts [i.e., to interpret experience in the way men do], women are forced to become characters in those texts. And since the stories men tell assert as fact what women know to be fiction, not only do women lose the power that comes from authoring: more significantly, they are forced to deny their own reality and to commit in effect a kind of psychic suicide. (p. 159)

The nameless narrator of Gilman’s story has two choices. She can accept her husband’s definition of reality [that his version is sane and that her version is mad]... or she can refuse to read his text, refuse to become a char-
acter in it, and insist on writing her own, behavior for which John will define and treat her as mad. (p. 160)

Despite the narrator’s final claim that she has, like the women in the paper, “got out,” she does not in fact escape the patriarchal text. Her choice of literal madness may be as good as or better than the “sanity” prescribed for her by John, but in going mad she fulfills his script and becomes a character in his text. Still, going mad gives the narrator temporary sanity. It enables her to articulate her perception of reality and, in particular, to cut through the fiction of John’s love. (p. 163)

The narrator’s solution finally validates John’s fiction. In his text, female madness results from work that engages the mind and will; from the recognition and expression of feelings, and particularly of anger; in a word, from the existence of a subjectivity capable of generating a different version of reality from his own. (pp. 164–165)

More insidious still, through her madness the narrator does not simply become the character John already imagines her to be as part of his definition of feminine nature; she becomes a version of John himself. Mad, the narrator is manipulative, secretive, dishonest; she learns to lie, obscure, and distort. (p. 164)

This desire to duplicate John’s text but with the roles reversed determines the narrator’s choice of an ending. Wishing to drive John mad, she selects a denouement that will reduce him to a woman seized by a hysterical fainting fit. Temporary success, however, exacts an enormous price, for when John recovers from his faint he will put her in a prison from which there will be no escape. (p. 164)

Of the many feminist readings of the story, perhaps the most widely known is that of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic (1979). For Gubar and Gilbert, the wallpaper represents “the oppressive structures of the society in which [the narrator] finds herself” (p. 90). The figure behind the wallpaper is the narrator’s double, trying to break through. But Jeanette King and Pam Morris, in “On Not Reading Between the Lines: Models of Reading in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” Studies in Short Fiction 26 (1989): 23–32, raise questions about this interpretation. Their essay, influenced by Lacan, is not easy reading (one finds such terms as “decentered subject,” “signified and signifier,” “a polysemic potential”), but they present some impressive evidence against the widespread view that the woman behind the paper is “the essential inner psyche which has been trapped by repressive social structures” (p. 25). First, they argue that if the woman indeed is the essential inner psyche, “the breaking free, even if only in the hallucination of madness, ought surely to indicate a more positive movement than the chilling conclusion of the tale suggests” (p. 25). They point out that the wallpaper is not described in terms of “a controlling order”; rather, the narrator says it has “sprawling flamboyant patterns,” and it resembles “great
slanting waves” that “plunge off at outrageous angles . . . in unheard-of contradictions.” For King and Morris, the wallpaper’s “energy and fertility are anarchic and lawless, at times aggressive. It displays, that is, an assertive creativity and originality that have no place in the wifely ideal constructed by patriarchal ideology” (p. 29). They therefore interpret it not as a metaphor of a repressive society but as a metaphor of the “forbidden self” (p. 29), “the repressed other” (p. 30). The narrator, seeking to comply with the male ideals, is thus threatened by the wallpaper, and her “attempts to tear down this obdurate wallpaper are not intended . . . to free her from male repression . . . but to eliminate the rebellious self which is preventing her from achieving ego-ideal” (p. 30). That is, she wishes to remove the paper (the image of her secret self, which she strives to repress) in order to gain John’s approval. “When the woman behind the paper ‘gets out,’ therefore, this is an image not of liberation but of the victory of the social idea.” We get a “grotesque, shameful caricature of female helplessness and submissiveness—a creeping woman.” Nevertheless, King and Morris argue, the narrator does indeed have “a desperate triumph . . .: she crawls over her husband” (p. 31).

King and Morris assume that “Jane” (mentioned only near the end of the story) is the narrator, but, like most earlier critics, they do not greatly concern themselves with arguing this point. William Veeder, in “Who Is Jane?,” Arizona Quarterly 44 (1988): 41–79, does argue the point at length. He writes, “By defining a context beyond Poesque horror and clinical case-study, Kolodny, Hedges, and others have convincingly described the heroine’s confrontation with patriarchy. What remains to be examined is another source of the heroine’s victimization. Herself” (p. 41). Veeder discusses Gilman’s difficult childhood (an absent father and a “strict and anxious mother”) and, drawing on Freud and Melanie Klein, argues that the story is not only about a repressive marriage but also about “the traumas wrought by inadequate nurturing in childhood” (p. 71). To escape bondage to men, “Jane moves not forward to the egalitarian utopia of Herland but back into the repressive serenity of the maternal womb” (p. 67).

We’ve had good luck recently with a paper assignment keyed to the final paragraphs of Gilman’s story. It takes as its point of departure an observation by Edith Wharton, a contemporary of Gilman’s and the author of The House of Mirth (1905) and The Age of Innocence (1920), who said that in structuring her novels she sought to “make my last page latent in my first.”

Wharton wanted her readers, after they had completed the final page, to be able to return to the first chapter and see the sources for the conclusion there: the novel would have a logic that would be developed throughout the story, which would give the whole work its effectiveness and coherence. Ask the class to apply Wharton’s statement to the conclusion of “The Yellow Wallpaper” where the narrator “creeps” over her husband. Is Gilman’s last page “latent in her first?”

Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing

In the next-to-last paragraph the narrator says, “I’ve got out at last.” What does she mean, and in what way (if any) does it make sense?
Because our fourth question in the text invites students to evaluate a comment about parenting, we may be guilty of turning attention away from Updike’s story and to the issue in the outside world with which the story is concerned. On the whole in our teaching we try to keep attention focused on the literary work. Yes, literature is connected with life, but the job that we like to do is to talk in detail about how particular works of literature achieve their meaning and why they make the impression that they do; we try not to use literary works as mere jumping-off points for a discussion of love or death or (in this case) parenting or whatever. Still, we recognize that it is sometimes acceptable and even appropriate to stand back from the work and to think about its connection with the world around us.

The narrative of Oliver’s early life, for all its matter-of-factness, is harrowing (corrective casts on his feet, his stomach pumped, his face blue from a near-drowning, his defective eye, and so on), not least because “He was the least complaining of their children” (paragraph 3). A few apparently flat statements in fact convey wry humor (“the friendly men who appeared to take her mother out,” the broken arm that resulted either from “falling down the frat stairs, or leaping, by another account of the confused incident, from a girl’s dormitory window”) but, again, for the most part the narrative proceeds almost mechanically, unrelieved by dialogue or by expansive description.

It proceeds, in fact, steadily, relentlessly, in the spirit of the title, “Oliver’s Evolution.” It just keeps going (“the teeth grew firm again”), but it takes a twist in the fifth paragraph, where we are told that Oliver married (no surprise), and that the girl “was as accident-prone as he” (again no surprise) and that “she looked up to him” (big surprise). Oliver, now loaded with responsibilities, begins to function effectively: “What we expect of others, they endeavor to provide.” In evolutionary terms, or let’s say in creative evolutionary terms, the circumstances demand a certain kind of response and the creature responds appropriately. The story ends, then, with Oliver having evolved into “a protector of the weak.”

As Updike reports the story of Oliver’s evolution, it all seems inevitable, a sort of up-from-the-apes narrative, each stage leading to the next, as inevitably or at least as easily as the word “Oliver” leads to the word “Evolution.”

Fairy tales have come in for a good deal of criticism, on various grounds: they often show women as passive and men as active (Sleeping Beauty is awakened by the kiss of Prince Charming); they depict old women as ugly and evil (witches); they contain terrifying elements (people fall into boiling cauldrons). To the best
of our knowledge, nursery rhymes have not come in for comparable criticism—perhaps because the implications about gender are less evident (there is a good deal of rhyming nonsense in nursery rhymes), perhaps because nursery rhymes are regarded as less important than fairy tales, or (more or less the opposite of the last conjecture) perhaps because nursery rhymes are treasured and few if any of us want to debunk the material that we loved in our earliest years.

“What Are Little Boys Made Of?” We give the version that we have known since childhood, but when we decided to print the verses we checked Iona and Peter Opie, The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes (1997), and we were surprised to find in line 3 not “Snips and snails” but “Frogs and snails.” The Opies report, however, that our version is at least as old as 1820.

The additional stanzas that we give in our second topic for discussion were reported in 1844, but to the best of our knowledge they are not widely known. Why? Is it that whereas the better known lines are purely imaginative—boys are not made of “snips and snails / And puppy dogs’ tails” and girls are not made of “sugar and spice”—the less well known lines do have (or can have) a literal truth; young men can sigh and leer, and young women can wear ribbons and laces and can have pretty faces. Is it possible that these lines about young men and young women are less well known because they are less metaphoric?

Anonymous

*Higamus, Hogamus* (p. 759)

We don’t want to make a big deal of these four lines (or they are sometimes printed as two lines), but we do find them amusing. Nonsense often is charming (here “hogamus higamus / higamus hogamus”), a charm increased if the hearer recognizes a parody of Latin conjugations (“amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant”) and declensions (“hic, haec, hoc”). Schoolchildren who laboriously learn Latin grammar are delighted to parody it—perhaps as a childish way of mocking the teachers who impose such tasks. Further, polysyllabic rhymes often are comic—especially when, as here, one of a pair of rhyming words is nonsense. But under all the fun is an assertion that one has to take seriously. Of course it is not invariably true, but it probably strikes many people as largely true. (See not only the poem by Dorothy Parker later in this chapter but especially the comment by a sociologist that we quote in the second question following Parker’s verse.)

In our first question in the text we ask whether it makes any difference if the couplets are reversed. We think there is a slight difference, or, rather, two slight differences. First of all, anyone who had a year of Latin is familiar with the declension that runs “hic, haec, hoc,” which is better echoed (parodied) in “higamus hogamus” than in “hogamus higamus.” But perhaps more important, we think the joke—sad though it may be, if it is true—is sharper in the movement from monogamy to polygamy than the other way around. That is, the jingle ends with a bit of locker-room humor: women are monogamous, but men (nudge, nudge, wink, wink) are polygamous.
So far as the second question in the text goes, we strongly prefer the following version: “Men are from Mars, women from Venus.” The second and third versions that we give seem needlessly wordy—the second “are” slows the thing down. But suppose we compare “Men are from Mars, women from Venus” with “Women are from Venus, men from Mars.” One might argue that this version has the advantage of ending emphatically: the second clause uses alliteration, and it uses shorter words. And yet, to our ears this version is less effective than “Men are from Mars, women from Venus,” which might be thought to end weakly, with an unstressed syllable. Why? Perhaps after the initial onslaught of the original (“Men are from Mars”), a reader welcomes the more bouncy or tripping “women from Venus.”

DOROTHY PARKER

_General Review of the Sex Situation_ (p. 760)

The title suggests an academic treatise, so that’s the first joke. The second joke perhaps is that the poem is so short; the “general review” of an immense topic is reduced to eight end-stopped lines, i.e., the topic is treated in a tiny space, in a no-nonsense manner, and with the implication that there is no more to be said. Further, this authoritative characterization of the presumably inevitable differences between the two sexes—no talk about “the construction of gender” here—concludes with the suggestion that of course things are a mess, but what can we expect?


LOUISE BOGAN

_Women_ (p. 761)

We begin class discussion of any poem by reading it aloud. After the reading of “Women,” if there are no questions, we ask students to summarize the poem. How does it describe women? What does it profess about them? We might then ask someone to read the first two lines. What does Bogan mean by “provident”? What contrast do the first two lines draw? (We don’t find answers to these questions easy to articulate and we tell the class that we don’t.) Similarly, we find lines 11 and 12 suggestive, even memorable, but how do students understand them? What does “benevolence” mean? How can one “use” benevolence “against” oneself? And why is “no man [a] friend” of benevolence? Do these lines or others suggest envy of men? With this question we would ask about the imagery in lines 13 and 14:

_They cannot think of so many crops to a field_  
Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.

Are not these images associated with men and here denied to women?
Deborah Pope, in her essay “Music in the Granite Hill: The Poetry of Louise Bogan,” in Critical Essays on Louise Bogan, ed. Martha Collins (1984), pp. 149–166, writes that in this poem women are “isolated from nature, the material world, productive social interchange with either sex, and isolated from themselves.” You might quote this comment, and ask students to specify which images or lines support Pope’s summary.

To answer the questions in the text:

1. Students have no difficulty hearing the exact rhymes in lines 2 and 4 of each stanza. Although the lines vary in length, it’s useful to ask about the length of the last line in each stanza. They are consistently brief. What effect does the brevity produce? We think it makes the lines more emphatic. Some students also notice the frequent alliterations and slant rhymes: women, wilderness; women, them; tight, hot; cattle, cropping; water, culverts; clean, cleft; like, life. We also point out Bogan’s use of pauses: in line 9 after “They wait,” in line 10 after “They stiffen,” in line 16 after “Too tense.” These pauses all, of course, reinforce the sense of the lines. Contrast these lines with lines 6–9:

   They do not hear  
   Snow water going down under culverts  
   Shallow and clear.

   No pauses here, reinforcing the flowing imagery.

2. Using “They” to begin half the lines of “Women” depersonalizes the poem. It is not a confession, but an accusation.

3. We like to offer a prize for the best imitation of “Women.” A book of poems? (The favorite prize: a voucher to submit the next paper one day later!)

At the conclusion of the discussion of “Women” we ask students to read the poem aloud, one student per stanza.

RITA DOVE

Daystar (p. 762)

The poem comes from Dove’s Pulitzer Prize book Thomas and Beulah (1986), which contains sequences of poems about African Americans who migrated from the South to the North.

In thinking about a poem, one can hardly go wrong in paying attention to the title. Here, why “Daystar”? “Daystar” can refer either to a planet—especially Venus—visible in the eastern sky before sunrise, or to the sun. Both
meanings are probably relevant here. The speaker’s brief period of escape from (at one extreme) the children’s diapers and dolls and (at the other) Thomas’s sexual demands are perhaps like the brief (and marvelous) appearance of a planet at a time when one scarcely expects to see a heavenly body; and this moment of escape—a moment of wonderful independence—is perhaps also like the sun, which stands in splendid isolation, self-illuminating. Sometimes, as she sits “behind the garage,” she is closely connected to the visible world around her (the cricket, the maple leaf), but sometimes, with her eyes closed, she perceives only her self. (The mention, in the last line of the poem, of “the middle of the day” perhaps indicates that the chief meaning of “daystar” here is the sun, but we see no reason to rule out the suggestion of the other meaning.)

THEODORE ROETHKE

My Papa’s Waltz (p. 763)

Writing of Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz” in How Does a Poem Mean (1975), John Ciardi says that the poem seems to lack a “fulcrum” (Ciardi’s word for a “point of balance” or point at which there is a twist in the thought), but that the fulcrum “occurs after the last line.” In his terminology, “The fulcrum exists outside the poem, between the enacted experience and the silence that follows it” (p. 253).


SHARON OLDS

Rites of Passage (p. 764)

One of our students wrote a good paper about this poem, calling it a “poem about perspective.” We liked the way he noted the difference in size between the speaker and her son and the other “short men” attending the party, and his movement from this observation to verbal details that illuminate the speaker’s point of view. This student said that the speaker in fact takes two points of view—two perspectives—on the boys, seeing them as children and as small adults (i.e., the persons they will grow up to be). We think it’s helpful to ask students to consider how the speaker perceives the boys, how they view themselves (“they eye each other”), and—a broader issue—how Olds means for readers to understand the lesson of the poem. What exactly is its tone? What is our own perspective on its descriptions supposed to be?
Here one can focus on Olds’s title. What is a “rite of passage” and in what respect is this birthday party an example of one? Turn next to specific moments in the poem’s language, as when the speaker quotes the boys’ warnings: “I could beat you up” and “We could easily kill a two-year-old.” Students, we have found, react very differently to these phrases. Some judge them to be comic—it’s funny and familiar to hear little boys making large threats—whereas others maintain that Olds wants us to hear these words as ominous, as a sign of the hard masculine world that these “short men” will inhabit (and promote) when they get older.

The discussion of “Rites of Passage” is always lively and becomes more so as it proceeds. A student in one of our classes wondered if this is a political poem. Is Olds using this scene to assail patriarchy, a system in which boys “naturally” assume manly poses and, while still small, are already looking and sounding like “bankers” and “Generals”? It is intriguing, too, to invite students to imagine other perspectives on this same subject. Would the boy’s father (note that no mention is made of him) interpret the scene differently from the mother? Is there a similar kind of typical scene at a girl’s birthday party against which this one could be compared?

Responses to these questions can be keyed to the poem’s final phrase: “celebrating my son’s life.” The word “celebrate” can be connected to the word “rites”—it has a sacred and solemn meaning, as in celebrating a marriage or a mass. More commonly, “celebrate” suggests showing joy at an event; being part of a festive, happy occasion; rejoicing in an opportunity to honor someone (i.e., celebrating a person’s achievements). Does Olds want her readers to hear her final line as ironic, or, as students have sometimes told us, does she instead mean it more straightforwardly, as if she were saying, “I’ve made my amused, satiric points, but it’s really a happy day after all, and I do love my son”? Don’t neglect the word “my,” however. It’s one of those small words that students tend to pass by, but it’s an important one. It indicates the speaker’s connection to the child (he is her child), renewed at the end of the poem. Yet while the speaker takes responsibility for him in one sense, this is balanced against the detachment, the separation, evident in the speaker’s perception that her small boy is a man in miniature, not her child as much as an adult in the making. The words in this last line are finely placed, reaching a complicated, disquieting balance.


Frank O’Hara

Homosexuality (p. 765)

We have enjoyed teaching this poem, and it has gone over well in the classroom. But we are not confident that we really understand it. It is shocking, and it is
entertaining; the word play is both unnerving and wonderful to behold. But the movement of the poem is hard to figure out: Does O'Hara's poem grow into a unified whole, or does his array of details come to seem confusing, signs of inconsistency, as if the poet had examined his rich theme only partially, without the further effort to gauge and order what everything he sees and feels amounts to?

Our text is taken from O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, published in 1971, and this is an editorial point that we mention to the class because for many students nowadays “homosexuality” has a different charge of meaning than it did three decades ago. So we start our analysis of “Homosexuality” by talking about the title.

Some of our students, it must be said, believe that homosexuality is sinful; and on their course evaluations, some students have objected to studying poems like this one that they say “go against” their religious faith. For our part, we think that these literary works should be taught; if they are not, the students will fail to learn about a range of human feeling and love that, in our view, they should know about. If a student's religious faith is strong, it will not be undermined through an exposure to a poem or story about homosexuality.

Our gay and lesbian students value the opportunity to read, study, and write about these poems and stories. But for them, “homosexuality” is a dated term—indeed, it is a term that most of them associate with people who are anti-gay and anti-lesbian. These students define themselves not as homosexual but as gay or lesbian or (a term which for them has a sharper, more militant edge) “queer.” (Cf. the slogan of an activist group: “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it.”)

When we last taught the poem, we asked the students to describe their responses to the title. The responses were interesting, ranging from “I found the title made me uncomfortable” to “I really liked the bold and direct use of the word”—which, this student said, must have seemed even more forthrightly so when the poem was first published. But looking back on the discussion, we suspect we may have erred a bit in how we set it up. The question “How do you respond?” is a good point of departure, for this and with most other poems. But we should have linked this question to another: “In the poem itself, as it unfolds, how is O'Hara using or not using the responses we have—that he knows we will likely have—to his title?”

It is important to take this step, moving from the responses of the reader to the poet, to the work that the poet has done in making the poem. The risk of relying too much on the responses of the students is that they may conclude, “Well, it is all subjective. When I read a poem, what matters is how I feel about it.” While this is an important part of the story, it is not the entire story. You have to turn the discussion back toward the poet—what he or she does with language (the poet's medium), what he or she has created, constructed, put together. The poem is something we respond to, but it is also something that a writer has made, a work of art.

When you pitch the discussion in this form, you can help the students to see the value of literary analysis—there is an object that we can analyze. This does not mean that all of us will interpret this or that detail the same way, or even that we will agree on large matters. But we do have something that we can look
at together, discuss, debate—organizations of language that we can inquire into, tones of voice that we can listen to carefully.

This point takes us to the first stanza, which seems to mark a point in the middle of a conversation already underway. “So we are talking . . .”: the implication is that something has been said that precedes the words of the poem at hand. Imagine the situation in these terms: you and I are having a talk; we agree about some important matter; and I then say to you, as if coming from both of us: “So we have decided then. . . .”

At first this speaker’s words seem confident, even defiant: “So we are taking off our masks.” But this tone shifts with the phrase “are we,” which turns the apparent assertion into a question. “Keeping” is a little tricky—O’Hara puts us off-balance with it. On one level it is a strong word, as in the phrase “I am keeping this for myself.” But following the tentative “are we,” “keeping” may have for us the echo of “keeping on,” which doubles back on the phrase “taking off.”

This, we suspect, is the association that O’Hara is working with, even as he sharply starts the second line with “our mouths shut.” Not “keeping on,” but “keeping shut.” The poem, one might suggest, is moving backwards from the heady claim (or so it seemed) of its first few words. We are taking off our mask. But are we? Are we keeping our mouths shut?

What appeared at first to be a poem through which a speaker proclaims his acceptance of his and others’ homosexuality—no more masks, this is who we are—now seems more cautious, hesitant. Maybe there is even some frustration, or a touch of self-directed impatience and anger: so that is what we are doing after all, just “keeping / our mouths shut”?

“As if we’d been pierced by a glance”—an intriguing phrase. One wonders whether O’Hara might have in mind here a moment in the Passion story:

But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs. But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side. . . . (John 19:33–34)

Perhaps instead, or in addition, O’Hara is seeking to evoke the apprehension that T. S. Eliot’s speaker expresses in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1917):

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume? (lines 55–61)

This passage reminds us of another, perhaps more pertinent poem, Eliot’s “The Love Song of St. Sebastian,” which Eliot included in a notebook manu-
script of poems that in 1968, three years after the poet's death, was shown as part of the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. The manuscript has now been published, included in T. S. Eliot: Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917, meticulously edited by Christopher Ricks (New York, 1996).

Sebastian was a Roman officer who served in Diocletian's Praetorian Guard; when he refused to worship idols and identified himself as a Christian, he was shot with arrows. He did not die from these wounds—he was left for dead but was nursed back to health, again testified to his faith, and was then clubbed to death—but pictures of his martyrdom show him as a beautiful nearly nude young man bound to a tree or column and pierced with arrows. His martyrdom was a popular subject for late medieval and Renaissance artists, including Piero della Francesca, Bellini, and Mantegna. At the turn of the century, Sebastian also was a favorite saint for homosexuals. Oscar Wilde, for instance, after his release from prison in 1897, took the name Sebastian Melmoth—Sebastian for the martyr, and Melmoth from C. R. Maturin's Gothic novel Melmoth the Wanderer (1820). Ricks quotes from the scholar Ian Fletcher: “Homosexuals had a particular cult of Saint Sebastian. The combination of nudity and the phallic arrows was irresistible.” So much was this the case that Eliot, in a letter that Ricks cites, felt obliged to say about his own aims in his poem: “There’s nothing homosexual about this.”

Perhaps we may seem to have gone far afield. Obviously one can bypass this possible line of literary and cultural context and can simply dwell on the word “pierced” in its own right. Pierce: to cut or pass through with or as if with a sharp instrument; stab or penetrate. But we thought the discussion grew richer to the students when we introduced this material. There was disagreement about how much of this is “in” the poem, but this phase of the conversation in class was itself stimulating, and we think it was valuable for the students.

The kind of close attention we have described here for the first stanza shows the way we proceed in our work on “Homosexuality.” The class can perform some rigorous analysis on this poem, and they can also have some fun with it. Moving to the second stanza: ask the students, “What does ‘the song of an old cow’ sound like?” How can such a song be “full of judgment?” “Judgment” of what kind? But not more judgment than . . . The “vapors which escape one’s soul when one is sick”: this evocative phrase has at least two intimations of meaning. The vapors come from a soul who is sick; at the same time, the vapors “escape,” suggesting that there is a release or liberation associated with them. Though we must then add: if the vapors gain release, they seem to stand in judgment, as if to pronounce a person diseased, unhealthy. Maybe O’Hara’s self-lacerating point is: there are moments when we homosexuals feel weighed down by self-judgments from which we otherwise seek, and succeed, in staying free.

One can see how quick and sly and fast this poem is. We said that you can have some fun with it, noting the fine phrase “the song of an old cow,” but no sooner did we make this suggestion than our commentary became darker, more disquieting. This in miniature gets at the power and the perplexity of the poem. We take delight in the keen, witty images and turns of phrase.
When you reach the end of the poem, you might ask the class, “What kind of statement is O’Hara making about homosexuality?” In a way this is not a good question; we do not usually want our students to be understanding poems as “statements.” But we think that this is the right question for O’Hara’s poem, and that is because the students will soon show through their differing observations that if “Homosexuality” is a statement, it is not a clear or simple one. They will see that “statement” is less helpful than other words, such as “expression” or “exploration.” We know that a statement can be provocative, but so can an exploration, through the range of feelings and sensations that it can lead us to experience. Homosexuality cannot be reduced to this or that alone. If you can enable the students to perceive homosexuality as involving everything and more that the complicated range of “Homosexuality” connotes, you will perform for them an important literary and cultural service.

Frank O’Hara was not only a prolific poet, but he also was actively involved in the New York art scene, with the painters Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and others. He worked on the staff of the Museum of Modern Art and was a member of the editorial group for the periodical Art News. For a detailed account of O’Hara’s tragically short life (he died in an accident on Fire Island in 1966, at the age of forty) and literary career, see Brad Gooch, City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara (1993). Another useful book, which delves into O’Hara’s interest in modern art, is Marjorie Perloff, Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters (1977).

Julia Alvarez

When we read line 1 for the first time, we thought “Woman’s Work” would be a protest poem in which Alvarez argued that the domestic work that many women have performed (and still perform) is, in truth, a form of art, and “high art” at that. But when we moved to line 2, we realized that line 1 comes not from the poet herself but from another woman, who is, we later learn, the speaker’s mother. The mother’s question is really a challenge to her daughter, and it is a challenge that the mother backs up through her own physical work—the first detail we hear about her is her scrubbing of the bathroom tiles. Not wash, but scrub, which means to remove dirt or grime by rubbing hard with a brush or cloth. A detail like this tells us something about the mother—who she is, what she’s like, how she affects others.

Line 3 is a bit of a puzzle. It seems to be part of the challenge that the mother issues. But these are not words we can easily imagine that this mother would speak. They strike us instead as the poet’s words, as she expresses in her own terms the injunction that the mother gives. But what exactly does the line mean? Part of its interest, and elusiveness, is the result of the sudden shift from inner to outer. At one moment the emphasis falls on the scrubbing of the tile,
keeping house; and at the next the emphasis is on the heart. Alvarez, it seems, is suggesting that caring for the house is as important—at least in the mother’s view—as caring for one’s deepest thoughts and feelings.

Like many of us when we were young, the speaker feels dismayed by her chores: she must clean the house with her mother while her friends have fun outside. The touch of humor here is her observation that if keeping house is a high art, it is also a difficult art—difficult to practice when pleasures beckon.

For students, one of the sources of interest in the poem is the nature of the speaker’s relationship to her mother. You can focus this issue by asking them to comment on line 9: “She kept me prisoner in her housebound heart.” Does this line affect us as a piece of resigned wit?—the speaker, stuck indoors, feels like a prisoner. Or is this line a sharper complaint?—the speaker judges that her life is rigidly confined by the rules that the mother has laid down. These readings are both possible, though we also notice that it is the mother’s heart that is “housebound”: her feelings too have become restricted by the round of domestic duties she undertakes.

The heart/house imagery becomes even more forcefully present in the next-to-last stanza. Ask the students if they hear bitterness in the speaker’s reference to herself as her mother’s “masterpiece.” We think that bitterness, anger, regret are there, but perhaps also some humor, even self-mockery. That is quite a series of verbs in line 14; the poet Alvarez must have enjoyed bringing these verbs together, and thus one wonders whether “masterpiece” has the edge we might have thought for a flash that it possessed.

When you work with students on this or any other poem, you can gain a great deal, and do them a very useful service, if you spur them repeatedly to consider and explore the meanings of words. This point is displayed well in the final stanza, which begins with the speaker’s outcry: “I did not want to be her counterpart!” “Counterpart” means:

1. a person or thing closely resembling another, esp. in function
2. a copy or duplicate, as of a legal document
3. one of two parts that fit, complete, or complement one another

The speaker did not want to be a copy or duplicate of her mother: she had in view a different kind of life for herself. But the discovery she makes is that she can be a counterpart in a different sense—not a copy of her mother, but a complement to her mother. Her mother performed one type of work—and for her it was an art. The poet-speaker in turn, taking her mother’s words to heart, is an artist as well, tending to the poems she writes with the same vigor and dedication that her mother had demonstrated in her actions.

MARGE PIERCY

Barbie Doll (p. 767)

The title alerts us to the world of childhood, so we are not surprised in the first line by “This girlchild” (like “This little pig”) or by “pee-pee” in the second
line. The stanza ends with the voice of a jeering child. The second stanza drops
the kid-talk, adopting in its place the language of social science. We have not,
then, made much progress; the “girlchild” who in the first stanza is treated like
a Barbie doll is in the second treated like a healthy specimen, a statistic. The
third stanza sounds more intimate, but she is still an object, not a person, and
by the end of this stanza, there is a painful explosion. The two preceding stan-
zas each ended with a voice different from the voice that spoke the earlier lines
of the stanza (in line 6, “You have a great big nose and fat legs,” we hear a jeer-
ing child, and in line 11, “Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs,” we hear an
adolescent imagining how others see her), but the third stanza ends with some-
thing of the flatly stated violence of a fairy tale: “So she cut off her nose and her
legs / and offered them up.” In the fourth and final stanza she is again (or bet-
ter, still) a doll, lifeless and pretty.

In recent years, in addition to white Barbies there have been African-
American, Hispanic, and Asian Barbies, but until the fall of 1990 the TV and
print ads showed only the fair-skinned, blue-eyed version. For additional infor-
mation about Barbie, see Sydney Ladensohn Stern and Ted Schoenhaus,
_Toyland: The High-Stakes Game of the Toy Industry_ (1990), and M. G. Lord,
_Forever Barbie_ (1994). Barbie’s wardrobe has changed from flight attendant to
astronaut, and from garden-party outfits to workout attire. She has a
dress-for-success outfit and a briefcase—but they are pink.

We think that Piercy’s best books of poetry are _Circles on the Water: Selected Poems_ (1982) and _Available Light_ (1988). She explores some of the
same feminist and political themes in her utopian novel _Woman on the Edge of
Time_ (1976).

**HENRIK IBSEN**

_A Doll’s House_ (p. 768)

First, it should be mentioned that the title of the play does not mean that
Nora is the only doll, for the toy house is not merely Nora’s; Torvald, as well
as Nora, inhabits this unreal world, for Torvald—so concerned with appear-
ing proper in the eyes of the world—can hardly be said to have achieved a
mature personality.

_A Doll’s House_ (1879) today seems more “relevant” than it has seemed in
decades, and yet one can put too much emphasis on its importance as a critique
of male chauvinism. Although the old view that Ibsen’s best-known plays are
“problem plays” about remediable social problems rather than about more uni-
versal matters is still occasionally heard, Ibsen himself spoke against it. In 1898,
for example, he said, “I must disclaim the honor of having consciously 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” (quoted in Michael Meyer, _Ibsen_
[1967], 2:297). By now it seems pretty clear that _A Doll’s House_, in Robert

Martin Adams’s words in *Hudson Review* 10 (Autumn 1957), “represents a woman imbued with the idea of becoming a person, but it proposes nothing categorical about women becoming people; in fact, its real theme has nothing to do with the sexes. It is the irrepressible conflict of two different personalities which have founded themselves on two radically different estimates of reality.”

Or, as Eric Bentley puts it in *In Search of Theater* (p. 350 in the 1953 Vintage edition), “Ibsen pushes his investigation toward a further and even deeper subject [than that of a woman’s place in a man’s world], the tyranny of one human being over another, in this respect the play would be just as valid were Torvald the wife and Nora the husband.”

Michael Meyer’s biography, *Ibsen*, is good on the background (Ibsen knew a woman who forged a note to get money to aid her husband, who denounced and abandoned her when he learned of the deed), but surprisingly little has been written on the dramaturgy of the play. Notable exceptions are John Northam, “Ibsen’s Dramatic Method,” an essay by Northam printed in *Ibsen* (1965), ed. Rolf Fjelde (in the Twentieth Century Views series), and Elizabeth Hardwick’s chapter on the play in her *Seduction and Betrayal* (2001). Northam calls attention to the symbolic use of properties (e.g., the Christmas tree in Act I, a symbol of a secure, happy family, is in the center of the room, but in Act II, when Nora’s world has begun to crumble, it is in a corner, bedraggled, and with burnt-out candles), costume (e.g., Nora’s Italian costume is suggestive of pretense and is removed near the end of the play; the black shawl, symbolic of death, becomes—when worn at the end with ordinary clothes—an indication of her melancholy, lonely life), and gestures (e.g., blowing out the candles, suggesting defeat; the wild dance; the final slamming of the door).

For a collection of useful essays on the play, see *Approaches to Teaching Ibsen’s “A Doll’s House”* (1985), ed. Yvonne Shafer. Also of interest is Austin E. Quigley’s discussion in *Modern Drama* 27 (1984): 584–605, reprinted with small changes in his *The Modern Stage and Other Worlds* (1985). Dorothea Krook, in *Elements of Tragedy* (1969), treats the play as a tragedy. She sets forth what she takes to be the four universal elements of the genre (the act of shame or horror, consequent intense suffering, then an increase in knowledge, and finally a reaffirmation of the value of life) and suggests that these appear in *A Doll’s House*—the shameful condition being “the marriage relationship which creates Nora’s doll’s house’s situation.” Krook calls attention, too, to the “tragic irony” of Torvald’s comments on Krogstad’s immorality (he claims it poisons a household) and to Nora’s terror, which, Krook says, “evokes the authentic Aristotelian pity.”

One can even go a little further than Krook goes and make some connection between *A Doll’s House* and *Oedipus the King*. Nora, during her years as a housewife, like Oedipus during his kingship, thought that she was happy but finds out that she really wasn’t, and at the end of the play she goes out (self-banished), leaving her children, to face an uncertain but surely difficult future. Still, although the play can be discussed as a tragedy and cannot be reduced to a “problem play,” like many of Ibsen’s other plays it stimulates a discussion of
the questions, “What ought to be done?” and “What happened next?” Hermann J. Weigand, in *The Modern Ibsen* (1925), offered conjectures about Nora’s future actions, saying,

But personally I am convinced that after putting Torvald through a sufficiently protracted ordeal of suspense, Nora will yield to his entreaties and return home—on her own terms. She will not bear the separation from her children very long, and her love for Torvald, which is not as dead as she thinks, will reassert itself. For a time the tables will be reversed: a meek and chastened husband will eat out of the hand of his squirrel; and Nora, hoping to make up by a sudden spurt of zeal for twenty-eight years of lost time, will be trying desperately hard to grow up. I doubt, however, whether her volatile enthusiasm will even carry her beyond the stage of resolutions. The charm of novelty worn off, she will tire of the new game very rapidly and revert, imperceptibly, to her role of songbird and charmer, as affording an unlimited range to the exercise of her inborn talents of coquetry and playacting.

Students may be invited to offer their own conjectures on the unwritten fourth act.

Another topic for class discussion or for an essay, especially relevant to questions 3 and 4 in the text: Elizabeth Hardwick suggests (*Seduction and Betrayal*, p. 46) that Ibsen failed to place enough emphasis on Nora’s abandonment of the children. In putting “the leaving of her children on the same moral and emotional level as the leaving of her husband Ibsen has been too much a man in the end. He has taken the man’s practice, if not his stated belief, that where self-realization is concerned children shall not be an impediment.” But in a feminist reading of the play, Elaine Hoffman Baruch, in *Yale Review* 69 (Spring 1980), takes issue with Hardwick, arguing that “it is less a desire for freedom than a great sense of inferiority and the desire to find out more about the male world outside the home that drives Nora away from her children” (p. 37).

Finally, one can discuss with students the comic aspects of the play—the ending (which, in a way, is happy, though Nora’s future is left in doubt), and especially Torvald’s fatuousness. The fatuousness perhaps reaches its comic height early in Act III, when, after lecturing Mrs. Linde on the importance of an impressive exit (he is telling her how, for effect, he made his “capricious little Capri girl” leave the room after her dance), he demonstrates the elegance of the motion of the hands while embroidering and the ugliness of the motions when knitting. Also comic are his ensuing fantasies, when he tells the exhausted Nora that he fantasizes that she is his “secret” love, though the comedy turns ugly when after she rejects his amorous advances (“I have desired you all evening”), he turns into a bully: “I’m your husband, aren’t I?” The knock on the front door (Rank) reintroduces comedy, for it reduces the importunate husband to conventional affability (“Well! How good of you not to pass by the door”), but it also saves Nora from what might have been an ugly assault.

Students will enjoy Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, *Ibsen’s Lively Art: A Performance Study of the Major Plays* (1989), which examines the

### Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. To what extent is Nora a victim, and to what extent is she herself at fault for her way of life?
2. Is the play valuable only as an image of an aspect of life in the later nineteenth century, or is it still an image of an aspect of life?
3. In the earlier part of the play Nora tells Helmer, Mrs. Linde, and herself that she is happy. Is she? Explain. Why might she be happy? Why not? Can a case be made that Mrs. Linde, who must work to support herself, is happier than Nora?
4. Write a dialogue—approximately two double-spaced pages—setting forth a chance encounter when Torvald and Nora meet five years after the end of Ibsen’s play.
5. Write a persuasive essay, arguing that Nora was right—or wrong—to leave her husband and children. In your essay recognize the strengths of the opposing view and try to respond to them.
GEORGE ORWELL

Shooting an Elephant (p. 821)

In the second paragraph of “Shooting an Elephant” Orwell explicitly tells us that his experience as a police officer in Burma was “perplexing and upsetting.” He characterizes himself as “young and ill-educated” at the time (clearly in the past) and says he was caught between his hatred of imperialism and his rage against the Burmese. The essay’s paradoxical opening sentence foreshadows its chief point (that imperialism destroys the freedom of both the oppressor and the oppressed), but Orwell devotes the rest of the first paragraph, with its ugly characterizations of the Burmese, to dramatizing his rage. Students unaware of Orwell’s preoccupation with decency (and unaccustomed to holding more than one paragraph in their heads at the same time) may fail to understand that the first two paragraphs do not contradict but reinforce each other. The racial slurs in the first paragraph, and elsewhere in the essay, are deliberate and show the alienation from normal feelings, the violations of self which were, as Orwell goes on to show, the by-products of his role. That he was playing a role is highlighted by the theatrical metaphors that accumulate in the seventh paragraph. (About to shoot the elephant, he sees himself as a “conjurer” with a “magical rifle,” as an “actor,” and as “an absurd puppet.”) The essay’s final paragraph, with its cold tone, its conflicting half-truths and rationalizations, again effectively dramatizes the deadening of feeling and loss of integrity Orwell experienced and that he believes all who turn tyrant experience.

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

The Emperor’s New Clothes (p. 826)

Most stories that touch on “innocence and experience” show the more or less painful fall into the reality of the adult world. Loss of innocence is seen as necessary—the pains are growing pains; childish perceptions must yield to adult perceptions. But “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is different. It delightfully suggests that the child’s perceptions are valid, and that the adult’s perceptions are clouded.
Of course, we all recognize the treasures of maturity; young children can scarcely see beyond the moment, but mature people can anticipate the future and make significant judgments. Maturity, however, may also introduce corruption, for example, replacing sincerity with hypocrisy or deviousness. One need not be a Wordsworthian to feel that as we grow up there is loss as well as gain. (Jesus’s words, “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven,” come to mind. Even Paul, who said, “When I became a man, I put away childish things,” also said, “Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children.”)

No one will deny that children are egocentric, but egocentricity is not the same as egotism, especially egotism that supports itself by dishonesty. In “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” the courtiers fear that their status will be lowered if they speak the truth—if they say what they see—and so, eager to retain their offices at court and to show that they are not simpletons, they resort to deception, until “the voice of innocence” speaks out truthfully. The emperor hears the truth, and so do the lords of the bedchamber, but having committed themselves, their egotism prevents them from acknowledging the truth, and so the stately but absurd procession goes on: “And the lords of the bed-chamber took greater pains than ever to appear to be holding up a train, although, in reality, there was no train to hold.”

JAMES JOYCE

*Araby* (p. 829)


Students have difficulty with the story largely because they do not read it carefully enough. They scan it for what happens (who goes where) and do not pay enough attention to passages in which (they think) “nothing is happening.” But when students read passages aloud in class, for instance, the first three paragraphs, they do see what is going on (that is, they come to understand the boy’s mind) and enjoy the story very much. To help them hear the romantic boy who lives in what is (from an adult point of view) an unromantic society, it is especially useful to have students read aloud passages written in different styles. Compare, for instance, “At night in my bedroom and by day in the classroom her image came between me and the page I strove to read” with “I asked for leave to go to the bazaar on Saturday night. My aunt was surprised and hoped it was not some Freemason affair.”

That the narrator is no longer a boy is indicated by such passages as the following:

her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood.
Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praise which I myself did not understand. My eyes were often full of tears (I could not tell why).

What innumerable follies laid waste my waking and sleeping thoughts. . . .

Morrisey points out that in addition to distancing himself from his past actions by such words as “foolish” and “follies” (and, at the end of the story, “vanity”), the narrator distances himself from the boy he was by the words “imagined” and “seemed,” words indicating that his present view differs from his earlier view.

The narrator recounts a story of disillusionment. The first two paragraphs clearly establish the complacent middle-class world into which he is born—the houses “conscious of decent lives within them” gaze with “imperturbable faces.” This idea of decency is made concrete by the comment in the second paragraph that the priest’s charity is evident in his will: he left all of his money to institutions and his furniture to his sister. (Probably even the sister was so decent that she too thought this was the right thing to do.) Morrisey, interpreting the passage about the priest’s will differently, takes the line to be the boy’s innocent report of “what must have been an ironic comment by adults.”

As a boy he lived in a sterile atmosphere, a sort of fallen world:

- The house is in a “blind” or dead-end street.
- The rooms are musty.
- The priest had died (religion is no longer vital?).
- A bicycle pump, once a useful device, now lies rusty and unused under a bush in the garden.
- An apple tree stands in the center of the garden in this fallen world.
- Nearby are the odors of stable and garbage dumps.

Nevertheless the boy is quickened by various things, for instance, by the yellow pages of an old book, but especially by Mangan’s sister (who remains unnamed, perhaps to suggest that the boy’s love is spiritual). He promises to visit “Araby” (a bazaar) and to return with a gift for her.

The boy for a while moves through a romantic, religious world:

- He sees her “image.”
- He imagines that he carries a “chalice.”
- He hears the “litanies” and “chanting” of vendors. He utters “strange prayers.”

Delayed by his uncle, whose inebriation is indicated by the uncle’s “talking to himself” and by “the hall-stand rocking” (his parents seem not to be living; notice the emphasis on the boy’s isolation throughout the story, e.g., his ride alone in the car of the train), he hears the clerks counting the day’s receipts—moneychangers in the temple.
“The light was out. The upper part of the hall was now completely dark.” The darkness and the preceding trivial conversations of a girl and two young men reveal—Joyce might have said epiphanize—the emptiness of the world. The boy has journeyed to a rich, exotic (religious?) world created by his imagination and has found it cold and trivial, as dead as the neighborhood he lives in.

The boy’s entry through the shilling entrance rather than through the six-penny (children’s) entrance presumably signals his coming of age.

This brief discussion of “Araby” of course seems reasonable to its writer, even the remarks that the rusty bicycle pump suggests a diminished world and that the entry through the shilling entrance rather than the sixpenny entrance suggests, implies, or even—though one hesitates to use the word—symbolizes (along with many other details) his initiation into an adult view. But how far can (or should) one press the details? An article in James Joyce Quarterly 4 (1967): 85–86 suggests that the pump under the bushes stands for the serpent in the garden. Is there a difference between saying that the rusty pump—in the context of the story—puts a reader in mind of a diminished (deflated) world and saying that it stands for the serpent? Is one interpretation relevant and the other not? Students might be invited to offer their own views on how far to look for “meaning” or “symbols” in this story, or in any other story. They might also be advised to read—but not necessarily to swallow—the brief discussions of symbolism in the text and in the glossary.

There is an immense body of biographical and critical work on Joyce. For undergraduates at an introductory level, we suggest keeping things simple. Probably you should make mention of Richard Ellmann’s biography (new and rev. ed., 1982), a classic of the biographer’s art. But from there, keep the focus on the story itself. We were disappointed by the poor response to “Araby” that we received the first two or three times we taught it. Eventually we realized that in the case of Joyce, the teacher may need to do more work than usual in the classroom. We now spend a fair amount of time lecturing on Joyce’s life and on the Irish background. This is not an approach we favor, especially in a course on literature and composition, where so much should depend on the questions and comments from students. But we discovered that Joyce’s characters and settings seemed far away in time and place to many students, even those from an Irish background themselves. To get the benefit we want from Joyce’s stories, we need to make him and his era vivid for the students.

Fortunately, we have a good array of sources to help us. These include Dubliners: Text, Criticism, and Notes, ed. Robert Scholes and A. Walton Litz (1969); James Joyce’s Dubliners: An Illustrated Edition with Annotations, ed. John Wyse Jackson and Bernard McGinley (1993); Don Gifford, Joyce Annotated: Notes for Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (2nd ed., 1982); Bruce Bidwell and Linda Heffer, The Joycean Way: A Topographic Guide to Dubliners & A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1981); and Donald T. Torchiana, Backgrounds for Joyce’s Dubliners (1986).
Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. What do the first two paragraphs tell us about the boy’s environment? What does the second paragraph tell us about his nature?
2. Of course none of us can speak authoritatively about what life was really like in Dublin around 1900, but would you say that Joyce gives—insofar as space allows—a realistic picture of Dublin? If so, was his chief aim to give the reader a slice of Dublin life? What do you think Joyce wants us to believe that life in Dublin was like?
3. The boy says that when his uncle returned he heard his uncle talking to himself, and he heard the hallstand (coatrack) rocking. Then he says, “I could interpret these signs.” What do “these signs” mean? How is the uncle’s behavior here consistent with other details of life in Dublin?

HA JIN

*Love in the Air* (p. 834)

For use in the classroom with this story, or for a paper assignment, here are three quotes by Ha Jin:

Ha Jin, interview (2006): “When we write poetry or fiction, it’s not just that we know people or we do a lot of research and then create an interesting story. You have to have a physical sense of a place, physical sensations, a lot of texture, a lot of concrete, tangible details.” (*Guernica Magazine*: www.guernica-mag.com)

In another interview, in relation to this story, Ha Jin observes: “There is always confinement in China for every individual. They have to find a way to survive and develop and grow as a human being. For me, the theme of confinement is not a very conscious thing. It’s just part of the story. And it’s everywhere, inside, outside. It’s part of Chinese society, the culture, the customs. It cannot be avoided. It’s present in everything, and so it seeps into my work.” (*The Glimmer Tree Guide to Writing Fiction*, edited by Susan Burmeister-Brown and Linda B. Swanson-Davies, published in 2006)

Ha Jin, in an essay (2009): “To some Chinese, my choice of English is a kind of betrayal. But loyalty is a two-way street. I feel I have been betrayed by China, which has suppressed its people and made artistic freedom unavailable. I have tried to write honestly about China and preserve its real history. As a result, most of my work cannot be published in China.”

He continues: “I cannot leave behind June 4, 1989, the day that set me on this solitary path. The memory of the bloodshed still rankles, and working in this language has been a struggle. But I remind myself that both Conrad and Nabokov suffered intensely for choosing English—and that literature can transcend language. If my work is good and significant, it should be valuable to the Chinese.” (*The New York Times*, May 30, 2009)

ZZ PACKER

Brownies (p. 843)

In an interview ZZ Packer has explained her name: “ZZ is just this nickname that I’ve had ever since I can remember. My actual name is Zuwena. It’s Swahili and means ‘good.’ My friends and family would just call me ZZ, but then after a while of teachers mispronouncing my name and everyone else in the world I began introducing myself as ZZ. So it just kind of stuck.” (ZZ Packer, Interview, identitytheory.com, posted April 29, 2003)

“Brownies,” the story we have selected, is included in Drinking Coffee Elsewhere, published in 2003. It is set in Atlanta, which has one of the highest levels of separation between whites and blacks in the South.

We begin by asking the students to describe what happens—the action of the story; and then we ask them to characterize the first-person narrator, Laurel, who is more perceptive and thoughtful than the others, which is evident in, among other things, her awareness that the white girls might not have used the n-word after all.

The point we are trying to convey is simple but important: The story, as readers experience it, depends upon the narrator, the specific figure who relates it.

We also ask the class to tell us about the other characters—Arnetta, for example, whose tone “had an upholstered confidence that was somehow both regal and vulgar at once. It demanded a few moments of silence in its wake, like the ringing of a church bell or the playing of taps.” Our goal is to connect our students’ observations and comments to details in Packer’s language. As always, we hope to prompt the class to be highly attentive to language and to ask questions about the meanings and implications of the words.

The main theme of “Brownies” is racial segregation; as Laurel says, “When you lived in the south suburbs of Atlanta, it was easy to forget about whites. Whites were like those baby pigeons: real and existing, but rarely seen or thought about.” It is segregation, and the multiple perceptions of (and forms or prejudice about) the racial “other” which living in separate spheres creates. The result, among the black girls, is pain, resentment, and anger, triggered in this instance by their own mistakes and confusions about the white girls.

Packer’s lesson is a valuable one. But we do raise with the class the possibility that it might be too obvious, made too overtly. Indeed some reviewers of Drinking Coffee Elsewhere, while admiring Packer’s gifted handling of language, wondered whether she tends to be too didactic, over-earnest about teaching a moral lesson. Is this the case, or not? If not, what is it in the story that makes the teaching that Packer offers challenging and complex, really likely to break through our habitual attitudes and defenses?

Another way to come at such questions is to ask students whether Packer suggests in her story that the patterns of bias and group-thinking depicted in “Brownies” can be overcome. What would it take to overcome them?

In addition to the infant there is a second speaker, an adult—presumably the mother, but nothing in the text rules out the possibility that the adult speaker is the father.

The infant speaks the first two lines, the adult (asking what to call the infant) speaks the third. The infant replies, “I happy am, / Joy is my name,” and the adult is then moved to say, “Sweet joy befall thee.” Is it too subtle to detect a difference between the infant, who knows only that it is happy, and the adult, who, in saying “Sweet joy befall thee,” is introducing (to the edges of our mind or, rather, to the depths of our mind) the possibility that—life being what it is—joy may *not* befall the infant? That is, even here, in the *Songs of Innocence*, we may detect an awareness of a fallen world, a world where in fact people do not always encounter “Sweet joy.”

The second stanza apparently is spoken entirely by the adult, but the language of the first two lines (“Pretty joy! / Sweet joy but two days old”) is close to the language of the infant—not to the language of a real infant, of course, but to the language of Blake’s infant, who began the poem by saying “I have no name, I am but two days old.” Still, there is a difference between the speakers. The mother sings (a lullaby?), partly out of her own joy, and partly, perhaps, to reassure the infant (at least that is more or less the function of lullabies in real life).

What of Blake’s illustration for the poem? The best discussion of the picture is Andrew Lincoln’s, in his edition of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1991), which is volume 2 in the series called *Blake’s Illuminated Books*, gen. ed. David Bindman. We quote Lincoln’s chief points:

The figures within the opened petals enact an Adoration scene. A mother in a blue dress nurses a baby in her lap, while a winged girl-angel stands with arms reaching out towards the infant.

The petals of the flower seem protective, although those that curl over from the left may suggest containment, hinting perhaps at the potential constraints that face the newborn child.

There are other images of constraint here. In the design, the drooping bud at the right may recall the temporal process in which flowers unfold and decay, while in the song joy is at once a present state of being and a hope for an uncertain future.

**William Blake**

*Infant Sorrow* (p. 858)

In “Infant Joy” we saw not only the child’s view but also the parent’s. Here we see only the child’s view, which regards the adult embrace not as an act
of love but as a threatening constraint. It’s not a question of which view—“Infant Joy” or “Infant Sorrow”—is truer. Both are true. In “Infant Sorrow” Blake lets us see life from the point of view of the infant, a creature who is helpless, distrustful of the parents, presciently aware that it has entered a “dangerous world” and that its cries sound like those of a “fiend” to all who cannot understand its distress.

The first stanza emphasizes physical actions—of the mother in labor, of the sympathetic father, and of the babe itself (“piping loud”). There is action in the second stanza too, but there is also something more; there is thought, really strategy. Confined by the father at the beginning of the second stanza, the infant decides it is best to turn to the mother (“I thought best / To sulk upon my mother’s breast”), but in any case the infant is still trapped.

Andrew Lincoln points out that the illustration seems to represent a rather “comfortable and secure interior.” He goes on to say that “In the light of the poem, the protection that surrounds the child here must itself seem threatening, potentially stifling.”

**WILLIAM BLAKE**

*The Echoing Green* (p. 859)

E. M. W. Tillyard discusses this poem in *Poetry Direct and Oblique* (1977). Among his points are these:

- Blake “finds in the traditional village sports and pieties a type of his world of innocence.”
- The poem moves from dawn in the first stanza, to midday in the second (presumably Old John sits under an oak to protect himself from the noonday sun), to evening in the third stanza, and thus “the form is a stylized day-cycle.”
- Beginning and end are balanced (echoing green, darkening green; waking birds, birds in their nest).
- “The old unfreeze and join their mirth to make up a full chorus with children.”

According to Tillyard, all of this is an indirect way of expressing “desire satisfied” and “fruition.” He goes on: “At the end of the ‘echoing green’ is the darkening green because its function is fulfilled.” All of this seems reasonable to us, if fulfillment is recognized as including weariness and the coming of darkness.

Some other points: Who is the speaker? Apparently a young person, if one leans on lines 9 (“our sports”), 15 (“our play”), and 24 (“our sports”), but not a child; the vision is that of a mature person, at least someone mature enough to know that “our sports have an end.”

In the first stanza, one action almost automatically generates the next: the sun rises, making the skies happy; the merry bells ring, stimulating the birds, who “Sing louder around / To the bells’ cheerful sound.”
Why “echoing green”? Because it resounds with the noise of children playing, of course, but also because the children are a renewed version of the old people, or, to put it the other way around, the old people are the distant echoes of the children. There are other echoes, too, in the repeated words: the title is repeated in the last lines of the first and second stanzas, and it is varied (“the darkening green”) at the end of the third stanza. Other repeated words are “sun” (1, 23), “bells” (3, 6), “birds” (6, 27), “seen” (9, 19, 29), “sports” (9, 24, 29), “laugh” (12, 15), and “such” (in 17 we get “Such, such”).

Allen Ginsberg sings “The Echoing Green” on Songs of Innocence and Experience by William Blake, Tuned by Allen Ginsberg.

**WILLIAM BLAKE**

*The Lamb, The Tyger* (p. 860)


In the course of arguing on behalf of reader-response criticism, Stanley Fish, in *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), has some fun calling attention to the diversity of opinions. He points out that in *Encounter* (June 1954), Kathleen Raine published an essay entitled “Who Made the Tyger?” She argued that because for Blake the tiger is “the beast that sustains its own life at the expense of its fellow-creatures,” the answer to the big question (“Did he who made the lamb make thee?”) is, in Raine’s words, “beyond all possible doubt, No.” Fish points out that Raine, as part of her argument, insists that Blake always uses the word “forest” with reference “to the natural, ‘fallen’ world.” Fish then calls attention to E. D. Hirsch’s reading, in *Innocence and Experience* (1964), in which Hirsch argues that “forest” suggests “tall straight forms, a world that for all its terror has the orderliness of the tiger’s stripes or Blake’s perfectly balanced verses.” In short, for Hirsch “The Tyger” is “a poem that celebrates the holiness of tigerness.” Hirsch also argues that Blake satirizes the single-mindedness of “The Lamb.”

We find all of this very baffling. We are not specialists in Blake, but it seems to us that both poems celebrate rather than satirize or in any way condemn their subjects. In “The Lamb” (such is our critical innocence), innocence is celebrated; in “The Tyger,” energy is celebrated. In “The Lamb” the speaker is a child, or is an adult impersonating a child. He asks the lamb a question and then gives the answer according to traditional Christian think-
ing. (In the Gospel of John [1:29, 35] John the Baptist twice greets Jesus as the Lamb of God, presumably drawing on the idea of the lamb as a sacrificial offering. And behind this idea is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, who is compared to “a lamb that is led to slaughter.”) The speaker uses a simple vocabulary (words of one and two syllables), and he uses end-stopped lines (one thought to a line). Lamb, God, speaker, and child are all united at the end of the poem.

In “The Tyger” the animal is “burning bright” because of its fiery eyes (6) and presumably because of its orange stripes, also flame-like. (Since the tiger is imagined as being created in a smithy, the poem also includes other images of fire in such words as “burnt” and “furnace.”)

Blake’s question in effect is this: Was the tiger created in hell (“distant deeps”) or in heaven (“skies”)—and by Satan or by God? Blake hammers these questions into our minds, but it seems to us that Blake clearly implies an answer. The creator is “immortal,” daring, “dread,” and—most important—creative. In traditional Christian thinking, then, the answer is that God created the tiger. Lines 17–18 (“When the stars threw down their spears, / And watered heaven with their tears”) have engendered much commentary. Possibly the lines allude to the war in heaven in Milton’s Paradise Lost, and Blake’s gist might be paraphrased thus: “When the rebel angels cast down their spears in defeat, did the triumphant God smile at his success, i.e., What were God's feelings when he had to be tiger-like to an aspect of his own creation?” This makes sense to us, but we admit that, strictly speaking, in Paradise Lost the rebellious angels never do “cast down their spears,” i.e., never surrender.

One last comment. Harold Bloom probably understands Blake as well as anyone else alive. In The Oxford Anthology of English Literature he gives this footnote, which we can’t quite bring ourselves to believe. You may want to think about it and to try it out on your students.

However the poem is interpreted, the reader should be wary of identifying the poem’s chanter with Blake, who did not react with awe or fear to any natural phenomenon whatsoever.

Blake probably had considerable satirical intention in this lyric, as a juxtaposition of his verbal description of the Tyger with his illustration seems to suggest. [The illustration shows an unimpressive beast.] The poem’s speaker, though a man of considerable imagination (quite possibly a poet like William Cowper), is at work terrifying himself with a monster of his own creation. Though Blake may mean us to regard the poem’s questions as unanswerable, he himself would have answered by saying that the “immortal hand or eye” belonged only to Man, who makes both Tyger and Lamb. In “the forests of the night,” or mental darkness, Man makes the Tyger, but in the open vision of day Man makes the Lamb.
GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

_Spring and Fall: To a Young Child_ (p. 862)

In our experience, students will have considerable difficulty if they simply read the poem silently to themselves, but if they read (and reread) it aloud, it becomes clear—and more important, it becomes something they value.

We begin, then, as we usually do with poems, by having a student read the poem aloud, and then we invite comments about the title and its connection with the two people in the poem. Students usually see that the poem presents youth and age, that Margaret is associated with spring and the speaker with the fall, and this leads to discussion of the Fall in Christian thought. Many students, however, do not know that in Christian thought the disobedience of Adam and Eve brought consequences that extended to nature and that the perennial spring of Eden therefore yielded to autumn and winter; that is, “Goldengrove” inherited death. (“Goldengrove,” incidentally, might seem to suggest preciousness and eternity, but here the golden leaves are a sign of transience and death.)

In the original version of “Spring and Fall” (1880), line 8 ran, “Though forests low and leafmeal lie.” When he revised the poem in 1884, Hopkins changed “Though forests low and” to “Though worlds of wanwood,” thus introducing the pallor of “wanwood” and also wonderfully extending the vista from “forests” to “worlds.” Margaret’s sorrow for the trees stripped of their golden foliage is finally sorrow for the Fall, whose consequences are everywhere. Her mouth cannot formulate any of this, but her spirit has intuited it (“ghost guessed”).


E. E. CUMMINGS

_in Just-_ (p. 863)

Of course a reader’s response to any sort of print on a page is partly conditioned by the appearance of the page. Nice margins and creamy paper can make a so-so story seem pretty good, and double columns and thin paper that allows
for show-through can make reading even an absorbing work difficult. And
probably any poet would be distressed to find the first twelve lines of his or her
sonnet printed on a right-hand page, and the final couplet—invisible to the
reader of the three quatrains—on the next page.

Our point, again, is that the physical appearance of any work counts, but
with Cummings's work it counts a great deal more, in a variety of ways. For
instance, “eddie and bill” catches the child’s way of speaking, and also conveys a
sense of an inseparable pair, just as “betty and isabel” does. (When the young-
sters grow up, they will be Eddie and Betty, and Bill and Isabel, but Cummings
is giving us children in the stage when boys play with boys and girls with girls.)
As for the variations in which the words “far and wee” appear, we can say only
that the spaces (in line 5, “far and wee”; in line 13, “far and wee”; in lines
22–24, “far and wee”) convey the variations in the balloonman’s whistle, and
the last of these perhaps suggests that he is moving away.

The allusion to Pan (via the goatfoot and the whistle) seems clear to us. Pan
is the woodland god of Arcadia, a land usually depicted as a world of perpet-
ual spring. Of course Pan is especially associated with the pursuit of nymphs,
but Cummings here gives us a rather sexless world, though we can hardly
repress the thought that this world of childhood (with its inseparable boys and
its inseparable girls) and of springtime play (marbles, dancing) will in time
become something else.

One other point: most students, in the course of class discussion, will see that
the repeated “wee” (lines 5, 13, 14) works several ways. The balloon man is “lit-
tle” (line 3); his whistle makes the sound of “wee”; “wee” is a child’s exclama-
tion of delight; and “we” children go running to buy balloons.

LOUISE GLÜCK

The School Children (p. 864)

On the surface, the poem seems loaded with pictures of cute children on their
way to school, bringing the traditional apples for the teachers: “with their little
satchels,” “apples, red and gold,” “their overcoats of blue or yellow wool.”
Even “how orderly they are” (said of the nails on which the children hang their
coats) can be taken as a benign comment on this happy scene.

But by the time we finish the second stanza we realize that this is not a
Norman Rockwell scene. The children must cross to “the other shore” where
they are confronted by people “who wait behind great desks.” Further, these
people are not presented warmly. Rather, they are presented (we never see them)
as godlike figures who wait “to receive these offerings.”

The third stanza is perhaps even more menacing, with that orderly row of
nails, waiting to accept the pretty coats. The text speaks—horribly—of “the
nails / on which the children hang. . . .” As we continue to read the sentence the
meaning changes radically, of course, and we see that it is not the children but
“their overcoats” that hang on the nails, but the thought lingers; the mind retains a vision of the children hanging from nails.

The last stanza reintroduces us to the teachers, who “shall instruct them in silence,” a menacing expression that we take to mean (1) shall teach them silently (a terrifying way of teaching), and (2) shall teach them to be silent (a terrifying condition). The stanza does not end, however, with the teachers or with the children. Rather, it ends with the mothers, who “scour the orchards for a way out,” i.e., who seek to equip their children with the “offerings” (line 7) that the gods require. That is, the mothers seek (by propitiating the gods) to protect their children from the severe socialization that awaits them, but it is already too late, because “the gray limbs of the fruit trees” (it is now autumn) bear “so little ammunition.”

In the last stanza, why “The teachers shall instruct them,” and “the mothers shall scour the orchards,” rather than “will instruct” and “will scour”? Although older handbooks say that shall expresses simple futurity in the first person (and will expresses determination in the first person), it is our impression that shall has almost disappeared. Indeed, part of what made Douglas MacArthur’s “I shall return” so memorable was that he used an unusual construction. To our ear, the use of shall in the last stanza of Glück’s poem has a voice-of-doom quality; the teachers must act as they will, and the mothers must act as they will—and the children will be the victims.


Louise Glück

Gretel in Darkness (p. 865)

In New Voices in American Poetry, ed. David Allan Evans (1973), p. 106, Ms. Glück comments on her poem:

To Hansel the escape from the forest was a means to an end: a future. To Gretel the escape is an end in itself. No moment in the ordinary existence she made possible by killing the witch and rescuing her brother can touch for her the moment of the escape. That moment was her triumph: it provided Gretel with an opportunity to experience herself as powerful. The whole episode, the drama in the forest, remains for her charged and present. It is in that episode that she wishes to imbed herself. Unfortunately, she is alone in this desire. Their adventure grows increasingly remote to Hansel,
presumably because the new life answers his needs. The Gretel of the poem perceives, and passionately wishes to alter, the discrepancy between her investment in the forest and Hansel’s.

LINDA PASTAN

Ethics (p. 866)

First, a word about the teacher and the ethical question posed. One may wonder what kind of teacher keeps asking the same question, year after year. (On the other hand, perhaps good teachers do ask the same questions, year after year. They change the answers, not the questions.) Why, by the way, does the stated ethical problem—an old chestnut—always involve a woman rather than a man? (We are reminded of Faulkner’s comment that “If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ is worth any number of old ladies.” One can hope that no one today would tolerate such talk.)

The poem begins by stating the ethical problem, but doesn’t go on to answer it. Rather, it rejects the problem as arid, something perhaps fit for youngsters to debate (though in the poem the students don’t care much about pictures or old people) but a concern that disappears when one is older and when one is “in a real museum” and is standing “before a real Rembrandt.” We infer that the speaker, older and wiser, does care about both art and life, and knows that one doesn’t have to choose between them. Art draws on life, and reveals life (lines 20–24), and both are “beyond saving by children” (25).

Although the speaker and her classmates were not much interested in the ethical problem that the teacher posed, other students may be. If so, you may want to set them loose on the first two lines of Yeats’s “The Choice”:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (p. 828)

This long discussion will consist of:
- some general introductory remarks
- a note on staging scenes in the classroom
- a note on writing a review
- a fairly detailed scene-by-scene commentary on the entire play


We will give some additional bibliography in the course of the following comment, but here we want to mention two very different works, both of great value. For a highly intelligent scene-by-scene commentary, we know of nothing better than Alfred Harbage’s *William Shakespeare: A Reader’s Guide* (1963), a book that is very wise but utterly unpretentious. (Nevertheless, in this manual we offer our own scene-by-scene commentary.) For persons concerned with textual issues, the three earliest texts of *Hamlet* are assembled in *The Three-Text “Hamlet”: Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio*, ed. Paul Bertram and Bernice W. Kliman (1991).

The nature of the Ghost has produced a good deal of commentary, most of it summarized in Eleanor Prosser’s *Hamlet and Revenge* (1971). She says that for the Elizabethans a ghost can be only one of three things: the soul of a pagan (impossible in this play, for the context is Christian); a soul from Roman Catholic purgatory (impossible in this play, because it seeks revenge); or a devil (which is what Prosser says this Ghost is). Prosser argues that the Ghost is evil because it counsels revenge, it disappears at the invocation of heaven, and it disappears when the cock crows. But perhaps it can be replied that although the Ghost indeed acts suspiciously, its role is to build suspense and to contribute to the play’s meaning, which involves uncertainty and the difficulty of sure action. Prosser sees Hamlet as a rebellious youth who deliberately mistreats Ophelia and descends deep into evil (e.g., he spares Claudius at his prayers only in order to damn him), but when he returns from England he is no longer the “barbaric young revenger . . . but a mature man of poise and serenity” (p. 217). He is generous to the gravediggers and Laertes, “delightful” with Osric. In short, the young rebel has been chastened by experience and by the vision of death, and so he is saved. He “has fought his way out of Hell” (p. 237). Prosser offers a useful corrective to the romantic idea of the delicate prince, as well as a great deal of information about the attitude toward ghosts, but one need not accept her conclusion that the Ghost is a devil; her evidence about ghosts is incontrovertible on its own grounds, but one may feel that, finally, the play simply doesn’t square with Elizabethan popular thought about ghosts.

**A Note on Staging Scenes in the Classroom**

In the course of teaching *Hamlet* we usually have students stage four or five parts of scenes, each about two or three pages long. (We devote five or six meetings to the play, so we usually have one performance for each meeting after the
first meeting.) For the first production, we ask for volunteers because it has been our experience that the students who immediately volunteer are those who have had some experience on the stage, and thus the first production is likely to be pretty good. For later productions we usually simply assign parts rather than accept volunteers.

We set the thing up about a week in advance of each performance, and we ask one student to serve as director, and two or three or four students—however many are necessary for the scene—to play the parts. They are told that they must get together at least once for a rehearsal, i.e., on the day that parts are assigned they must, immediately after class, agree on a time when they will rehearse. (Unfortunately this requirement will eliminate some students, who simply cannot be present for a rehearsal.) We give the performers and the director photocopies of the relevant pages, with marginal annotations offering a few suggestions about how this or that speech might be delivered, e.g., about what gestures might be appropriate, etc., but we emphasize that what they do in class is up to them. They are not expected to memorize the parts—they read from the pages while they act—but they do gesticulate and move about, sit, etc., as seems appropriate.

Among the passages from the first two acts that we have used in class (we believe with some success) are the first 62 lines of the play (up through Horatio’s remarks following the departure of the Ghost); 1.3 (Laertes, Ophelia, Polonius); 2.2.1–57 (Claudius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Polonius); 2.2.169–324 (Hamlet, Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern). But there is no need for us to specify additional passages; if you like the idea, you know which passages you want to assign.

This business of staging scenes has several good effects. For one thing, we have been impressed with how competent most students are, even the shy ones. The rehearsal gives them some confidence, and they almost always do quite well. (We should add that the casting is gender-blind, or almost so. Because there are far more male than female parts, we regularly ask women to play some male roles, though we confess that we have never cast a man in a female role.) Second, when students prepare to act a part, they begin to see the complexities, the multiplicity of ways that a speech or line or word may be delivered. Further, they begin to see how important tones of voice, pauses, and gestures can be.

Take, for instance, 3.4, the “closet” (private chamber) scene, in which Hamlet kills Polonius and then sternly—ferociously? almost insanely?—lectures the Queen. When he urges Gertrude to “Look here upon this picture, and on this” (3.4.54), exactly what are the pictures? From Marvin Rosenberg’s admirable The Masks of Hamlet—a massive account of the stage business that has developed over the centuries—we learn that there are three chief ways of staging this passage. There may be large portraits on the wall (students who choose this route will simply draw two large frames on the blackboard before the production begins), or two framed portraits on a table; or—the second of the three ways—the performers may use two miniature pictures (for instance, Hamlet may wear, hanging from a chain around his neck, a miniature of Hamlet
Senior, and Gertrude may wear a miniature of Claudius, either around her neck or on a bracelet. The third approach is to use no pictures other than the word-pictures that Hamlet evokes in his speeches.

If miniatures are used, and one miniature hangs on Hamlet’s chest and the other is in Gertrude’s bosom, the scene may be charged with sexual overtones as Hamlet closely grasps his mother and lifts the picture from her bosom. (In our notes to the students, we simply alert them to the several ways of playing the scene—the three methods that we have mentioned—and we also tell them that they may use a combination, e.g., there may be a large picture of Claudius on the wall, which Hamlet may contrast with a miniature of his father that he wears.)

Although it takes time to have students perform several passages, we believe that your students—the actors and the spectators—will enjoy the performances and will learn a good deal.

**A Note on Writing a Review**

Students enjoy writing reviews of a film. Most of them see lots of films, and thus they feel in this area at least they possess some real expertise and experience. The reviews that they write in our courses are lively and entertaining; the students are more honest and open about stating what they really think than they are in their assignments on literary works, where, unfortunately, they are inclined to worry too much about “what the professor thinks and wants to hear.”

The most common flaw in these reviews is that students tend to say what they think without explaining what led them to this or that response, judgment, conclusion. In one sense they are right to see a review of a film or novel or new book of non-fiction as an opportunity to express their own opinion: “This is my opinion.” Nothing wrong with that. But students need to realize that simply giving an opinion does not amount to much. A reviewer needs to do that but, at the same time, should explain what it is in the story, characterization, setting, etc., that led to this opinion: What is it based upon? If all that counted were the act of stating an opinion, there would be little need to write about it: you could simply tell yourself what you think. Writing means not only clarifying an opinion, a response, a judgment for yourself but also for the reader, the person to whom you are speaking, to whom you are seeking to make a connection.

Explicitly or implicitly, when we write a review, we are attempting both to state what we think and to convince our readers to think the same way that we do. You might say that this places us under an obligation: we must give the evidence in the film or the book that impelled us toward our opinion. A review would not be effective otherwise; it would be an opinion with nothing underneat supporting it.

If, for example, we decide that Derek Jacobi excelled in his performance of Claudius in Branagh’s film version of *Hamlet*, we want to highlight how he spoke his lines at an important moment, how he looked, how he acknowledged or ignored the others around him, how he responded to Gertrude, how he
addressed and engaged Hamlet, etc. When writing a review, we usually have only a limited amount of space: we have to be economical and concise. But we can be selective and yet still be specific. Remind your students that they need to be pointing to this, to that, example or set of examples in order to share their opinion with the reader. Whether we are analyzing a poem or writing a review, we must bring forward the evidence, the examples from the text or film itself that shape and support our conclusions.


**Scene-by-Scene Commentary**

In a moment we will offer a scene-by-scene commentary on the play, but we want to mention again that another commentary of this sort—and a very good one—is available in Alfred Harbage’s *A Reader’s Guide to Shakespeare* (1963). For a commentary of more than 900 pages, emphasizing theatrical productions, consult Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Hamlet* (1992). We make no claims for the originality of any of the following remarks. They are derived from decades of reading commentaries, seeing productions, teaching the play, and conversing with colleagues.

When we teach *Hamlet* in an introductory course, we usually allot five days to it, doing roughly an act per day. We spend part of at least two meetings having students perform a short scene or part of a scene. Our practice is to use volunteers for the first of these scenes, but we then usually assign students for any other scenes that we may want to stage, simply because we have found that some students who hesitate to volunteer will nevertheless gladly participate if asked. We give each actor a photocopy of the pages of the scene, on which we have jotted some minimal bits of direction, and we assign another student to serve as the director. Sometimes we recommend that the director read the relevant pages in Rosenberg’s book, so that he or she may try out some approaches. It is the responsibility of the students to meet twice for rehearsal. In order to make certain that they can indeed all meet, during the class meeting when we choose the performers, we set a time when they can meet to rehearse, e.g., Monday and Thursday, 4:00–6:00 P.M. The students are not expected to memorize the parts; while performing they read from the text, but they do engage in a certain amount of movement, e.g., sitting, embracing, gesticulating.

1.1 The play begins with soldiers and ends with a soldier’s funeral. Although the idea that Hamlet is a romantic, melancholy figure who cannot make up his mind still has currency, we tend to emphasize Hamlet’s energy, resourcefulness, courage, and even military skill. He is involved in a battle to the death, and we do not think it incongruous to conceive of Hamlet as a soldier. Fortinbras (literally “strong-in-arm”), you will recall, at the end of the play
says that had Hamlet become king, he would in all likelihood have “proved most royal.” (How Fortinbras could know this is, admittedly, unclear, but we assume that Shakespeare wanted his audience to take the comment seriously, and so we tend to interpret the play in a way that fits with this final evaluation.)

This opening scene is chiefly in blank verse, but most of the first twenty-five lines, chiefly short, often iambic, could pass as prose. These lines, though simple and direct, introduce the note of mystery. Further, as is apparent when one sees this scene on the stage, the element of unstabilizing doubt is strong: Francisco is the soldier on duty, so he ought to challenge the apparent interloper, but it is Bernardo (coming to relieve Francisco) who utters the first words, the challenging “Who’s there?” Later in the scene we will learn that Bernardo and Marcellus have seen the Ghost on two previous nights, so it is not surprising that Bernardo is jumpy and (hearing or seeing something) calls out “Who’s there?” Francisco’s response (“Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold”) is not an answer to the question, and it thus further indicates to us the state of uncertainty and confusion. Our point: Hamlet is not the only character in the play who is puzzled by his encounters and who is unsure of what is what and who is who.

In this commentary we will try to confine ourselves to the text, but here we want to mention that although we admire Kenneth Branagh’s film (1996), we are not wild about its opening, with its shots of Elsinor in snow, an immense statue of Hamlet Senior, a rasping noise, and (here we quote from the printed version of the screenplay) “CRASH! A body, from right of frame, bundles [Francisco] forcibly to the ground. On the frozen ground they struggle, dangerous flashing blades in the gloom.” All of this before the second line of dialogue is spoken. We think that if you simply read the first twenty lines aloud or have students perform them, students will see that none of Branagh’s embroidery is necessary.

Because the play was originally staged in daylight, Shakespeare has to inform his audience that the scene takes place at midnight, and this he does by having Bernardo say, “Tis now struck twelve,” a good dramatic hour. Francisco goes on to set the psychological scene: “Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart.” The uncertainty is emphasized by additional questions (“Who is there?” “Who hath relieved you?” “What, is Horatio there?”), all within the first twenty lines. We in the audience are kept in the dark. Marcellus says, “What, has this thing appeared again tonight?” He goes on to speak of “this dreaded sight,” and Horatio says, “Tush, tush, ’twill not appear,” but the spectator or reader still does not know what “this . . . sight” or “this apparition” or this “it” is.

Bernardo begins to narrate the events of “last night,” setting a cosmic stage (“When yond same star that’s westward from the pole / Had made his course t’ilume that part of heaven / Where now it burns”), and in the very act of narration the Ghost appears, almost as though he has been waiting for his cue. How the Ghost entered in Shakespeare’s theater we do not know. Perhaps he merely walked on, perhaps he rose through a trapdoor. Whose ghost is it? It is said to look like the king, but perhaps it is an imposter. Horatio asks, “What
art thou . . . ?" (again, the element of uncertainty), and when “by heaven” he charges it to speak, it stalks away. Marcellus says the Ghost is “offended,” but why? Because it is an evil spirit, disguised as the king, who cannot respond when charged “by heaven”? Or because it indeed is the king and is offended by Horatio’s charge that it “usurps” the night and the “fair and warlike form” of the dead king of Denmark? The audience thus far has been put into suspense and then partly gratified: we at last see the “thing” or “apparition,” but we still do not know whether it is the ghost of the king or a usurper, presumably an evil spirit in the form of the king. And all this within fifty lines.

Horatio informs us that “This bodes some strange eruption to our state,” and (whether the Ghost is or is not the dead king) we are ready to believe him. Marcellus tells the men to “sit down,” and presumably they do so, somewhat relaxing the tension—but only somewhat, since the narrative that Horatio proceeds to set forth, concerning King Hamlet and the Norwegians, is filled with anticipation of a future struggle. Bernardo conjectures that the Ghost is associated with the war with Norway; Horatio (evoking Julius Caesar) gives it a cosmic dimension. Probably we are so absorbed with the narrative that we are taken by surprise when the Ghost reappears.

Usually we linger a bit over Horatio’s speech, in order to make sure that the students pick up the important political background that it provides about the former kings of Denmark and Norway, the men whose sons bear the same name as their fathers—Hamlet and Fortinbras. The elder Hamlet, “our last king,” Horatio explains, fought a deadly duel with King Fortinbras of Norway. He states that old Fortinbras was incited by pride and that Hamlet’s father was obliged to accept the challenge.

It is not surprising that Horatio seeks to cast the king of his own country in a favorable light (though some scholars have wondered whether Horatio, who has come from Wittenberg University, is a Dane or not), but Shakespeare has crafted the line so that it is somewhat ambiguous. “Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride” is meant by Horatio to refer to Fortinbras, but when we hear the line it seems for a moment also to refer to Hamlet. The annotation in our text states, “refers to old Fortinbras, not the Danish king,” which bears witness to the ambiguity of the line: our editor feels that there is something in the line he needs to straighten out. He is right, but part of the meaning is in our response to the line before it is straightened out.

Our editor glosses “emulate” as “ambitious,” but in addition to this older meaning, we think that “emulate” also suggests “to strive to equal or excel, especially through imitation; to compete with successfully; to approach or attain equality with.” Shakespeare is prompting us to consider how these two kings are both different and the same, both of them moved by pride and honor, both of them setting an example that their sons in their different ways—Hamlet with much more complexity and difficulty—will respond to powerfully.

Horatio says that Hamlet’s success in the dual enabled him to gain Fortinbras’s lands. But now, in violation of the pledge which the old kings made before the duel (the winner gets the other’s lands), young Fortinbras is on the
march for revenge. Horatio then reports that young Fortinbras has “sharked up
a list of lawless resolutes” and is planning to regain what his father lost.

The shark is a predator of the sea—fierce, dangerous, deadly; here the word
connotes something of the angry, indiscriminate way that the shark feeds on
other fish—which looks forward to the imagery of food and eating in the next
lines. The word can also refer to a ruthless, greedy, dishonest person (e.g., a loan
shark)—which gives all the more charge to the word “lawless”—or to a person
unusually skilled in a particular activity (e.g., a card shark). As a verb, “shark”
means “to obtain by deceitful means; to practice or live by fraud and trickery.”
It's a wonderfully chosen word that reveals a central feature of both Fortinbras's
character and the kind of men he has enlisted in his army of mercenaries,
against whom Denmark is now hastily making preparations to defend itself.

“Lawless resolutes”: such is Fortinbras's force as Horatio apprehensively
describes it here. When we actually see the army in 4.4, it seems well-organized
and disciplined, a fine fighting force, capably led by a “hot” (Horatio's word)
but decisive and efficient Fortinbras. His narrow intensity is impressive, and to
an extent it dramatizes a limitation in young Hamlet, as he observes himself.
But while Fortinbras is more focused, not deterred by brooding doubts, he is for
that very reason less interesting than the self-examining Hamlet, who has so
many more elements in his character.

Why in fact is the Ghost walking? To warn the Danes against a Norwegian
threat? Or to warn against some other “feared events,” perhaps of a cosmic
nature? Later we will learn that it walks because its death is unavenged, but of
course none of the figures on the stage knows that the king was murdered, so
they have no reason to offer this explanation. The closest anyone comes to
touching on this point is Horatio’s suggestion that perhaps the Ghost appears
because one of the living may do something to “ease” it, but this hypothesis
appears along with several others, thereby emphasizing the uncertainty.

The cock crows, the Ghost mysteriously appears in various parts of the
stage (“’Tis here” “’Tis here”), and then it vanishes. Just as no one knows how
the Ghost appeared in the Elizabethan stage, no one knows how it vanished.
Conceivably it exited through one door just as another identically costumed
actor appeared briefly at a second door; or perhaps it disappeared through one
trapdoor and rose through another. The ambiguous nature of the Ghost is sus-
tained by the contrast between Marcellus’s assertion that it is “majestical” and
Horatio’s assertion that “it started, like a guilty thing / Upon a fearful sum-
mons” and that it cannot appear in the daylight. Marcellus goes on to suggest
that it may be an evil spirit, something that cannot appear at Christmas time.

Is the Ghost “an honest ghost” or is it, as Eleanor Prosser learnedly argues
in Hamlet and Revenge (1967), a demon impersonating Hamlet’s father, with
the aim of enticing Hamlet to damnation? Prosser assembles massive evidence
that Elizabethans did not regard a son as obligated to avenge the death of a
murdered father and massive evidence to the effect that most Elizabethan
revenge plays condemn revenge. Looking specifically at Hamlet, she argues that
the Ghost is hellish (i.e., a demon, not the spirit of Hamlet’s father) because it

urges revenge, it leaves when heaven is invoked and again when the cock crows, and it darts about suspiciously. Nevertheless, against all of her evidence, the writers of these pages believe that the Ghost is what it claims to be, the spirit of Hamlet's dead father. We take the play not to be about what Prosser in effect suggests it is chiefly about (Hamlet's escape from the devil's plot to ensnare his soul) but, rather, to be about a man's heroic fulfillment, at the expense of his life and the lives of others, to bring a murder to justice.

You may want to suggest to your students that they keep an eye out for passages concerned with Christianity. How Christian is the play? Probably the most explicitly Christian passages are Marcellus's speech here, the Ghost's later reference to purgatory, the scene in which Claudius prays, the burial of Ophelia, and Hamlet's comments on providence and on the Christian prohibition against suicide. On the other hand, all of these passages exist in a play in which revenge is never condemned. And it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that one of the moments when Christian doctrine is most in evidence is the passage when Hamlet decides not to kill the praying king (he believes that to kill the praying king would send Claudius to heaven rather than to hell), and it is precisely this bit of theological reasoning that has most deeply offended many viewers and readers.

Although 1.1 is filled with doubt, with surprise, and with dire talk, it ends lyrically, with the coming of dawn, described (not shown, of course, on the Elizabethan stage) by Horatio. We have moved from midnight to dawn and from armed figures and an armed Ghost to a description of the dawn walking in homespun clothing, i.e., we have moved into a more comfortable world—but only for a brief while.

1.2 This scene is a bit long to do in class with student actors, but we have sometimes done the first part, up through Hamlet's first line (“A little more than kin, and less than kind”), or even up through the end of Hamlet's first soliloquy.

In contrast to the “dark” and sparsely populated opening scene, 1.2 begins with a fanfare of trumpets (“Flourish”) and lots of colorfully dressed figures. Handsomely dressed members of the court crowd the stage, but Hamlet is set apart from these colorful figures, probably physically and certainly by black garments (“nighed color,” “inky cloak”). This contrast is evident whether the costumes are Elizabethan (doublet and hose) or modern, or something in between, as in Branagh's film, which was set in the late nineteenth century, with the women in ball gowns and the men in colorful military attire—except for Hamlet, in black. One of the characteristics of any tragic hero is his isolation—his sensibilities set him apart—here made visible by Hamlet's costume and probably by his position on the stage. Branagh's published text tells us that Hamlet stands at the other end of the hall, “a black silhouette.” Even when the tragic hero has a confidant such as Horatio he is, finally, alone, as we will see. Claudius engagingly—or is it unc-tuously?—summarizes the recent history of Denmark. He assures his hearers that although the dead king still is very much remembered, the time has come to go about new business. Claudius has married the queen, with the full knowledge and presumably the advice and consent of the court, and he thanks them for their help. He turns to the present difficulty, young Fortinbras.
The speech, again, seems highly competent, even masterful, but perhaps its very polish, its abundant and perhaps too-adept use of antitheses, makes a hearer uneasy, makes a hearer sense that Claudius is trying to make the hasty marriage acceptable by tying it to the funeral. Consider the following passage:

Therefore our sometime sister, now our Queen,
Have we, as 'twere, with a defeated joy,
With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral, and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife.

That image of one eye joyful and the other downcast (or perhaps dropping tears), as well as the mixture of “mirth in funeral” and “dirge in marriage” and “delight and dole,” is enough (a) to reveal Claudius’s skill as a shrewd politician and (b) to make us a bit queasy. The audience does not yet know that Claudius is a villainous hypocrite, but the lines certainly allow us to suspect hypocrisy.

A word about the marriage between Claudius and Gertrude. Hamlet will later call it incestuous, but if the Elizabethans regarded the marriage of a man to his sister-in-law as incestuous, why does Claudius go out of his way to speak of Gertrude as “our sometime sister, now our Queen”? Theoretically such a marriage was incestuous, but Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII, had married Catherine of Aragon, his sister-in-law, after the death of her husband, Henry’s brother, Prince Arthur. Before making this marriage he had sought advice and was assured it was acceptable. Later, after he became infatuated with Anne Boleyn (and anxious for a male heir), he had moral doubts and was assured that the marriage was not acceptable. In short, the Elizabethans were of two minds about whether such a marriage was incestuous; it seems that Claudius’s view was acceptable, and so was Hamlet’s.

The rest of this long speech by Claudius shows him efficiently going about his business as king, explaining to the court the state of affairs with Norway, and dispatching Cornelius and Voltemand to the king of Norway. We notice that whereas Hamlet Senior conquered Fortinbras Senior in battle, King Claudius—apparently not a heroic figure—prefers diplomacy; he instructs the messengers to tell old Norway to restrain young Fortinbras.

Claudius’s next speech is one of our favorites for revealing Shakespeare’s skill in suggesting character:

And now Laertes, what’s the news with you?
You told us of some suit. What is’t, Laertes?
You cannot speak of reason to the Dane
And lose your voice. What wouldst thou beg, Laertes,
That shall not be my offer, not thy asking?
The head is not more native to the heart,
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.
What wouldst thou have, Laertes?

If we ask students to perform this scene, in the annotated pages that we give them we call attention to Claudius's repetition of “Laertes”—an obvious attempt (presumably successful) to ingratiate himself. A master of what Dale Carnegie later formalized as *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Claudius names Laertes four times in nine lines, thus verbally caressing him. In our notes to student performers of the scene we suggest that perhaps Claudius put both hands on Laertes’s shoulders at the beginning of the last of these lines. Or perhaps he puts an arm around Laertes’s shoulders, or even around his waist.

Students will immediately see the effect of the repetition of “Laertes”; they are less likely, however, to notice another method Claudius uses in order to ingratiate himself with Laertes, his shift from the royal first person plural (“You told us of some suit”) to the first person singular (“my offer”), and in addressing Laertes the shift from “you” to the more intimate “thou.”

Laertes makes his brief speech (he came to witness Claudius’s coronation; Horatio will explain that he came for the funeral of Hamlet’s father), and Claudius—apparently deferring to Polonius in yet another ingratiating touch—grants Laertes’s wish, such is the power of a king. Claudius then turns to Hamlet, again putting aside the royal form: “my cousin” and “my son” (not “our cousin” and “our son”). His response is a one-line speech with a bitter pun, probably uttered as an aside, and when Claudius speaks another line and is greeted with another bitter one-line answer, Gertrude intervenes, telling Hamlet not to “forever” mourn his father. Hamlet, still bitter, picks up Gertrude’s word “seems” and insists that his feelings are genuine. This is one of the passages that have caused some interpreters to say that Hamlet is a nasty self-centered figure, always whining, morally quite inferior to King Claudius, who is doing his best to govern a kingdom that has recently lost its leader and that is threatened by Norway. (This interpretation never ceases to amaze us.) Claudius—a man who has murdered his brother—in the next speech has the chutzpah to tell Hamlet that his grief is “unmanly” and even “impious,” that “It shows a will most incorrect to heaven.” Claudius’s moralizing lecture continues:

Fie, ’tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
To reason most absurd, whom common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried.
From the first corse till he that died today,
“This must be so.”

The speech takes one’s breath away, especially when one recalls that “the first corse” was that of Abel, killed by his brother, Cain—a parallel to the murder that Claudius has committed.

Having delivered this stern rebuke, Claudius again seeks to ingratiate himself with Hamlet, in effect announcing that Hamlet is his heir (“let the world take note / You are the most immediate to our throne”). At the same time he makes it clear that he wants to keep Hamlet under surveillance: “For your intent / In going back to school in Wittenberg, / It is most retrograde to our desire.” The “our”—the royal plural—makes it clear that Claudius is issuing a command. Gertrude adds two lines, and Hamlet (in effect snubbing Claudius) says, “I shall in all my best obey you, madam.” Claudius politely ignores the slight, seizes the favorable aspect of Hamlet’s response, and puts the best gloss on it: “Why, ‘tis a loving and a fair reply.” Announcing that he is pleased by this response, he informs the court that when he drinks, the cannon will join the celebration, “Respeaking earthly thunder.” Readers and viewers may remember this passage (and the later sounds of the cannon when the king drinks) at the end of the play, when Fortinbras orders the soldiers to fire cannon as a tribute to the dead Hamlet.

Hamlet’s first soliloquy: Our text gives “sullied,” in the famous passage (“O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt”); the quartos read “sallied” (probably an alternative form of “sullied”) but the Folio reads “solid.” Students need not be bothered with a textual problem; “sallied” or “sullied” makes sense, but in our view “solid” goes better with “melt.”

In this soliloquy Hamlet calls attention to the Judeo-Christian prohibition against suicide, and in the final scene of the play (5.2) he will make explicit reference to “Providence,” but, interestingly, nowhere in the play does Shakespeare raise the issue of the relation of revenge to Christian morality. The point is important because one sometimes hears that Hamlet’s delay is due to a conflict in his mind between the Ghost’s command that Hamlet avenge his death and the biblical injunction, “To me belongeth vengeance” (Deuteronomy 32:35; Hebrews 10:30). To repeat: the issue of the morality of revenge is never raised in the play.

The soliloquy clearly reveals Hamlet’s sense of despair, despair engendered not only by the death of his father but by the hasty (as it seems to him) remarriage of his mother. Indeed, his mother’s action seems to be the greater cause of pain. We pause here to mention that this tragedy is unusual in that the hero’s tragic situation is not of his own making. For the most part, tragic heroes (e.g., Macbeth, Othello, Lear) take some action that brings about their suffering, but Hamlet has done nothing. He suffers, but not because of any action he has taken. And at this moment he gets, again without initiating the action, news of the Ghost, news that will somewhat lift his spirits. With Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo, Hamlet is among friends, though, as we will see, even Horatio cannot fully share his feelings. The scene ends (we are skipping a lot) with Hamlet significantly rejecting the formal farewell of the friends (“Our duty to your honor”) and substituting for it the much more intimate “Your loves, as mine to you.” The very last lines of the scene, like the last lines of the first scene, end with a note of hope.

With so much to cover in each scene and act and in the play as a whole, we always feel hard-pressed to decide what to include in (and what, reluctantly, to exclude from) class discussion. But we do try to give special attention to one or more of Hamlet’s soliloquies, both for their dramatic importance and for the immediate
connection they have for the students, who are familiar with many of the famous lines. In this soliloquy, as we have noted, Hamlet is in despair, especially from the pain of his mother's remarriage. “That it should come to this!” Hamlet cries out:

But two months dead—nay, not so much, not two.

Hamlet corrects himself sharply in the middle of the line, with three negatives. He is wounded by the hard fact of how recently it was that his mother remarried and insists on getting the period of time right, perhaps because to do otherwise would almost amount to excusing his mother's deed: no, she could not claim it was as long as two months; it was less than that.

So excellent a king, that was to this
Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother
That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth,
Must I remember?

“Excellent”: this is Hamlet's word to describe his father's quality as king. His father, as king, was outstanding, superior, but more than that. In his Dictionary (1755), Samuel Johnson defines excellent as meaning “of great virtue; of great worth; of great dignity; eminent in any good quality.” Virtue; dignity; worth; eminence. The word evokes a great deal about Hamlet's sense of his father's distinction and the specialness of his reign.

Hamlet's father was Hyperion to the satyr that is Claudius. Hyperion, in Greek mythology, is one of the Titans, the father of Helios, god of the sun; Selene, goddess of the moon; and Eos, goddess of the dawn. The satyr, on the other hand, is one of the deities of the mountains and the woods, with horns, tail, and, sometimes, the legs of a goat. The satyrs are portrayed in Greek mythology as the companions of Dionysus; they drink, dance, play music, and pursue nymphs. And in these activities, the satyr, for Hamlet, makes a fitting figure for the dissolute and lecherous Claudius.

Hamlet is angry, grievously hurt, and his intense language shows how much he has suffered—and how punished he is each time he remembers and recapitulates to himself what his mother and uncle have done. Hamlet, at this point, is overwhelmed by the profligate sexuality his mother has displayed in remarrying so quickly; he does not yet know about his father's murder—this will not come until the Ghost's appearance in 1.5. What comes painfully to mind for Hamlet now are images of his father's graciousness and sensitivity; he loved his wife so much that he wished that the winds might not blow too harshly on her face. The delicacy of this image—though the reference to the “heaven” also conveys its grandeur—is in striking contrast to the next one:

Why, she would hang on him
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on.

Hamlet represents his father as a man of power, of prominence, yet one who is lovingly attentive to his wife. She, however, cruelly hangs on him, her sexual appetite increasing each time it is satisfied. The image Hamlet uses for her suggests a person somewhat desperate, out of control, who cannot keep in check her erotic desires. The implication is that she could not handle being without a husband—a husband who is depicted here as a victim, a man oppressed by his wife’s sexual demands. Hamlet, too, may feel victimized by his mother’s sexuality, which saturates his consciousness and which in this speech hits home for him with sickening force. His mother might say in her own defense that she was deeply in love with her husband, but Hamlet’s vision of this love is coarse, burdensome—she “hang[s] on him,” consuming (as the image shifts) one meal after another.

The line concludes:

And yet within a month.

The two months have been reduced to less than two and, now, to less than a single month. And the impact of these adjustments in time reinforces Hamlet’s indignation. To Hamlet, it feels if anything less than a month; the new marriage seemed almost instantaneous. We realize we are stretching a point, but to us Hamlet suggests that his mother was unfaithful to her husband’s memory, and unfaithful to this memory with such disturbing speed that she may have been unfaithful to him even when he was alive. How much longer could Hamlet’s father have succeeded in satisfying her ever-growing sexual appetite? It was only a matter of time before she would betray him, if she had not already done so. The Ghost’s characterization of Claudius as “adulterate” (1.5.42) suggests that Gertrude had been unfaithful while married to Hamlet Senior.

This soliloquy also offers a fine opportunity to work with videos of the play. Nearly always, we focus on the text first, reading the lines aloud, exploring the meanings and implications of words and images, getting a feel for the tone, the movement, the organization. Then we turn to one or two video clips to reflect on how much or how little the actor has come close to our own interpretation and sense of how Shakespeare is characterizing Hamlet—or maybe we should say, how Hamlet is characterizing himself—through this speech.

Laurence Olivier, in his film version, begins this soliloquy in voiceover; we hear Hamlet’s words as we watch him move silently, thinking to himself and walking slowly in the shadowy hall that Claudius, Gertrude, and the others have just left. But we see and hear Olivier himself uttering the bitter words, “Nay, not so much, not two,” as though this point is one he cannot keep held within. He does the same thing later, with “and yet within a month,” emphasizing once more the unmistakable speed of his mother’s remarriage: he cannot think of this in silence.

While Olivier’s tone is haunted, soft, painfully internalized, Kenneth Branagh’s in his film is fiercer, angrier, more aggressively agonized. Through his tone of voice he makes his contempt for Claudius very vivid in the “Hyperion to a satyr” contrast, and as he declares “Heaven and earth / Must I remember,”
he holds his hands against his head, wishing he could protect himself from the memories and images that cut into his consciousness.

This might be a good occasion for you to explain to students that there is a long, rich, complicated tradition of “playing Hamlet,” and that indeed each new Hamlet is more or less obliged somehow to make his Hamlet different. When Branagh performed the part on the stage (and later on film) he was keenly aware of how the great Olivier had done the part. One way of understanding Branagh’s performance in his film is in fact to perceive it as a response to Olivier’s, every detail of which Branagh knows and is acting (or, rather, reacting) against.

This movement from the text to the film helps to remind students that Hamlet is a work to be read—enjoyed and explicated—and a work to be acted, brought to life anew in each production. Often, we have found that watching a film clip—say, of one of the soliloquies—enables students to understand a word or line or image that they could not quite grasp while they were reading the text on their own. Sometimes, too, it works in the other direction; the students will conclude that an actor is misinterpreting a line, misrepresenting the tone of the speech as (according to the students) Shakespeare wants it to be heard and experienced.

1.3 This rather domestic scene with Laertes, Ophelia, and Polonius comes between Hamlet’s plan to meet the Ghost and the meeting itself. It is sometimes said to relieve the tension, but it might also be said to increase the tension: we listen with some interest to these lightweight people—but perhaps we also have, at least at the edges of our minds, thoughts about how Hamlet and the Ghost will meet.

Laertes has inherited something of his father’s windiness, and in his dispensing of worldly knowledge he also resembles his father. Ophelia, significantly, has little to say in the scene; her longest speech occupies six lines, but most of her speeches consist of one line or half a line, such as “Do you doubt that?” and “No more but so?” Some recent Ophelias, with heightened feminist consciousness, have delivered these lines forcefully, or playfully, rather than meekly. And during Laertes’s long speech some Ophelias have glared, smiled contemptuously or condescendingly, or in other ways indicated their independence. Still, these shows of assertiveness surely are something new, and they are not easily harmonized with some of her other comments, such as (to her father) “I do not know, my lord, what I should think” and “I shall obey, my lord.” On the other hand, she is certainly not without spirit. After enduring Laertes’s thirty-four-line lecture, she amusingly urges him to follow his own advice.

“Enter Polonius” the text says, but how does he enter? Given his propensity to eavesdrop, in some productions he enters silently at the rear, unseen by Ophelia and Laertes, and he observes them for a while before he makes his presence known. What to make of Polonius’s advice? It can be delivered mechanically or absent-mindedly, making Polonius seem a fool. But certainly much of the advice is sound, and at least half a dozen lines (probably more) have found their way into common speech with no ironic implications, e.g., “Neither a borrower nor a lender be,” “The apparel oft proclaims the man,” and “This above
all, to thine own self be true.” Putting aside this last bit for the moment, one can say that Polonius’s advice consists of worldly wisdom, much of it venerable, with sources in Isocrates, Cato, and other ancients. Is it good advice? In William Blake’s words (though we can’t recall the source), “Good advice for Satan’s kingdom.” Consider “Give thy thoughts no tongue.” We can all agree that there are times when it is right to hold one’s tongue (not just shrewd and self-serving, but morally correct), but Polonius’s words easily include advice to be hypocritical. “Neither a borrower nor a lender be,” but surely there are times when we should be generous, willing to lend money even though it may not be returned. “Beware / Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in, / Bear’t that the opposed may beware of thee.” Perhaps Laertes heeds this advice too well; once he enters into the quarrel, he will stop at nothing, not even at the use of a poisoned foil. The bit of advice that is perhaps most memorable is

This above all, to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Exactly what “self” does Polonius have that he can be “true” to it? If he is essentially a somewhat fatuous dispenser of platitudes, and one who fawns on the king, is this the self he should be true to? As for Laertes, he talks about honor, and in 5.2 he is so concerned with his honor that he accepts Hamlet’s apology only tentatively, explaining that before he fully accepts it he wishes to consult “some elder masters of known honor”—but while he is saying this very line he holds in his hand a weapon he knows has been tipped with poison. If anyone in the play strives to be true to himself, it is Hamlet. For what it’s worth, when the writer of this paragraph discusses in class the idea of being true to oneself, he customarily mentions the scene in Ibsen’s Peer Gynt when Peer, an individualist whose motto has been “Peer, to thyself be enough,” finds that by living this sort of life he has lost himself. He strips off layer upon layer of an onion, each layer representing a human relationship that he has cast off, and of course he finds there is no core, no self, because, Ibsen suggests, the nature of the self is social. Another way of getting at this idea is to look at Frost’s “The Silken Tent” (in our text), where Frost makes the point that the tent stands up because it is tied down by guy lines, “countless silken ties of love and thought / To everything on earth the compass round.” A discussion of this sort does, admittedly, get pretty far from the play, from talk about Shakespeare’s art, about Hamlet’s problem, about revenge, about tragedy, but we think it is worth it. It’s our guess that students will never again speak of “being true to themselves” without thinking hard about what they mean.

To get back to the play, and to 1.3, we like to tell students that although Shakespeare’s genius is evident in the famous lines, some of which we have just quoted, it is evident too in Polonius’s “Affection, pooh,” his contemptuous (and contemptible?) but marvelously revealing response to Ophelia’s comment that Hamlet “has made many tenders of his affection.” Polonius, full of worldly wis-
dom, cannot imagine that Prince Hamlet may indeed love Ophelia and will not seek to seduce her. We mentioned that the tragic hero is isolated from others; certainly Hamlet’s world is not Polonius’s. And, not surprisingly, in his last speech in this scene, Polonius forbids Ophelia from maintaining any contact with Hamlet, which, of course, serves to isolate Hamlet still further, depriving him of a connection with a loving, decent woman.

1.4 The setting is the cold guard-platform on the battlements, but the flourish of trumpets and the firing of cannon (“two pieces go off”) remind us that Claudius and his court are comfortably reveling. Hamlet’s comments on this habit of firing cannon when the king drinks are worth discussing in class. First, we notice that although Hamlet is “native” and “to the manner born” (i.e., he is familiar with the custom from birth), he dislikes the custom; he is isolated, separated from his fellows. Second, commentators who see Hamlet as prone to delay because he thinks too much see in the long speech he makes just before the Ghost appears a tendency to philosophize, to generalize. The argument goes thus: Hamlet begins with a specific situation (cannon being fired when the king drinks), and from this he moves, first, to commenting that Danes drink too much and then that because they are known for their heavy drinking they have a bad reputation that overshadows their good qualities. From this he goes on to reflect about “some vicious mole of nature” or “the stamp of one defect” that destroys a person. He gives several possibilities: the mole (blemish) may be (1) “in their birth—wherein they are not guilty,” or (2) it may be “some complexion” (i.e., a dominant trait of temperament), or (3) it may be “some habit.” When he goes on to say that it may be “nature’s livery, or fortune’s star,” we may be justified in thinking that we are not quite clear about the categories, but in any case we do understand his point that whatever the virtues of the Danes, in the view of other people they “take corruption / From that particular fault.”

The gist of the entire passage is clear enough, but the details are obscure, especially the end of the speech: “The dram of evil / Doth all the noble substance often dout, / To his own scandal.” (The passage appears only in Q2, and what in our text appears as “evil” in Q2 is “eale,” usually taken to be an error for “evil” but perhaps a word whose meaning we have lost. And where our text gives “often dout,” Q2 gives “of a doubt.”) In any case, some critics, as we have said, see in this episode a tendency for Hamlet to move from the particular to the general, or (to put it severely) to lose sight of the immediate issue. For them, this is Hamlet’s tragic flaw. (We disagree.)

This speech about the “vicious mole of nature” is sometimes regarded as Shakespeare’s discussion of Aristotle’s concept of hamartia, a term that used to be translated as “tragic flaw” but now is more usually translated as “tragic error.”

Despite the common image of Hamlet as melancholy, romantic, and indecisive, in the latter part of this scene he acts swiftly and bravely. He vigorously rejects the entirely reasonable warnings of Marcellus and Horatio, and he bravely approaches the Ghost. In fact, when he defies his comrades, he probably draws his sword when he says, “I’ll make a Ghost of him that lets me”
(“lets” of course means “hinders,” as in a let ball in tennis, not “allows”). A Hamlet who draws his sword here may then hold it in front of him, using the hilt as a cross that offers protection. Hamlet exits, following the Ghost; he will receive the information that will change his life and all of Denmark.

1.5 The Ghost says Hamlet is bound to “revenge” the father’s death, and this issue has given rise to an immense amount of comment. We have already referred to Eleanor Prosser, who in her book argues that Hamlet does not have a duty to avenge his father. A good deal of comment along these lines argues that Shakespeare regularly recommends forgiveness, for instance, Cordelia forgives Lear. On the other hand, Macduff vows vengeance on Macbeth for killing his family, and no critics object.

The Ghost imposes restrictions: “Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven.” Hamlet now has acquired devastating knowledge (his uncle has murdered his father, and his beloved mother not only has married promptly but married the murderer), and he has also acquired the duty to avenge his father. This is not all; he must, again, not contrive against his mother, and he must not taint his mind, i.e., he must not become so consumed with hatred that he himself becomes villainous. If readers or viewers ever thought that he should heed the platitudinous remarks of his uncle and his mother in 1.2, to the effect that his grief was excessive and that he should reconcile himself to his father’s death, surely they now realize that, given the new information and the new charges laid upon him, his grief can only deepen.

In the ensuing soliloquy he is not mad but he is somewhat hysterical (consider his odd injunction to himself to record his observation that a villain can smile), as well he might be, given his experience. His mother is a “most pernicious woman,” his uncle a “villain, villain, smiling damned villain.” When Horatio and Marcellus return, Hamlet goes on to speak what Horatio accurately calls “wild and whirling words,” but, again, one must consider the revelations that have been made to him.

When the Ghost speaks from below, telling the mortals to swear, it is unclear what they say or do. The stage direction (“They swear”) is an editorial addition—there is no such authentic direction and there is no dialogue. Possibly they simply place their hands on the cross-like hilt of the sword, or they may kiss the sword.

Why does Hamlet caution his friends that he may put on an “antic disposition”? In the source, it was known who killed the king, and Hamlet was guarded lest he attack the killer. He therefore feigned idiocy in order to deceive the guards into thinking he was harmless. But in Shakespeare’s play Claudius has no reason to think that Hamlet knows of the murder, and therefore Claudius has no reason to fear Hamlet. By feigning madness Hamlet can only attract attention to himself and cause Claudius to be suspicious. The commonest explanation for Hamlet’s announcement that he may feign madness is that (given the burden placed upon him by the Ghost’s revelations and commands) perhaps he knows that he will not always be able to control himself and he therefore is cautioning his fellows about his possible odd behavior. Later in the play he insists he is not mad (e.g., in 3.4, when he says to Gertrude, “I essen-
tially am not in madness, / But mad in craft”), but in 5.2, when he apologizes to Laertes, he twice alludes to his madness and his “sore distraction.”

The scene ends not with a couplet (a fairly common way of ending a scene) but with an unrhymed line following the couplet, which, so to speak, weakens what might otherwise be a strong ending. That is, the vigor of a pair of rhymed lines (“The time is out of joint. O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right”) is diminished by “Nay, come, let’s go together.” Possibly Horatio and Marcellus have stepped back, maybe even bowing, to allow their social superior to go out first, but Hamlet insists on their leaving with him, partly out of courtesy, partly out of a need for human closeness.

2.1 This scene, like the next (the act consists of only two scenes), is largely concerned with spying, in this instance a father spying (through his agent, Reynaldo) on his son. Hamlet’s father was, from all that we are told about him, a heroic figure; the father whom we see in this scene is a very different sort of person. Reynaldo protests that the false charges Polonius suggests be spoken of Laertes would “dishonor” Laertes (line 27), but in fact they dishonor Polonius. Polonius in this scene is despicable, but he is also something of a comic figure, which is to say that the first part of the scene offers some comic relief.

Ophelia’s report of Hamlet’s visit to her closet (private chamber) has been variously interpreted. Our own view is—this seems perfectly obvious to us—that Hamlet, having been cut off by Ophelia, as Polonius had ordered (“I did repel his letters and denied / His access to me”), has now lost not only his father and (for all purposes) his mother but also the woman whom he loves, and this final loss has very nearly driven him mad. Ophelia says he looked at her “As if he had been loosèd out of hell / To speak of horrors,” and indeed he can speak of horrors, the report of the Ghost, who has been loosed out of purgatory. Polonius interprets Hamlet’s behavior as a sign that Hamlet is “mad for thy love,” which is almost right, but, more exactly, we take it that Hamlet is maddened not by love (Polonius’s view) but by Ophelia’s rejection of his love. His mother (by her marriage) shut the door on him, and the woman whom he loves has now shut him out of her life. Ophelia’s report is of his anguished farewell to his beloved.

There are, of course, other interpretations. Bradley sees in Hamlet’s visit a stratagem: Hamlet is putting on the antic disposition he mentioned earlier (he knows Ophelia will report his behavior to Polonius, who will report it to the king). Why? In order to disarm Claudius, i.e., in order to seem a harmless lunatic, mad for love. In our view, the description is too convincing, too moving, for us to take Hamlet’s behavior as feigned. The most astounding interpretation we have encountered, however, is that of Harold Goddard, who in *Yale Review* (March 1946) argues that the episode reported by Ophelia never really took place. The whole thing, Goddard says, is Ophelia’s hallucination; nothing in the play, he argues, confirms it, i.e., Hamlet never mentions the episode and no other character claims to have witnessed it. To the extent that there is no scrap of evidence in the play that specifically supports the view that the episode

actually occurred, Goddard is right, but it seems to us so clear that Ophelia is speaking the truth that no confirmation is needed.

Polonius, we believe, is right in thinking that Hamlet’s behavior shows “the very ecstasy [i.e., madness] of love,” but wrong in not seeing that the “ecstasy” is caused by the anguish Hamlet experiences when rejected by Ophelia. A few more words about Polonius: the stage direction in Q2, “Old Polonius,” easily lets us think of him as slightly doddering. Notice line 6, “Marry, well said, very well said. Look you, sir,” with its repetition and its insistence on being heeded (note also “Mark you” in line 42), and especially lines 50–51, when he loses his train of thought, lapses into prose, and then asks, “Where did I leave?”

2.2 This scene, the longest of the play, affords several passages that students can effectively perform in class. Consider the possibility of asking students to do the first thirty-nine lines, in which the king and queen talk with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This unit begins with Claudius preparing to make use of the two young men—the scene will end, many lines later, with Hamlet preparing to make use of the Players—and with a little coaching the student actor who plays Claudius can convey the cunning that lies beneath the apparent geniality. Although Claudius seems to be solicitous for Hamlet’s sake, his real concern is his own well-being, and when in lines 14–17 he asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to “gather” and to “glean” information from Hamlet, he is in effect urging them to spy.

The queen immediately adds a bit of flattery (“Good gentlemen, he hath much talked of you”), and she ends her short speech with a thinly disguised offer of bribe: “Your visitation shall receive such thanks / As fits a king’s remembrance.” Then comes this dialogue:

Rosencrantz. Both your Majesties
    Might, by the sovereign power you have of us
    Put your dread pleasures more into command
    Than to entreaty.

Guildenstern. But we both obey
    And here give up ourselves in the full bent
    To lay our service freely at your feet,
    To be commanded.

King. Thanks, Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern.

Queen. Thanks, Guildenstern and gentle Rosencrantz.

The repetition of the word “both” (in the first line of Rosencrantz’s speech and the first line of Guildenstern’s) probably goes unnoticed, but no one can miss the almost comic repetition in the lines of the king and queen, where the names of the friends are reversed. The passage hints at the interchangeability of these two friends, two ciphers, we might say, which leads us to quote Goethe’s shrewd remark in Wilhelm Meister:
What these two persons are and do [Wilhelm says] it is impossible to rep-
resent by one. . . . These soft approaches, this smirking and bowing, this
assenting, wheedling, flattering, this whisking agility, this wagging of the
tail, this allness and emptiness, this legal knavery, this ineptitude and insi-
pidity, . . . how can they be expressed by a single man? There ought to be
at least a dozen of these people . . . for it is only in society that they are any-
thing. They are society itself, and Shakespeare showed no little wisdom and
discernment in bringing in a pair of them. Besides, I need them as a couple
that may be contrasted with the simple, noble, excellent Horatio.

(When we coach students for the scene, we usually read this passage to them
and briefly discuss it.)

Another scene that acts well in class and helps students to see something of
the ways in which Shakespeare characterizes his figures is the episode in which
Polonius diagnoses Hamlet and reads Hamlet’s letter while the king and queen,
barely able to contain themselves, listen to him. Polonius is so full of himself, so
confident of his perceptiveness, that he probably doesn’t realize he is lying when
he tells Claudius and Gertrude that he had perceived Ophelia’s love for Hamlet
“Before [his] daughter told [him].”

Soon after Polonius proposes using Ophelia as bait (“I’ll loose my daughter to
him”) so that Claudius can verify Polonius’s diagnosis, a stage direction reads,
“Enter Hamlet reading a book.” Some directors, following a suggestion first made
by John Dover Wilson, have Hamlet enter a dozen lines earlier, unseen; he hears
the plot, retreats, and then enters more audibly. The idea behind this staging is to
communicate to the audience that in the next scene, 3.1, when Hamlet speaks to
Ophelia, he is really speaking for the benefit of the hidden Claudius and Polonius.
You may want to raise the issue now and discuss it when you talk about 3.1.

Hamlet’s conversations with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, after Polonius
leaves, also work well in the classroom. The passage begins with conventional
phrases from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (“My honored lord,” “My most dear
lord”), phrases that contrast with the earnestness or almost boyish enthusiasm of
Hamlet’s “My excellent, good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Ah,
Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do you both?” But Hamlet’s remarks soon turn bit-
ter. Of course in the first dozen or so lines he does not yet know that they are in
effect spies, but presumably he senses (and we know) that they are not people with
whom he can speak with ease, and very soon he sees through them, saying directly,
“Were you not sent for?” They are no match for Hamlet, and a dozen or so lines
later the two collapse and Guildenstern confesses, “My lord, we were sent for.”

You may want to comment on Shakespeare’s use of prose, or, rather, his uses
of prose. We saw Polonius slip into prose when he lost his train of thought in
2.1.50; later in the play, when Ophelia becomes mad, she speaks in prose, a form
that, in a play that is predominantly in blank verse, can indicate a loss of com-
mand of language. We have already seen prose used for Hamlet’s letter, in 2.2,
where Shakespeare wants to set off a form of discourse from the normal language
of the play. (In blank verse plays, letters and proclamations normally are in prose.)
In short, Shakespeare uses prose for a variety of purposes, and his prose is as shapely, as artful, as his poetry. Although prose is commonly regarded as the language of normal speech, we should remember that despite M. Jourdain’s joke in *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, prose is not what most of us speak. Normally we utter repetitive, shapeless, and often ungrammatical torrents; prose is something very different—a sort of literary imitation of speech at its most coherent.

Shakespeare often uses prose for small talk, such as Hamlet’s conversations with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but he uses it also for princely reflections on “What a piece of work is a man” in the present scene. Perhaps he uses prose here because in the very act of speaking about man’s nobility he wishes to undercut the assertions—the “goodly frame” is for Hamlet a “sterile promontory,” and the creature who is “like an angel” is for him the “quintessence of dust.” In any case Shakespeare conducts his prose as carefully as his verse. One might, in fact, contrast this speech, with its deeply moving contrasts, with Polonius’s rather dotty verse speech describing Hamlet, which also abounds in contrasts, but entertainingly pointless ones: “My liege and madam, to expostulate / What majesty should be, what duty is, / Why day is day, night night, And time is time, / Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time.”

In the Player’s speech, as in a letter or a proclamation in a play, Shakespeare uses a distinctive style—as he will again in the play-within-the-play—to separate it from its context. True, in the Player’s speech he uses blank verse rather than, say, octosyllabic couplets, but it sounds different from the rest of the blank verse in *Hamlet*. Conveying this difference to students is not easy, however, because to inexperienced readers most of Shakespeare’s verse sounds pretty strange, pretty extravagant. That’s one reason why when we teach *Hamlet* we call attention to the apparent naturalness of the verse in the very first scene, for instance, in such a speech as “Horatio says ’tis but our fantasy, / And will not let belief take hold of him / Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us,” or even in the heightened language at the end of 1.1: “But look, the morn in russet mantle clad / Walks o’er the dew on yon high eastward hill.” This language, they can see (with a little help), differs from the Player’s bombastic speech: “The rugged Pyrrhus, like th’ Hyrcanian beast,” or “The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms, / Black as his purpose, did the night resemble / When he lay couchèd in th’ ominous horse. . . .” Students may at first not quite hear the difference, but as you go on with the speech they probably will perceive its difference, its strangeness, at least in some lines.

But of course you won’t talk only about the style of the speech, or even about the nice bit of imitation where “Did nothing” is emphasized (some would say “enacted”) by the nothingness that makes up the rest of the line:

So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood,
   And like a neutral to his will and matter
Did nothing.

A question: Is the “hellish Pyrrhus” an image of Claudius, or is he an image of the avenging Hamlet? Or both? Certainly he resembles Hamlet in his quest
for revenge and in (temporary) paralysis, and one can also argue that Pyrrhus, “horribly tricked / With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,” anticipates Hamlet, who is at least partly responsible for the deaths not only of Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Claudius but also of Ophelia and Laertes (and perhaps we can add Gertrude). Our own view is that in the picture of Pyrrhus we see a bloodthirsty avenger who is an image of what Hamlet might be if he went cold-bloodedly or hot-bloodedly about his task; that is, ultimately the spectator (on reflection) contrasts Hamlet with Pyrrhus, to Hamlet’s credit.

The scene ends with a long soliloquy in which Hamlet reproves himself, a soliloquy that provides some of the evidence for the view that Hamlet delays, that Hamlet is a man who cannot make up his mind, that Hamlet knows what he should do but invents excuses for not doing it. And yet, would one want him to go about his work as Pyrrhus does? Best not to be dogmatic here. Many intelligent readers and spectators have felt that Hamlet’s plan to confirm the honesty of the Ghost (“the spirit that I have seen / May be a devil”) is mere stalling; others have felt that it is entirely reasonable and, further, quite in character for a man who is thoughtful, unlike (for instance) the impetuous Laertes, who is easily manipulated by Claudius.

3.1 “To be, or not to be” is among the most famous lines in Shakespeare, and the soliloquy in which it occurs is probably the most extensively discussed passage in Shakespeare. In reading some of the scholarship, one inevitably recalls James Joyce’s comment (well, OK, it’s a comment that Joyce puts into the mouth of Buck Mulligan), “Shakespeare is the happy hunting ground of all minds that have lost their balance.” Rather than seek to review the arguments about the precise meanings of certain words and about the degree to which the speech is about human existence as opposed to being about Hamlet’s particular problems, we refer you to Harold Jenkins’s Arden edition (1982) of Hamlet, pp. 484–490.

Spectators last saw Hamlet when he was energized by his plot to trap Claudius; now, in the soliloquy, he meditates. His problem is not merely to find a way to kill Claudius but to find some meaning in life, in a world of injustice and infidelity. Here again we call attention to the tragic hero as someone isolated from others, isolated by his heightened consciousness. True, Hamlet casts a wide net in his meditations; he has not (for instance) personally suffered “the law’s delay.” We can say, however, that his reflections are significantly rooted in his experience. If he has not in any very obvious way experienced “the insolence of office,” he has nevertheless experienced Claudius’s power to prevent him from returning to Wittenberg, and with Ophelia’s rejection he has experienced “the pangs of disprized [i.e., unvalued] love.”

Incidentally, “disprized” is the Folio reading; Q2 has “despiz’d.” A small difference, but there are so many small differences that no two modern eclectic editions of Hamlet are the same. And while we are touching on small textual matters, we want to mention that when, after this soliloquy, Ophelia first addresses Hamlet and asks “How does our honor for this many a day?” he replies, in F (the text chiefly used in our book), “I humbly thank you; well, well, well.” In Q2 there is only one “well,” and many editors take F’s repetition to be
an unauthorized actor’s addition—and indeed it may well be. No one doubts that this is the sort of thing that actors do, and F affords several examples. Still, and here is our point, the larger issue is this: Is the text of a play the play that the author drafts, or the play that the actors perform, with revisions made in the course of rehearsals and perhaps with the permission (or reluctant permission) of the dramatist? Since Shakespeare was a member of the company that performed his plays, we can be sure that he was aware of actors’ interpolations. What he thought of them is something we cannot be sure of. Once a director has settled on a text, there is still the problem of how to deliver the lines. It’s too simple to say, “Just speak the lines, don’t ‘interpret’ them, don’t ‘give a reading’ of them.” One must interpret them, one must give a reading. In the present instance, does Hamlet speak “Well, well, well” bitterly? Absent-mindedly? Cautiously? The verbal assault on Ophelia is shocking and distressing, especially since we have no doubt that Hamlet in the main is a noble figure. An occasional critic has argued that Hamlet thinks Gertrude is eavesdropping and that his words are really directed at her. We find this view unconvincing, but we do believe that the attack on women is prompted chiefly by Hamlet’s thoughts of Gertrude, though the words fall on Ophelia’s ears. In any case, surely the words are provoked by the unendurable distress he has experienced, caused by (a) the death of his father; (b) the murderer’s apparent success (the unsuspected Claudius rules Denmark); (c) Gertrude’s swift marriage to the murderer; and (d) Ophelia’s rejection of Hamlet’s love. We might also add (e) Hamlet’s awareness that his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spying on him, but in the context of these other agonizing experiences, their treachery is almost beneath attention. And we might also add (f) Dover Wilson’s theory that Hamlet has heard Polonius tell the king that he and the king should eavesdrop on Hamlet’s conversation with Ophelia—but we do not believe this to be the case.

In any case, Hamlet’s comments on the discrepancy between appearances and reality (e.g., “I have heard of your paintings, too, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another”) have already been anticipated by several passages in the play. The most notable anticipation is Claudius’s own reflection about cosmetics earlier in this scene, in the speech immediately preceding “To be, or not to be,” when in an aside Claudius comments on Polonius’s assertion that often with “pious action we do sugar o’er / the devil himself.” Claudius’s words are:

O, ’tis too true!
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!
The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plastering art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.

Claudius’s words are very important because they seem to confirm that he is as guilty as the Ghost claimed. His words indicate that his conscience torments him: he recognizes that his pious actions conceal the work of a man who
(in the word that Polonius used) is the devil himself. But it is not clear what Claudius is, or might be, guilty of: Is he referring here to the murder of his brother, or to the over-hasty marriage to Gertrude, or to both?

Whatever its exact source, Claudius's guilt cuts him like the lash of a whip—he feels its searing pain. “Smart” is a keenly chosen word, wonderfully fitting in this context. It means, first, “with a stinging sensation.” But, second, it implies mental alertness, shrewdness, intelligence, as if to suggest that the lash itself knows the depth and degree of Claudius's guilty conscience. Claudius is looking inward, with self-contempt, and he sounds in his awareness of his inauthenticity a little like Hamlet in some of his brooding soliloquies.

In the next lines, Claudius compares himself to a “harlot.” This word originally referred to a vagabond, beggar, rogue, rascal, villain, low fellow, knave, and (by the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries) a man of loose life, a fornicator; later, it came to refer to an unchaste woman, a prostitute, a strumpet, though it could apply to men as well. Claudius is suggesting that he is as false as a whore, who commits sexual sin while making herself look pretty—attractive on the outside, ugly within. To put the point more exactly: Claudius is saying that the harlot’s cheek is to his deed as the harlot’s makeup is to the fine-sounding (but false and falsifying) words he uses. Perhaps the cheek is pockmarked, scarred from smallpox, implying that this woman can only make her way in life by trying to cover up what she looks like and selling her body. The sexual reverberations of these lines may intimate that what is really on Claudius's mind is not the murder but the remarriage or, more likely still, the connection of the murder to the marriage. Possibly he wanted Gertrude as much as or more than he wanted the crown, and it was for this reason that he killed his brother.

In some productions, these lines are cut, perhaps because the director does not want Claudius to expose himself to the audience before the dumbshow and the Players' spoken play in 3.2. Apparently some directors conclude that if the lines are retained, 3.2 loses its suspense. On the other hand, one could argue that the suspense would still be there, just in a different form. The audience would come to 3.2 in possession of this revelation in 3.1 spoken by Claudius himself. The question, How will the King react?, will be vivid and suspenseful in either case.

When Hamlet suddenly asks Ophelia, “Where's your father?” he may be manifesting his antic disposition (the question seems to come out of nowhere), or he may have seen the arras stir (in some productions, Polonius sticks his head out in order to see or to hear better, and Hamlet catches a glimpse of him), or he may see a foot protruding beneath the arras. In Branagh's film, responding to what Branagh's stage direction calls “a tiny noise,” Ophelia “glances across the room. And then it dawns.” Best, in our view, Hamlet may just suddenly—mysteriously, instinctively—sense that something is wrong, that he is being spied on.

The scene ends with Claudius correctly perceiving that Hamlet’s condition is not due merely to love of Ophelia. In his next-to-last speech in the play, Claudius
astutely speaks of Hamlet’s “brains still [i.e., continually] beating” on a “something-settled [i.e., lodged] matter in his heart,” and here he puts his finger on Hamlet’s distinctive quality, a mind that cannot dismiss what he has experienced.

3.2 Hamlet’s speech about acting and about the nature of drama may well tell us something about Shakespeare’s own ideas, but we may also connect it with Hamlet’s own character, particularly with his intense concern to get things right—again, that continually beating brain. The comment that drama holds the mirror up to nature, showing “virtue her own feature, scorn her own image,” is ancient. Donatus attributed it to Cicero, and it was a Renaissance commonplace. In particular, the idea was especially relevant to satiric comedy. The theory basically holds that a spectator watches the play, sees how foolish certain behavior is (e.g., miserliness, or jealousy, or love-sickness), and, not wanting to be like the absurd person on the stage, reforms his or her own behavior. Whether anyone today believes this idea about the social function of comedy is perhaps questionable, but it is worth thinking about Bernard Shaw’s formulation of it in the Preface to his Complete Plays (1931):

If I make you laugh at yourself, remember that my business as a classic writer of comedies is “to chasten morals with ridicule”; and if I sometimes make you feel like a fool, I have by the same action cured your folly, just as the dentist cures your toothache by pulling out your tooth. And I never do it without giving you plenty of laughing gas.

After the Players leave the stage, Horatio enters, the true friend, in contrast with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom Hamlet now dismisses from the scene. Hamlet tells Horatio that he has selected him as his special friend because Horatio is a stoic. Horatio is:

As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that Fortune’s buffets and rewards
Hast ta’en with equal thanks. . . .

(There is a pun in “suffering”: undergoing; experiencing pain.) Hamlet continues in this vein, praising the stoical man, the man who is “not a pipe for Fortune’s finger,” the man who “is not passion’s slave.” Such a man, he says, is Horatio, and therefore Hamlet has taken him to his bosom. We must believe that Hamlet’s characterization of Horatio is apt, and we can see why Hamlet admires him, but it is also appropriate to point out that the very qualities that Hamlet praises in Horatio are qualities that make him less than Hamlet, less than a tragic hero. Hamlet’s intense feeling or obsessiveness (remarked on by Claudius at the end of 3.1, when Claudius speaks of Hamlet’s “Brains still beating” on a “something-settled matter in his heart”) is part of the essence of a tragic hero, whose response to experience is not stoical acceptance but rather a passionate and an everlasting “no.” The stoic is an unimpassioned bystander, not a heroic doer, not one who feels an obligation to set the time right.
The dumbshow has caused a good deal of odd comment: Why, critics ask, does Claudius tolerate the sight of the crime in the dumbshow, since he finds the sight intolerable when the Players follow it up in a spoken performance? Answers vary. The chief answers are: (1) Claudius doesn’t see the dumbshow because he has been chatting with Gertrude; (2) the printed text mistakenly conflates two versions, i.e., in one version there was a dumbshow, to which the king responded, and in another version there was a spoken text, to which the king responded; (3) the king can put up with the dumbshow because he is not convinced that it proves Hamlet is aware of his crime, but when the crime is enacted a second time, he realizes that Hamlet indeed is sending him a message; (4) the dumbshow is necessary for us (not for Claudius) because the spoken performance will be interrupted, i.e., Shakespeare considerately shows us the whole thing and then shows us what happens when Claudius responds in the middle of the spoken version. In our view, the last explanation is the most satisfactory. In fact, we see no problem.

The style of the play-within-the-play, especially its beginning, is notably old-fashioned (couplets in an elaborated style):

Full thirty times hath Phoebus’ cart gone round
Neptune’s salt wash and Tellus’ orbèd ground,
And thirty dozen moons with borrowed sheen
About the world have times twelve thirties been. . . .

The reason for this distinctive style is of course to set it off from the “normal” verse language of the play. Invite students to think of comparable examples in film and television, where a flashback or a fantasy is presented. (Color may yield to black and white, or normal speed to slow motion.)

In talking about the Player King’s speeches we almost always call attention to two passages that are relevant to thematic concerns:

What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.
The violence of either grief or joy
Their own enactures with themselves destroy.

(Late in 4.7, Claudius will say something quite similar to Laertes: “That we would do / We should do when we would, for this ‘would’ changes, / And hath abatements and delays.”) The second passage that we sometimes dwell on is this:

Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown;
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.

Examples of ironic happenings abound in the play, for instance, Claudius prepares poison for Hamlet, but Hamlet forces Claudius to drink it, and Laertes’s poisoned foil similarly is used against Laertes himself.

When the king rises, thereby interrupting the performance, he provides proof that he is the murderer. But exactly why does he rise? Is it because (1) he is shocked to learn that Hamlet knows that Claudius is the murderer, or because (2) he is struck with guilt? This second interpretation gains some confirmation from several passages in the play. Earlier, Claudius has indicated that indeed he has a conscience, when in an aside he says (3.1) of Polonius’s speech about hypocrisy, “How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.” Later, in the scene when he is praying (3.3), he does not spare himself: “O, my offense is rank.” It is not foolish to say that Claudius may be guilt-struck when he sees the crime enacted in the play-within-the-play.

The delightful passage in which Hamlet plays upon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, while accusing them of trying to play upon him, can go over very well in class. Again, we like to impress upon students that Shakespeare is not all fancy language and high sentiments; he can write wonderful colloquial prose. A line such as “It is as easy as lying” (often said to be proverbial, but we have never seen an earlier citation) is just as Shakespearean, and just as good, as “To be or not to be.” And it is noteworthy that after Hamlet has finished playing upon his former friends, he turns to Polonius and plays a bit on him, with the business about the shape of the cloud.

In the final speech in 3.2, for instance, when he says, “Now could I drink hot blood,” Hamlet is rather like the poisoner Lucianus (“Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit”), and in the next scene, when he contemplates killing the king but holds off because he wants to be sure to send the king’s soul to hell, he perhaps sounds like a Machiavellian villain such as Iago, but for the most part Hamlet retains our sympathy. Even the speech about drinking hot blood modulates into this:

Soft, now to my mother
O heart, lose not thy nature! Let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
Let me be cruel, not unnatural;
I will speak daggers to her, but use none.

Still as becomes evident in a moment, his hope that in dealing with his mother he will not become “unnatural” (e.g., unfilial) does not prevent him from formulating an almost diabolic design against Claudius.

3.3 Claudius’s first speech lets us know that he knows Hamlet is at war with him; Claudius is obviously getting Hamlet out of the way, but only later will we learn of Claudius’s plot to have Hamlet killed. Guildenstern’s first speech here is typical in its obsequiousness and its windiness (“Most holy and religious,” “many many,” “live and feed”). Rosencrantz’s speech is no less obsequious, but it also sets forth the traditional view that the fall of a king is essentially different from the fall of a lesser person: “The cess of majesty / Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw / What’s near it with it.” Like Guildenstern in the preceding speech, Rosencrantz goes on to (in effect) repeat himself: “or it is. . . .” However
true the speech is, it is (a) windy, and (b) unconsciously ironic, since these words consciously refer to Claudius but can be applied to Hamlet Senior, whose death in fact was brought about by Claudius. That is, this apparent praise of Claudius is utterly misplaced, since it was Claudius’s act of murder that has brought suffering to Denmark.

In discussing the episode of the king at prayer, students may need some help in understanding the difference between remorse and repentance. Claudius himself is clear about the difference. He knows that he feels a gnawing distress or mental anguish for his action (remorse, from the Latin re + mordere, to bite), but he also knows that if he were repentant (from re + penteir, to be sorry) he would resolve to change. The obvious sign of a change would be that he would give up the fruits of his action (the crown and the queen), but he cannot bring himself to this second stage:

But O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? “Forgive me my foul murder”?
That cannot be, since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder:
My crown, mine own ambition, and my Queen
May one be pardoned and retain th’ offense?

He knows the answer. Still, he tries to pray. As it turns out, he knows that his prayer is not heartfelt; again, he is remorseful but not repentant—but Hamlet, observing Claudius at prayer but not knowing Claudius’s state of mind, does not realize that Claudius is in effect unconfessed.

What are we to make of Hamlet as he contemplates killing the praying king? Almost all commentators agree that Hamlet’s sentiments are dreadful. For those with an Aristotelian bent, Hamlet here commits hybris, trying to kill not only Claudius’s body but also his soul. We may as well toss in the term hamartia; the word is commonly translated as “tragic flaw” or (better) “tragic error,” but etymologically it is a matter of “missing the mark,” and Hamlet indeed misses, not only in the sense of passing up an opportunity but also in the sense of misinterpreting what is happening, since the king in fact is not contrite. We hasten to add that we do not encourage the application of these Greek terms, at least not in this episode, but some students are familiar with them (or at least with “tragic flaw”) and may bring them up. For most critics, Hamlet here is at his worst. For some critics, however, the words are so dreadful that he cannot really mean them. In this view, Hamlet is looking for an excuse not to kill Claudius, and so he falls upon this ingenious way of not acting. Such was Coleridge’s view, and it survives in Bradley: “That this again is an unconscious excuse for delay is now pretty generally agreed.”

Let’s look at the situation a bit differently: How does an audience respond at this point? Our hunch is that most people (a) do not want Hamlet to kill Claudius while the king is praying and has his back to Hamlet, and (b) they do not want Hamlet to kill while he is in this somewhat demoniacal mood. Most
of us probably feel immense relief when, a moment before he might strike, he
interrupts his own action.

A few words about the staging: Claudius often kisses a cross before pray-
ing and after his unsatisfactory prayer brushes the cross aside, or he may
remove a crucifix that he has been wearing. Some Hamlets leave a token that
the king (to his great distress) finds when he stops praying. Among the things
that Hamlet has left in stage productions are a coxcomb that the antic Hamlet
has worn, a gown that he has worn, or a weapon. In some productions Claudius
puts down his own sword before kneeling to pray; Hamlet, unseen, removes the
sword, and Claudius discovers the loss when he has finished praying.

3.4 This is the famous “closet” scene, almost always staged as a bedroom
scene, but a closet is merely a private room (as opposed, for instance, to an
audience chamber) and it therefore need not contain a bed. The Freudian read-
ing (Hamlet, endowed with an Oedipus complex, desires to kill his father and
sleep with his mother, and therefore he cannot bring himself to kill the man—
Claudius—who in fact has done what Hamlet himself wanted to do) is widely
popular and doubtless has contributed to the strongly sexual staging that the
scene often gets today. But we do not need Freud or Ernest Jones to tell us that
in this scene Hamlet is intensely concerned with his mother’s sexuality, and as
Rosenberg points out in The Masks of Hamlet, pre-Freudian productions often
made use of a bed in this scene.

When Hamlet compares the picture of his father with the picture of
Claudius, in the twentieth century he has usually pulled from his bosom a
miniature of his father and from Gertrude’s bosom a miniature of Claudius (lots
of room for sexuality here), but sometimes the pictures are framed canvases
hanging on a wall, and sometimes they are two coins that Hamlet pulls out of
his pocket. Occasionally they are not a pair; the picture of Claudius may be a
framed picture on a table, and the picture of Hamlet Senior may be a miniature
that Hamlet wears on a chain around his neck.

We have not discussed the question of why Hamlet delays, or (as some crit-
ics put it) whether he delays. The implication in this last view is that although he
reproaches himself for delay (in the present scene he speaks of himself as “tardy”
[line 110] and the Ghost speaks of Hamlet’s “almost blunted purpose” [line 115]),
Hamlet in fact acts quite vigorously, i.e., he quite reasonably and systematically
must first verify the Ghost. When he has established Claudius’s guilt, he promptly
stabs him, or thinks he does, only to find that he has killed Polonius rather than
Claudius. In this view, although Hamlet reproaches himself for delay, and the
Ghost also does, both of these figures are (understandably) impatient and they do
not accurately represent the facts. Then there is the Freudian view, already men-
tioned, that Hamlet delays because he cannot kill the man who has done what he
himself wishes to do. And there is a very old no-nonsense view, attributed to
Thomas Hanmer: if Hamlet acted promptly the play would end too soon, so the
playwright had to find excuses for delaying the killing. Our own experience, most
recently confirmed when we saw Branagh’s film, is that despite the occasional
reference to delay, a spectator does not (so to speak) feel that Hamlet delays.

Two other points about the scene, or, perhaps, one point drawing on two passages. When we merely read the play, we hear Hamlet lecture his mother at some length but we may forget that his moralizing is delivered in the presence of a bloody corpse. When we witness the play, the corpse can be relatively inconspicuous, e.g., behind the bed, but usually it is very conspicuous, and presumably its presence strongly colors our response to Hamlet in this scene. It can be unnerving to hear Hamlet lecture in the presence of a bloody body. The second passage that we have in mind is his final speech in the scene, where, thinking about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (“adders fanged”) he seems to take a bit too much relish in the thought of destroying them:

For 'tis the sport to have the enginer
Hoist with his own petard, and 't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon. O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet.

One doesn’t want to press the point too hard, but isn’t it reasonable to say that this is not the mood the viewer wants Hamlet to be in when he finally brings Claudius to justice?

This entire speech, in fact, presents Hamlet in a disturbing light. Not only does he show a zesty glee about the fate he will contrive for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—he will “blow them at the moon”—but he also speaks demeaningly, coarsely, about Polonius, whose “guts” Hamlet hauls away. Perhaps Hamlet is correct to term Polonius a “foolish prating knave,” but one need not conclude that Polonius therefore deserved to be killed. Hamlet acted hastily when he thrust the sword through the arras, and, one could say, he excuses himself for his dreadful error by putting the blame on his victim. Polonius, we should remember, is not only the overbusy counselor to the King but also the father of Ophelia, and she (and Laertes too) suffer grievous pain because of Hamlet’s bloody deed.

In some productions we have seen, Hamlet speaks the lines of this speech hysterically. He is very worked up, frenzied, distracted. There’s something to be said for this approach. It removes some of the coarseness from Hamlet’s words about Polonius and some of the formality of his goodbye to his mother (“good night,” he says twice—sincerely? mockingly? sorrowfully?). From this point of view, Hamlet is not in full possession of his faculties as the tremendously charged scene with his mother concludes; and so we should not pin him too literally to the words that he uses. The words matter less than the complex feelings behind the words.

Hamlet’s words have also been spoken in a soft, quiet, even contrite tone, the tone thereby taking some of the harshness out of the words. In more than one production we attended, the phrase “lug the guts” was omitted.

One more point, which you may wish to mention to the class: lines 209–217 (“There’s letters sealed . . .” to “. . . two crafts directly meet”) are not

in F and may pose a bit of a problem. They do not seem to jibe with what
Hamlet later (5.2.4ff.) reports to Horatio, where he tells of discovering the mur-
der order in Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's papers. How, one wonders, has he
found the "letters sealed," to which he refers?

The play is filled with intriguing puzzles of this kind. Some of them are hard
(if not impossible) to resolve; others, it seems, can be resolved with interpretive
effort and ingenuity. We try to find moments during class to bring up examples
of the play's textual cruxes and perplexities—we mention a number of them in
this commentary. It is important to explain to students what a Shakespeare play
is—that an edition of the play that we read is the result of a demanding edito-
rial process that involves the study of texts and manuscripts often filled with
mysteries and contradictions. But we need to remind ourselves that Hamlet
is a big challenge for students, and it may be risky to linger too much over this or
that textual problem or issue. When we teach the play, we find that the students
do best when they keep their attention on the main lines of character develop-
ment and organizing themes.

4.1 It is impossible to know if Gertrude really believes Hamlet is "mad as
the sea and wind" (line 7) or if she is covering for Hamlet. Similarly, her asser-
tion that Hamlet "weeps for what is done" (line 27) cannot be verified. But
what is especially interesting about this short, urgent scene is the growing sep-
aration between Claudius and his queen. In line 28 he says, "O Gertrude, come
away!"; in line 38, "Come Gertrude"; in line 44, "O, come away!" Throughout
this speech she remains silent, presumably moved by what Hamlet has told her
during the closet scene. In stage productions, if Claudius seeks to put his arm
around her waist or shoulder, she usually draws away from him. Note, too, that
in his last line in the scene ("My soul is full of discord and dismay") he reveals
that the battle with Hamlet (and with his own conscience?) is indeed unnerving
him. And why shouldn't he be unnerved? If in the prayer scene Hamlet has left
with Claudius a token, for instance, a coxcomb, Claudius may now be holding
it nervously.

4.2 A reader may take this scene to be chiefly one in which Hamlet ver-
bally displays his antic disposition, but in fact the scene is filled with physical
action. There are the offstage shouts, then the bustling entrance of
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who in effect have been pursuing Hamlet.
Branagh's stage direction in the script for his film gives an idea of the physi-
cal business: "They circle each other in the large room. Wary of a quick
move." In the film, as in many productions, courtiers and soldiers enter, and
attempts are made to lay hands on Hamlet. In Branagh's film, "Hamlet grabs
Rosencrantz around the neck, taking him hostage against the growing
crowd," and ultimately "Hamlet throws Rosencrantz back to the crowd." Incidentally, the last sentence in the scene, Hamlet's "Hide fox, and all after"
(doubtless a line from a game of hide-and-seek) appears only in F, and it is
commonly regarded, probably rightly, as an actor's addition. So again we can
raise the question: What is the text of a play by Shakespeare—the play that
he wrote or the play that was produced?
4.3 In line 14 we learn that Hamlet now is “guarded,” and when he appears on the stage his hands may be bound, or he may be surrounded by armed guards. In Daniel Day-Lewis’s production he was confined in a strait-jacket. The wit-battle concerning the trip to England makes it clear that Hamlet and Claudius are at war. Here is how Branagh presents this passage in his film-script. (We do not preserve Branagh’s typography, punctuation, or spelling, only his words.)

Claudius: . . . Therefore prepare thyself.
The bark is ready, and the wind at help,
Th’ associates tend, and everything is bent
For England.
Hamlet: For England!
Claudius: Ay, Hamlet.
Hamlet: Good.
(Claudius will not give in to Mr. Smart-arse.)
Claudius: So it is, if thou knew’st our purposes.
Hamlet: I see a cherub that sees them. But come, for England! Farewell, dear mother.
Claudius: Thy loving father, Hamlet.
Hamlet (brightly): My mother. Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so my mother. (This last with real hatred.)

This is warfare, and we are not surprised to hear, a few moments later, the king confess in a soliloquy that he has ordered “the present [i.e., instant] death of Hamlet.” In our view (here we tip our hand) it is entirely appropriate at the end of the play for Fortinbras to order the soldiers to treat Hamlet as a soldier who died doing his duty: “Let four captains, / Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage. . . .”

4.4 This scene (along with Fortinbras’s other scenes) is often deleted in productions, but it is an important scene, not only because it shows a contrast between Fortinbras in command and Hamlet in custody but also, of course, because of the great soliloquy in which Hamlet meditates on the distinction between man and beast, characterized by the human being’s possession of (a) rationality and (b) a sense of honor. These two qualities may be in conflict: rationality may cause us to think carefully (we may find ourselves “thinking too precisely on th’ event”), whereas our sense of honor may cause us to act impetuously, even rashly. Hamlet praises Fortinbras as a man of action, but notice how some of the diction in his speech quietly undermines the praise. Expressions such as “divine ambition puffed,” “eggshell,” “straw,” “fantasy and trick of fame” make the hearer doubt the worth of the quarrel motivated by honor. True, the speech ends strongly: “O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!” yet even here, in “bloody,” we may have mixed feelings about what Hamlet apparently is praising.

4.5 The scene begins with the queen, obviously agitated (“I will not speak with her”), seeking to put off an encounter with Ophelia, partly of course to avoid
a stressful situation, but partly because the queen herself is almost distraught (in line 17 she speaks of her “sick soul”). Perhaps the Gentleman’s speech describing the mad Ophelia is meant to prepare the viewers, lest they laugh when they next see her. What has driven Ophelia mad? Among the possible causes: (1) the death of her father, at the hands of the man she loved; (2) Hamlet’s rejection of her; (3) guilt at the thought that, on her father’s order, she betrayed Hamlet.

In 1.4.90 Marcellus had said, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” and the truth of his remark is everywhere in evidence here—in Ophelia’s madness, in Gertrude’s soul-sickness, in Claudius’s uneasiness in this scene (“Where is my Switzers? Let them guard the door” he calls out when he hears “a noise outside”). In fact, when Claudius speaks to Gertrude and enumerates the causes of Ophelia’s madness, saying “When sorrows come, they come not single spies, / But in battalions,” we can rightly take his words to apply to his own distress, we might say his dis-ease. And notice, too, in this speech, how Claudius is becoming isolated from his wife. Twice he addresses her, once near the beginning of the speech and once near the end (“O Gertrude, Gertrude,” “O my dear Gertrude”) but he gets no response from her. (A bit later, however, Gertrude seizes Laertes in order to protect Claudius.)

We need comment only briefly on Laertes here. It is obvious that his angry words about the death of his father can be compared and contrasted with Hamlet’s:

How came he dead? I’ll not be juggled with.
To hell, allegiance! Vows to the profoundest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand.
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes, only I’ll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father.

Having seen Claudius work his charms upon Laertes in 1.2, we are not surprised to see that Claudius can easily disarm this angry young man, indeed partly by the same device of unctuously repeating Laertes’s name:

What is thy cause, Laertes,
That thy rebellion looks so giantlike?
Let him go, Gertrude. Do not fear our person.
There’s such divinity doth hedge a king
That treason can but peep to what it would,
Acts little of his will. Tell me, Laertes,
Why thou are thus incensed. Let him go, Gertrude.
Speak, man.

Claudius calms Laertes, assures him that the crown is innocent, and that justice will be done. Claudius’s last words in the scene are, “And where th’ offense is,
let the great ax fall.” At the end of the play we will see that the ax falls on Claudius as well as on the others, innocent and guilty.

4.6 Hamlet’s letter (in prose, as usual) reveals a confident tone, and it reports energetic action—in effect it refutes the idea that Hamlet is someone who cannot act decisively. Also noteworthy is the fact that Hamlet tells Horatio to give the letter (his word is “letters,” but the plural form regularly has a singular sense) to the king, i.e., Hamlet does not contrive to make an unexpected appearance. As we will see in subsequent passages, his mood now differs from his earlier moods; he now is beyond contriving. Incidentally, in the next scene Claudius assures Laertes that Laertes can use an unbated foil without Hamlet noticing it because Hamlet is “Most generous, and free from all contriving.”

4.7 The dialogue between Laertes and Claudius, or especially the portion beginning after Hamlet’s letter and continuing up to the entrance of the queen, is a bit long, but students can perform it effectively in class. Laertes is not exactly dumb, but he is no match for the Machiavellian Claudius, and one almost feels sorry for him when Claudius says, “Can you devise me?” and Laertes replies, “I am lost in it, my lord.” A moment later, when Claudius says, “Will you be ruled by me?” Laertes replies, “Ay, my lord, / So you will not o’errule me to a peace,” and of course peace is the last thing that Claudius has in mind for Laertes. Claudius flatters Laertes (“You have been talked of since your travel much, / And that in Hamlet’s hearing”), telling him that Lamord’s report of Laertes “Did Hamlet so envenom with his envy / That he could nothing do but wish and beg / Your sudden coming o’er to play with you. / Now, out of this—” and Laertes, who has not quite followed what Claudius is getting at, rather simply asks, “What out of this, my lord?” Notice that Claudius does not directly answer the question, but instead keeps Laertes in suspense and whets his appetite by asking, “Laertes, was your father dear to you?” One cannot help admiring Claudius, so skilled is he in manipulating the impetuous young man. Claudius continues, bringing up again the motif of action that may dissolve into nothing (“Time qualifies the spark”). Laertes assures Claudius that he would “cut [Hamlet’s] throat in’ the church,” a sentiment seconded by the murderer Claudius, who piously observes that “No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize.” And then on to a passage we mentioned a moment ago, when Claudius rightly says that Hamlet, being “generous, and free from all contriving, / Will not peruse the foils.” True, earlier Hamlet had been engaged in contriving, but when he returns from the sea journey he is changed for the better, willing to act at the right moment (“the readiness is all”) but not plotting to establish the conditions of the moment.

If one wants to talk about hamartia, one can say that Hamlet is guilty of a “tragic error” (he does not peruse the foils), but certainly this error or mistake proceeds not from a flaw in character but from a virtue. In contrast to Hamlet’s virtue is Laertes’s dishonorable behavior; Claudius has suggested using an unbated foil, and Laertes not only consents to using it but adds that he will also poison the tip. Claudius then suggests that as a backup he will prepare a poisoned chalice. Surely it makes no sense to see Hamlet as flawed when one sees villainy such as this.

Laertes is (from the spectators’ view) at a low point, but the report of Ophelia’s death does get some sympathy for him. The audience’s response, however, is probably complex. We sympathize, and perhaps are even touched by his grief, but we also know that the reason why he does not utter the “speech of fire” that blazes within him is that he is confident he will kill Hamlet in the duel.

5.1 The dialogue between the clowns is amusing even when it is acted by amateurs, and even when it is delivered to people not familiar with the footnotes. But why does Shakespeare include in this dialogue passages insisting on Hamlet’s age? Doubtless he wanted to convey the irony inherent in the fact that Hamlet was born on the very day that the gravedigger began his trade—it is almost as though the gravedigger has all this time been digging in anticipation of Hamlet’s death—and Shakespeare also wanted to connect Hamlet’s birth with the triumph of Hamlet’s father over Fortinbras. Still, why did Shakespeare insist on Hamlet’s age? Perhaps he wanted to emphasize Hamlet’s maturity, lest the audience think too much about Hamlet as the moody student of 1.1.

We want to talk a bit about Hamlet’s famous leap into the grave—a leap that maybe he does not make. Certainly Laertes leaps into the grave first. Laertes’s dialogue clearly calls for his leap, and stage directions in Q1 and F confirm it. He says, “Hold off the earth awhile, / Till I have caught her once more in mine arms” and then, after leaping into the grave, he says, “Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead.” Hamlet’s leap is far less clearly established; in fact, it depends entirely on a stage direction a bit later in Q1, a so-called “Bad Quarto”: “Hamlet leaps in after Laertes.” This direction, not in Q2 or F, may well merely reflect a provincial production. It is attractive in some ways, since the leap into the grave can be taken as a sort of symbolic entrance into death, and the leap out as a sort of renewal of life. On the other hand, it serves to make Hamlet the aggressor, and many students of the play wish to see in the Hamlet who has returned from the sea journey a new, mature Hamlet, a Hamlet who proclaims his kingly identity with “This is I, / Hamlet the Dane.” (Cf. Claudius’s earlier use of “the Dane” to mean the king, when he says to Laertes, in 1.2, “You cannot speak of reason to the Dane, / and lose your voice.”

Further, the dialogue pretty clearly indicates that Laertes is the aggressor. Hamlet says, “I prithee, take thy fingers from my throat,” and “Hold off thy hand,” perhaps indicating that Hamlet’s mere announcement that he is “the Dane” has caused Laertes to climb out of the grave and to seize him. Such is the way the episode is staged in Branagh’s film. Somewhat strangely, Laertes has no lines in this scene after he and Hamlet are separated, even though Hamlet directly addresses him, for instance, with “Hear you, sir, / What is the reason that you use me thus?” (By the way, one may wonder how Hamlet can be unaware of why Laertes is enraged.) In some performances, Hamlet offers a hand or arm to Laertes, who angrily (and silently) rejects the offer. In other performances, Laertes is still being restrained by those who separated him a moment ago during the fight. You may want to invite students to talk about how they would stage the fight and the remainder of the scene.
5.2 We spend a lot of time discussing this scene in class, much of it on the
question of whether Hamlet’s change of mood after the sea journey is (to put
the matter crudely) a Good Thing or a Bad Thing. Our own view is that he has
brought himself into the proper frame of mind, proper in that it ultimately is
satisfactory to the spectator. That is, he pretty much ceases to be the blood-
thirsty avenger, the man scheming and at the same time upbraiding himself for
not accomplishing his purposes. He becomes, in our view (speaking a bit
broadly), the man who rightly understands that he has a task to fulfill and that
he will fulfill it, but in a way not yet known to him. The Ghost had enjoined
him, “Taint not thy mind” (1.5.86), but we have seen that Hamlet in his blood-
thirsty moments, and especially in his desire to catch the king’s soul, comes close
to violating this command. Even the passage at the end of 3.4, when he contem-
plates with pleasure outwitting and destroying Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,
has a disturbing edge to it:

For ’tis the sport to have the enginer
Hoist with his own petard, and ’t shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon.

Now, however, in the final act his mood is different. In his second speech in 5.2
he tells Horatio that he acted rashly:

Rashly
And praised be rashness for it—let us know
Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us
There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will. . . .

Telling Horatio about the letter ordering his death, he rightly says:

Being thus benetted round with villains,
Or I could make a prologue to my brains,
They had begun the play.

Thus, in a situation not of his own making (just as his initial situation—the
death of his father and the remarriage of his mother—was not of his making),
he responds more or less spontaneously, i.e., without the calculated villainy that
characterizes a Machiavellian. His response, a forged letter that sends
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death, has distressed some commentators, but
we confess that our own uneasiness is very slight. In the traditional legend,
Hamlet contrives a successful revenge, and obviously in Shakespeare’s play
there are traces of Hamlet as an intriguer. But in Shakespeare’s play, interest-
ingly, most of Hamlet’s intriguing comes to nothing. The obvious exception is
the execution of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but whatever uneasiness a spectator or reader might have about their end is diminished: (a) The deaths are reported, not seen; (b) we have little sympathy for the two victims; (c) Hamlet is acting under great pressure, with his own life at stake; (d) asked by Horatio how Hamlet “sealed” the letter, Hamlet replies, “Why, even in that was heaven ordinant,” and we are inclined to believe him (more about this in a moment); and (e) no one in the play expresses grief over the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Horatio’s dry comment probably expresses much the audience’s sentiment: “So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to ‘t.”

What about this business of heaven being “ordinant”? The play (unlike Lear) is set in a Christian world, with a ghost from purgatory, talk of “our Savior’s birth,” and so on. When we experience this play, do we strongly feel a divine providence? Hamlet is not a medieval biblical play with a heaven-sent avenging angel. On the whole, things seem to work out on a purely naturalistic level. And yet: the Ghost gives Hamlet information that is otherwise unknown; the traveling players appear from nowhere, so to speak, allowing Hamlet to confirm the Ghost’s message; during the sea voyage Hamlet, unable to sleep, is mysteriously prompted to examine the commission from Claudius; he forges a different commission and providentially (he says) is able to seal it with the king’s signet; a pirate ship comes out of nowhere, and Hamlet alone boards it; Laertes and Claudius, not Hamlet, prepare the unbated poisoned foil that will enable Hamlet to fulfill his revenge; and this fulfillment is accomplished publicly, in circumstances arranged not by Hamlet but by Claudius. (Whether Hamlet holds the poisoned rapier by chance or not is something we will look at in a moment.) We do not want to say anything to the effect that the play shows God is always at work in the world in mysterious ways, but we do want to say that in some mysterious way things work out, and that Hamlet fulfills his revenge without becoming a villainous avenger.

We have not yet looked at several speeches in 5.2, after Osric’s departure, in which Hamlet seems to some commentators to have achieved an inner peace (in contrast, for instance, to the end of the soliloquy in 4.4, when he says “O, from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!”). To other commentators, however, these speeches indicate that he has lapsed into further inaction, inaction that he masks as resignation to heaven’s will. The two most explicit passages are:

(1) I am constant to my purposes; they follow the King’s pleasure. If his fitness speaks, mine is ready; now or wh ensever, provided I be so able as now.

(2) Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.

In the second speech, the line about the “special providence in the fall of a sparrow” echoes Matthew 10:29: “Not a sparrow shall fall on the ground without
your Father's knowledge.” Writing about this passage, A. C. Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) said that he did *not* find “any material change in [Hamlet's] general condition or the formation of any effective resolution to fulfill the appointed duty. On the contrary [the speech and some other speeches] seem to express that kind of religious resignation which, however beautiful in one aspect, really deserves the name of fatalism rather than of faith in Providence.” H. B. Charlton, essentially a Bradleyite, in his own *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1949) says pretty much the same thing:

> Worst of all, recognition of the will’s impotence is accepted as . . . the calm attainment of a higher benignity, whereas it is nothing more than a fatalist’s surrender of personal responsibility. That is the nadir of Hamlet’s fall.

(p. 103)

We see the point, but we differ. We don’t know how either of the two contrasting views (Hamlet as lapsing in fatalism vs. Hamlet as achieving a heightened state of awareness) can ever be proved to the satisfaction of those who begin by holding the other view, but it seems to us that Hamlet’s move from bloodthirsty plotting to an awareness that he must make himself ready to act when the right moment comes represents progress. Further, his apology to Laertes indicates a healthier state of mind than he has sometimes earlier displayed. And what of his comment, shortly before the duel, that the culprit was not Hamlet but “Hamlet’s madness”? We are uneasy here. Is he lying? If so, his behavior is reprehensible. We prefer to think he now understands that indeed some of his earlier behavior (his cruel rejection of Ophelia comes to our minds) was the result of an emotional stress that caused him to behave in ways that would be shameful for a rational person. Remember, too, that we in the audience know, but Hamlet does not know, that the man to whom he is apologizing is prepared to murder Hamlet. Surely the spectator’s response during this speech when Hamlet shifts some of the blame for his actions to his madness is not condemnation of Hamlet for evading responsibility but wonder about what Laertes’s response will be. And what is Laertes’s response? This man who is planning to use a poisoned foil insists in a fatuous and finicky way that he can accept Hamlet’s apology only provisionally, and that before he can be certain that Hamlet’s apology leaves Laertes’s honor unbesmirched, he will consult “some elder masters of known honor.” An audience that responds intelligently to Laertes’s twisted sense of honor can hardly judge Hamlet adversely.

The duel between Hamlet and Laertes perhaps brings to mind thoughts of the conflict between Hamlet Senior and Fortinbras, an honorable battle, in the heroic manner, that contrasts strongly with the treachery that underlies the present encounter. Exactly what happens in this final duel is a bit uncertain. Does Hamlet, wounded by Laertes’s unbated foil, suddenly realize that Laertes is out to kill him, and does he therefore wrest the weapon from Laertes’s hand? Q1 (the “Bad Quarto”) says, “They catch one another’s Rapiers, and both are wounded, Laertes falleth downe, the Queene falleth downe and dies.” The Folio
says, “In scuffling they change Rapiers.” Q2, a good quarto, has no stage direction here. The problem, then, is this: Do they exchange rapiers because Hamlet knows that Laertes holds an unabated rapier? Or does the exchange result from chance, from a scuffle in which the weapons are accidentally exchanged? Is this fatal exchange one of “accidental judgments, casual slaughters” (“casual” from the Latin casus, “chance”) that Horatio will mention when he tells Fortinbras what has just occurred?

Olivier in his film has Laertes thrust at Hamlet and draw blood. Hamlet, realizing that Laertes’s foil is unabated, in the next round knocks the foil out of Laertes’s hand, retrieves it for his own use, and gives Laertes the blunt-tipped foil. Branagh in his film has Laertes rush at Hamlet, nick Hamlet’s shoulder, then run past him, stop, and face him. After a few seconds of slow circling, “suddenly it’s a free-for-all, and now Hamlet chases Laertes round the hall, in amongst the crowd. . . . A great leap from Hamlet trips Laertes up. His sword skids away. Hamlet rushes for it. He looks at the tip—enraged. He throws his own sword to Laertes and retains the poisoned one.”

Laertes confesses his treachery (“The foul practice / Hath turned itself on me”), blames the king and says Claudius “is justly served,” thus publicly vindicating Hamlet. “Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet,” Laertes says, and we take seriously the word “noble.” As we have earlier said at some length, Hamlet fulfills the Ghost’s command, and—remarkably—he does so in a way that does not taint him with murder.

Horatio summarizes the “woe and wonder” (standard characteristics of heroic tragedy) that Denmark has witnessed:

So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall’n on th’ inventors’ heads.

“Purposes mistook” are evident: Laertes prepares a foil to poison Hamlet, but he himself dies by that foil; the king prepares a poisoned drink for Hamlet, but Gertrude drinks it, and ultimately Hamlet forces the king to drink it. The “carnal” and “unnatural acts” may include Gertrude’s incest; the “casual slaughters” may include the murder of Polonius and the drowning of Ophelia. But we need not try to identify each of Horatio’s words with a particular happening in the play. It is enough, we think, to see that Hamlet, thrust into a tragic situation that is not of his own making, has at last performed the arduous task that he was ordered to do. T. S. Eliot, in “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” a bit snidely says that Hamlet, having made a mess, “dies fairly well pleased with himself.” In our view, Eliot misunderstands the play, partly because he does not see that Hamlet has indeed been successful (though at a terrible cost), and partly because he does not realize that it is appropriate
for the tragic figure to make a dying speech in which he sums up his essence. (Othello has been similarly criticized for, in Eliot’s words, “cheering himself up.”) Many of your students will know Macbeth, so you may want to remind them that we get a report of the final speech made by the traitor Cawdor, just before he was executed: “Very frankly he confessed his treasons, / Implored your Highness’ pardon and set forth / A deep repentance: nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving it.”

The play ends with Fortinbras (“strong arm,” the man of action) awarding Hamlet a salute from the cannon (“a peal of ordnance is shot off”), a military tribute to a heroic figure, a tribute to a man who, though he apparently preferred the meditative life associated with the university, nevertheless fulfilled a tremendously demanding task. When we hear the sounds of the cannon at the end of the play, we may recall that earlier in the play the cannon were set off when the base king drank. Now at the end, it is evident that Denmark has been purged of a criminal king, by a man who “was most likely, had he been put on, / To have proved most royal.”
The book from which we reprint this selection enjoyed—and deserved—great success. It made visible to vast numbers of middle-class readers (we include ourselves among them) a world that we were hardly aware of. Thus, Dorothy Gallagher, in The New York Times Book Review (quoted on the rear cover of the paperback edition wrote,

Valuable and illuminating. . . . We have Barbara Ehrenreich to thank for bringing us the news of America’s working poor so clearly and directly, and conveying with it a deep moral outrage.

We agree; we were fascinated by every page of the book—the details are fascinating, and they are skillfully set forth, and yet in addition to feeling gratitude to Ehrenreich we experienced another sensation too. Let’s look at the end of Ehrenreich’s first paragraph with this sentence:

Over and over we hear in voiceover or see in graphic display the “three principles,” which are maddeningly, even defiantly, nonparallel: “respect for the individual, exceeding customers’ expectations, strive for excellence.”

As teachers of composition, of course we too cringe. It would have been so simple for Wal-Mart to have said “respect the individual, exceed the customer’s expectations, strive for excellence.” And maybe if we had been subjected to the Wal-Mart version, again and again, in voiceover and in graphic display, it would have maddened us also. But can a case be made that Ehrenreich is over-educated for the job she is being trained for, and she is overly sensitive? The orientation program at Wal-Mart was not designed for a graduate of Reed College (a highly selective college) who went on to earn a Ph.D. in cellular biology.

We imagine that most readers will greatly enjoy the piece—we have already said that we enjoyed it—but we wonder, nevertheless, if perhaps Ehrenreich comes across as something of a crab? Yes, she doubtless is motivated by a sense of economic injustice, and she calls attention to deceptions (e.g., the store’s anti-
union pitch) and outrageous conditions, but, still, we wonder if some readers will feel that Ehrenreich herself—in her energetic demolition job, and in her righteous indignation—takes a bit too much pleasure in the revelation of the failings of others. A topic for discussion.

**Stop Me If You’ve Heard This One:**
Jokes about Lines of Work (p. 997)

First, an extremely important point: We think it is advisable, when beginning to discuss jokes, for instructors to remind their classes that many jokes are based on extremely offensive stereotypes (notably of gender, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality), and to caution students not to introduce such jokes into the discussion. True, we print jokes based on stereotypical views of certain kinds of work—for instance, pediatricians versus surgeons—but we trust that these jokes are not mean-spirited, not meant to stimulate the hearer to contemptuous thoughts about the subject. They are, we hope, more “laughing with” than “laughing at.” Having said this, it immediately occurs to us that even tellers of the most vicious jokes are likely to say, if challenged, “I’m only kidding,” or “What’s the matter? Can’t you take a joke?” But we think that a cautionary word at the beginning of the discussion will be enough to prevent any embarrassment later.

Still, while we are on this topic of stereotypes, we want to mention that the topic of whether a stereotype may sometimes embody some truth may well come up. It happens that in our random reading we came across a book about surgeons that is relevant to the first joke that we give in the text, a joke concerning kinds of doctors who go duck-hunting. The joke is at the expense of general practitioners, pediatricians, and surgeons, each of whom behaves differently from the others, in a way that is supposedly characteristic of the type, but the joke is especially at the expense of surgeons. Joan Cassell, in *The Woman in the Surgeon’s Body* (Harvard UP, 1998), says that “values and symbolism” of the surgeon’s culture “are culturally masculine: hardness; cold brilliance; an intense, narrowly focused drive” (p.101). It is our impression that many people would agree—pediatricians and surgeons among them—that (speaking in general) pediatricians and surgeons are usually rather different kinds of people.

* * *

We are keenly aware that analyses of the nature of jokes—attempts to explain why certain stories evoke a laugh or at least a smile or the sense of pleasure that accompanies a laugh or a smile—usually are tedious and always are unfunny. Nevertheless, we will offer a few comments—but first, so that this entry will not utterly disappoint you, we offer a wise reflection from George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*:

“A difference of tastes in jokes is a great strain on the affections.”

And now to business. When we speak of jokes we are speaking here of short narratives that evoke laughter, not of one-liners such as Groucho Marx’s “Those are my principles, and if you don’t like them I have others,” or J. F. Kennedy’s “Washington is a city of Southern efficiency and Northern charm.” But even in such lines we get a quality that is characteristic of the joke—a surprise, a frustration of what is expected, and then a release through laughter, or at least a smile.

Let’s talk for a moment about this business of “what is expected.” In literature, notably in fiction and drama, the writer sets up expectations—we get foreshadowing—so that at the end of the work the reader experiences a sense of the fulfillment of expectations, but of course these expectations have been fulfilled by a plot that was in some ways not entirely foreseen. In E. M. Forster’s much-quoted formulation from *Aspects of the Novel* (1927),

Shock, followed by the feeling of, “Oh, that’s all right,” is a sign that all is well with plot: characters, to be real, ought to run smoothly, but a plot ought to cause surprise.

A joke—again, we are talking about short narratives, i.e. something happening to a character or characters within a setting—often begins with an opening that offers some traditional (i.e., stereotyped) characters in a stock situation (“A customer in a restaurant said to the waiter,” or “A priest, a rabbi, and a minister entered a bar”) but the joke ends not with the satisfying fulfillment of expectations but with something so improbable—something so incongruous, so greatly in violation of character or of probability—that it evokes laughter. Thus—though maybe this joke isn’t funny enough—we get something like this:

**Customer.** Waiter! What’s this fly doing in my soup?

**Waiter.** It looks to me like the breast-stroke.

The idea that laughter derives from an utterly unanticipated fulfillment of expectations is ancient: Aristotle mentions it in *Rhetoric* 3.2, when he gives advice on how a speaker can raise a laugh. Also relevant is Immanuel Kant’s famous line, from *Critique of Judgment* (1790), “Laughter is an effect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.”

Usually the transformation occurs because we are presented with the incongruous—in the example just given, the information that the waiter provides is utterly inappropriate to the customer’s question. (The *incongruity theory* of humor is thought to have been first set forth by James Beattie, Scottish philosopher and poet, in an essay on laughter, in 1776. Incongruity is the basis, too, of the much more famous treatise by Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (1900), with its much-quoted formula that the comic is “the mechanical encrusted on the organic.” That is, when we see human beings—organic creatures, who ought to be flexible, who ought to adapt appropriately to a given situation—behave mechanically, the incongruity of their behavior, given the situation, makes us laugh. Bergson’s chief example is this: Customs officials, in a harbor, see a boat foundering. They heroically rush to the rescue, but as soon as they have safely brought the passengers ashore they—here is...
the mechanical business—immediately ask, “Have you anything to declare?” This joke may not strike all of us as very funny, but it does illustrate the point, and, when you think about it, it does explain why stock characters—let’s say, the lover, the jealous husband, and the miser, are funny.

A few other points: We will not offer laborious comments on each joke, but we do want to make two additional points: First, Why do men tell jokes more than women? By chance we happened to come across a relevant article that we think is worth looking at. According to Helga Kotthoff, “Gender and Humor: The State of the Art,” Journal of Pragmatics 38:1 (2006): 4-25, in Western societies there is a “traditional incompatibility between displaying femininity and active, in particular, aggressive joking” (p 4). She argues that humor “creates new, unusual perspectives on the object and thereby communicates sovereignty, creative power, and the freedom to intervene in the world. Such demonstrative displays of subjectivity and their potential to define normality have been less accepted by women (p. 5).

Second, and last, it is probably true that most comedy is (at least to some degree) subversive, revolutionary. It questions authority, it punctures propriety by showing that the learned professor is either ridiculously pedantic or grotesquely absent-minded, the doctor is a quack, the busy merchant is a ridiculous miser (or is a pretentious show-off), and so forth. That is, comedy questions such traditional values as scholarship, professional expertise, and hard work. Again, it values flexibility, Bergson’s “organic” rather than “mechanical” response to unexpected situations. It values a spirit of playfulness (“comedy” comes from the Greek komos, revel), a spirit of independence and resourcefulness in a world that too often has become mechanical, predictable, almost inhuman, we might say.

THE BROTHERS GRIMM

Mother Holle (p. 1002)

One of the pleasures given by many fairy tales and stories is that not only are the good rewarded but the bad are punished. It is nice that in “Mother Holle” the good daughter (that is, a stepdaughter) receives a fine reward; it is even nicer that the bad daughter gets her severe comeuppance.

We find we are drawn to ask students why in such stories the author or authors provide us with both things—the rewards for the good, the punishments for the bad. Possibly the answer is quite simple: We want to see the full (should we say, ruthless?) administration of justice, to all parties. Still, one wonders why it is not enough that the good person, after mistreatment, comes to a good end. Why does the bad person need to be punished? Perhaps we value justice but also relish seeing bad persons suffer some pain (or even death), which we tell ourselves they richly deserve.

You might ask your students whether the bad daughter in this story is really so bad. True, she is lazy, but, on the other hand, most of us are lazy, at least
some of the time. Maybe the point is that it is acceptable to be lazy and idle and shiftless some of the time, just not all of the time. The bad daughter here, who apparently is lazy all of the time, is covered with pitch, a sticky black substance—a detail that some scholars contend is a sign of racism by the Brothers Grimm: blackness is the external indicator of badness within. (We have heard, by the way—but we have not verified the assertion—that in African folklore black has, as in white cultures, negative implications. Given the fact that the night is dark, and human beings are especially vulnerable in the dark, it is perhaps not surprising that blackness is often associated with evil.)

Of course a good/bad polarity is a convention of fairy tales. Once upon a time it happened that there was a good daughter and a bad daughter. Yet it is interesting that—so it appears—this is the convention: One person by nature is good (and attractive), and the other one is the opposite (and also is ugly). Each is the way she is by nature: The story is the working out of this nature, with the ultimate beneficial result to the good person, and the punitive result to the bad one. You could argue that this is fair; you could argue as well that it is not.

What about the role of Mother Holle? In some translations she is Frau Holle, or Mother Hulda, and in Germanic pre-Christian folklore she is a goddess who rules the weather and who operates as a female guardian figure. In this tale Mother Holle affects and influences the lives of the daughters, but she does not control them; each daughter defines herself, and her fate, through her own actions. Mother Holle then steps in with the rewards and punishments.

We have said two daughters, and there are two in this story. However, it is conceivable that the two daughters are intended to reflect the two natures, the good and the evil (though this term may be too strong) in each of us, which beckon to us and which we either accept or reject. The problem with this view is that while in the world of stories and tales the good wins out and the good person ends up with a happy life, reality often is different.

You might ask your students: What is the point of “Mother Holle” anyway? What is the apparent moral, and what, if we press a bit further, might be the real moral?—the claim or assertion that the story is really making? Come to think of it: Is “Mother Holle” a story that we like or that we loathe?

**WILL EISNER**

*The Day I Became a Professional* (p. 1005)

As we say in our first comment after the story, there is a problem here; most readers will not know who Ludwig Bemelmans was, and therefore the point is lost until they read Eisner's note, and perhaps also our comment, where we suggest that if they substitute the name of some cartoonist whom they value (Disney? Trudeau?) they will pretty much get Eisner's idea.

And what is Eisner's idea—his point, even (dare we say it?) his moral? We think it pretty much comes down to “Trust yourself,” or “Be true to yourself.”
As viewers look at the first page of images, they may perhaps be faintly amused by the proud father in the first image (we take the background figure in the first image to be the father) and, in the second image, by the artist’s confidence as he dresses for success. Similarly, in the third image—still on the first page—the standing artist confidently holds his large portfolio as he towers above the frumpy seated figures. Eisner could have shown the portfolio resting on the ground, but, no, this strong guy is not inconvenienced even by holding so unwieldy an object.

On the second page we see the artist sitting next to a small balding guy whom we later learn is (from the informed reader’s point of view) the famous Bemelmans. Our hero is invited to enter the office of the art director, and probably as soon as we see the director—at the bottom of the second page—we smell a rat. He looks too complacent, confidently leaning back and smoking his pipe. The third page is devoted almost entirely to this loathsome character, though it does also depict (in the lowered shoulders) the dejection of the artist. (Lots of chance here to talk about body-language.)

The last page—and now we get much more spoken dialogue than the previous pages offered—shows us, in the first drawing, the dejected artist (again, the posture tells us what his state of mind is), and in the middle of the page we hear Bemelmans’s wisdom—though it is important that at this stage we do not know that the speaker is a highly successful artist. Presumably he has had his rejections too, has gone through what the younger man is now going through, but he has learned not to despair. Well, anyone might say this, but why should we believe it? Because—we find at the very end—it is said by someone who indeed has produced valuable work, someone whose work the reader esteems.

And now the reader fully understands the title of the graphic story. One way of becoming a professional is by ignoring the comments of know-it-alls and by remaining true to one’s vision. We hasten to add that of course this is not the whole story. Of course there are times when one’s critics are right, when one should listen to criticism, or should have self-doubts. No four-page graphic fiction is going to tell the whole story, give advice that can be applied to every circumstance. No work of literature, however long—not The Odyssey, The Divine Comedy, Hamlet—tells the whole story. Rather, when we read a work, we find that, within its own limited world, so to speak, it seems true, seems to say all that needs to be said, at least for the moment. And, to return to the title, one becomes a professional when one learns that—on some things—one must not compromise.

**Daniel Orozco**

*Orientation* (p. 1009)

This story might well have appeared in our thematic unit, “American Dreams and Nightmares,” along with such dystopias as Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” or Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery.” Orozco’s basic gimmick is to use...
an imperturbable narrator—almost an innocent eye—who calmly proceeds to
tell us about a horrifying world.

The unnamed narrator seems to be guiding the new employee through an
ordinary workplace ("That's my cubicle there, and this is your cubicle") but
even by the end of the first paragraph we realize that we are being given a
guided tour of a monstrous world: "If you must make an emergency phone call,
ask your supervisor first. If you can't find your supervisor, ask Phillip Spiers,
who sits over there. He'll check with Clarissa Nicks, who sits over there.”
Meanwhile, presumably, the emergency—maybe a fire, or maybe a heart
attack—has become a disaster.

Because we see even in this first paragraph that the place of employment is
a hell, and the helpful guide is a demented monster, it is not quite true to say
that the darkness progressively deepens, but the cumulative effect does make the
place seem worse and worse, and the guide more and more depraved. The place
is one in which the new employee should feel free to ask questions—but “Ask
too many questions . . . and you may be let go.” The guide, droning amiably,
lets the new worker know that one worker gets his kicks by sneaking into the
women’s room (paragraph 5), another worker is an abused wife (7), another is
a serial killer (24), and so on, and all of these horrors are related flatly, help-
fully. The narrator is so much a company man (or woman) that, explaining the
glorious comprehensive health plan, he or she assures the auditor that if all of
Larry Bagdikian’s six daughters “were to simultaneously fall victim to illness or
injury . . . Larry Bagdikian would not have to pay one dime. He would have
nothing to worry about” (13). Six daughters simultaneously stricken, and lucky
Larry “would have nothing to worry about.”

At the end of the ninth paragraph the narrator says, “Isn’t the world a funny
place? Not in the ha-ha sense, of course.” And the reader is compelled to agree.

JOHN UPDIKE

A & P (p. 1013)

It may be useful for students to characterize the narrator and see if occasion-
ally Updike slips. Is “crescent,” in the fourth sentence, too apt a word for a
speaker who a moment later says, “She gives me a little snort,” and “If she’d
been born at the right time they would have burned her over in Salem”? If this
is a slip, it is more than compensated for by the numerous expressions that
are just right.

“A & P” is, in its way, about growing up. Invite students to characterize the
narrator as precisely as possible. Many will notice his hope that the girls will
observe his heroic pose, and some will notice, too, his admission that he doesn’t
want to hurt his parents. His belief (echoing Lengel’s) that he will “feel this for
the rest of [his] life” is also adolescent. But his assertion of the girls’ innocence
is attractive and brave.
Some readers have wondered why Sammy quits. Nothing in the story suggests that he is a political rebel, or that he is a troubled adolescent who uses the episode in the A & P as a cover for some sort of adolescent emotional problem. An extremely odd article in *Studies in Short Fiction*, 23 (1986): 321–23, which seeks to connect Updike’s story with Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” says that “Sammy’s sudden quitting is not only a way of attracting the girls’ attention but also a way of punishing himself for lustful thoughts.” Surely this is nonsense, even further off the mark than the same author’s assertion that Queenie’s pink bathing suit “suggests the emerging desires competing with chastity.” Sammy quits because he wants to make a gesture on behalf of these pretty girls, who in appearance and in spirit (when challenged, they assert themselves) are superior to the “sheep” and to the tedious Lengel. Of course Sammy hopes his gesture will be noticed, but in any case the gesture is sincere.

What sort of fellow is Sammy? Is he a male chauvinist pig? An idealist? A self-satisfied deluded adolescent? Someone who thinks he is knowledgeable but who is too quick to judge some people as sheep? Maybe all of the above, in varying degrees. Certainly his remark that the mind of a girl is “a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar,” is outrageous—but later he empathizes with the girls, seeing them not as mindless and not as mere sex objects but as human beings who are being bullied. If we smile a bit at his self-dramatization (“I felt how hard this world was going to be to me hereafter”), we nevertheless find him endowed with a sensitivity that is noticeably absent in Lengel.


Students will likely be familiar with Updike’s name; some will have seen the film version of his novel, *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984). But because he wrote so much, students may be unsure what by Updike they should read. For starters, we recommend the early novel, *Rabbit, Run* (1960), and the short story collections, *Pigeon Feathers* (1962) and *Problems* (1979). Updike was also an extraordinarily versatile and accomplished literary critic. His essays and reviews have been collected in *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (1983); *Odd Jobs: Essays and Criticism* (1991); and *More Matter: Essays and Criticism* (1999).

**Additional Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing**

1. Sammy: comic yet heroic?
2. What kind of person do you think he is?
3. Question 5 in the text quotes Updike, thus:

   I want stories to startle and engage me within the first few sentences, and in their middle to widen or deepen or sharpen my knowledge of human activity, and to end by giving me a sensation of completed statement.

   What do you want stories to do?
In our third question in the text we raise the issue of the alleged distinction between the arts and the crafts, and we refer to our discussion of it at the beginning of Chapter 24. You may want to begin the discussion in class by raising this issue. Or, of course, you may want to talk only about the story itself.

But what is “the story itself”? One can perhaps discuss it as autonomous, perhaps in the way that one might discuss a piece of music, or an abstract painting, or even a lyric, but we think that Traven’s story has to be discussed, at least in part, as a fable, which is to say that we think he is commenting on life. And we think his comment is pretty obvious: in this fable, the naive person is the New York capitalist, not the illiterate Indian, for the capitalist doesn’t understand that there is more to life than making money. In fact, the capitalist, despite his skill with pencil and paper, is quite stupid, and the Indian is quite wise, because the Indian knows that if he engages in the sort of business that Mr. Winthrop proposes, he will be ruined, i.e., his way of life will vanish.

When the Indian tells Mr. Winthrop that the more units Winthrop wants, the higher the unit-cost will be, Winthrop is dumbfounded, and indeed readers also are puzzled. This scene sounds rather like an episode in a Marx Brothers movie, when Groucho wants to hire Chico’s band. He is told the price will be (we don’t remember the figures, but are just guessing) a hundred dollars. Chico then adds that they have to rehearse, and Groucho must pay for the rehearsal time, so the price will be a hundred and fifty dollars. Groucho replies, “Well, how much if you don’t rehearse?” and Chico says, “You can’t afford it.” (Well, it’s funny when the Marx Brothers do it.) But the Indian’s explanation (paragraphs 80–86) does make sense (sort of).

We find Traven’s story entertaining, and we do see that it touches on a significant issue, the exploitation of uneducated foreign craftsworkers, but we also strongly think that Traven caricatures the American businessman and sentimentalizes the Mexican Indian. For one thing, so far as we know from our reading about Japanese, African, and Latin American weavers, basket-makers, and potters, most traditional craftspeople (as opposed to persons taking courses in a craft on a college campus) do not greatly vary their production—they have a traditional pattern, or a few traditional patterns, and this is pretty much what they stick to. Second, they would not understand this Indian’s comment when he says, “I’ve got to make these canastitas my own way and with my song in them and with bits of my soul woven into them.”

But we don’t want to end on a curmudgeonly note. We think the story is entertaining to read, and it does set one thinking about artistic motives and the relationships between works of art and life. And if you have the faintest interest in baskets, see Louise Allison Cort, *A Basketmaker in Rural Japan* (1994), a fascinating book with excellent photographs.
This story will work wonderfully for some students, less so for others. The students who enjoy it will find it funny, while the students who don’t enjoy it will complain that Moore is aiming for comedy but not achieving it. Some will be impressed by Moore’s virtuosity; others will judge her voice to be too insistent, repetitive, irritating.

Who is speaking in this story? When we first read it, we were inclined for a time to identify the voice as Moore’s: This is the author speaking, parodying in a How-To form the steps that a writer must follow in order to become successful at her craft. But the references to “Francie” in the story soon make clear that the voice is not Moore’s; rather the voice is that of a character whom she has imagined. The point of view is complicated further by the fact that the tips and suggestions are delivered to “you,” to the second-person pronoun, from beginning to end. Is Moore poking clever, fast-paced ironic fun at herself? Is she satirizing earnest but simpleminded aspiring writers like Francie? Or is she scoring comic points at the reader’s expense, especially readers (this means you) who might dream of becoming a novelist or short story writer and are eager for guidance: So, how is it done? Where do I start, what should I do, how should I gain experience?

For the story’s comedy to succeed, the advice presented has to seem off-center, skewed, crazy, and yet based on a measure of sense. Disillusionment, pain, suffering—these are described ironically in the first paragraph, even as they do strike us as part of the writer’s necessary knowledge. A writer cannot be naive, innocent, limited in his or her emotional range; the writer must feel and know a great deal to understand his or her own life and the lives of others and then to project this understanding in characters he or she creates. To say this is to utter a cliché and also a truth. It’s something that a genuine writer takes to heart, learns through labor, and weaves into the activity of writing. It’s also something that a poor or superficial, or sincere but unskilled, writer believes and attempts to put into practice but cannot: The magic is not there.

There are many sharp turns and absurd twists in Moore’s story. Some of the jokes are very good, as when Francie wonders whether fate, rather than computer error, has led her to the creative writing class. “Perhaps,” she observes in a report of parental wisdom, “this is what your dad meant when he said, ‘It’s the age of computers, Francie, it’s the age of computers.’” Other jokes are bad but are intended to be bad—clumsy and clunky, as in the paragraph about “Fishmeal” and “Mopey Dick.”

After we discuss the point of view and tone of “How to Become a Writer,” and its elements of irony and comedy, we ask the class, “Is this a good story?” The answers that we have received are intriguing. The students admire Moore’s stylistic gifts, but, in our experience, most of them are not convinced that “How to Become a Writer” is a good story. Nothing happens in it, they frequently
say—which is an interesting complaint, given the criticisms of Francie’s writing that she reports in the story itself. Francie is told that she shows a fine feeling for imagery and for rhythm, but, it is said, she has little or no conception of plot. Moore is very canny; she anticipates our criticism and embeds it into the story. This will not keep students from noting the absence of plot, but it makes them seem to be expressing a charge that Moore herself is aware of: How can she be criticized for lacking a plot when she knows that already?

But press the students, “So, I’ll ask again, is this a good story or not?” “How to Become a Writer” offers a good opportunity for the members of the class to say what they want to find in a story, what Moore does and does not offer in comparison with other writers studied in the course, and, furthermore, what makes a story like this one “contemporary.” If it turns out that too many students are unresponsive to or critical of Moore, tell them how acclaimed (and successful) she is: “Well, what do you make of that?” This story comes from Moore’s highly regarded first collection, Self-Help, in which several stories are presented in a How-To structure and feature the second-person pronoun “you” (“How to Be an Other Woman,” “The Kid’s Guide to Divorce,” “How,” “How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)”). She is responding to the cascade of self-help manuals and instruction books on the market and to the staggering popularity in the media for advice about everything from losing weight to getting into the best college to being your own best friend. Many readers of Self-Help have praised Moore as a shrewd explorer of contemporary life. And her later collection Birds of America (1998) has been even more successful, reaching the fiction best-seller list for a month and receiving one glowing review after another.

For differing perspectives on Self-Help, consult the reviews by Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times, March 6, 1985; and Jay McInerney, The New York Times Book Review, March 24, 1985. Kakutani admires Moore’s gifts but finds the stories too limited and the collection as a whole not coherent as a work of art, whereas McInerney comes to a different conclusion, commending Moore’s flexible, well-modulated voice. See also Carol Iannone, “Post-Counterculture Tristesse,” which examines both Moore and David Leavitt, Commentary 83 (February 1987): 57–61.

The March 24, 1985, issue of the Book Review also includes this brief profile, written by Caryn James:

At the age of 28, Lorrie Moore often strikes others as precocious. “I’m not one of those people who always wanted to be a writer; everyone assumes I am,” she said in a telephone interview, pointing out that, like the heroine of her story “How to Become a Writer,” her career began haphazardly. She signed up for a high school linguistics course, was shunted off to creative writing instead and stayed. But success came early, while she was a student at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y. The first story she ever sent out won first prize in Seventeen magazine’s fiction contest. “When I won, I thought, this is easy, but I also felt a little sheepish—I was competing against 13- and 14-year-olds, and I was 19.”

Chapter 25: All in a Day’s Work

After graduation she worked as a paralegal for two years—“I was still writing. I had a lot of energy; I even took tap-dance lessons”—then got an M.F.A. at Cornell University. Last September she began teaching writing workshops at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Asked about influences on Self-Help, she said, “When I was 18 or 19, my favorite writer was Margaret Atwood. For the first time I read fiction about women who were not goddesses or winners. In some ways they were victims, but they weren’t wimps. They were stylish about their victimization.” She sets herself apart from other savvy short-story writers with whom she might be linked. Ann Beattie’s “male characters seem to get all the good lines. I give the women in my stories more than equal time.” A major influence is a timeless one, with a twist. “I suppose it’s arrogant, but every writer is influenced by Shakespeare. I’m always trying to write Romeo and Juliet and it comes out as something else, like in Alice in Wonderland, when she tries to recite poetry and it comes out as that awful poem about crocodiles.”


For an excellent essay on the contemporary short story, which includes discussion of Moore, see Vince Passaro, “Unlikely Stories: The Quiet Renaissance of American Short Fiction,” Harper’s (August 1999): 80–89.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

The Solitary Reaper (p. 1031)


The situation in “The Solitary Reaper” is notably Wordsworthian: a single humble figure is in a landscape that is both dreary and richly mysterious. The poem opens with an exclamation of wonder and a hint of biblical or at least archaic language (“Behold her”); in line 4, with the consecutive stresses on “Stop here,” we get one of the poem’s very few metrical variations.

In the second stanza the vision widens to include an oasis in Arabia and the Hebrides off western Scotland; her voice is like a nightingale’s telling the desert travelers that they approach life and a refreshing coolness, and like the cuckoo’s heralding the warm spring in the cold north. In line 15 the trochee in “Breaking” perhaps helps to communicate a suggestion of strength or vitality.

In the third stanza the poet says he cannot understand the words of her song—possibly because she sang in Gaelic, possibly because she is distant. In any case, her song resembles the nightingale’s and the cuckoo’s in that it is a song and a sign of life, but it differs from theirs in that it is melancholy, and here Wordsworth again extends the vision now to the distant past and the present and the high and the low.
Note, too, that the melancholy is presented in a work of art, and it should be noted that although the song is melancholy there is no evidence that the girl is melancholy. Presumably—if the singer is like people in the real world—there is indeed a sort of joy to be gained from singing a melancholy song. We included the poem in this section partly in order to let students discuss connections between labor and song. Some students may be familiar with African-American work songs such as “Take this hammer.”

The feminine rhymes (“ending” and “bending,” in lines 26 and 28) perhaps suggest the continuity of the song which, so far as the speaker was concerned, did not end. The redundancy in “motionless and still” (line 29) perhaps serves to communicate the poet’s entranced state, though perhaps it is merely a redundancy.

WALT WHITMAN

I Hear America Singing (p. 1032)

This poem, first published in Leaves of Grass in 1860, as no. 20 of “Chants Democratic,” employs neither a rhyme scheme nor a metrical pattern, qualities that many inexperienced readers think are essential to poetry. Instead, it employs repetition and rhythm.

We encourage students to think about Whitman’s choices of words. Note “carols,” for example: a religious folk song or popular hymn, particularly one associated with Christmas. “Mechanic”: here, a manual laborer or artisan. All of the occupations that Whitman refers to involve physical effort and exertion.

Whitman and democracy: scholars often have called attention to the democratic themes in Whitman’s verse. Here, in inspiring tones, he celebrates the mechanics, carpenters, masons, and others, including women. For him they have an important place in the nation—and they merit an important place in poetry, where typically they had not been found.

The problem, or, perhaps, the limitation of this poem is that Whitman’s attempt at inclusiveness may prompt a reader to notice that certain kinds of workers are not present; the poem is both inclusive and not inclusive. No one is working at a desk, and there is no mention of slaves working in the Southern fields—though in 1860 there were nearly 4 million slaves in the United States. Despite its apparent inclusiveness, then, the poem offers a narrow view of work. There is no reference to slaveholders, either. Should there be?

It is not easy to write a truly good, truly satisfying poem of this kind. Possibly we should say instead that it is too easy: We can celebrate this group, and that one, and this other one. But we always will leave some persons, some groups, on the outside. No poem is big enough to include everybody who could and should be named. It is to Whitman’s great credit that in his poetry and prose he is capacious, generous, welcoming: He invites any and all into his embrace, and into the Union. But even he is not perfect. Is perfection possible in such a poem? What does it really mean to be Walt Whitman, the great “democratic” poet?
We also have found it stimulating to students to pose to them this question, in the context of Whitman’s poem: What kinds of singing would Whitman hear if he were alive today?

Carl Sandburg

Chicago (p. 1033)

Carl Sandburg was the brawny, big-hearted poet of immigrants and laborers, of common men and women, an enemy of exploitation and injustice, a celebratory singer of the working people of America, its industries and factories and its grand panoramas of mountains, rivers, and landscapes. “The great mid-West,” observed the poet, critic, and anthologist Louis Untermeyer, “that vast region of steel mills and slaughterhouses, of cornfields and prairies, of crowded cities and empty skies, spoke through Carl Sandburg.”

Sandburg was a very popular poet (he said he wrote “simple poems for simple people”), but during the 1920s he launched a biographical project on Abraham Lincoln—it required six volumes to complete (1926-39)—and today even more people may be aware of him for the Lincoln biography than for his verse.

Sandburg also wrote books of children’s tales, including Rootabaga Stories (1922) and Rootabaga Pigeons (1923). In addition, he made important contributions to the study of American song, folklore, and oral tradition through his compilations The American Songbag (1927) and The New American Songbag (1950). Often he toured the country, reading his own poems and reading the poems and singing the ballads (accompanying himself on the banjo or the guitar) included in these books.

In the poem we have included, published in 1916, Sandburg is speaking to Chicago, addressing the city—which is named only in the title. In bursts of short phrases, and in longer flowing lines, as well as through present tense, he acknowledges Chicago’s bad behavior, but he defends and honors the city, saying that even its worst features are central to its vitality and appeal. The vivid details and surging rhythms make us feel Sandburg’s pride in this city of rough and tough workers—something that we stress when we teach this poem and read it out loud from start to finish.

However, we also urge students, as the discussion proceeds, to give the words and images a close examination. What is our response, for example, to the gunman who kills, who escapes justice, and who kills again? What do we make of the contrast between big, brutal Chicago and the “little soft cities”? “Fierce as a dog,” “cunning as a savage”: these are strong, yet perhaps upon reflection, unnerving similes for Sandburg to use in praise of a great city—a major metropolis in the modern world. “An ignorant fighter”: how do we react to this simile?

Sandburg’s celebration of Chicago is powerful, but many of us, when we think about it, might not be at all comfortable with his terms, which in forceful
and violent language are keyed to agriculture and industry. This is one way, Sandburg’s way, to praise the booming, energetic Chicago: he tells us what Chicago is as it appears to him, its advocate. But what else could it be? One wonders whether in the city that Sandburg depicts anyone has ever read a book, attended a concert, gone to church, or spent a day in school.

**Gary Snyder**

*Hay for the Horses* (p. 1034)

The first sentence is seven lines long. Admittedly the lines are short, but the effect nevertheless is of a long journey for the unnamed “He,” a trucker who has come from X and gone through Y and at last arrives at Z. “We” (the narrator and the trucker) did this and that, but not until line 19 do we hear the trucker’s voice:

“I’m sixty-eight” he said.

And he goes on to speak the rest of the poem.

Our first question asks students to think about the poet’s attitude toward the man whom he talks about, and our second question asks students to think about his attitude toward himself, and also about their attitude—i.e., the readers’ attitude—toward him. In our view, although the trucker explicitly expresses exasperation (“dammit”) that he has spent his entire adult life doing what at the age of seventeen he said he “would hate to do,” the reader nevertheless feels that there has been something heroic about the trucker’s life. True, the only dictio

Students can learn something about writing by thinking about the length of the four sentences that constitute this poem. The first stanza consists of a fairly long sentence (four and a half lines) and a short one (half a line, completing the fifth line of the poem). The brevity of that second sentence reinforces the content—that no one thought about the father—and the brevity also, of course, adds emphasis by virtue of its contrast with the leisurely material that precedes it.

Similarly, the fourth sentence, much shorter than the third, adds emphasis, an emphasis made more emphatic by the repetition of “What did I know?”

Next a confession: we thought about glossing “offices” in the last line, for students will almost surely misinterpret the word, thinking that it refers to places where white-collar workers do their tasks. But we couldn’t come up with a concise gloss that would convey the sense of ceremonious and loving performance of benefits. And it may be just as well to spend some class time on this important word, because the thing as well as the word may be unfamiliar to many students. After the word has been discussed, the poem may be read as a splendid illustration of an “office.” Like the father in the poem, who drives out the cold and brings warmth (by means of love, of course, as well as coal) to an unknowing child, an “austere and lonely” writer performs an office, shaping experience for another person’s use.

One may want to raise the question in class of whether the knowledge that the author was black affects the poem’s meaning.


**SEAMUS HEANEY**

*Digging* (p. 1036)

The comparison of the pen resting in the hand, “snug as a gun,” may especially remind a reader that in Ireland literature has often been closely connected with politics and with war, but of course the idea of the pen as a weapon is widespread, best known in the adage that “The pen is mightier than the sword.” Less well known, but in the same vein, is Napoleon’s preference of newspapers to battalions.

The image of the weapon is then largely replaced by the lines about the speaker’s father digging—now flowerbeds, but twenty years ago he dug nourishing potatoes—but such words as “lug,” “shaft,” and “cool hardness” (though said of potatoes) keep the gun in our midst, at least faintly. Similarly, the emphasis on the father’s posture (careful, professional, expert) suggests the discipline of a marksman—and of a writer.

Heaney then goes further back in time, to his grandfather digging not potatoes but turf, the fuel that cooks the potatoes and that heats a home, thus a substance no less necessary to life than food. But the evocation of these pictures of father and grandfather digging serves to remind the poet that he has “no spade to follow them” (24). What, then, is his place in the family, and his role in society? What nourishment, what fuel can he contribute? And so we come back to the pen: “The squat pen rests” (30, a repetition of the first half of line 2). “I’ll
dig with it” (31). The “squat pen” is the poet’s spade and gun, to be used with the energy and precision with which his father and grandfather used their spades, and to be used, presumably, with the same life-sustaining effect.

**MARGE PIERCY**

*To be of use* (p. 1038)

One of the best features of “To be of use” is how it employs in line 1 a common phrase and claim that, as the poem unfolds, Piercy makes vivid, deepens, and complicates.

“The people I love the best”: that’s simple enough, the first part of a definition. “The people I love the best” are those who . . . . And the first stanza by itself might make for a good poem. Piercy thus would be saying, boosted by the energy and verve of her well-placed verb “jump,” that she loves above all people who know what they want to do and who decisively, emphatically, do it. The image of the seals is complimentary and affectionate—and comical too, evoking something splashily funny about the dedicated workers whom Piercy in this stanza celebrates.

We hear in these lines an allusion to a famous phrase in Conrad’s novel *Lord Jim* (1900), where the character Stein says:

A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns—nicht wahr [won’t he]? . . . No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up. So if you ask me—how to be?

The pleasure and interest of the poem overall lie in Piercy’s expansion and exploration of the opening line, carried on in a sequence of stanzas, and in an array of images. When we teach “To be of use,” we encourage students to describe the impact, and the implications, of the imagery in the first stanza, and then we move to the second, asking, “How do the images of the ox, the water buffalo, pulling the cart change or modify the sense of the people whom Piercy loves?” Same question about the third stanza, with its imagery and its relationship to what has been expressed before. Then, as the poem moves into the final stanza: How do the preceding stanzas prepare the reader for the conclusions that the speaker reaches about the nature of “the work of the world”?

When we teach this poem, we move through the text slowly: we want the students to register and be conscious of the specific meanings and implications of Piercy’s words. Often, that’s more than half the battle in helping students to enjoy poetry.

“Botched,” for instance, in line 19, derives from a Middle English word for “mend.” But “botch” in fact means the opposite—to mend not at all, or to
mend badly: “to ruin through clumsiness; to make or perform clumsily; bungle; to repair or mend clumsily.” When the work is “botched,” it “smears the hands.” “Smear: to spread or daub with a sticky, greasy, or dirty substance; to apply by spreading or daubing: smeared suntan lotion on my face and arms; to stain by or as if by spreading or daubing with a sticky, greasy, or dirty substance; to stain or attempt to destroy the reputation of; vilify: political enemies who smeared his name; slang: to defeat utterly; smash.” Press the students, then, to see and feel that “smearing,” and then to hear and absorb the different range of association in “crumbles to dust,” which perhaps alludes to Genesis 3:19: “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

For further reading, we suggest Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy (1982). Students might also enjoy Early Ripening: American Women Poets Now (1988), which Piercy edited, and her memoir, Sleeping with Cats (2002).

For a helpful listing of primary and secondary sources, and other materials (e.g., interviews with Piercy), visit the Marge Piercy Home Page: www.archer-books.com/Piercy.

In an interview, Piercy has identified key “influences” on her work; we are fond of quoting the passage in the classroom because it dramatizes for students that good writers see wide-ranging reading as the background from which their own vocation and craft emerge:

In the beginning there were the romantics, Byron and Shelley and Keats, and also Whitman and Dickinson. That was the beginning, at fifteen. My earliest passions. Then came Eliot. Then came Blake and Yeats and Joyce, Joyce and Yeats and Blake, intense and burning passions. I discovered Muriel Rukeyser very early, when I was a senior in high school, and I loved her always. Always. Then came William Carlos Williams and Neruda and Vallejo. But all this is a gross simplification, because I was always reading so much. I left out Pope. I left out Wordsworth. They were both terribly important. As were Edith Sitwell and Edward Arlington Robinson. I loved Elizabethan lyrics and Wyatt. Just as I put in a lot of time reading fairy tales, tales of all sorts, the basic stories, I put in a lot of time with ballads. Child’s ballads and the variations [Francis James Child’s English and Scottish Popular Ballads]. Ginsberg liberated my imagination at a critical time, 1959. My reading style was heavily influenced by Black poets in the late sixties—not that I imitated what they did, which would have been silly and meretricious, but that they inspired me to figure out how to put my poems across: Sonia Sanchez, June Jordan, Don L. Lee.

**MARGE PIECY**

*The Secretary Chant* (p. 1039)

To take our final question in the text: In the words of *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, a chant is “a mode of verbal performance somewhere between speech and song.” It goes on to say that “presumably any
verbal text can be chanted,” but our strong impression is that most chants are highly rhythmic. We will add—admittedly we are getting a bit nervous here—that a person chanting is a person who has become, at least to a small extent, subordinated, subservient to a pattern outside of the self, e.g., the priest to the sacred text. In the case at hand, the secretary—presumably a person at the mercy of every guy (or gal?) who wants something filed or who feels in need of a cup of coffee—has become dehumanized, “a chain of paper clips,” “a badly organized file,” “a reject button,” and so on.

Our second question asks if the poem is “chiefly an amusing, witty, playful piece” or is “a serious social commentary.” Our own response is that it is both—the poem is a playful engaging performance in words (especially the last four lines) but it also is a strong social commentary. It may well be taught along with Orozco’s “Orientation,” another comic work with a strong bite.

JOHN UPDIKE

Ex-Basketball Player (p. 1040)

Although the first lines of the poem set forth a matter-of-fact description of how to get to a place (“Berth’s garage”), we take it that the language evokes the glory days of the former basketball star. Notice “runs past,” “Bends,” “and stops, cut off,” “a chance to go.” The first stanza consists of two sentences, but the effect is of a periodic sentence, the meaning suspended until the end, sort of like a play in the game, which doesn’t (so to speak) achieve its meaning until the play is over.

The second stanza continues to evoke the game (“stands tall,” “Five on a side”), though to a lesser degree. Incidentally, gas pumps of the sort Updike describes probably no longer exist, and certainly “Esso” has disappeared (it is now Exxon Mobil).

Pathos is evoked, at least faintly, even in the first stanza (“Flick Webb . . . helps Berth out”), more so in the third and fourth stanzas, especially in the fourth, with the pitiful comic business of dribbling an inner tube, but most strongly in the final stanza, where the silence is deafening: “Flick seldom says a word to Mae, just nods,” and the “applauding tiers” that once faced the high school athlete now are merely the racks with candy in the luncheonette. Somehow the final line, devoted entirely to a Homeric catalog naming the cheap candies, strikes us as especially sad.

Our mention of “epic catalog” reminds us that the poem is in blank verse, and although the diction certainly does not evoke John Milton, the piece might almost be called “Paradise Lost.”

A stimulating critical study is William H. Pritchard, Updike: America’s Man of Letters (2000), a cogent, accessible reader’s guide to Updike’s career as a writer, which began in 1954 with the publication of a short story in The New Yorker.
First a few comments not about the play but about rodeo (pronounced either RO dee o or ro DAY o, but the second pronunciation is more common amongst those who perform in the spectacle). Rodeo (from a Spanish word meaning “[cattle] ring,” ultimately from rodear = to go around, to surround) apparently developed in the 1880s as a celebration of a successful round-up. Cowboys would demonstrate the skills of their trade, riding, lassoing, and wrestling animals to the ground. In any case, what was at first a home-grown event—in which the performers were also most of the spectators—soon became an entertainment for a larger public. The writer of this page, a New Yorker who knew horses only as creatures that were ridden by mounted policemen, recalls seeing rodeos in Madison Square Garden when he was a child in the 1930s. Obviously the audiences in the Garden were remote from the audiences that Big Eight speaks of:

Used to be fer cowboys, the rodeo did. . . . Used to be people came to a rodeo had a horse of their own back home. Farm people, ranch people—lord, they knew what they were lookin’ at. Knew a good ride from a bad ride, knew hard from easy.

What the viewer of Jane Martin’s Rodeo comes to see is that Big Eight, though relatively uneducated, understands pretty clearly that what was once a good-natured, friendly demonstration of useful skills in front of an audience of (more or less) peers has become Show Biz, mere entertainment, run for the profit of capitalists and offered to an ignorant audience. Big Eight herself is not exactly a role model, with her earthy comments about the large breasts of Tits Nelson, or her dismissal of “some New York faggot,” but in our view she comes across as thoroughly sympathetic, and indeed we believe that readers and spectators increasingly respect her as the play proceeds.

At first she is merely entertaining, a specimen of local color, but as she continues to talk we realize that what she says makes sense and is important. We realize, too, that she is indeed talking to us. You may want to help your students to see that her speech is not a soliloquy—not a character’s revelation of inner thoughts addressed to no one (though of course a soliloquy gives information to the audience). Rather, in her monologue (from Greek, monologos = single speech) Big Eight is decidedly speaking to a listener. In this case the listener is the entire audience; all of us, as a collective body, are to be understood as a character whom Big Eight is addressing. And she is not just nattering or whining about losing her job. Rather, she is making valid points, first about the development of the rodeo, and second—a much larger point—about the commercialization of all sorts of activities, for instance, sport—and can we add education?
Well you look out, honey! They want to make them a dollar out of what you love. Dress you up like Minnie Mouse. Sell your rodeo. Turn yer pleasure into Ice damn Capades. You hear what I’m sayin’? You’re jus’ merchandise to them, sweetie. You’re jus’ merchandise to them.

Having said this, we should also mention that there are those who believe that the rodeo, early and late, was and is a cruel entertainment, based largely on the pain of animals. PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and other organizations have charged that calf roping, for instance, often results in serious injuries to the animals, and that bucking broncos buck because they are given an electric shock when the gate is opened and because the flank (or “bucking”) strap is tightly cinched below the ribcage, causing pain. We have also heard that irritants are sometimes placed under the flank strap and also in the animal’s anus to stimulate bucking. Rodeo officials deny these charges. Officials also point out that the human performers are more likely to sustain injury than the animal performers—an argument not convincing to persons who are aware that the human performers are volunteers but the animal performers are not.

If indeed part of the spectator’s pleasure in a rodeo was or is sadistic, i.e., is not simply pleasure in seeing the accomplishments of the human performers but is partly rooted in witnessing the pain of animals, one might think twice before lamenting the decline of old-style rodeo. We are reminded of Thomas Macaulay’s comment on the Puritans’ opposition to bear-baiting: “The Puritan hated bear-baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators.” One might well ask the class: Are there certain pleasures that indeed we should not be allowed to experience? Should we enjoy calf roping? Cock fighting? And do we want to restore public executions, where crowds can enjoy the spectacle of seeing someone hanged or shot or injected with a lethal dose?

Macaulay’s comment will provoke some interesting responses, we think, but we recognize that it is not central to Jane Martin’s play: the quotation will stimulate a discussion of rodeos, but not of Martin’s Rodeo. Here is another quotation that we think can be useful in teaching the play itself. Ursula K. Le Guin, from Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew (1998) says,

The story is not in the plot but in the telling. It is the telling that moves.

Le Guin is speaking about fiction, not about drama, but her comment gets us back to a point we made a moment ago: the play is a monologue, but the speech is not merely the revelation of a character’s thought, and it is not spoken in isolation. Rather, the monologue that constitutes Rodeo tells a story in an engaging way, and it is very much addressed to an audience: the entire audience in the theater is conceived as Big Eight’s listener. The plot, so to speak, of Rodeo is in the telling, the shifts in tone. The speech begins with a pretty direct statement that indeed sums up Big Eight’s point (“Shoot—Rodeo’s just goin’ to hell in a handbasket”) but by the end of the monologue this statement has infinitely

more resonance than at the beginning. Big Eight goes on to talk about the early days, when a rodeo was essentially for knowledgeable folk (“Used to be fer cowboys”) and was a family affair (“Used to be a family thing”). Then we get the talk about the bankers and the New York faggots, about Mickey and Minnie Mouse, and so on, and near the end—though of course all of the monologue is addressed to the audience—the motif is broadened with the assertion that all of us are “jus’ merchandise” in the eyes of folks who look only at the bottom line.

“The telling,” to take Le Guin’s term, is what holds us—allegedly Big Eight’s telling but of course really Jane Martin’s.

One tiny complaint: Are we being picky when we say that, on rereading in preparation for writing this note, we find ourselves disturbed by occasional inconsistencies in the rendering of the dialect? Thus, in the first paragraph we get “jest” (for “just”), but in the last paragraph we get “jus’” (again for “just”). In the second paragraph and elsewhere we get “fer” (i.e., “for”) but elsewhere we get “for”; sometimes we get “ya” (i.e., “you”) but elsewhere we get “you.” If we were directing the play, we would tell the actor to be consistent.

A word about the last topic that we give in the text, in which we ask students to consider the effect of ending not with a blackout, as the playwright instructs, but with a fadeout. This question of course gets into the business of the “language” of drama: a play is not simply people talking, i.e., using “language” in the ordinary sense of the word. There is also body language (gesture), and the language of costume (Hamlet’s “inky cloak” tells the viewers that he is in mourning), and—and this is what we are getting at here—the “language” of lighting, information conveyed to an audience by the kinds of illumination that are used. A blackout (the sudden extinguishing of all light on the stage) inevitably surprises the audience; it is a sudden blow, and in Rodeo it might be thought of as analogous to the shocking dismissal of Big Eight. On the other hand, a fadeout (the gradual lowering of the lights) usually conveys pathos, a sort of slow dying. Our own practice is to follow the playwright’s instructions, simply because we believe that authors are entitled to have their plays staged the way they want them to be staged, but we nevertheless believe that in Rodeo the blackout is less effective, less meaningful, than a fadeout would be. We think that what a blackout gains in immediate effect it loses in meaning, the gradual extinction of a way of life. A topic for discussion.

ARTHUR MILLER

Death of a Salesman (p. 1044)

(This discussion is an abbreviation of our introduction in Types of Drama.) The large question, of course, is whether Willy is a tragic or a pathetic figure. For the ancient Greeks, at least for Aristotle, pathos was the destructive or painful act common in tragedy; but in English, “pathos” refers to an element
in art or life that evokes tenderness or sympathetic pity. Modern English critical usage distinguishes between tragic figures and pathetic figures by recognizing some element either of strength or of regeneration in the former that is not in the latter. Tragic protagonists perhaps act so that they bring their destruction upon themselves, or if their destruction comes from outside, they resist it, and in either case they come to at least a partial understanding of the causes of their suffering. The pathetic figure, however, is largely passive, an unknowing and unresisting innocent. In such a view Macbeth is tragic, Duncan pathetic; Lear is tragic, Cordelia pathetic; Othello is tragic, Desdemona pathetic; Hamlet is tragic (the situation is not of his making, but he does what he can to alter it), Ophelia pathetic. (Note, by the way, that of the four pathetic figures named, the first is old and the remaining three are women. Pathos is more likely to be evoked by persons assumed to be relatively defenseless than by the able-bodied.)

The guardians of critical terminology, then, have tended to insist that “tragedy” be reserved for a play showing action that leads to suffering which in turn leads to knowledge. They get very annoyed when a newspaper describes as a tragedy the death of a promising high school football player in an automobile accident, and they insist that such a death is pathetic, not tragic; it is unexpected, premature, and deeply regrettable, but it does not give us a sense of human greatness achieved through understanding the sufferings that a sufferer has at least in some degree chosen. Probably critics hoard the term “tragedy” because it is also a word of praise: To call a play a comedy or a problem play is not to imply anything about its merits, but to call a play a tragedy is tantamount to calling it an important or even a great play. In most of the best-known Greek tragedies, the protagonist either does some terrible deed or resists mightily. But Greek drama has its pathetic figures too, figures who do not so much act as suffer. Euripides’s *The Trojan Women* is perhaps the greatest example of a play which does not allow its heroes to choose and to act but only to undergo, to be in agony. When we think of pathetic figures in Greek drama, however, we probably think chiefly of the choruses, groups of rather commonplace persons who do not perform a tragic deed but who suffer in sympathy with the tragic hero, who lament the hardness of the times, and who draw spectators into the range of the hero’s suffering.

Arthur Miller has argued that because Oedipus has given his name to a complex that the common man may have, the common man is therefore “as apt a subject for tragedy.” It is not Oedipus’s complex, however, but his unique importance that is the issue in the play. Moreover, even if one argues that people of no public importance may suffer as much as people of public importance (and surely no one doubts this), one may be faced with the fact that the unimportant people by their ordinances are not particularly good material for drama, and we are here concerned with drama rather than with life. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman’s wife says, rightly, “A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man.” Yes, but is his exhaustion itself interesting and do his activities (and this includes the words he utters) before his exhaustion have

interesting dramatic possibilities? Isn’t there a colorlessness that may weaken
the play, an impoverishment of what John Milton called “gorgeous tragedy”?

Miller accurately noted (Theatre Arts, October 1953) that American drama
“has been a steady year by year documentation of the frustration of man,” and
it is evident that Miller has set out to restore a sense of importance, if not great-
ness, to the individual. In “Tragedy and the Common Man” (reprinted in our
text), published in The New York Times in the same year that Death of a
Salesman was produced and evidently in defense of the play, Miller argues on
behalf of the common man as a tragic figure, and he insists that tragedy and
pathos are very different: “Pathos truly is the mode for the pessimist... the
plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them
alone, lies the belief—optimistic, if you will—in the perfectibility of man.”
Elsewhere (Harper’s, August 1958) he has said that pathos is an oversimplifica-
tion and therefore is the “counterfeit of meaning.” Curiously, however, many
spectators and readers find that by Miller’s own terms Willy Loman fails to be
a tragic figure; he seems to them pathetic rather than tragic, a victim rather than
a man who acts and who wins esteem. True, he is partly the victim of his own
actions (although he could have chosen to be a carpenter, he chose to live by the
bourgeois code that values a white collar), but he seems in larger part to be a
victim of the system itself, a system of ruthless competition that has no place for
the man who can no longer produce. (Here is an echo of the social-realist drama
of the thirties.) Willy had believed in this system; and although his son Biff
comes to the realization that Willy “had the wrong dreams,” Willy himself
seems not to achieve this insight. He knows that he is out of a job, that the sys-
tem does not value him any longer, but he still seems not to question the values
he had subscribed to. Even in the last minutes of the play, when he is planning
his suicide in order to provide money for his family—really for Biff—he says
such things as “Can you imagine his magnificence with twenty thousand dollars
in his pocket?” and “When the mail comes he’ll be ahead of Bernard again.” In
the preface to his Collected Plays, Miller comments on the “exultation” with
which Willy faces the end, but it is questionable whether an audience shares it.
Many people find that despite the gulf in rank, they can share King Lear’s feel-
ings more easily than Willy’s.

Miller gathered his early plays, including Death of a Salesman, in Collected
Plays (1957); this volume also contains his illuminating introduction. For criti-
cal commentary, see Death of a Salesman: Text and Criticism, ed. Gerald Weales
(1967), and also the collections of essays edited by Robert W. Corrigan (1969),
Helen Wickham Koon (1983), and Harold Bloom (1986).

An excellent resource is Understanding “Death of a Salesman”: A Student
Casebook to Issues, Source, and Historical Documents, ed. Brenda Murphy and
Susan C. W. Abbotson (1999). For a revealing account of the origins of Miller’s
play, see John Lahr, “Making Willy Loman,” The New Yorker, January 25,
1999. For a cogent, highly positive review of a Broadway production that
starred Brian Dennehy in the title role, see Ben Brantley, “Attention Must Be

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. Willy says Biff can’t fail because “he’s got spirit, personality . . . personal attractiveness. . . . Personality always wins the day.” In an essay of 500 to 1,000 words, distinguish between “personality” and “character,” and then describe each of these in Willy.

2. The critic Kenneth Tynan has written, in Tynan Right and Left (1967), “Death of a Salesman . . . is not a tragedy. Its catastrophe depends entirely on the fact that the company Willy Loman works for has no pension scheme for its employees. What ultimately destroys Willy is economic injustice, which is curable, as the ills that plague Oedipus are not.” What do you think of Tynan’s view?
Most students are concerned with being themselves (more specifically, with being true to themselves), with being individuals, with establishing their identity, and only a curmudgeon would point out that some students who are confident that they are highly individualized in fact wear the clothing of the tribe. They may think they would wear “any old thing,” but they wouldn’t be seen dead in the wrong kind of jeans, they cut their hair after the current fashion, and so on.

In talking about identity—for instance, in speaking about Raya’s conclusion, in which she determines that she will be true to herself—we have found, over the years, that we sometimes talk about Frost’s “The Silken Tent” (Chapter 22), where the suggestion is that our “self” in large measure is established by the “countless silken ties of love” that connect us to others, let’s say to our parents, our siblings, our friends, our—well, the list is endless. Or we sometimes mention the episode in Ibsen’s Peer Gynt in which Peer, seeking to find his essential self, peels an onion—each layer represents a relationship or tie that he has freed himself from (business partner, lover, etc.). He finds that there is no essential self, no core to the onion. (In teaching Hamlet we mention that Polonius’s intelligent-sounding and obvious advice to Laertes—“to thine own self be true”—is not at all obvious and perhaps is not very intelligent, since we are likely to have several selves. Hamlet, we notice, must work very hard before he is able to be true to himself, and the effort costs him his life.)

As Raya observes, when she was in Los Angeles, with her family and close friends, she was Mexican, but when she visited her maternal grandmother she was Puerto Rican. Now, at Columbia, she finds that she is, or must consider herself, Latina. What she is saying, of course, is that peer pressure is forcing an identity on her that is new to her and that she does not want to accept. (In the text, we touch on this point in our second question, and in our third question we ask students to think about terms—whether Hispanic or Latino—that assemble Spanish-speaking people—including those like Raya, who says she doesn’t speak Spanish well—into a single group.)

It seems evident to us that politically Raya is to the right of the center. For instance, she expresses skepticism about multiculturalism, and she speaks dis-
paragingly of bilingual education. Her political stance will please some students and displease others, and they may well be more concerned with her politics than with the quality of her essay as a piece of argumentative writing. We include the essay, however, because we think it shows students that they themselves can write interestingly and effectively. In our view, most students who are native speakers can write an essay about as good as Raya’s, if they will take the trouble to draft it well in advance of the due date, revise it, perhaps submit it to peer review, and revise it yet again.

Raya’s conclusion (in her two final paragraphs) is that she is going to be herself, not someone manufactured by others. As we indicate at the beginning of this comment, we think this conclusion needs further thinking, but we also think the essay is clear, intelligent, and interesting.

Andrew Lam

Who Will Light Incense When Mother’s Gone? (p. 1115)

We admired Lam’s essay when we came across it, and we promptly assigned it for class discussion. To us, it seemed to describe poignantly the separation of feelings between a Vietnamese mother and her son. Writing from the son’s perspective, Lam sensitively treats a familiar dimension of immigrant experience: the older generation clings to beliefs, customs, and practices from which the younger generation feels distant. Alice Walker, Amy Tan, Julia Alvarez, and many others have in their own ways explored these divisions, fears, and resentments between generations—and also the possibilities and prospects for acceptance and reconciliation. In multiethnic, multicultural fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama, this is an important storyline and recurring theme.

This helps to explain why we responded with interest and pleasure to the essay and put it on the syllabus. We were sure that students would respond well to it, and quickly. But what happened instead is that the class proved slow at first to say much at all. One student said she liked the detail of the incense; another said she was amused by the meaning attached to the word “cowboy”; and a couple of others spoke approvingly (though not with much enthusiasm) about the narrator-son as he portrays himself, afflicted by doubts and concerns. That was about it.

Finally, one student said, “I’ve read lots of things like this before.” Others in the class then chimed in, saying the same. With something of a start, we realized that the familiarity of Lam’s account implied a problem with it for students. In grammar school and high school, and now again in college, students today read many works about multicultural and multiethnic America, and the topic of immigration, with its rewards and sorrows and splits between generations, is treated with great frequency. Our students respected the situation that Lam presents, but the nature of the situation, the cultural and emotional predicament, was not new to them.

For once we had our wits about us, and we asked: “Does an essay have to say something new in order to be good?” Some in the class spoke cogently about the importance for any piece of writing to come from a new angle, a fresh point of view; one student said, “a writer has to make you pay attention.” But others maintained that if a work is well-written, it does not have to say something new—that there’s a value in the telling and hearing of the same or similar stories. One of the students said something like this: “Maybe if it’s the same story you’ll realize you’re not alone, that your experience is shared.”

We next asked, “Well, if it’s the case that nearly all of you find this article to be the same as other articles you’ve read, how would you make it different?” One student jumped right in. She said she was tired of reading about mothers and fathers and grandparents who are attached to the old ways; this student wanted to read a story or an essay in which the members of the older generation insist that the children reject the old ways, even as the children for their part are determined to embrace and perpetuate them. The class liked that idea: never underestimate the yearning for novelty. But this also gave us an opening: “That sounds good, but is that really true to life? Is that what typically happens in an immigrant family?”

The students’ response to Lam’s essay made us wonder whether we had overvalued it. Maybe there’s not enough that’s new in it. But the fact remains that the class we devoted to this essay was a very good one, and we think you’ll benefit from using it. Perhaps there’s something to be learned about our work as teachers from this experience. It’s true that sometimes we want to resist the students if we think they are missing a point in a stubborn way, or dismissing this or that literary work because it fails immediately to engage them. But it’s also true that we can gain something by letting the students have their say, and then working with that. Agree with them, and then kindle their curiosity about why they have the response they do. Give them a chance to do some teaching and learning.

Amy Tan

*Two Kinds* (p. 1117)

It’s not a bad idea to ask a student to read the first two paragraphs aloud and then to invite the class to comment. What, you might ask them, do they hear besides some information about the mother’s beliefs? Probably they will hear at least two other things: (1) the voice of a narrator who does not quite share her mother’s opinion, and (2) a comic tone. You may, then, want to spend some time in class examining *what the writer has done* that lets a reader draw these inferences. On the first point, it may be enough to begin by noticing that when someone says, “My mother believed,” we are almost sure to feel some difference between the speaker and the reported belief. Here the belief is further distanced by the fivefold repetition of “You could.” The comedy—perhaps better charac-
terized as mild humor—is evident in the naiveté or simplicity of ambitions: open a restaurant, work for the government, retire, buy a house with almost no money down, become famous. Many readers may feel superior (as the daughter herself does) to this mother, who apparently thinks that in America money and fame and even genius are readily available to all who apply themselves—but many readers may also wish that their mothers were as enthusiastic.

The second paragraph adds a sort of comic topper. After all, when the mother says, in the first paragraph, “you could be anything you wanted to be in America,” the ambitions that she specifies are not impossible, but when in the second paragraph she says, “you can be prodigy too,” and “you can be best anything,” we realize that we are listening to an obsessed parent, a woman ferociously possessive of her daughter. (In another story in Tan’s Joy Luck Club a mother says of her daughter, “How can she be her own person? When did I give her up?”) Obsessions, of course, can be the stuff of tragedy—some students will be quick to talk about Macbeth’s ambition, Brutus’s self-confidence, and so forth—but obsessions are also the stuff of comedy; witness the lover who writes sonnets to his mistress’s eyebrow, Harpo Marx in pursuit of a blonde, the pedant, and all sorts of other monomaniacs whose monomania (at least as it is represented in the work of art) is not dangerous to others.

The third paragraph, with its references to the terrible losses in China, darkens the tone, but the fourth restores the comedy, with its vision of “a Chinese Shirley Temple.” The fifth paragraph is perhaps the most obviously funny so far: when Shirley Temple cries, the narrator’s mother says to her daughter: “You already know how. Don’t need talent for crying.”

There’s no need here to belabor the obvious, but students—accustomed to thinking that everything in a textbook is deadly serious—easily miss the humor. They will definitely grasp the absurdity of the thought that “Nairobi” might be one way of pronouncing Helsinki, but they may miss the delightful comedy of Auntie Lindo pretending that Waverly’s abundant chess trophies are a nuisance (“all day I have no time to do nothing but dust off her winnings”), and even a deaf piano teacher may not strike them as comic. (Of course, in “real life” we probably would find pathos rather than comedy in a deaf piano teacher—and that’s a point worth discussing in class.) So the point to make, probably, is that the story is comic (for example, in the mother’s single-mindedness, and in the daughter’s absurd hope that the recital may be going all right, even though she is hitting all the wrong notes) but is also serious (the conflict between the mother and the daughter, the mother’s passionate love, the daughter’s rebelliousness, and the daughter’s later recognition that her mother loved her deeply). It is serious, too, in the way it shows us (especially in the passage about the “old Chinese silk dresses”) the narrator’s deepening perception of her Chinese heritage.

As a child, she at first shares her mother’s desire that she be a “prodigy,” but she soon becomes determined to be herself. In the mirror she sees herself as “ordinary” but also as “angry, powerful”; she is an independent creature, not an imitation of Shirley Temple. The question is, Can a young person achieve independence without shattering a fiercely possessive parent? Or, for that matter,
without shattering herself? We can understand the narrator’s need to defy her mother (“I now felt stronger, as if my true self had finally emerged”), but the devastating effect when she speaks of her mother’s dead babies seems almost too great a price to pay. Surely the reader will be pleased to learn that the narrator and her mother became more or less reconciled, even though the mother continued to feel that the narrator just didn’t try hard enough to be a genius. It’s worth reading aloud the passage about the mother’s offer of the piano:

And after that, every time I saw it in my parents’ living room, standing in front of the bay window, it made me feel proud, as if it were a shiny trophy that I had won back.

As a mature woman, the narrator comes to see that “Pleading Child” (which might almost be the title of her early history) is complemented by “Perfectly Contented.” Of course, just as we have to interpret “Pleading Child” a bit freely—let’s say as “Agitated Child”—so “Perfectly Contented” must be interpreted freely as, say, “Maturity Achieved.” We get (to quote the title of the story) “two kinds” of experience and “two kinds” of daughter in one.


**ALICE WALKER**

*Everyday Use* (p. 1125)

The title of this story, like most other titles, is significant, though the significance appears only gradually. Its importance, of course, is not limited to the fact that Dee believes that Maggie will use the quilts for “everyday use”; on reflection we see the love, in daily use, between the narrator and Maggie, and we contrast it with Dee’s visit—a special occurrence—as well as with Dee’s idea that the quilts should not be put to everyday use. The real black achievement, then, is not the creation of works of art that are kept apart from daily life; rather, it is the everyday craftsmanship and the everyday love shared by people who cherish and sustain each other. That Dee stands apart from this achievement is clear (at least on rereading) from the first paragraph, and her pretensions are suggested as early as the fourth paragraph, where we are told that she thinks “orchids are tacky flowers.” (Notice that in the fifth paragraph, when the narrator is imagining herself as Dee would like her to be on a television show, she has glistening hair—presumably because the hair has been straightened—and she appears thinner and lighter-skinned than in fact she is.) Her lack of any real connection with her heritage is made explicit (even before the nonsense about using the churn top as a centerpiece) as early as the paragraph in which she asks if Uncle Buddy whittled the dasher, and Maggie quietly says that Henry whittled it. Still, Dee is confident that she can “think of something artistic to do with the dasher.” Soon we learn...
that she sees the quilts not as useful objects but only as decorative works; Maggie, on the other hand, will use the quilts, and she even knows how to make them. Dee talks about black “heritage,” but Maggie and the narrator embody this heritage and they experience a degree of contentment that eludes Dee.

Many white students today are scarcely aware of the Black Muslim movement, which was especially important in the 1960s, and they therefore pass over the Muslim names taken by Dee and her companion, the reference to pork (not to be eaten by Muslims), and so on. That is, they miss the fact that Walker is suggesting that the valuable heritage of American blacks is not to be dropped in favor of an attempt to adopt an essentially remote heritage. It is worth asking students to do a little work in the library and to report on the Black Muslim movement.

Houston A. Baker Jr. and Charlotte Pierce-Baker discuss the story in *Southern Review* (new series 21 [Summer 1985]), in an issue that was later published as a book with the title *Afro-American Writing Today*, ed. James Olney (1989). Their essay is worth reading, but it is rather overheated. Sample:

Maggie is the arisen goddess of Walker’s story; she is the sacred figure who bears the scarifications of experience and knows how to convert patches into robustly patterned and beautifully quilted wholes. As an earth-rooted and quotidian goddess, she stands in dramatic contrast to the stylishly fiery and other-oriented Wangero. (p. 131)

The essay is especially valuable, however, because it reproduces several photographs (in black and white only, unfortunately) of quilts and their makers. Lots of books on American folk art have better reproductions of quilts, but few show the works with the artists who made them. It’s worth bringing to class some pictures of quilts, whether from the essay by the Bakers or from another source. Even better, of course, is (if possible) to bring some quilts to class.


**Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing**

1. “Everyday Use” is by a black woman. Would your response to the story be the same if you knew it were written by a white woman? Or by a man? Explain.

2. How does the narrator’s dream about her appearance on the television program foreshadow the later conflict?

3. Compare “Everyday Use” with Bambara’s “The Lesson.” Consider the following suggestions: Characterize the narrator of each story and compare them. Compare the settings and how they function in each story. What is Miss Moore trying to teach the children in “The Lesson”? Why does Sylvia resist learning it? In “Everyday Use,” what does Dee try to teach her mother and sister? Why do they resist her lesson? How are objects (such as quilts, toys) used in each story? How in each story does the first-person narration enlist and direct our sympathies?

EMMA LAZARUS

The New Colossus (p. 1132)

Before we comment on Lazarus’s poem, we want to give a little additional background about the statue, supplementing our headnote to the poem.

Strictly speaking, Auguste Bartholdi’s sculpture is entitled Liberty Enlightening (i.e., illuminating) the World. Paid for by public subscription, it was the gift of the French people (not the government), presented in memory of French assistance during the War of Independence. The statue was built in sections in France, shipped to the United States, and unveiled and inaugurated in October 1886.

The statue, 150 feet tall, is made of thin sheets of beaten copper affixed to an iron and steel framework designed by Gustave Eiffel, who later built the Eiffel Tower. A classically draped woman, her left foot advanced and stepping on the broken shackles of tyranny, she holds a torch in her raised right hand and a tablet in her left hand. Her face is traditionally said to be that of Bartholdi’s mother, but even if this pleasant story is true, the face is highly stylized in a severe classic manner.

Liberty was an ancient Roman goddess—but she was the goddess of personal freedom (i.e., of the condition opposite to slavery), not the goddess of a political idea. From the late eighteenth century, however, the goddess was interpreted in terms of political freedom and democracy. The symbolism of Bartholdi’s statue is very clear:

1. The tablet, which doubtless is meant to call to mind the tablets held by Moses, is inscribed “JULY IV MDCCLXXVI.” Thus, Liberty is associated both with God and with American history; the idea is that liberty, divinely ordained, flourished in America in 1776 and will spread throughout the world.
2. The torch represents the dispelling of darkness, i.e., the dispelling of political ideals which enslave. Probably, too, there is an association here with Christ, who in John 8:12 calls himself “the light of the world.”
3. The radiant or sunburst crown is a sort of halo, making the figure a secular saint. The seven rays suggest the seven planets, the seven seas, the seven continents, etc.
4. The base stands on a star fortress (Fort Wood, on what used to be called Bedloe’s Island but is now Liberty Island), suggesting that liberty is indomitable.


The poem (which should be compared with the next poem, by Aldrich) is almost inseparable from its history. It was written in support of a campaign to raise funds for a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty—the manuscript was auctioned and the proceeds given to the fund. In 1886 the poem was read at the dedication of the statue, and in 1903 (the twentieth anniversary of the writing of the poem) a bronze tablet with the poem was placed on an interior wall of the pedestal. In 1945 the bronze tablet was moved from the second-story landing inside the pedestal to the main entrance of the statue. The poem is inevitably joined to a cherished national image, and probably millions of schoolchildren (among them the writer of this note) took pride in memorizing the lines.

When we came to prepare this section of our book, there was never any doubt that we would include the poem—the last four and a half lines alone demand inclusion. But in rereading the poem we did feel a tad uneasy about the highfalutin’ opening lines, with their classical allusion and their overall “poetic” tone. Lazarus is writing in the genteel tradition—the tradition that derived from classically educated English poets such as Tennyson—rather than, obviously, in the tradition of Whitman. No “barbaric yawp” would come from the mouth of this New Yorker, who was descended from a prosperous Sephardic family that had lived in the United States since the eighteenth century. Her lines praise America in a rather academic way, by comparing it favorably to the classical world.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the colossus is periphrastically evoked as “the brazen giant of Greek fame,” or that electricity in the torch is “the imprisoned lightning,” or that ancient lands are places of “storied pomp.” It is all very declamatory, possibly right for a bronze plaque—but (at least to our ear today) a trifle inflated or stiff. Having said this, we want to add that we are still moved by the final words, spoken by the statue. The words spoken by this colossal symbol of a lofty ideal seem to us less inflated than the earlier lines, spoken by the poet or by the reader. (Here we are expressing the idea that when readers read lyric poems, as opposed to dramatic monologues such as “My Last Duchess,” the readers themselves are the speakers, the poems are their utterances.)

A few additional points:

1. Lazarus calls the statue “Mother of Exiles,” thereby anticipating the great final passage, in which the statue welcomes “the wretched refuse” of countries across the sea, i.e., low-status persons scorned by the powerful. In France the statue was officially called *Liberté Éclairant le Monde* (“Liberty Enlightening the World”), though in the United States it is popularly known as the *Statue of Liberty*. (The French title emphasizes the torch, symbolizing illumination,
i.e., knowledge, and, by extension, freedom, since knowledge is supposed to free us from the bonds of ignorance. The French did not intend to symbolize America as a haven for the oppressed, but as an example of a republican government. But the great increase in immigration in the following years, and Lazarus’s poem, have given the statue a meaning it did not originally have.

2. In line 8, “air-bridged” and “twin cities” deserve a bit more comment than we give them in our headnote in the text. New York (which was confined to the island of Manhattan) and Brooklyn were separate cities when Lazarus wrote the poem; not until 1898 did the two cities, and some other communities, combine into “Greater New York.” The Brooklyn Bridge was the world’s first great suspension bridge, i.e., the roadway is supported not on arches or pillars but rather is suspended from vertical cables that are attached to main cables; the main cables are hung on two towers, and their ends are anchored in bedrock. This method of construction requires far fewer intermediate supports beneath the bridge, thus giving it a sense of airiness (hence “air-bridged” in line 8).

3. The words “wretched refuse” in line 12 have disturbed some people, and we raise this point below, in our first question. Our own feeling is that there is nothing bothersome here. The poet is not saying that these people are unworthy or without value; rather, she is saying that they are distressed or afflicted (“wretched”) and they are rejected (“refuse”) by those in power in their own lands.

4. The poem ends with the words, “the golden door.” Naive immigrants supposedly thought that the streets were paved with gold—the idea goes back at least to the conquistadors who searched for El Dorado, the legendary kingdom rich in precious metals—but surely “the golden door” is a metaphor for opportunity, for a chance not only to make money but also to live a new kind of life, a life of freedom.

Lazarus wrote the poem in 1883; obviously in discussing the poem in a course in literature it is not essential to talk about the pros and cons of today’s immigration policies. Still, an instructor may well be interested in relating the poem to the life around us, so here is a brief history of our immigration policy. The Open Door policy of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America was changed, in 1924, to a national origins quota system which favored Northern and Western Europe and severely restricted immigration from everywhere else. This system was replaced in 1965 by a law (with amendments) that said there were three reasons to award visas to immigrants:

1. An immigrant might possess certain job skills, especially skills that this country needs. (Relatively few visas were awarded on this basis.)
2. An immigrant might be a refugee from war or from political persecution, and we would offer “political asylum.”
3. An immigrant might be related to an American citizen or to a legal alien (the “family reunification policy”).

In 1965, when this policy was formulated, there was little immigration from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. Today, 90 percent of all immigration to the United States comes from those areas. Upwards of 80 percent are people of color. Whatever our policy is, is it not racist? What about numbers, rather than percentages? The peak decade for immigration was 1901–1910, when about 8.7 million immigrants arrived, chiefly from Southern and Eastern Europe. Probably 1981–1990 matched this, if illegal immigrants are included, but in any case in 1901–1910 the total United States population was less than one-third of what it is today. After 1910, immigration declined sharply; in all of the 1930s, only about 500,000 immigrants came to the United States, and in all of the 1940s there were only about 1,000,000, including refugees from Hitler. The figure now is about 1.5 million annually, plus an unknown number of illegal immigrants (the usual guess is half a million annually). The latest figures (2011) say that 16.7% of the residents of the United States are of Latino origin.

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. At the International Arrivals Building of John F. Kennedy Airport a plaque, with large gold letters, quotes some of the most famous words in the poem—the speech in the last five lines—but it omits the third line from the end, “The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” Apparently those who installed the plaque thought that Lazarus regarded the immigrants as trash, “wretched refuse.” Is this the way you read the line? Or do you think Lazarus is giving not her view but the view of the European ruling classes? Or what?

2. A question about the first lines: Why does Lazarus begin with a negative, saying what the Statue of Liberty is not? Does this form for the opening of the poem strengthen or weaken it?

3. In the first two lines of the poem, Lazarus mistakenly says that the colossus of Rhodes symbolized tyranny, when in fact it symbolized resistance to tyranny. In your opinion, how damaging to the poem is this factual error?

THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH

The Unguarded Gates (p. 1133)

One can hardly neglect the opportunity to compare this narrow-minded poem with the poem that precedes it in the text, Emma Lazarus’s “The New Colossus.” Lazarus—imaginatively looking from the European immigrant’s point of view—sees New York Harbor as enriched and purified by “sea-washed, sunset gates,” where a beacon “GloWS world-wide welcome.” Aldrich—looking from his Boston nest—sees the “Wide open and unguarded . . . gates” and the “sacred portals” (lines 1 and 16) as the entries through which we foolishly admit destructive hordes. Are all immigrants potential threats? No, lines 12–17
specify the people whom we must care for, “sorrow’s children” and so forth. How can we recognize them, or, rather, how can we recognize the others, people who threaten our civilization? Easily, by their place of origin and (in most cases) color or religion:

Men from the Volga and the Tartar steppes,
Featureless figures of the Hoang-Ho,
Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt, and Slav,
Flying the Old World’s poverty and scorn;
These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,
Those tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.

From 1865 onward Aldrich lived chiefly in Boston, so one is not entirely surprised to find the hostile reference to the “Kelt”—Protestant Bostonians were known for their hostility to the recent Irish immigrants—but the reference to the Teuton is a bit puzzling, since persons like Aldrich identified themselves as Anglo-Saxons and therefore as related to German stock. It’s our guess that Aldrich had in mind Catholic German peasants. In any case, Aldrich’s terrific hostility to what is now called the Other is evident. For him, the people who constitute the Other are “a wild, motley throng,” without recognizably human faces (“featureless figures”), and they bring not only “unknown gods and rites” but also their “tiger passions.”

The hostile references to people from Asia (given the context, the Kelts and the Teutons are sort of dishonorary Asians) allow us to say that Aldrich was openly racist—though we should add that, by today’s standards, almost everyone else was racist too, and indeed racism was respectably founded in what was thought to be the most advanced science of the day. Doubtless when he speaks of Liberty as a “white goddess” he has in mind a classical structure of white marble, but surely he would say that the material aptly symbolizes the superior—most highly evolved—people that he has in mind.

Putting aside what we can call the basic ideas of the poem, what can we say about it as poetry? We can say something rather similar to what we said about Emma Lazarus’s poem—that is, Aldrich is writing poetry in the manner of a proper Victorian, i.e., in accordance with the classical tradition. Like Lazarus, he cannot think of sounding a Whitmanian “barbaric yawp.” Predictably, he sees the United States as another Rome (line 20) and the new immigrants as barbarian invaders. But what sort of United States does he see? It is white, it is entered through “sacred portals” (line 16), and it is a place of “freedom” (line 17). Evidently it is not the America that Emerson, in “The Poet” (1841), said awaited its poets:

Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boasts and our repudiations [i.e., refusals to acknowledge debts], the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung.
Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ampler geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.

Aldrich is a singer of a very limited America.

**JOSEPH BRUCHAC III**

*Ellis Island* (p. 1134)

Ellis Island, in Upper New York Bay, southwest of Manhattan Island, from 1892 until 1943 was the chief immigration station of the United States. In its first year, it saw 450,000 immigrants arrive, and in its peak years in the first decade of the twentieth century the annual number exceeded a million; the total number of Ellis Island graduates was over seventeen million. When the island closed, immigration was at a low point, and for some years the buildings fell into ruin. They have now been renovated and form a museum of immigration. In 1965 Ellis Island became part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument (the statue—on its own island, separated from Ellis Island by a few hundred yards of water—had been declared a national monument in 1924).

In our discussion of Emma Lazarus’s “The New Colossus” we mention that in the first decade of the twentieth century about 8.7 million immigrants entered the country, most of them via Ellis Island. This means, of course, that the great-grandparents or even the grandparents or parents of an enormous number of today’s Americans are alumni of the island, and it has a hold on their affections.

Bruchac begins by calling up an image of two of his grandparents who had endured the long journey and “the long days of quarantine.” He implicitly contrasts their journey and their anxiety—about 10 percent of the visitors were denied admission for reasons of health—with “a Circle Line ship,” a ship that makes a daily pleasure cruise of a few hours around the islands, chiefly patronized by tourists. He goes on to evoke “the tall woman, green / as dreams of forests and meadows,” i.e., the green patina of the *Statue of Liberty* connects it with nature.

In the second stanza he says that like millions of others he has come to the island, but of course there is a distinction between the millions who, pursuing a dream (lines 10 and 17) came as immigrants and the millions who now come as tourists, perhaps in homage to their ancestors and to the nation that accepted them.

There is, then, a contrast between the first and second stanzas, but the two harmonize. The third stanza, however, introduces a serious complication: if the immigrants were pursuing a dream, they nevertheless also were invading the “native lands” (lines 20–22) of others. (Bruchac himself, as we mention in the headnote, is part Native American and part Slovak.) The Native Americans are characterized as people “who followed / the changing Moon,” people who have or who had “knowledge of the seasons / in their veins,” so
they too, like the green statue, are associated with nature. Is the reader to think that these people are gone—or, on the contrary, that their heritage lives on, for example, in the “veins” of the poet? To our mind, the fact that Bruchac ends the poem with a reference to a knowledge that is in the “veins” suggests that he sees the heritage as still living—and the violence wrought by later immigrants as also still living.

Bruchac is a prolific author who has written poetry, fiction, and many books for children and young adults. We especially value the work he has done as an editor; his edited collections include Breaking Silence: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Poets (1983); Songs from This Earth on Turtle’s Back: Contemporary American Indian Poetry (1983); and Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets (1987).

**Anonymous**

*Slavic Women Arrive at Ellis Island in the Winter of 1910*  
(photograph, p. 1134)

We chose this image partly because it relates closely to Joseph Bruchac’s poem (he mentions his Slavic heritage) but also because it gives a somewhat unusual image of Ellis Island, which is rarely associated with snow, or, for that matter, with an all-female group. Probably the husbands of these women had come earlier, found work, and then had sent for their wives. And probably, too, what the women carry on their backs and over their arms is all that they have brought with them.

We have sometimes used this photograph as an occasion for recommending novels and stories about immigrant life. See, for example, Abraham Cahan, *Yekl, a Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), and Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (1925). For an evocative account of the East European Jews, see Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers* (1976).

**Aurora Levins Morales**

*Child of the Americas* (p. 1135)

The author, born in Puerto Rico of a Puerto Rican mother and of a father whose origins went back to the ghetto in New York and beyond that to Europe, came to the United States when she was thirteen and has lived in Chicago, New Hampshire, the San Francisco Bay Area, and now in Massachusetts. Her heritage and her experience thus are considerably different from those of most Puerto Ricans who are now in the United States.

Whereas other Latinas in this book emphasize the difficulties of their divided heritage (see Pat Mora’s “Immigrants”), Morales celebrates her diversity and apparently is at ease as a Latina in the United States: she is “a light-skinned
mestiza of the Caribbean, / a child of many diaspora,” she was born “at a crossroads,” she is “a U.S. Puerto Rican Jew, / a product of the ghettos of New York,” “Spanish is in [her] flesh,” but in the next-to-last stanza she insists that she is “not african,” “not tainá,” “not european.” Most significantly, she insists that she is not fragmented but is, on the contrary, “whole.”

In short, Morales holds to the old idea of the United States as a melting pot, an idea not heard so often today. The conception of the melting pot has largely given way to the conception of America as a “gorgeous mosaic,” a “salad bowl,” a kaleidoscope, i.e., a place where there is great variety but where each ingredient maintains its identity.

You can recommend to students two books by Morales. The first, coauthored with her mother, Rosario Morales, *Getting Home Alive* (1986), includes short essays, stories, and poems about their lives, languages, cultures, and religions. Rosario was born in Puerto Rico, the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants who moved to New York when she was a child; Aurora was born in New York and, when she was a child, moved with her parents to Puerto Rico. In *Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity* (1998), Morales presents essays on social identity, ecology, children’s liberation, and other topics.

**Gloria Anzaldúa**

*To Live in the Borderlands Means You* (p. 1137)

As we say in our headnote in the text, obviously the “borderlands” are not merely physical locales. Among other things, they are the multicultural heritage *within* a single individual, as expressed, for example, in Joseph Bruchac’s poem, “Ellis Island,” where he finds his cherished Slovak heritage doing violence to his Native American heritage.

The poem is macaronic, that is, the writer uses one language chiefly but includes foreign words. The origin of the term *macaronic* is uncertain but is commonly said to be due either to the fact that *maccarone* is a mixture (a dumpling made of flour, butter, and cheese) or that macaroni is heaped on a plate and sauce is dribbled over it. Earlier macaronic poetry was chiefly comic (“Mademoiselle got the croix de guerre / For washing soldiers’ underwear, / Hinky, dinky, parlez-vous”), but some was serious, and in modern times it usually is serious. Consider, for instance, Eliot’s use of foreign terms in *The Waste Land*. Today it is especially common in serious poems by Chicanos or by persons from Puerto Rico; obviously it indicates, among other things, that the writers value Spanish as well as English.

The entire poem is of great interest, but the second stanza especially strikes us, with its assertion that the *india* had been betrayed for 500 years, and that

denying the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black. . . .

The first point, about the *india*, strikes us as especially contemporary because until almost yesterday all Spanish-speaking people of South America were called “Hispanic,” even though many of them were evidently of Indian origin. It’s our impression that only recently, perhaps along with a heightened awareness of ethnic values in the United States, are persons of Indian origin insisting on this heritage, rather than gliding over it and characterizing themselves as Hispanic—a Eurocentric term that implies a European heritage.

If in your classes you have students from Central or South America, you may want to ask them how they identify themselves—as Hispanics, Latinos/Latinas, Chicanos? It is our impression that most people from Central or South America define themselves in terms of the country of their origin, rather than with any of these all-embracing terms. But insofar as one of the broader terms is used, it probably is Latino/Latina, rather than Hispanic; both are Eurocentric, but the former is not English and therefore seems to be preferred by people who wish to distinguish themselves from Anglo culture.

Anzaldúa’s work includes *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), a book of essays and poems, written in English and Spanish, in which she explores her identity as a lesbian and a Chicana writer.

**JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA**

*So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans* (p. 1138)

The title, the first line, and indeed the whole poem have the flavor of ordinary but forceful speech, and we think this closeness to pugnacious speech, on both sides of the fence, accounts for much of the work’s power. That is, it is not enough for a poem to set forth admirable sentiments, let’s say, sympathy for the disenfranchised. We want it to be a poem, not just the expression of ideas we approve of.

Here we find art in the contrast between the title, which evokes the ordinary world, and the first line and a half, which give us a preposterous world of mounted bandits, and then the third line, which gives us, even more preposterously, a bandit asking us to hand over not money but our job: “Ese gringo, gimme your job.”

To our ears, the most successful lines in the poem are of this sort—lines that show an ear for common speech and a sense of the absurd—and the least successful are the straight, earnest lines of the advocate, such as “I see the poor marching for a little work, / I see small white farmers selling out / to clean-suited farmers living in New York.” But we realize that what we have been saying, which in some measure separates literature from political activity, may be unconvincing to others.

In fact, are Mexicans taking jobs from Americans? Well, first of all, many of these “Mexicans” are themselves Americans of Mexican origin. Second, although the subject is much disputed, some reputable authorities insist that
much of the work that Chicanos do—as migrant laborers, domestic workers, gardeners, and so forth—is in fact so low-paying that Anglos and African Americans will not do it. That is, the jobs wouldn’t exist except for the fact that “Mexicans” are willing to do them.

Of Baca’s books, we especially value Immigrants in Our Own Land and Selected Early Poems (1990 ed.) and Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio (1992).

**LANGSTON HUGHES**

*Theme for English B* (p. 1140)

We have found this poem to be very provocative for getting students to think about what constitutes the identity of a poet. The question has always been an important one, but perhaps in the highly multicultural 1990s it became especially vexed and contentious. “Will my page be colored that I write?” Hughes’s speaker asks. Does a poem inevitably reflect the race, ethnicity, gender, and/or class of its author? Can members of a different group really read and understand such a poem, or is a poem a circuit of communication that passes only from the author to the members of the group whose identity he or she shares?

For Hughes, persons cannot be separated off into groups, however much they might wish they could be. “That’s American,” he says. If there is an essential America, it lies in the fact that in America no one is truly separate from anyone else. Everyone is “part” of one another and has much to learn: no one can claim to be beyond the need of knowing about what others have to teach them. We like at this point both to commend Hughes’s faith and to query students whether they can accept it for themselves.

**MITSUYE YAMADA**

*To the Lady* (p. 1142)

First, some background. In 1942 the entire Japanese and Japanese-American population on America’s Pacific coast—about 112,000 people—was incarcerated and relocated. More than two-thirds of the people moved were native-born citizens of the United States. (The 158,000 Japanese residents of the Territory of Hawaii were not affected.)

Immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, many journalists, the general public, Secretary of the Army Henry Stimson, and congressional delegations from California, Oregon, and Washington called for the internment. Although Attorney General Francis Biddle opposed it, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, allowing military authorities “to prescribe military areas . . . from which any or all persons may be excluded.” In practice, no persons of German or Italian heritage were dis-
turbed, but Japanese and Japanese Americans on the Pacific coast were rounded up (they were allowed to take with them “only that which can be carried”) and relocated in camps. Congress, without a dissenting vote, passed legislation supporting the evacuation. A few Japanese Americans challenged the constitutionality of the proceeding, but with no immediate success.

Many students today may find it difficult to comprehend the intensity of anti-Japanese sentiment that pervaded the 1940s. Here are two samples, provided by David Mura. Lt. General John DeWitt, the man in charge of the relocation plan, said:

The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become “Americanized,” the racial strains are undiluted. To conclude otherwise is to expect that children born of white parents on Japanese soil sever all racial affinity and become loyal Japanese subjects. . . . Along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 enemies, of Japanese extraction, are at large today. There are indications that these are organized and ready for concerted action at a favorable opportunity. The very fact that no sabotage has taken place to date is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken.

One rubs one’s eyes in disbelief at the crazy logic that holds that because “no sabotage has taken place,” such action “will be taken.” The second quotation Mura has called to our attention is a remark made in 1942 by Senator Tom Steward of Tennessee:

They [the Japanese] are cowardly and immoral. They are different from Americans in every conceivable way, and no Japanese . . . should have the right to claim American citizenship. . . . A Jap is a Jap anywhere you find him. They do not believe in God and have no respect for an oath of allegiance.

By the way, not a single Japanese American was found guilty of subversive activity. For two good short accounts, with suggestions for further readings, see the articles entitled “Japanese Americans, wartime relocation of,” in Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan (1983), 4:17–18, and “War Relocation Authority,” in 8:228.

It may be interesting to read Yamada’s poem aloud in class, without having assigned it for prior reading, and to ask students for their responses at various stages—after line 4, line 21, and line 36. Line 14 poses a question that perhaps many of us (young and old, and whether of Japanese descent or not) have asked, at least to ourselves. The question, implying a criticism of the victims, shows an insufficient awareness of Japanese or Japanese-American culture of the period. It also shows an insufficient awareness of American racism; by implying that protest by the victims could have been effective, it reveals ignorance of the terrific hostility of whites toward persons of Japanese descent.
The first part of the response shows one aspect of the absurdity of the lady’s question. Japanese and Japanese Americans were brought up not to stand out in any way (certainly not to make a fuss), and to place the harmony of the group (whether the family or society as a whole) above individual expression. Further, there was nothing that these people could effectively do, even if they had shouted as loudly as Kitty Genovese did. For the most part they were poor, they had no political clout, and they were hated and despised as Asians. The absurdity of the view that they could have resisted effectively is comically stated in “should’ve pulled myself up from my / bra straps” (echoing the red-blooded American ideal of pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps), but of course the comedy is bitter.

Then the speaker turns to “YOU,” nominally the “lady” of the title but in effect also the reader, and by ironically saying what we would have done points out what in fact we did not do. (The references to a march on Washington and letters to Congress are clear enough, but most students will not be aware of the tradition that the King of Denmark said that he would wear a Star of David [line 27] if Danish Jews were compelled by Nazis to wear the star.)

Thus far the speaker has put the blame entirely on the white community, especially since lines 5–21 strongly suggest that the Japanese Americans couldn’t do anything but submit. Yet the poem ends with a confession that because Japanese Americans docilely subscribed to “law and order”—especially the outrageous Executive Order 9066—they were in fact partly responsible for the outrage committed against them. The last line of the poem, “All are punished,” is exactly what Prince Escalus says at the end of Romeo and Juliet. Possibly the echo is accidental, though possibly the reader is meant to be reminded of a play, widely regarded as “a tragedy of fate,” in which the innocent are victims of prejudice.

From this poem, students might proceed to two other books by Yamada: Desert Run: Poems and Stories (1988) and Camp Notes and Other Poems (2nd ed., 1992).

NILA NORTH SUN

Moving Camp Too Far (p. 1144)

The first stanza evokes the world of the Indian, though the very first words (“i can’t”) make it clear that this world is lost, at least to the speaker. We are in the world not of the Vanishing Red (cf. Frost’s poem with this title) but of the Vanished Red.

The second stanza begins by evoking a contrast (that’s what second stanzas often do)—but a moment later the contrast proves to be illusory, since the affirmative words (“i can see an eagle”) become negative (“almost extinct”). The second stanza, then, does not really contrast with the first; rather, it intensifies the first (again, that’s what second stanzas often do). Further, the second stanza builds to a climax of degradation; the affirmative “i can dance to indian music” descends
into “rock-n-roll hey-a-hey-o,” and then to the further, and final—and surprising,
but in retrospect almost inevitable—collapse of “& unfortunately / i do.” The
degradation is evident, and what perhaps is most painful is that the speaker
implicitly accepts at least some of the responsibility.

For background information, consult Klaus Lubber, Born for the Shade:
Stereotypes of the Native American in United States Literature and the Visual

LUIS VALDEZ

Los Vendidos (p. 1145)

Students who have been told that stereotyping people is wicked and that charac-
ters (whether in fiction or in drama) should be well motivated, believable, and so
on may find it difficult to see anything of value in a work that uses one-dimensional
stock characters. Perhaps one way to help them enjoy such a work is to talk
briefly about stereotypes in films they have enjoyed and admired. The roles per-
formed by Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, Bogart—or even some roles in soap
operas—may help them to see that stereotyped characters can be powerful.

Los Vendidos is comic in the sense of having some laughs in it, and also (at
least to a degree) in the more literary sense of being a play with a happy ending.
If one stands at a distance, so to speak, and looks at the overall plot, one sees
the good guys outwitting the bad guys (Ms. Jimenez). In the talk about going to
a party, there is even a hint of the traditional komos or revel.

It is of course entirely appropriate that the play includes amusing passages.
Valdez has said that he wanted to lift the morale of his audience (chiefly striking
workers), and he wrote and staged comedies—in the sense of plays with happy
endings—because he wanted to help change society. He did not want, obviously,
to show the tragic nature of the human condition. He makes his aims clear in his
short essay, “The Actos.” One might ask students to think especially about
whether in this play he does anything to “show or hint at a solution” to the “social
problem.” In some actos the message is clear, for instance, “Join the union.”

It’s our view that Los Vendidos does not at all suffer by failing to give a “solu-
tion.” (Of course it’s implied that Anglos should not think of Mexican Americans
as stupid and lazy, should not expect them to be subservient, and should value
them as people, but Valdez does not offer a solution for Anglo prejudice.) Much
of the strength of the play seems to us to lie in the wit with which the stereotypes
are presented, and also in the ingenuity of the plot, when the robots come alive
and thus reverse the stereotype: the Mexican Americans are shown to be shrewd
and enterprising, and Honest Sancho is shown to be lifeless.

For further study, students might begin with Jaime Herrera, “Luis Miguel
Valdez,” in Updating the Literary West, ed. Max Westbrook and Dan Flores
(1997), pp. 379–385. See also Harry J. Elam Jr., Taking It to the Streets: The

Topic for Critical Thinking and Writing

At the end of the play the Mexican Americans are shown as shrewd and enterprising. Has Valdez fallen into the trap of suggesting that Mexican-American culture is not distinctive but is just about the same as the Anglo imperialistic (capitalistic) culture that he satirized earlier in the play?

LORRAINE HANSBERRY

A Raisin in the Sun (p. 1155)

The first time we taught A Raisin in the Sun, we made a mistake. On Day One, we began by telling the students about the play’s biographical and historical contexts; in particular, we stressed the impact of the Supreme Court’s landmark ruling in Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 and the stirring story of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and their relation to the themes that Hansberry treats. In theory this still sounds like a good idea, but the result was that we made A Raisin in the Sun feel dated to the students, more of a historical artifact than a play that might engage and inspire them.

What worked better, when we taught the play a second time, was to highlight the contexts during the final class meeting. We made use of a number of photographs, from The Eyes on the Prize (1991), Let Us March On!: Selected Civil Rights Photographs of Ernest C. Withers 1955–1968 (1992), King: the Photobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (2000), and Bruce Davidson’s Time of Change: Civil Rights Photographs, 1961–1965 (2002). Having studied, discussed, and written about the play as they experienced it for themselves, the students could then bring their responses to (and locate them within) the broader history of the period.

In passing, we might mention that it is usually better, especially in introductory courses, to turn directly to discussion. Biographical and historical contexts are rich and vivid, and we are always tempted to tell the students about them. The problem is that, despite our best intentions, often when we have started this way, we have ended up closing down class discussion rather than opening it up. On one level, the students are interested in the contexts we tell them about, but frequently their main response is a bit of a sinking feeling—that in order to understand and appreciate the text, they need to know much more “background” information than they do.

For introductory students, a lot or even a little preliminary knowledge can be a dangerous thing—dangerous if it seems to signal to them that they are not ready, are not equipped for, an experience of the work on their own.

An approach that we have found effective is, on the first day, to ask students to review the analysis in Literature for Composition of Hughes’s “Harlem,” which includes the line that Hansberry used for her title. It is a simple-seeming but important lesson for students to see how one writer relates her
work to another—how, in this case, Hansberry seizes on a resonant image in a well-known poem to foreshadow the issues she intends to treat in her own work. Either for a writing assignment before the first class meeting, or else as “something to think about” for discussion on the first day, we invite students to reflect upon Hughes’s poem and, from there, Hansberry’s choice of title. The point: do your best to get the students talking right away, so that they feel the play has an immediate accessibility to and vitality for them as readers.

As we make this suggestion, we are reminded of a teaching tip given to one of us long ago by a colleague: begin where the students are, not where you are. The list of topics that we present in the book indicates the themes, questions, and issues that we seek to highlight and deepen as class discussion proceeds. On two occasions, we have also made use of the film version (1961) that stars Ruby Dee as Ruth Younger and Sidney Poitier as Walter Lee Younger. It proved effective as a teaching tool, in part because of a number of major and minor changes and cuts in the screenplay. For example, the text of the play itself is entirely keyed to the Youngers’ Southside apartment, but in the screenplay, the Youngers are presented at the close on their way to their new home in Clybourne Park.

We should add that there are also differences between the play as originally written and the play as it was produced on stage in 1959. The full text takes more than three hours—too long, it was felt, for a successful production in the late 1950s, all the more so given the controversial nature, for that era, of the play’s themes. So cuts were made, including Walter’s conversation at bedtime with Travis, and the exchange between the Younger family and Mrs. Johnson. You may not have time to examine these alterations in detail, but you might find it helpful to take note of them during class discussion: What might be gained, what is lost, by cuts of this kind?

Race is obviously central to the play, but we recommend that you encourage students to reflect too on the issues of gender and class. As the critic L. M. Domina, for example, has pointed out, a key element in A Raisin in the Sun is the transformation of Walter Younger from a somewhat weak, ineffectual figure at the outset (he is still living in his mother’s house and is not successful enough to support his family by himself) into the strong leader of the household. However, as Domina emphasizes, Walter’s ascendancy is complicated by the fact that he achieves his manhood by making decisions for the women as well as for himself; as more than one critic has remarked, for Walter to step forward, the women must step back. And, as the conflicts between Walter and the others over the insurance check bear witness, and as Walter’s response to George Murchison reveals, social class (i.e., class tension) is tied to race and to gender roles.

Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry’s ex-husband (they divorced in 1964) who adapted and produced a number of her works, professed that A Raisin in the Sun is much more than a play about race and racism—that it has “universal” significance:

If we ever reach a time when the racial madness that afflicts America is at last truly behind us—as obviously we must if we are to survive in a world
composed four-fifths of people of color—then I believe *A Raisin in the Sun* will remain no less pertinent. For at the deepest level it is not a specific situation but the human condition, human aspiration and human relationships—the persistence of dreams, of bonds and conflicts between men and women, parents and children, old ways and new, and the endless struggle against human oppression, whatever the forms it may take, and for individual fulfillment, recognition, and liberation—that are at the heart of such plays. It is not surprising therefore that in each generation we recognize ourselves in them anew.

This might be a good note with which to conclude study of the play.

It is impossible to know exactly what Seattle said, since we have only a translation of the speech, that is, a version filtered through a white man’s mind. Still, the speech as we have it probably is at least fairly close to what Seattle said. Interestingly, it strongly contrasts with the stereotype of the grunting Indian who says little more than “How,” and “White man speak with forked tongue.” Presumably—since stereotypes not only reflect the needs of those who create them but also often contain some truth—when Indians spoke in the white man’s language they were ill at ease and taciturn, but when they spoke in their own languages they were (especially on ceremonious occasions) expansive and eloquent.

Perhaps the most immediately obvious features of the piece are the figures of speech (mostly drawn from nature), the emphasis on tribal history, and the speculations on the future, all of which probably seemed unnecessary to the white men, who must have been primarily concerned with making a deal and getting on with their daily business.

The references to the president as not only the “white chief” but the “father Washington” are especially interesting. Notice that Seattle says, “Our great father Washington, for I presume he is now our father as well as yours, since [King] George has moved his boundaries to the north; our great and good father, I say, sends us word . . . that if we do as he desires he will protect us.” The tentativeness in “I presume he is now our father” is revealing. The patriarchal language is traditional, but the Indians clearly are mere stepchildren, adopted (so to speak) by the father in Washington simply because the English father no longer reigns in these parts. Moreover, the new father says he will protect his children if they “do as he desires.” Clearly Seattle is under no illusion that a tie of love, or even of tradition, binds the white father to the adopted children. And the speech as a whole, despite the courteous view that the offer is fair, is filled with a pessimism that, in the light of subsequent history, is fully justified. (In this it is utterly different from Indian myths, which, neither addressed to whites nor about whites, are filled with a sense of joy.) But the pessimism in Chief Seattle’s speech is countered,
too, by a profound reverence for the land and for the dead, including those whose deaths are still in the future.

ELIZABETH Cady Stanton

Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions (p. 1217)

Stanton’s Declaration of 1848 is the historic precursor of the decade-long effort that finally failed in 1982 to enact an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution. The Fourteenth Amendment, enacted twenty years after the Seneca Falls Convention, did provide that no state “shall . . . deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, nor deny any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” At face value, that might look like the rejection of gender as a basis for lawful discrimination. Opponents of the ERA in the 1970s who professed sympathy with feminist claims for constitutional equality often pointed to the language quoted as if that settled the matter. Not so, however.

The term male entered the Constitution in the Fourteenth Amendment itself (see section 2), thereby helping to etch more clearly the implicit and historic male bias of the Constitution and the laws from the beginning and indicating that “due process” and “equal protection” were not to be given a gender-free reading. An Illinois case of 1873 settled this issue for decades. Arguing that she was entitled under the Fourteenth Amendment to be admitted to the bar, Myra Bradwell unsuccessfully fought her case through the state courts to the U.S. Supreme Court. The language of the majority’s decision enshrined in constitutional interpretation the worst excesses of male chauvinism (see Bradwell v. Illinois, 83 U.S. 130 [1873]). Even the right to vote (“elective franchise,” paragraph 4) was not incorporated into the Constitution until 1920 (the Nineteenth Amendment). Full equality of the sexes under the laws and the Constitution, whether or not it is a good thing, still does not exist in our society.

Civil death (question 3) is the ultimate extreme to which a person can be reduced: denial by law of all civil rights, privileges, immunities, and liberties. (Not even prisoners on death row, today, suffer civil death.) Stanton elaborates the point (paragraphs 9–11). It was commonplace among feminists of the previous century to point out that marriage under law was functionally equivalent to civil death.

It was not, however, functionally equivalent to chattel slavery (which was to last another fifteen years after the Seneca Falls Convention; not surprisingly, the women who organized the convention were staunch abolitionists). It might be a useful classroom exercise for students to explore the differences under law in the 1840s between the status of American white women, as the Declaration reports it, and the status of American black slaves. An excellent source for slave law is A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., In the Matter of Color (1978).
ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Address at the Dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery

(p. 1220)

Lincoln delivered this “Address” on November 19, 1863, at the site where four months earlier 179,000 Americans had fought. There were 51,000 casualties in the battle.

One reason that the “Address” is brief is that, as Richard A. Lanham points out in Revising Prose (1979), the brevity is expressive. “Lincoln took for his subject the inevitable gap between words and deeds. At Gettysburg, this gap was enormous, and the shortness of Lincoln’s speech symbolizes just this gap. . . . Lincoln’s brevity did not remove the emotion of the occasion but intensified it” (p. 108).

An instructor can profitably go through the address, sentence by sentence, helping students to see that although it seeks by praise to arouse the audience’s respect for the dead, it also seeks to move the audience to action. It begins by speaking of an action even earlier than the battle (the bringing to birth of a new nation); it then turns to the present (“Now we are engaged”), and it ends by calling upon the hearers to resolve that the dead did not die in vain, that is, it calls upon the hearers to act so that the nation “shall have a new birth of freedom.” The structure is thus past, present, future. The “Address” is at least as much about future deeds of “us the living” as about the past deeds of “these honored dead.” The praiseworthy deeds of our forefathers and of our dead contemporaries are to be a stimulus to our own future deeds. This emphasis on the future is, of course, related to the praise of the past through the imagery (as Gilbert Highet points out in an admirable short essay in his The Clerk of Oxenford [1954]) of birth: “conceived in Liberty,” “a new birth of freedom.” Highet effectively calls attention to Lincoln’s use of antithesis (for instance, “what we say here” versus “what they did here”) and to his use of the rhetorical device called tricolon (division into three parts, as in “we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground,” and in “we are engaged,” “we are met,” and “we have come”).

There is no doubt that the address begins with images of birth (“brought forth,” “conceived,” “created”) and employs such an image in its final sentence (“a new birth of freedom”), but Gary Wills, in his Prologue to Inventing America (1978), pushes the imagery rather far:

The suggested image is . . . a marriage of male heaven (“Our fathers” and female earth (“this continent”). And it is a miraculous conception, a virgin birth. The nation is conceived by a mental act, in the spirit of liberty, and dedicated (as Jesus was in the temple) to a proposition.

Maybe. A bit more conservatively one can suggest that the biblical echo of “Four score and seven” (cf. Psalm 60, which says that “the days of our years are three score and ten”) is picked up in “our fathers” and perhaps in “brought forth” (cf. the biblical “and she brought forth a babe”). And the last words of the speech, “perish from the earth,” are a phrase that appears in the Book of Job.
Another way of putting the matter is to say that Lincoln delicately enlarges his hearers’ understanding of the event. His second paragraph tells them why they are at Gettysburg, and it concludes by affirming that “It is altogether fitting and proper” that they gather for their avowed purpose. The next paragraph, however, courteously diminishes this purpose (“But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate . . .”), and it substitutes a grander purpose or obligation.

Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., in an appendix to his *A New Birth of Freedom* (1983), prints the seven early texts of the speech. Two are drafts that Lincoln wrote before he gave the address, two are contemporary reports, and three are versions that Lincoln wrote in the months following his delivery of the speech. Thus, the two drafts say, “We are come to dedicate a portion of it,” and the three later autographs say, “We have come to dedicate a portion of this field.” All of the variations are slight, and the wording in modern texts represents a consensus. It is not known exactly what Lincoln actually said at Gettysburg.

As for the first part of our second question—Is “government of the people” the same as “government by the people”—our answer is No. We take “government of the people” to mean “the governing over the people,” as when one might say that “parents are in charge of the government of children.”

**A Note on Conducting Interviews**

Terkel has compiled a fair number of books of interviews, so it is possible that some of your students have encountered one or another of his books, perhaps on their own, perhaps in a course in sociology or economics. In these books he presents what seem to be raw interviews, with only the briefest of introductions, though doubtless he edited the material that he collected. A related genre is the essay based on an interview, where the writer describes the setting, includes some of the questions that prompted the responses, and perhaps concludes with some remarks of his or her own. Many students have had experience writing this sort of paper in courses in women’s studies, education, and sociology, and they report that they enjoy working on these assignments, so if you have never made such an assignment, you may want to consider asking students to interview someone, for example, a great grandparent or an elderly neighbor who remembers the Great Depression, and then write an essay about the person’s memories. If you do ask your students to conduct an interview and to write an essay based on it, you may want to equip them with the following suggestions (abridged from our material in *The Little, Brown Reader*).

*   *   *

**A Note on Conducting an Interview**

In preparing to write about some of the thematic topics in *Literature for Composition*, you may want to interview faculty members or students, or persons not on the campus. For instance, if you are writing about the Great Depression...
you may want to talk to instructors who teach economics or American history or
sociology. If you are writing about September 11, 2001, you may simply want to
collect the views of people who have no special knowledge but who may offer
thoughtful responses. Obviously topics such as love, American identity, and law
addressed in this book are matters that you might profitably discuss with some-
one whose experience is notably different from your own.

A college campus is an ideal place to practice interviewing. Faculties are
composed of experts in a variety of fields and distinguished visitors are a regu-
lar part of extracurricular life. In the next few pages, we’ll offer some advice on
conducting interviews and writing essays based on them. If you take our advice,
you’ll acquire a skill you may well put to further, more specialized use in social
science courses; at the same time you’ll be developing skills in asking questions
and shaping materials relevant to all research and writing.

Guidelines for Conducting an Interview and Writing an Essay

You can conduct interviews over the telephone or online using electronic mail,
but in the following pages we assume that you are conducting the interview
face-to-face.

1. Finding a subject for an interview. If you are looking for an expert, in the
college catalog, scan the relevant department and begin to ask questions of stu-
dents who have some familiarity with the department. Then, with a name or
two in mind, you may want to see if these faculty members have written any-
thing on the topic. Department secretaries are good sources of information, not
only about the special interests of the faculty but also about guest speakers
scheduled by the department in the near future.

2. Doing preliminary homework. Find out as much as you can about your
potential interviewee’s work. If the subject of your interview is a faculty mem-
ber, ask the department secretary if you may see a copy of that person’s vita
(Latin for “life,” and pronounced vee-ta). Many departments have these brief
biographical sketches on file for publicity purposes. The vita will list, among
other things, publications and current research interests.

3. Requesting the interview. In making your request, don’t hesitate to men-
tion that you are fulfilling an assignment, but also make evident your own interest
in the person’s work or area of expertise. (Showing that you already know
something about the work, that you’ve done some preliminary homework, is
persuasive evidence of your interest.) Request the interview, preferably in writ-
ing, at least a week in advance, and ask for ample time (probably an hour to an
hour and a half) for a thorough interview.

4. Preparing thoroughly. If your subject has written on the topic, read and
take notes on the publications that most interest you. As you read, write out the
questions that occur to you. As you work on them, try to phrase your questions
so that they require more than a yes or no answer. A “why” or “how” question
is likely to be productive, but don’t be afraid of a general question such as “Tell
me something about . . .”
Revise your questions and put them in a reasonable order. Work on an opening question that you think your subject will find both easy and interesting to answer. “How did you get interested in . . .” is often a good start. Type your questions or write them boldly, so that you will find them easy to refer to.

Think about how you will record the interview. Although a tape recorder may seem like a good idea, there are good reasons not to rely on one. First of all, your subject may be made uneasy by its presence and freeze up. Second, the recorder (or the operator) may malfunction, leaving you with a partial record, or nothing at all. Third, even if all goes well, when you prepare to write you will face a mass of material, some of it inaudible, and all of it daunting to transcribe.

If, despite these warnings, you decide (with your subject’s permission) to tape, expect to take notes anyway. It’s the only way you can be sure you will have a record of what was important to you out of all that was said. Think beforehand, then, of how you will take notes, and if you can manage to, practice by interviewing a friend. You’ll probably find that you’ll want to devise some system of shorthand, perhaps no more than using initials for names that frequently recur, dropping the vowels in words that you transcribe—whatever assists you to write quickly but legibly. But don’t think you must transcribe every word. Be prepared to do a lot more listening than writing.

5. Presenting yourself for the interview. Dress appropriately, bring your prepared questions and a notebook or pad for your notes, and appear on time.

6. Conducting the interview. At the start of the interview, try to engage briefly in conversation, without taking notes, to put your subject at ease. Even important people can be shy. Remembering that will help keep you at ease, too. If you want to use a tape recorder, ask your subject’s permission, and if it is granted, ask where the microphone may be conveniently placed.

A good interview develops like a conversation. Keep in mind that your prepared questions, however essential, are not sacred. At the same time don’t hesitate to steer your subject, courteously, from apparent irrelevancies (what one reporter calls “sawdust”) to something that interests you more—“I’d like to hear a little more about . . .” you can say. Or, “Would you mind telling me about how you . . . ?” It’s also perfectly acceptable to ask your subject to repeat a remark so that you can record it accurately, and if you don’t understand something, don’t be afraid to admit it. Experts are accustomed to knowing more than others do and are particularly happy to explain even the most elementary parts of their lore to an interested listener.

7. Concluding the interview. Near the end of the time you have agreed upon, ask your subject if he or she wishes to add any material, or to clarify something said earlier. Express your thanks and, at the appointed time, leave promptly.

8. Preparing to write. As soon as possible after the interview, review your notes, amplify them with details you wish to remember but might have failed to record, and type them up. You might have discovered during the interview, or
you might see now, that there is something more that you want to read by or about your subject. Track it down and take further notes.

9. Writing the essay. In writing your first draft, think about your audience. Unless a better idea occurs to you, consider your college newspaper or magazine, or a local newspaper, as the place you hope to publish your interview. Write with the readers of that publication in mind. Thinking of your readers will help you to be clear—for instance, to identify names that have come up in the interview but which may be unfamiliar to your readers.

As with other writing, begin your draft with any idea that strikes you, and write at a fast clip until you have exhausted your material (or yourself). When you revise, remember to keep your audience in mind; your material should, as it unfolds, tell a coherent and interesting story. Interviews, like conversations, tend to be delightfully circular or disorderly. But it is legitimate to edit the interview in order to give it some shape.

If you’ve done a thorough job of interviewing you may find that you have more notes than you can reasonably incorporate without disrupting the flow of your story. Don’t be tempted to plug them in anyway. If they’re really interesting, save them, perhaps by copying them into your journal; if not, chuck them out.

In introducing direct quotations from your source, choose those that are particularly characteristic, or vivid, or memorable. Paraphrase or summarize the rest of what is usable. Although the focus of your essay is almost surely the person you interviewed, it is your story, and much of it should be in your own words. Even though you must keep yourself in the background, your writing will gain in interest if your reader hears your voice as well as your subject’s.

You might want to use a particularly good quotation for your conclusion. Now make sure that you have an attractive opening paragraph. Identifying the subject of your interview and describing the setting is one way to begin. Give your essay an attractive title. Before you prepare your final draft, read your essay aloud. You’re almost certain to catch phrases you can improve, and places where a transition will help your reader to follow you without effort. Check your quotations for accuracy; check with your subject any quotations or other details you’re in doubt about. Type your final draft, then edit and proofread carefully.

10. Going public. Make three copies of your finished essay, one for the person you interviewed, one for your instructor—hand it in on time—and one for yourself.

Topic for Writing

Write an essay based on an interview. Among possible interviewees are: someone who remembers the Great Depression; a recent immigrant; the adolescent child of a recent immigrant; a veteran of the Vietnam War; a veteran of the war in Iraq. If you can manage to do so, include a few photographs of your subject, with appropriate captions.
When he was ten, Schwarzenegger says he dreamed of “being the best in the world in something,” and by fifteen he focused on being “the best body builder in the world.” He says it was not only a dream that he dreamed at night but “also a daydream,” and indeed he “turned this dream into reality.”

Without attempting to psychoanalyze Schwarzenegger, it is apparent that he had an enormous need for attention. He wanted “not to be big physically, but big in a way that everybody listens to me when I talk.” Of course he did become big physically, and though he is scarcely known for his lofty words, people do listen to him when he talks, not only because of his eminence as a body builder but also because he is known to be very rich—he has made a fortune in real estate as well as in a variety of other commercial activities—and of course because he was elected Governor of California.

What do we think of Schwarzenegger? His values are fairly clear. He wants to be the most muscular man in the world, he wants everyone to see him as “something special,” he loves California because “it has all the money in the world” and because it is endowed with “show business” and “wonderful weather” and “beautiful country” and “beautiful-looking people.” Philosophy teachers will blanch at his assertion that he is “a strong believer in Western philosophy,” a philosophy that, in his view, is “the philosophy of success, of progress, of getting rich.”

If Schwarzenegger had any vision of doing good in the world, he kept it to himself. Still, whatever one thinks of body building and of the rest of Schwarzenegger’s “philosophy,” it is obvious that he achieved his preeminence by hard work (widely regarded as a virtue) and by single-minded devotion. Schwarzenegger’s devotion to his ideal, he says, required him to sacrifice “a normal life.” (Does one think of Yeats’s assertion that one must choose between perfection of the work and of the life?) There is no reason to doubt Schwarzenegger’s statement that in order to excel in body building he “had to suppress . . . feelings.” Well, this is, in a sense, the stuff of an ascetic, even of a tragic hero. The difference, however, is that the ascetic and the tragic hero work for goals that we can consider in some degree noble, even if they are somehow tainted. An Oedipus relentlessly seeks the truth, and an Antigonê cannot neglect the duties owed to the dead.

Addendum: When the preceding paragraphs were first published, Schwarzenegger’s infidelities were unknown. Today it is harder to think of him as an ascetic.

If students have read Animal Farm (1949) or (less likely) Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World (1932), they may already be familiar with the word dystopia, “an imaginary society in which the condition of life is deplorable; the opposite of
Utopia,” or “a book depicting an imaginary oppressive society.” (The dys is from Latin, “bad,” so dystopia = “bad place.”)

Dystopias customarily are set in the future, and presumably are intended to warn readers of what may be in store. Obviously they arise out of present concerns, and they are not to be judged by how well they predicted the future. If Orwell’s 1984 tells us anything at all about a society, it tells us something about 1948, when it was written, not about 1984, the period in which it is set.

Much of Vonnegut’s satire is sufficiently heavy so that we can call it sarcasm. Whereas readers of Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels have to proceed for several pages before smelling a rat, readers of “Harrison Bergeron” realize by the third sentence (if not by the end of the first) that Vonnegut’s words do not mean what they say:

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren’t only equal before god and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

It is evident that George and Hazel are meant to be warnings of what we might become in a state that is determined to see to it that everyone is equal in every way, but what are we supposed to make out of their son, Harrison? Presumably he is highly gifted in every way (hence the multiple handicaps), and he retains an individualism that presumably Vonnegut admires and that Vonnegut wants his readers to admire—and yet Harrison at first seems to be no less dictatorial than the Handicapper General.

“I am the emperor!” cried Harrison. “Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!” He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

He tears off the handicaps, thereby showing what each individual can become. That is, his seemingly tyrannical words apparently are necessary if the slaves are to be freed. From here on, the fantasy moves (as we understand it) from dystopia to utopia, that is, the (so to speak) fantastic ideally horrible society becomes a fantastic ideally beautiful society. When the dancers dance, “Not only were the laws of the land abandoned but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well” (paragraph 72).

Additional Topic for Writing

In an essay of 250–500 words, consider whether the story would be better if it ended with paragraph 78, when the dancers, suspended in the air, “kissed each other for a long, long time.” Or might it have ended more effectively with para-
graph 79, when Diana Moon Glampers shoots the Emperor and Empress? Give your reasons for preferring one ending to the others.

**LANGSTON HUGHES**

*One Friday Morning (p. 1228)*

This story produces a vigorous reaction in the classroom, but not always a positive one: “One Friday Morning” is not a story that students like very much, not at first at any rate. To them everything seems painfully obvious: Nancy Lee is earnest, accomplished, hard-working, admirable; she deserves the scholarship that then is cruelly taken away from her on purely racist grounds. We begin by conceding this point: yes, the story line and characterization do seem obvious. But we know that Langston Hughes is a thoughtful, skillful writer, in both prose and poetry: What if we assume that he knew what he was doing, and that he wrote the story as he did for a specific purpose? What will be the interpretive result if we proceed on this basis?

In our view, the obviousness of the story line is meant to prepare for an unjust ending. Most of us expect that Nancy Lee will be outraged by the unfair treatment she receives. We expect her—in fact, we likely want her—to lash out against the racism embedded in America that denies deserving people their rewards simply on the basis of skin color. But Hughes's character does not do that. The ending of the story is self-affirming and highly patriotic. Nancy Lee is not embittered; she is not defeated. She takes Miss O'Shay's words to heart and renews her allegiance to the United States as a nation where the ideals of liberty and justice will one day be secured for all people. Nancy Lee will continue her struggle, and she is confident that friends like Miss O'Shay will support her.

Some students, we find, are quick to judge this ending “sentimental.” Sometimes they use even stronger terms—unrealistic, phony, sappy. But challenge these judgments; ask the students directly how they would have written the ending. Nancy Lee should have.... Well, what should she have done? Denounced American racism and given up her aspirations? Concluded that all white people are racists? For Hughes it was important that Nancy Lee experience racism in all of its gross unfairness but not give up on herself, on white people, or on American ideals. From one point of view, this may seem a conveniently optimistic, too-comforting ending. But from another, it is a hard ending: it is difficult to continue to think and feel as Nancy Lee does; if anything, it would be far easier not to.

We suggest that when you teach this story, you probe and test the students’ habitual ways of thinking and feeling. Your students probably will be inclined to conclude, “Nancy Lee is so naive, such a dreamer.” But you then can press the students to imagine the possibility that Nancy Lee is not naive, but is, instead, strong and courageous, a person who will not surrender the dreams she holds for herself, for her fellow African Americans, and for the nation.

**WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS**  
*The Use of Force* (p. 1234)

We will begin by glancing at the fourth topic that we give in the text, which reports that one student took the story as an account of a rape. Our own view is different: the story certainly is an account of a doctor’s forcible assault on a student, but we take it that the assault is exactly what the doctor says it is, an attempt to examine the child’s throat. Still, we grant that there are sexual implications. As we see it, the chief evidence consists of the following passages:

The child was fairly eating me up with her cold, steady eyes. . . . [She was] an unusually attractive little thing, and as strong as a heifer in appearance. . . . She had magnificent blond hair, in profusion. (paragraph 3)

After all, I had already fallen in love with the savage brat. . . . (21)

and of course the passage that we cite in topic 4:

Will you open it now by yourself or shall we have to open it for you? (18)

But this last passage actually seems to us the least substantial, almost an accident, in the way that many sentences—in daily life, not just in this story—with “it” can be given an unintended and irrelevant sexual significance.

As we see it, the doctor is indeed taken with the girl’s beauty (“magnificent blond hair, in profusion”) and especially with her defiant spirit (“The child was fairly eating me up with her cold, steady eyes”), but evidence of this sort does not mean that he rapes her, even in fantasy. In our view, the doctor is charmed by the girl, especially in contrast to her well-meaning but thoroughly conventional parents. Thus, when the mother says to the girl, “Such a nice man. . . . Look how kind he is” (14), the doctor is disgusted by the banal (though of course well-intentioned) remark: “At that I grind my teeth in disgust” (15). Similarly, when the mother says to the girl after the girl has knocked the doctor’s glasses from his face, “You bad girl” (17), the doctor says, “Don’t call me
a nice man to her. I’m here to look at her throat on the chance that she might have diphtheria and possibly die” (18).

And this last quotation gets us to our main point: when it comes down to it, the doctor is indeed doing his job, serving not only the girl but the society around her, and if she has diphtheria, it is his job to cure her, to save her and those around him, even if it means not being “a nice man.” So in our view the assault on the girl is more or less medically necessary (he is telling the truth when he says, “I had to have a throat culture for her own protection” [19]), but—and this is a big but—the doctor several times admits that he lost control over himself:

But now I also had grown furious—at a child. (28)

Perhaps I should have desisted and come back in an hour or more. (30)

But the worst of it was that I too had got beyond reason. (30)

We take these admissions to be essential to the story. As we see it, it is not a story about a literal rape, or even (despite some sexual imagery) about a fantasy rape. It is what it is, a story about a doctor’s forcible examination of a physically and psychologically attractive child. The doctor begins the attempted examination (11) with a professional manner (“Well, I said, suppose we take a look at the throat first. I smiled in my best professional manner”), and he continues for a moment (“Aw, come on, I coaxed” [13]), but he soon loses his professional cool. Still, it can be said that (a) he does have professional reasons for doing what he does, and (b) he realizes that his behavior was tainted (“It was a pleasure to attack her” . . . “blind fury”), so we can hardly call him a monster. What the story “shows” is that doctors are human. (We fear that some students may say the story “proves” or “teaches” this or that. Although we keep telling our students that the essays they write are arguments, we regularly remind them that, once we get beyond such forms as proverbs and fables, most works of literature do not seek to argue or prove or teach; rather, they invent situations that we find memorable and meaningful.)

As we see it, the story is about a doctor who is aware that—he is human—in professional situations he sometimes behaves unprofessionally, and who is contemptuous of laymen who think doctors are inherently nice dispassionate guys. By the end of paragraph 30, or 31 at the most, the reader knows all this, but the story continues through paragraph 33. In paragraph 32 we at last learn that the girl’s throat is indeed diseased, but this point is almost irrelevant to the story as we see it. Why, then, does it continue to paragraph 33? In 30 and 31 the doctor repeats his social justification (“I have seen at least two children lying dead in bed of neglect in such cases,” “Others must be protected against her. It is a social necessity”), and he also repeats that he was acting not rationally (“I too had got beyond reason,” “blind fury”). In the next-to-last paragraph he speaks of his “unreasoning assault” but we know all this; the only new infor-
mation is that indeed the girl was ill. Nor does the final paragraph tell us any-
thinking that is very new—but it is important, in our view, because it is a sort of
tribute to the girl. The story ends thus:

Now truly she was furious. She had been on the defensive before but now
she attacked. Tried to get off her father’s lap and fly at me while tears of
defeat blinded her eyes.

We take this concluding paragraph to be the doctor’s reaffirmation of the doc-
tor’s praise of the girl’s vitality.

In short, although some of the language evokes rape, we disagree with the
student who argued that the story is a veiled report of a girl who is sexually vio-
lated. But she certainly is in a significant sense violated. The somewhat extenu-
atating circumstances are (a) the medical necessity, and (b) the doctor’s awareness
that, like the child, he too had “got beyond reason” (30).

SHIRLEY JACKSON

The Lottery (p. 1238)

This story is based on fertility rituals of the sort described in Sir James Frazer’s
The Golden Bough: a community is purged of its evil, and fertility is ensured,
by the sacrifice of an individual, that is, by killing a scapegoat. “Lottery in
June, corn be heavy soon,” Old Man Warner says. In “The Lottery,” the
method of execution is stoning, which Frazer reports was a method used in
ancient Athens.

Until the last six paragraphs we think we are reading a realistic story about
decent small-town life. Probably on rereading we notice that, despite all the
realism, the time and the place are never specified; we may feel we are reading
about a twentieth-century New England town, but we cannot document this
feeling. On rereading, too, we pay more attention to the early references to
stones, and to the general nervousness, and of course we see the importance of
Tessie Hutchinson’s outburst. (Consult Helen E. Nebeker, “The Lottery’:
Symbolic Tour de Force,” American Literature 46 [1974]: 100–107.) With the
last six paragraphs the horror comes, and it is described in the same matter-of-
fact, objective tone used in the earlier part of the story.

Inevitably a discussion turns to the question, “Does the story have any
meaning for a modern society?” Students in the 1990s may have to be reminded
that a lottery was used as recently as the Vietnam War to pick the people who
would be subject to slaughter.

In Come Along with Me, Shirley Jackson discusses the furor “The Lottery”
evoked after its original publication in the New Yorker in 1948. Lenemaja
Friedman, in Shirley Jackson (1975), reports that Jackson said of the theme:
“Explaining just what I hoped the story to say is very difficult. I suppose I
hoped, by setting a particularly brutal ancient rite in the present and in my own village, to shock the story’s readers with a graphic demonstration of the pointless violence and general inhumanity in their own lives.” On the other hand, Jack O’Shaughnessy in *The New York Times Book Review* (August 18, 1988, p. 34), said that after reading the story in the *New Yorker* he wrote to Jackson, asking, “What does it mean?” He says that Jackson replied, on a postcard, “I wish I knew. Shirley Jackson.”

Perhaps this story should not be pressed for its meaning or theme. Formulations such as “Society engages in ritualized slaughter,” or “Society disguises its cruelty, even from itself,” or “Even decent people seek scapegoats” do not quite seem to fit. Isn’t it possible that the story is an effective shocker, signifying nothing? As many people have pointed out, much of the effect of the story depends on the contrast between the objective narration and the horrifying subject. The story is clever, a carefully wrought thriller, but whether it is an allegory—something about the cruelty of humanity, a cruelty which is invisible to us because it is justified by tradition—is a matter that may be reasonably debated.

The date of the story is significant, June 27, close to the summer solstice, and the season for planting. Some of the names, too, are obviously significant: the ritual is presided over by Mr. Summers, the first man to draw a lot is Mr. Adams, and conservative warnings are uttered by Mr. Warner. Note, too, that the leaders of the attack on Mrs. Hutchinson are Adams (the first sinner) and Graves (the result of sin was death).

One last point about the ritual: Clyde Dunbar, at home with a broken leg, does not participate. Why? Because a sacrificial victim must be unblemished.


---

**GRACE PALEY**

*A Man Told Me the Story of His Life* (p. 1244)

The structure of this story is simple enough. Vicente, opposed by “the school,” is dissuaded from becoming a doctor. Authority triumphs. Later, when he consults a doctor on behalf of his wife, the doctor brushes him off. Again authority triumphs. But Vicente correctly diagnoses his wife’s ailment and the doctor admits it, though he remains puzzled by Vicente’s ability. The conflict is resolved, then, and Vicente saves a life—but the reader understands that the ending is scarcely a happy one. For one thing, although Vicente has saved his wife’s life, part of his own life has been lost. That’s put too strongly, of course, since Vicente is alive and he doesn’t seem to be deeply embittered, but Vicente has been prevented from living the rewarding, successful life that he had wanted. We can even assume that if the authorities had not prevented him from becoming a doctor he would have saved additional lives.
The first question in the text asks why Paley begins by saying, “Vicente said”; she could have begun with Vicente’s own words, and called the piece “The Story of My Life.” One can put the question a bit differently, shifting attention from the author’s intention to the reader’s response: How would your responses be different if . . . ? If Vicente narrated the story, we might feel that he is tugging too directly on our heartstrings. We might even feel that he has a chip on his shoulder, since he is telling anyone and everyone how he was prevented from becoming a doctor. In Paley’s version, on the other hand, Vicente tells one person that he wanted to be a doctor, and this one person passes the story on to us. In its present form, the story slightly distances him from us, and his story is, one might say, vouched for by the narrator.

It’s noteworthy that Paley doesn’t describe “the school” as being composed of villains. “The school” doesn’t mean to oppress Vicente; it just can’t conceive that he can be anything other than “an excellent engineer.”

Why the information about Vicente’s service as an army cook? Presumably his ability to see connections and proportions served him as a cook (“I prepared food for two thousand men”), and the passage hints both at his competence and his justifiable pride in being of use to humanity. And, again, the reader is guided to believe that Vicente could have been of more use if “the school” had been more open-minded.

Is Vicente characterized (question 2), or is he simply “a man”? Although he is a bit puzzled and a bit aggrieved, his mind has not been poisoned by the shabby treatment he received. Students might be invited to comment on the last two paragraphs especially. In the penultimate paragraph, Vicente tells the doctor that he has looked in a book, diagnosed the pain, etc. In the last paragraph, the doctor tests the girl, confirms Vicente’s diagnosis, and (apparently unable to comprehend the fact that Vicente looked at a book and understood what he read) asks Vicente how he knew. By ending this way, with the doctor’s stupidity, and without any concluding bitter remark by Vicente, Paley makes sure that the reader will hold Vicente in esteem.

Perhaps a bit more can be said about a reader’s perception of Vicente. Because he has been deprived of substantial higher education, he sounds a bit childish, as in the choppy beginning of the last paragraph: “The doctor made a test. He said. . . .” (This point can’t be pressed too hard, since the voice of the narrator, which we hear in the title and in the first two words of the story, is equally simple.) His pride is engaging, not offensive (“Did you know I saved her life?”), and his affection for his wife is especially evident when he mentions her name. Other people are, for him, simply “the teacher,” “the principal,” “the army,” and “the doctor,” but his wife is not simply “my wife,” she is Consuela.

The brevity, the apparently simple narrative style, and the presence of a strongly felt message (even though it is not explicitly stated) give this story a fable-like quality. For a brief comment on fables, see the discussion of Paley’s “Samuel” in this manual.
Tobias Wolff

*Bullet in the Brain* (p. 1244)

If you don’t want to teach this story as part of a thematic group, you may want to teach it in conjunction with our discussion of Character (pp. 351–52): The plot can be summarized in a sentence, and the interest in the story is almost entirely in the character of the protagonist.

One might almost say not “in the character of the protagonist” but in “the two characters of the protagonist,” because, after all, the real interest in this two-part story (the parts are marked by a space) is in the contrast between the boy and the man whom the boy becomes. The first part sets forth the mature man, Anders, the book critic who is “known for the weary elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed.” The Anders whom we see here is almost a caricature, a flat character. He is, quite simply, a rotten guy. Thus, even though he shares the irritation of the woman on line at the bank, when she expresses her irritation he takes a different line and he rebukes her for it. He has, to put it briefly, somehow lost all sense of how to respond as a human being. Thus, during the bank robbery instead of being terrified he is amused by the robber’s clichés (“bright boy,” “dead meat,” “capiche”). The robber’s gun barrel tickles him, and he has to “fight back the titters.” When he looks at the ceiling and sees the painting, he analyzes it in a way that is utterly inappropriate to the situation. He has simply lost all sense of proper human feeling.

After the bullet enters his brain, we are first told what he did not remember: His first lover, his wife, Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, his participation in an anti-war rally. That is, we are told that he did not remember the things that made him a responsive human being, and, especially, the love of language that caused him to become a literary critic. Then we are told what he did remember: A pick-up game of baseball, a boy who says, “Short’s the best position they is.” He would like to hear the boy say these words again, but he knows not to ask, because the other boys will mistakenly think he is “ragging the kid for his grammar.” It’s not that at all, not that at all. He is “elated” by the words, by “their pure unexpectedness and their music.” Now we know for sure why he became a literary critic. And now the reader can guess that somehow he overdosed on books—doubtless many of them badly written books—and became the bitter figure we see in the first part of the story.

Tim O’Brien

*The Things They Carried* (p. 1249)

A few words should be said about the movement away from the highly anecdotal story of, say, the Middle Ages and even of the late nineteenth century (e.g., Maupassant)—a movement toward what has been called the lyric style of, say, Chekhov and Joyce.
Most stories, even those of the twentieth century, retain something of the anecdotal plot, a fairly strong element of conflict and reversal. Howard Nemerov offers a satirical summary in *Poetry and Fiction* (1963):

Short stories amount for the most part to parlor tricks, party favors with built-in snappers, gadgets for inducing recognitions and reversals; a small pump serves to build up the pressure, a tiny trigger releases it, there follows a puff and a flash as freedom and necessity combine; finally a celluloid doll drops from the muzzle and descends by parachute to the floor. These things happen, but they happen to no one in particular.

Some writers, however, have all but eliminated plot, and it’s not unusual for twentieth-century writers of stories to disparage narrative (especially the novel) and to claim some affinity with poets. Frank O’Connor, in an interview in *Paris Review* (reprinted in *Writers at Work* [1958], edited by Malcolm Cowley), said that the short story was his favorite form because it’s the nearest thing I know to lyric poetry—I wrote lyric poetry for a long time, then discovered that God had not intended me to be a lyric poet, and the nearest thing to that is the short story. A novel actually requires far more logic and far more knowledge of circumstances, whereas a short story can have the sort of detachment from circumstances that lyric poetry has.

In his book on the short story, *The Lonely Voice* (1963), O'Connor amplifies this point. Faulkner makes pretty much the same point in another *Paris Review* interview that is reprinted in the same collection. Faulkner says:

I’m a failed poet. Maybe every novelist wants to write poetry first, finds he can’t, and then tries the short story, which is the most demanding form after poetry. And failing at that, only then does he take up novel writing.

Doubtless, Faulkner is being at least somewhat facetious, but we can’t quite dismiss his implication that the short story is allied to the poem—by which he must mean the lyric.

If the course is being taught chronologically, students probably have already encountered Chekhov, Joyce, and Hemingway; if, for instance, they have read “Araby” they have read a story in which (many of them think) “nothing happens.” In the “lyric story” (if there is such a species) the emphasis is not on telling about a change of fortune, marked by a decisive ending, but rather is on conveying (and perhaps inducing in the reader) an emotion—perhaps the emotion of the narrator. There is very little emphasis on plot, that is, on “What happened next?” (Chekhov said, “I think that when one has finished writing a short story one should delete the beginning and the end”), though of course there is a good deal of interest in the subtle changes or modulations of the emotion.
Certainly in “The Things They Carried”—a story set in a combat zone—there is none of the suspense and catastrophic action that one would expect in a war story of the nineteenth century, say, a story by Ambrose Bierce or Stephen Crane. In “The Things They Carried” we learn fairly early that Ted Lavender got killed; because no one else gets killed, an inexperienced reader may conclude that nothing much happens in the story.

Of course, as far as plot is concerned, what “happens” is that Lieutenant Cross, feeling that his thoughts of Martha have led him to relax discipline with the result that one of his men has been killed, determines to pay attention to his job as a military leader, and he therefore burns Martha’s letters and photographs. But this narrative could scarcely sustain a story of this length; or, to put it another way, if that’s what the story is about, much of the story seems irrelevant.

Even inexperienced readers usually see that “The Things They Carried” is not to be judged on its plot, any more than is (say) “Born in the U.S.A.” If some passages are read aloud in class, even the least-experienced readers—who may miss almost all of the subtleties when they read the story by themselves—will see and hear that O’Brien interestingly varies “the things they carried,” from physical objects (chewing gum and the latest gear for killing) to thoughts and emotions. In short, he uses verbal repetition (which creates rhythm) and metaphor to a degree rarely if ever found in the novel.

Not least of “the things they carried” are themselves and their minds. “For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity.” “For the most part” is important. O’Brien doesn’t sentimentalize the soldiers; they can be afraid and they can be wantonly destructive. He tells us, fairly late in the story, that “They shot chickens and dogs, they trashed the village well.” He tells us, too, that “They carried the soldier’s greatest fear, which was a fear of blushing.” “They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die.” “They carried shameful memories.” This insistent repetition, rather like the incremental repetition in the old popular ballads (e.g., “Edward,” “Lord Randall,” “Barbara Allen”), serves less to record a sequence of events than to deepen our understanding of a state of mind.

Still, there is, as has already been said, something of the traditional narrative here: Lieutenant Cross at last does something overt (burns Martha’s letters and photographs). He thus “carries” less, literally, since the first line of the story is “First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha.” Whether by burning the letters and photos he will in fact lighten his load—his guilt—is something about which readers may have different opinions. He may indeed impose stricter discipline, but it’s hard to imagine that he will think less of Ted Lavender. Cross himself seems skeptical. “Lavender was dead. You couldn’t burn the blame.” One may lighten one’s load by shooting off fingers and toes, and thus gain release from combat, and one can dream of flying away (“the weights fell off; there was nothing to bear”), but a reader may doubt that when Cross lightens his physical load he will find that the weights will fall off, and that he will have nothing, or only a little, to bear. He will still be a participant in a war where “men killed and died, because they were embarrassed not to.” One may wonder,
too, if Cross will be able to forget about Martha, or, so to speak, to keep her in
her place. He thinks he will be able to do so, but the matter is left unresolved:

Henceforth, when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that
she belonged elsewhere. He would shut down the daydreams. This was not
Mount Sebastian, it was another world, where there were no pretty poems
or midterm exams, a place where men died because of carelessness and
gross stupidity. Kiowa was right. Boom-down, and you were dead, never
partly dead.

This quotation, however, raises yet another question, and perhaps a central
question if one takes the story to be about Cross rather than about the soldiers
as a group. Cross here seems to assume that death comes only to those who are
careless or stupid. He thinks, presumably, that it is his job as an officer to pre-
vent the carelessness and the stupidity of his men from getting them killed. But
of course we know that in war even the careful and the bright may get killed.
Further, nothing in the story tells us that Lavender was careless or stupid. He
was killed while urinating, but even the careful and the bright must urinate. We
are told that he was shot in the head, and perhaps we are to understand that,
contrary to standard operating procedure, he was not wearing his helmet, but
the point is not emphasized. When we first hear of Lavender’s death we are told
that Cross “felt the pain” and that “he blamed himself,” although the reader
does not know exactly why the lieutenant is blameworthy. Later perhaps a
reader concludes (though again, this is not made explicit) that it was Cross’s job
to insist that the men wear their helmets. In any case, the reader is probably
much easier on Cross than Cross is on himself.

To the extent that the story is about Cross’s isolation—and, as Kiowa
knows, Cross is isolated—it fits Frank O’Connor’s remark (in The Lonely
Voice) that a short story is “by its very nature remote from the community—
romantic, individualistic, and intransigent.” But, to repeat, it’s probably fair to
say that O’Brien is as much concerned with celebrating the state of mind of all
the “legs or grunts” as he is with recording the sequence of actions that constitu-
tes Lieutenant Cross’s attempts to deal with his sense of guilt.

This story has been reprinted in a book called The Things They Carried, where
it is one of twenty-two related but discontinuous pieces ranging from two to twenty
pages. The book is dedicated to “the men of Alpha Company,” and the names in
the dedication correspond to the names in the stories. Further, in the book the nar-
erator identifies himself as Tim O’Brien. A question thus arises: Is The Things They
Carried a collection of stories, or is it biography, history, or whatever? Perhaps
one’s first thought, given the dedication and the name of the narrator, is that the
book reports what O’Brien experienced—and yet in an interview in Publisher’s
Weekly O’Brien said, “My own experience has virtually nothing to do with the
content of the book.” He claims he used his own name for that of the narrator
merely because he thought it would be “neat.” (In another interview, he said the
use of his own name was “just one more literary device.”) If we believe what he

told the interviewer, the book is fiction. But perhaps O’Brien is toying with the interviewer. Or perhaps he is behaving in accordance with a point made in the book: “In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.” Has O’Brien been infected by the “fact-or-fiction?” game of much recent writing? If so, should someone tell him that what we value in his writing is his ability to bring the Vietnam War home to us, rather than his philosophizing?

SHERMAN ALEXIE

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (p. 1261)

Perhaps the first thing to say—though it is immediately evident to anyone who reads the story—is that neither the Lone Ranger nor Tonto appears in the story, and the story is not set in heaven. Some of the conflict in the story is indeed between being white and being Indian in America, but most of the conflict is set within the speaker himself. (By the way, most Indians apparently prefer “Indian” to the term that most whites now use, “Native American,” but most whites seem to prefer to use “Native American.” In our view, it is best to use a more specific word, such as “Navajo” or in Alexie’s case, “Spokane Coeur d’Alene.”)

We say the conflict is both external and internal. A police officer says to the narrator, “You’re making people nervous. You don’t fit the profile of the neighborhood” (paragraph 12). And we meet the police again in paragraph 45, when they arrive presumably in response to a phone call from an uneasy resident who who has heard the narrator shout “very loudly.” The white/Indian suspicion is evident in numerous details, for instance in the scene with the 7–Eleven clerk who searched “for some response that would reassure him that I wasn’t an armed robber” (14). The narrator empathizes with the white clerk but he also taunts him a bit, which is to say that he deliberately contributes to the uneasiness in the air. Further, and this gets us closer to the heart of the story, the narrator has had a white girlfriend, and judging from what he tells us about their relationship, he must have been impossible to live with. One of the few things that happens in the story is that his ex-girlfriend calls him up, and they have a desultory conversation.

Our point: In this story, very little happens. There is very little “story” in the root sense of the word, historia, a record of happenings, or in the sense of a memorable event, the kind of thing set forth in an anecdote, with a beginning, a middle, and a surprising and conclusive end. In short, we are very far from the ingeniously plotted story associated especially with Maupassant, O. Henry, and Maugham. Here, after paragraph 75 there is a break, and then two short paragraphs constitute the ending. The first of these two mentions the narrator’s desire to live “closer to the river, to the falls where the ghosts of salmon jump.” This sentence, with its “ghosts of salmon,” does not quite introduce a new world, but it does give—at least to the white reader—an Indian world with a new dimension, a mystery that helps convey the narrator’s alienation from the
white world in which his body chiefly lives its daily life, the world, for instance, of the Third Avenue 7-Eleven, the world of the white high school he attended, the world of his girlfriend. And the last sentence—“I know how all my dreams end anyway”—brings us back to the nightmares that he described, for instance in paragraph 41 where he reports dreaming of white soldiers playing polo with the head of an Indian woman.

Inevitably the subject will come up in class: Is Alexie making too big a deal of the conflict between whites and Indians, or, to put it a bit differently, of the injustices done to Indians in past centuries, injustices that presumably explain his sense that he is “lost” (paragraphs 6 and 9)? Our own response is that (a) terrible injustices were done to Indians, and (b) Alexie himself suggests that the responses of his narrator are sometimes over the top. Take, for instance, the narrator’s treatment (paragraphs 36–37) of his girlfriend.

She was a kindergarten teacher and I continually insulted her for that.

“Hey, schoolmarm, I asked. “Did your kids teach you anything new today?”

His ancestors were treated horribly, and he himself is sometimes—maybe often—treated badly (remember the police episode) but, to put it bluntly, he is sometimes insufferable. And he knows it. In paragraph 31 he mentions an occasion when “There was no one around to ask me to grow up.”

Our second question, following the story, asks students to think about the white guy in paragraphs 54–63, the son of the BIA chief. Here is part of what Alexie tells us:

And he could play. He played Indian ball, fast and loose, better than all the Indians there.

The narrator goes on to say that he himself was a pretty good basketball player, and this white guy “needed to be beaten by an Indian,” so he jumped into the game—but “that white kid took over the game.” This is as close as we get to a fistfight between the Lone Ranger and Tonto, and the white guy wins. There is thus—we say this very tentatively—the suggestion that when the colonizer and the colonized meet in a contest, the colonizer may show that he has indeed become proficient in the techniques or skills of the colonized. Or put it this way: The guy from the dominant culture moves easily within the subjugated culture, but the guy from the subjugated culture—the narrator—finds it difficult to move within the dominant white culture. We are emphatically not saying that this episode reveals the “message” of the story. We are saying only that the episode does show us a young male who provides a contrast to the narrator, a young male at ease in a culture not his own. Makes a fellow think. And Alexie’s narrator does plenty of thinking about his condition.

As we see it, then “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven” is largely about the narrator’s awareness that (a) of course the Lone Ranger/Tonto
relationship was fanciful, was absurd, was based on ignoring reality, and (b) the narrator himself can be a nasty guy whose actions inhibit the development of any satisfying relationship. It is a story that is chiefly a revelation of character, with a minimal plot.

Amy Sterling Casil

Perfect Stranger (p. 1265)

Ms. Casil, the author of the story, has generously acceded to our request for questions that she would put to students if she were teaching the story.

1. “Perfect Stranger” is a science fiction story that poses the question, “What if genetic technology could be used to modify physical appearance, intelligence, and talents?” Do you think Denny’s parents had the right to give him treatments to make him “perfect?”

2. Do you think there is a difference—let’s say an ethical difference—between the treatment that cured Denny’s heart defect before he was born, and the later treatments he received to change his eye color and give him talents or abilities he wasn’t born with? Please explain your position.

3. In the beginning of the story, it is raining and the father, Gary, is frustrated that his wife Carolyn has thrown away the toy football he gave to his son Denny years before. In your opinion, are these elements of the story symbols or metaphors, and if so, what feelings or ideas do they represent? What do you make of the last line of the story “Let it rain”?

4. Is Gary, the father, a reliable narrator or an unreliable narrator? Or sometimes one, and sometimes the other. Cite passages in the story that support your view(s).

5. The genetic treatments presented in the story do not currently exist, and the helpful talking house that Gary designed also does not exist. Both are strong potentials, however, based in current science and technology. How does Casil make the future context and situation seem plausible and realistic?

6. What is Gary’s intent near the end of the story when he “started upstairs on quiet feet?”

7. The house is a character in the story, although it is not a person, but rather a form of artificial intelligence designed by Gary. Gary has several conversations with the house throughout the story, and late in the story it reminds him, “Don’t forget to put your knife in the dishwasher.” If Gary created the house, can he be seen as “arguing with himself,” as well as trying to conceal his intent from himself? Support your response with examples.

8. Did Gary and Carolyn make their son Denny perfect by giving him all the treatments? Or, is only one word of the story’s title accurate?

9. Discussing his friend Candy with his father, Denny says, “She’s a mundane, Dad. I just can’t get interested in a girl who’s never had any type of modi-
fications.” Later, Gary overhears Denny tell another girlfriend, “But everyone’s parents are pretty much mundanes. You should see my Dad.” Look up pop culture or sub-cultural references and the dictionary definition of the word “mundane” and discuss why Gary would have been so disturbed by Denny using this word.

10. Gary contrasts his upbringing and teen years with Denny’s life and attitude at several points throughout the story. Some futurists, for instance Ray Kurzweil, have proposed a “technological singularity” which represents a point beyond which technology and artificial intelligence will grow so exponentially that the unaided human mind cannot comprehend it. Can Gary’s alienation from Denny be seen as an example of how someone would feel being born “before the singularity,” as opposed to Denny, who seems to have been born after it? Or, is it simply a generation gap experienced by all parents and teens?

RALPH ELLISON

Battle Royal (p. 1276)

The term “battle royal” has two chief meanings: (1) a fight involving several or many contestants, and (2) a bitterly fought battle. Both meanings are relevant to this story, most obviously in the contest between the boys in the ring, and almost as obviously in the battle between blacks and whites.

The battle between blacks and whites in many ways is evident enough to all of the participants, but in two important ways it is not evident to some of them. First, the whites presumably did not perceive that the narrator’s grandfather was a traitor and a spy; presumably they mistakenly accepted his feigned acquiescence as genuine submission, not realizing that in fact he was an enemy, maintaining his ideals in the only way available to him. Second, the narrator, who in his youth accepted the traditional answers, did not understand that a war was going on, or ought to be going on. In his immaturity he sought to please the whites, subjecting himself to all sorts of indignities—not only by fighting against blacks for the amusement of whites and grabbing for counterfeit coins on an electrified rug but also by giving a speech that he thinks is impressive but reduces him to a puppet mouthing ideas that lend support to his enemy. He is so unaware of his plight that even during the fisticuffs he wonders if his speech will impress his audience. (Ellison emphasizes the point a little later in various ways, for instance, when the M.C. introduces the boy as someone who “knows more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary,” and when the narrator tells us that he was swallowing his own blood while giving his speech to the amused audience.) As the narrator says at the beginning of the story, it took him a long time to realize that he must be himself—not the creature that white society wants him to be—and that as far as white society goes, a black is an invisible man, i.e., a person of no identity.

As long as he accepts the role the whites give him, he serves the purpose of whites. In fact, because he is verbally talented, he is extremely useful to whites; he will persuade other blacks to perceive themselves as the whites perceive them. As the school superintendent puts it, the boy will “lead his people in the proper paths.” Thus the scholarship is used by the whites to strengthen their army by recruiting a man who betrays the blacks. If the narrator had not ultimately come to understand this, he would have become a traitor of a sort very different from his grandfather. Fortunately, however, the nightmarish experience of the battle and the subsequent speech are balanced by another sort of nightmare, a dream (presided over by his grandfather) in which the briefcase contains not a scholarship but a note: “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.” (The message is rooted in a horrible practical joke, in which a white plantation owner would send an illiterate African American to another plantation owner, with a letter supposedly recommending the bearer but which actually said, “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.” The second owner would say he could not offer a job, but would recommend that the bearer go to a third plantation, and so on.) The narrator’s dream is as real as the battle, and more real than the scholarship, since the scholarship (though of course literally real) was not at all what the young man had thought it was.


**ROBERT HAYDEN**

*Frederick Douglass* (p. 1286)

The second question, in the text, asks why the subject of the sentence is delayed so long. We take it that Hayden is seeking to instill in the reader a sensation corresponding (in an infinitely tiny way, of course) to the agonized sense of waiting that African Americans for more than a century have experienced.

Another point: the words “mumbo jumbo” in line 6 perhaps deserve a comment. Among certain West African tribes, Mumbo Jumbo is or was revered as a god who protects the people from evil. In white America, where African religion was scarcely regarded with sympathy or even with tolerance, the words came to mean gibberish. Hayden neatly turns the tables, applying the term not to the language of Africans or African Americans but to the language of white politicians.

We are always seeking opportunities to urge students to read the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845); the best edition has been prepared by
392  Chapter 27: American Dreams and Nightmares

David Blight and is published by Bedford Books (1993). Biographies of this extraordinary nineteenth-century orator, writer, and reformer have been written by Benjamin Quarles (1948) and William McFeely (1991).

LORNA DEE CERVANTES

Refugee Ship (p. 1287)

Most students will quickly grasp the significance of the title. Like a refugee on a ship, the speaker is isolated from her origins and she is uncertain—indeed desperate—about her future. In the original version (see question 3 in the text) the repetition in the last two lines (“a ship that will never dock / a ship that will never dock”) perhaps indicates a condition of numbed hopelessness, a sense that she is doomed to drift forever and will never be able to achieve a stable identity. (We are not saying that repetition always has this effect. The repetition in the last two lines of Frost’s “Stopping by Woods” probably has quite a different effect.) But in the revision, printed in our text, the line is in Spanish rather than in English, which suggests to some readers of our acquaintance that she is no longer “orphaned” from her Spanish name and that Spanish is no longer “foreign” (line 7) to her.

The change, thus interpreted, is somewhat puzzling, since the recovery of Spanish (i.e., the regaining of her Spanish heritage) would seem to contradict the idea of the boat never landing. A related point: the original poem (1974) did not end with a period (it had no final punctuation), so it seemed inconclusive, unfinished, unending, and thus appropriate to the idea of a speaker who can’t find her identity. The period at the end of the revision (1981) of course adds a note of finality—but is the idea that the ship will never dock or (since the final line is in Spanish) that the Spanish heritage has been regained?

Still another conspicuous difference between the original and the revision is in a figure of speech in line 9 of the revision, where the speaker refers to her “bronzed skin.” In the original (see below, line 9) she spoke of her “brown skin.” Students might be asked to comment on the change. Our own view is that “bronzed” is somewhat more elevated, perhaps even suggesting heroic monuments in bronze. Other changes are in the lineation, and from “I am an orphan to my Spanish name,” by virtue of the lowercase initial letter, somewhat diminished. Here is the 1974 version.

Refugee Ship

like wet cornstarch I slide past mi abuelita’s eyes
bible placed by her side
she removes her glasses
the pudding thickens

mamá raised me with no language
I am an orphan to my Spanish name
the words are foreign, stumbling on my tongue
I stare at my reflection in the mirror
brown skin, black hair

I feel I am a captive
aboard the refugee ship
a ship that will never dock
a ship that will never dock

By the way, in class a Chicano student brought up a point that provoked considerable discussion. He mentioned that many people with Spanish names are by no means rightly characterized as “Hispanic,” since they are descended largely or entirely from Native Americans, and they were deprived of their own languages by the Spaniards. Some of these people may think of themselves as “Spanish,” but in Cervantes’s words they really are “orphaned,” persons who have lost their original (i.e., indigenous) culture. The student was somewhat surprised to find himself saying that just as these people who have lost their original identity have come to regard themselves as Spanish or “Hispanic,” so the Chicanos of today may in time forget their “Spanish” identity (really something imposed on many of them) and they may become as assimilated to the Anglo world as they now are to the “Spanish” world. That is, although the student fully sympathized with the speaker’s anguish, he found it ironic that she presumably regards the grandmother as at ease in a Spanish culture that probably struck the grandmother’s ancestors as foreign and undesirable.

Most students probably will feel that the second and third stanzas present few if any difficulties, but they may be puzzled by the first stanza, especially by the images of “wet cornstarch” and “pudding.” We confess our own uncertainty. Perhaps part of the idea is that “wet cornstarch” has no permanent shape, no identity, just as the speaker feels she has no identity. Or, on the contrary, is the point that “wet cornstarch” is sticky, thereby suggesting that the speaker can’t move easily, can’t get anywhere (like a ship that can’t dock)? (But the speaker does not in fact say that she feels “like wet cornstarch”); rather, she is saying something about the way in which the grandmother perceives, or doesn’t perceive, her.) A more evident point is that cornstarch is white, which perhaps is the way the grandmother sees the speaker. That is, although the speaker has “bronzed skin, black hair,” since she speaks English rather than Spanish (her mother’s words are “foreign”) she is an Anglo to the grandmother.

And what about “the pudding” in the last line of the first stanza? Again, it’s our understanding that the first stanza gives the speaker’s interpretation of the way in which the grandmother perceives her. “The pudding thickens,” then, is a description of the way in which the grandmother, who has removed her glasses, perceives the speaker. Someone who is not wearing the glasses that she needs might well feel that the scene is “thickening.” But why “pudding”?
Probably there is a connection with “cornstarch,” but exactly what is the connection? Is a pudding thought to be (like the wet cornstarch of the first line) shapeless? But in fact a pudding that thickens (with the aid of cornstarch) is not shapeless; it has considerable consistency or identity.

For a very different attitude toward being a Latina in the United States, see Aurora Levins Morales’s poem “Child of the Americas” in the preceding chapter.

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

Richard Cory (p. 1288)

The point is not that money doesn’t bring happiness; even a thoroughly civilized spirit (grace, taste, courtesy) does not bring happiness. The protagonist’s name is significant. “Richard” suggests “Rich,” and probably his entire name faintly suggests Richard Cœur de Lion (and cœur = heart and core, and also suggests cour = court). These suggestions, along with “crown,” “favored,” “imperially,” “arrayed,” “glittered,” and “king,” emphasize his superiority. Other words emphasize his dignity, courtesy, and humanity: “gentleman,” “clean favored,” “quieter,” “human,” “schooled,” “grace.” Everything combines to depict him as a man of self-sufficiency, dignity, and restraint—yet he kills himself. Still, even his final act has some dignity: it is stated briefly, and it takes place on “one calm summer night.” Students might be asked if anything is lost by substituting (what might on first thought seem more appropriate) “one dark winter night.” If this rewriting is not bad enough, listen to Paul Simon’s version of the poem. He sings it, with Art Garfunkel, on Sounds of Silence, Columbia CS 9269.

W. H. AUDEN

The Unknown Citizen (p. 1289)

In “The Unknown Citizen” the speaker’s voice is obviously not the poet’s. The speaker—appropriately unidentified in a poem about a society without individuals—is apparently a bureaucrat. For such a person, a “saint” is not one who is committed to spiritual values but one who causes no trouble.

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. What is Auden satirizing in “The Unknown Citizen”? (Students might be cautioned to spend some time thinking about whether Auden is satirizing the speaker, the citizen, conformism, totalitarianism, technology, or what.)
2. Write a prose eulogy of 250 words satirizing contemporary conformity, or, if you prefer, contemporary individualism.

3. Was he free? Was he happy? Explain.
4. In a paragraph or two, sketch the values of the speaker of the poem, and then sum them up in a sentence or two. Finally, in as much space as you feel you need, judge these values.

**ALLEN GINSBERG**

*A Supermarket in California* (p. 1290)

The poem evokes Walt Whitman by name and evokes his poetry in the long, unrhymed lines and in the catalogs of commonplace objects of American life. But Ginsberg’s America is not Whitman’s, for Ginsberg makes the point that Whitman too was lonely while he lived and finally encountered the loneliness of death. The allusion to the Spanish poet García Lorca is to his poem on Walt Whitman and also calls to mind yet another homosexual poet whose love was unreciprocated. As we see it, the “self-conscious” poet, his head aching (line 1), draws inspiration from Whitman, who lived in an earlier and more innocent age, an age when a man could unselfconsciously celebrate male beauty and comradeship. But that age is “the lost America of love” (11), and in any case the Whitman who celebrates it and who is the poet’s “courage-teacher” (12) was himself “lonely” (again 12) and, like all mortals, at last lost all. By the way, in the last sentence, Ginsberg seems to confuse Lethe (the river of forgetfulness) with Styx (the river across which Charon poled his ferry).


**MARGE PIERCY**

*What’s That Smell in the Kitchen?* (p. 1291)

Putting aside the title (in which, at least in retrospect, perhaps we hear the voice of the oafish husband comfortably seated in the TV room), the first words of the first line (“All over America women are”) might lead us to expect some sort of feminist/Whitmanesque assertion of glorious unity, or of flourishing individuality, and in a sense we get something like this, but in a comic domestic vein. The burnt dinners are fully explained in the final line, but the reason becomes evident fairly soon in the poem—certainly by line 9, with its punning glance at kitchen utensils in “Anger sputters in her brainpan.”

We hesitate to mention here so obvious a point, but not all students understand that “burning dinners” is metaphorical—no less metaphorical than the “calico / smile” of lines 7–8, or the “anger [that] sputters in her brainpan” of line...
9. If some of your students are not likely to understand immediately that the poem is metaphoric, we think it is useful to begin discussion by mentioning that the poem is rich in metaphors, and then get the members of the class to talk about the metaphors.

**YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA**

*Facing It* (p. 1292)

The title is both literal (he is facing the wall) and figurative (he is confronting the terrible memories of past experiences).

Soldiers in other wars, too, underwent traumatic experiences, and the experience of a combatant is almost bound to include episodes that seem unreal or surreal. But the fact that the Vietnam War had so little popular support—was not convincingly bolstered by the idea that it was being fought for a good cause—was particularly disconcerting and demoralizing. Much of Komunyakaa’s poem catches a sense of unreality and a sense of the loss of self. Thus, a black man looking at his reflection in the black wall finds his reflection literally disappearing; at the same time, if the wall has caused his reflection to disappear, it has nevertheless caught the man himself, drawn him back into the horrible experiences that the wall in effect memorializes. (Strictly speaking, the wall memorializes those who died, not the war itself. That is, the memorial does not say that the war was either good or bad, only that certain people died in the war.)

From the title on, the speaker is “facing it”—facing the painful memories aroused by standing in front of the wall and confronting or reliving the war experiences. He sees a vision of the booby trap that killed a comrade, Andrew Johnson, and, as reflected in the wall, the loss of the arm of a veteran, who therefore is standing near the poet. At the end of the poem the violence is transformed by the return to the world outside of the wall. In the wall the poet sees a woman “trying to erase names,” that is, apparently engaged in a futile action, though one hopes that the memories of the war can be diminished if not erased. But then he corrects himself and realizes that the wall is in fact mirroring an act of affection: “No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair.”

Some of your students may have visited the wall. If so, you may want to ask them to report their experiences.


MAYA LIN

Vietnam Veterans Memorial (photograph, p. 1293)

The monument was commissioned by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, which held a design competition. Any U.S. citizen over the age of eighteen could enter a design. The criteria were as follows: The monument had to (1) be reflective and contemplative in character; (2) be harmonious with its surroundings; (3) include the names of the nearly 58,000 persons who died or who remain missing in action; (4) make no political or military statement about the war; (5) occupy no more than two acres of land. The competition was won by Maya Ying Lin, an undergraduate at Yale University. Her design consists of two 250-foot walls of polished black granite, meeting at a 136-degree angle. The walls are ten feet tall where they meet but taper off into the sloping ground. The names of the dead are inscribed chronologically in order of death. The names begin not at the left end of the monument but at the intersection of the two walls, at the top of the right-hand wall. The names continue along the wall, and when space on the right-hand wall is exhausted (where the tip of the wall points to the Washington Monument) they continue at the western end of the left-hand wall (whose tip points to the Lincoln Memorial). Thus, the names of the first who died in the war (on the left-hand side of the right-hand wall) are adjacent to the names of the last to die (on the right-hand side of the left-hand wall).

When the winning design was announced—there were 1,421 entries—it was met with much opposition. It did not convey heroism, it was not made of white marble (the traditional material of memorials), and it was not representative. Despite the controversy, the memorial was built—though as a compromise, a flagpole and a realistic sculpture of three soldiers (two white, one black) were erected nearby. Today the monument is universally recognized as a masterpiece, though it is very difficult to explain why visitors find it so deeply moving. Something has to do with the site (pointing, as we have said, to the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial), something has to do with the sequence in which the names are inscribed, but much has to do with the reflective black granite sinking into the sloping grass. The criteria, you will recall, included the monument be reflective—and it is reflective, in a literal way that the committee doubtless had not envisioned. Visitors looking for the names of friends and loved ones see themselves in the monument. It is not too much to say that the living and the dead meet here, set in an area rich in historical asso-
ciations. Perhaps we can also say that although the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is indeed a memorial, it is not gloomy, chiefly because it is animated by images of the living, but also because of the site, a grassy slope in an area flanked by memorials to Washington and Lincoln.

One wonders, too, to what extent viewers are moved by the knowledge that the memorial was created by a young woman—an undergraduate!—of Asian ancestry. It is appropriate at this point to quote Maya Lin’s own comment on her work. We find it interesting but far from definitive:

I thought about what death is, what a loss is . . . a sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar. The idea occurred to me there on the site. Take a knife and cut open the earth, and with time the grass would heal it. As if you cut open the rock and polished it.

—American Institute of Architects Journal 72 (May 1983):151

Useful discussions of the memorial can be found in Jan C. Scruggs and Joel L. Swerdlow, To Heal a Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1992), and in an article by Charles L. Griswold in Critical Inquiry 12 (1986): 688–719. (Griswold’s article is reprinted in Critical Issues in Public Art, ed. Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster, rev. ed., 1998.) Somehow, no discussion does much to account for the experience of visiting the memorial.

Billy Collins

The Names (p. 1294)

When we typed “Billy Collins” into Google, among the things that came up was a short piece he wrote in 2002, “Poetry and Tragedy,” in which Collins, then the nation’s poet laureate, offered a two-paragraph comment about poetry and the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Here is the second half of the second paragraph:

It’s not that poets should feel a responsibility to write about this calamity. All poetry stands in opposition to it. Pick a poem, any poem, from an anthology and you will see that it is speaking for life and therefore against the taking of it. A poem about mushrooms or about a walk with a dog is a more eloquent response to Sept. 11 than a poem that announces that wholesale murder is a bad thing.

That’s worth discussing in class. Sooner or later one wants to talk in some detail about this particular poem, “The Names,” and one way of getting into it is by asking students to think of names or naming in association with disaster or tragedy. Some of them will mention Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, where the names of the Americans who died are inscribed not in alphabetic order.
(Collins’s principle) but in the order of the dates of their deaths. Discussion may include comment on names on tombstones, inscribed in an effort to give the deceased a continuing life in the mind of the viewer. And in a discussion of names it is conceivable that if you are blessed with exceptionally well-prepared students someone may mention Yeats’s “Easter 1916,” which concludes thus:

I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Yeats here is working in the tradition of the epic catalog, naming the heroes. (Epic catalogs are not limited to heroes: they include names of beautiful people, ships, places, even—in Paradise Lost—fallen angels.) The inventory is normally presented in order to honor its subject, to give new life to it, to remind hearers that these people or things or traits must never be forgotten. The catalog, often presented in ritualistic or incantatory manner, summons up things that have vanished and thus gives them new life. Some students may be familiar with genealogical passages in the Bible, for instance, the descendants of Noah in Genesis 5:1–30, or the descendants of Adam down to the descendants of Saul (I Chronicles 1:1–9), where, again, the act of naming affirms the importance of persons and gives them new life in the minds of the hearers. (The New Testament also includes genealogies, naming the ancestors of Jesus [Matthew 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38], but here the primary purpose is to establish Jesus as the prophesied Messiah.)

Collins, working in the epic tradition, celebrates the individuals. The poem begins with the sleepless poet, “unhelped by any breeze” (no quickening breeze animates his mind, apparently there is no inspiration in the literal sense of “breathing into”), yet the “soft rain” stimulates thought of the names, and perhaps it is not fanciful to see a connection between the “soft rain” and new life. Collins begins with five names, in alphabetic order, then comments a bit (lines 7–14), mentioning “Twenty-six willows,” at which point we can guess that the twenty-six willows will stand for the letters of the alphabet. Why willows? Because the willow, especially the weeping willow, is an emblem of mourning: during the Babylonian exile the Jews wept for Zion and they hung their harps on willows (Psalms 137:1–2); rejected by her husband, Desdemona sings a song about a rejected woman (“The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree, / Sing all a green willow,” Othello 4.3); a somewhat comic version of the suicidal lover appears in The Mikado (“On a tree by a willow a little tomtit / Sang ‘Willow, titwillow, titwillow’”). The willow is a common motif on nineteenth-century tombstones. But from this motif of nature, Collins then moves to walking “barefoot / Among thousands of flowers” (11–12), and it is easy enough to see the flowers as emblems of rebirth.

He then moves to the next five letters of the alphabet, F, G, H, I, and J, cleverly connecting this list with his previous reference to flowers by calling up a victim named Fiori, Italian for “flower.” After this second group of five names, he again comments (17–23), sometimes speaking figuratively (“Names written in the air”) and sometimes literally (“A name under a photograph taped to a mailbox”). Then come what at first might seem to be five more names, K, L, M, N, and O, but after a very brief comment we get six additional names, beginning with P, Q, R, S, T, and U, providing some variety, assuring us that the poem is not proceeding mechanically by fives. And then another comment, again part metaphoric (“Names written in the pale sky”) and part literal (“Names silent in stone / Or cried out behind a door”).

The final group of five names includes X, but probably there was no victim whose name began with X, so Collins effectively solves the problem by saying “let X stand, if it can, for the ones unfound.” The poem ends by at first taking us out into green nature—a world of fields and birds—but that might seem too glib an ending so Collins takes us from nature to

the dim warehouse of memory.

So many names, there is barely room on the walls of the heart.

That is, Collins returns us to the victims themselves (“so many names”) and to ourselves, the living, who in “the walls of the heart” give the victims whatever life they retain.

In our fourth question we invite students to think about defining “sentimentality,” and to discuss Collins’s poem in the context of their definition. We suggest that when you assign the poem, you might ask students to come to class prepared to discuss question 4.

You might dare to ask the students, is “The Names” truly a moving and effective poem, or does it possess power primarily because of its connection to a terrible and tragic event?

In an interview published in the New York Times, December 19, 1999, Collins emphasizes his keen attention, as he constructs his poems, to the responses of the reader. “As I’m writing,” he says “I’m always reader conscious. . . . I have one reader in mind, someone who is in the room with me, and who I’m talking to, and I want to make sure I don’t talk too fast, or too glibly. Usually I try to create a hospitable tone at the beginning of a poem. Stepping from the title to the first lines is like stepping into a canoe. A lot of things can go wrong.” This implies one of Collins’s strengths, but perhaps also one of his limitations. Sometimes he seems less to be expressing and exploring—really exploring—an issue or theme than presenting it in a form that will surprise, disconcert, or ruffle the reader a little but not a lot. Collins is clever and sincere, and that does not always lead to complex poems.

The poet-critic Jeredith Merrin, in “Art Over Easy,” The Southern Review 38:1 (Winter 2002): 202–214, has sharply criticized Collins as superficial and unchallenging. She concludes he “is not without some rhetorical skills, charm, and wit. . . . But what he finally offers is disappointingly monotonous and slight.”
Descriptions of old people, and especially of poor old people, are likely to be sentimental, portraying them as (a) too sweet, and (b) too weak, in an attempt to create a warm glow in the reader, but we think that Brooks stops short of getting us into this swamp. Her old people are poor (therefore doubly weak, i.e., aged and financially insecure), and indeed they are “Mostly Good,” but “mostly” of course says that they are not entirely good. We can imagine that they have their irritable moments, states of mind unthinkable in (say) Mother’s Day verse.

Brooks says (twice) that they engage in “remembering.” She doesn’t tell us explicitly what they remember, but “twinklings” suggests remembered pleasures, and “twinges” suggests remembered pains. Presumably the pleasures outweigh the pains, because even though their food and their lodgings are humble (“beans,” “their rented back room”), they are surrounded with objects of their earlier years—“beads and receipts and dolls and clothes, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.” The final word sounds terribly old-fashioned to us—we see ancient lamp shades and tablecloths with fringes, and of course it also suggests the outer extremes, and relatively fragile substances, almost an objective correlative for the old people, who are (so to speak) on the fringe of existence. Notice, too, that the last sentence dwindles from poetry into prose, more or less. True, the final word does rhyme with “twinges,” but the line itself goes on and on, whereas all the earlier lines are relatively short. Further, it uses and four times, giving it a somewhat sprawling tone, conveying a life that lacks sharp emphases.

To get back to our first point, sentimentality. We have had good discussions in class centered on this topic. We ask students to define the term and then to offer their opinions on whether sentimentality in literature is a good or a bad thing—and why.

The Academy of American Poets Web site includes an entry for Brooks, with biography, bibliography, and a list of online resources. Visit the search tool at www.poets.org/poets.

DOROTHY PARKER

Résumé (p. 1297)

First, we want to say that we include this poem with reservations. It is possible that a close friend or a family member of someone in class has committed suicide, and a flippant discussion of the poem will be extremely distressing.

In our second question, in the text, we ask if the poem offers “insight into an interesting state of feeling, or perhaps . . . a view worth thinking about.” In a way, Parker’s quip has a connection with a comment by Hemingway, in a letter:
The real reason for not committing suicide is because you always know how swell life gets again after the hell is over.

And, in a different way, with Nietzsche:

It is always consoling to think of suicide: In that way, one gets through many a bad night.

And here is another famous passage, this one by Soren Kierkegaard, that can be used in conjunction with Parker:

What Philosophy says is true, “Life must be understood backwards.” But we should not forget another saying: “Life must be lived forwards.” The more one thinks about this, the more one sees that life in our temporal existence can never become entirely intelligible because at no moment are we sufficiently balanced so that we can take the backward-looking view.

One famous passage that we would not quote—because of the possibility mentioned at the beginning of this discussion—is Aristotle’s remark, in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, that to kill oneself as an escape from “bodily or mental anguish is the deed of a coward.”

In short, we think that Parker’s poem can lead to a serious discussion of larger issues. One might also ask students if they think it is inappropriate to write about suicide the way Parker does.
Chapter 28

Law and Disorder

Martin Luther King Jr.

Letter from Birmingham Jail (p. 1301)

King’s letter was prompted by a letter (printed in the text) by eight Birmingham clergymen. His letter is unusually long (“Never before have I written so long a letter”) because he was jailed at the time and thus was unable to speak to audiences face to face.

King goes to some length to show that his work is thoroughly in the American (and Judeo-Christian) tradition. That is, although he rebuts the letter of the eight clergymen, he represents himself not as a radical, nor in any way un-American (and of course not as an opponent of the Judeo-Christian tradition), but as one who shares the culture of his audience. Thus, although he rejects the clergymen’s view that he is impatient, he begins by acknowledging their decency. They are, he says, “men of genuine goodwill”—and in saying this King thereby implies that he too is a man of goodwill. Moreover, King’s real audience is not only the eight clergymen but all readers of his letter, who are assumed to be decent folk. Notice, too, in his insistence that he is speaking on an issue that involves all Americans, his statement (paragraph 4) that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” But his chief strategy early in the letter is to identify himself with Paul (paragraph 3), and thus to guide his mainly Christian audience to see him as carrying on a tradition that they cherish. Notice also the references to Niebuhr, Buber (a Jew), and Jesus.

It is usual, and correct, to say that King is a master of the appeal to emotion. This essay reveals such mastery, as in paragraph 14, when he quotes a five-year-old boy: “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?” And because King is really addressing not so much the eight clergymen as a sympathetic audience that probably needs encouragement to persist rather than reasons to change their beliefs, an emotional (inspirational) appeal is appropriate. But the essay is also rich in lucid exposition and careful analysis, as in paragraph 6 (on the four steps of a nonviolent campaign) and paragraphs 15–16 (comparing just and unjust laws).

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. Think of some injustice that you know something about, and jot down the facts as objectively as possible. Arrange them so that they form an outline.
Then, using these facts as a framework, write an essay (possibly in the form of a letter to a specific audience) of about 500 words, presenting your case in a manner somewhat analogous to King’s. For example, don’t hesitate to make comparisons with biblical, literary, or recent historical material, or to use personal experiences, or to use any other persuasive devices you wish, including appeals to the emotions. Hand in the objective list along with the essay.

2. If some example of nonviolent direct action has recently been in the news, such as actions by persons opposed to nuclear power plants, write an essay evaluating the tactics and their effectiveness in dealing with the issue.

ELIZABETH BISHOP

The Hanging of the Mouse (p. 1313)

Most students will be familiar with animal fables, especially perhaps those of Aesop (we give “The Ant and the Grasshopper” and “The North Wind and the Sun” in earlier chapters), the semi-legendary Greek slave of the sixth century B.C. They may never have read any of the fables, but they will have heard of such memorable characters as the ant and the grasshopper, the tortoise and the hare, and the dog in the manger. They will know, too, that such fables are characterized by (1) animals who have human traits, especially human weaknesses, and by (2) a moral, usually explicitly set forth at the end.

Bishop’s little animal story is somewhat different. True, the animals reveal human foibles, but there is no explicit authorial moral statement at the end. The narrator apparently merely reports an episode and lets it go at that. In fact, when we read Bishop’s story we probably make a pretty clear mental distinction between the narrator who tells the story and the author who wrote it. The narrator earnestly reports what he or she (let’s say “he,” for the sake of simplicity) sees. Thus, “a vague feeling of celebration”—there will be a public hanging!—fills the air on the night preceding the event. The animals decide “several times” (i.e., they are an irresolute, irrational bunch, unaware of their motives and purposes) to “wander about the town,” and then, since it is late, this mindless crew decides it is “only sensible” (we always assure ourselves that our actions are “sensible”) to arrive at the square in time for the hanging.

In short, despite some sophisticated vocabulary such as “lassitude” in the first paragraph, the narrator is of the type customarily called an innocent eye, or a naive narrator, or an unreliable narrator. This narrator is impressed, for instance, by the brisk military behavior of the “two enormous brown beetles in the traditional picturesque armor of an earlier day,” and because he is impressed by their precision he is faintly annoyed by the mouse, whose inept behavior somewhat spoils the otherwise impressive show.

They came on to the square through the small black door and marched between the lines of soldiers standing at attention: straight ahead, to the right,
around two sides of the hollow square, to the left, and out into the middle where the gallows stood. Before each turn the beetle on the right glanced quickly at the beetle on the left; their traditional long, long antennae swerved sharply in the direction they were to turn and they did it to perfection. The mouse, of course, who had had no military training and who, at the moment, was crying so hard he could scarcely see where he was going, rather spoiled the precision and snap of the beetles.

If in class you read this passage aloud and invite students to give their ideas of what sort of person the narrator is, you probably will find that they see the very considerable limitations of the narrator. And you can then ask them if they think the narrator and the author hold identical views. Or you may want to read the next two sentences:

At each corner [the mouse] fell slightly forward, and when he was jerked in the right direction his feet became tangled together. The beetles, however, without even looking at him, each time lifted him quickly into the air for a second until his feet were untangled.

The professionalism of the beetles can hardly be questioned, but surely their efficiency (and the implied indifference to the wretched mouse) appalls the reader, though not the narrator. Incidentally, in the penultimate paragraph the narrator again notices the mouse’s feet: when the trap is sprung, the mouse’s “feet flew up and curled into little balls like young fern-plants.” The narrator’s almost aesthetic perception of physical appearances is keen, making the imperception of brutality the more heartbreaking.

Thus far Bishop has been almost Swiftian in her irony, though Swift (who said his life was characterized by *saeva indignatio*, “savage indignation”) is rarely so restrained. In her final paragraph Bishop becomes a little more direct (can one say “obvious”?), when she writes that the cat, concerned that the squirming and shrieking kitten may have experienced too much, nevertheless takes comfort in the thought the kitten has learned “an excellent moral lesson.” Exactly what, you may want to ask students, is the lesson? That crime does not pay? Bishop is careful not to tell us what the mouse’s offense is. No one in the crowd, apparently, knows what the condemned mouse has done that merits death, and certainly the impressively costumed frog who in an impressive voice reads the charge from an impressive-looking scroll gives no clue as to what the offender did that merits execution. In short, the “excellent moral lesson” that concludes a fable here is unstated, though perhaps we find ourselves saying that the story is about human blindness.

We hope that students will see in Bishop’s verbal performance witty touches (the beetles in picturesque armor, the raccoon as the masked executioner), keen perception of detail (again, those tiny mouse feet curling “into little balls like young fern-plants”), and implicit in this unemotional voice the author’s awareness of the horror.
When Thomas More called his book *Utopia*, he punned on the Greek “good place” (*eu topos*) and on “no place” (*ou topos*). Like all the rest of us, he knew that the fully happy society is “no place,” if only because accidents, disease, and death are part of life. Le Guin’s narrator gives us a fairly detailed description of an imagined happy society—Omelas is “bright-towered by the sea,” the old celebrants in the festival wear “long stiff robes of mauve and grey,” and the boys and girls are “naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms”—but the narrator also is vague about many things that we would dearly like to know. For instance, although the narrator tells us that there is no king and there are no slaves in Omelas, the narrator also makes a confession, “I do not know the rules and laws of their society. . . .” The story includes other confessions of ignorance, and at one point the narrator, aware that the narrative thus far has been unconvincing and fairy-tale like (e.g., those bright towers by the sea), almost gives up, and urges the reader to imagine Omelas “as your own fancy bids.”

Doubtless Le Guin is vague about important matters because she—like everyone else—cannot depict a convincing Utopia that can withstand scrutiny. But she is also vague for a more important reason: she is not earnestly writing a Utopian tale like, say, Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. Rather, she is raising a moral problem, or, more exactly, she is amplifying a problem that William James had raised. Omelas need not be a convincing presentation of the perfectly happy life, and indeed the narrator makes Omelas most convincing when he (or she?) prefaches the information about the suffering child with these words: “Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.” When we learn about the wretched child, Omelas becomes much more believable, for we are all aware that much of our happiness in fact depends on the suffering of others. These others may be the exploited workers whose painful labor allows us to eat and dress well; they may be the sick, whose ills make some physicians prosperous; they may be the aggrieved, whose lawsuits pay the college tuition for the children of lawyers; they may even be the suffering animals whose pain in medical laboratories may help to alleviate our own pain. In short, whoever we are, some of our happiness depends on the misfortunes of other creatures—and at times we are aware of this fact. Le Guin’s happy city now becomes easily understandable: it is an image not of an ideal world but of our world.

Where a parable usually evokes a fairly clear moral and leaves us in little doubt about how we ought to act, this story leaves us puzzled. It heightens our awareness of a cruel fact of society, but it does not tell us how we can reform our society. Put another way, where does one go when one walks away from Omelas? Can we really envisage the possibility of a happy life that is not in any way based on suffering and injustice somewhere? Is the story therefore pointless, mere fantasy, mere escapism? Presumably Le Guin is simply seeking to make us think, so
that we will learn to act in ways that minimize the suffering of others. It is inconceivable that life will ever be Utopian, but it is not inconceivable that injustice and human suffering may be reduced.

Additional Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. How convincing does the narrator think the picture of Omelas is? Why do you suppose that Le Guin did not offer details about the laws of the land? Does Omelas become more convincing when we learn about the child?
2. Characterize the narrator.
3. What is the point of walking away from Omelas? Can the walker go to a better society? If not, is the story pointless? (Put another way, the story is a fantasy, but is it also escapist fiction?)
4. If you were ever greatly bothered by an experience in which you realized that your happiness depended at least in part on the unhappiness of another, describe the situation, your response, and your present feelings.

WILLIAM FAULKNER

Barn Burning (p. 1320)

Against his vision of the ideals of the Confederacy, embodied in Major de Spain and Colonel Sartoris in much of Faulkner's writing, Faulkner sets his vision of a more widely held ideal—cunning and self-centeredness—embodied in the Snopes family. (Flem Snopes, the older brother in “Barn Burning,” is a major character in The Town, The Mansion, and The Hamlet; Abner Snopes, the father in “Barn Burning,” is a lesser character in The Unvanquished and in The Hamlet. But the boy, Colonel Sartoris Snopes, does not appear in the novels.)

It would be wrong, however, to see the Snopes family—and especially, here, Abner Snopes—as merely contemptible. Abner's single-mindedness, however unlovely and destructive, gives him a hero's aspect, for example, when he walks resolutely on toward the great house and refuses to deviate by even a single step that would enable him to avoid stepping in the horse dung. Abner Snopes has, we might say, something of the air of the tragic hero who, like Job confronted with what seems to be an assault on his integrity, will maintain his own ways even before God. He has, in Faulkner's words, a “ferocious conviction in the rightness of his own actions.” Or, to quote again, a deep sense of the importance of “the preservation of integrity, else breath were not worth the breathing.” This second passage, by the way, comes in the discussion of “the niggard blaze” that is part of Snopes's way of life. Coupled with the burning barns, it suggests that Snopes is a Promethean figure—not the Prometheus of the ancients, who gave fire to man out of pity, but a romantic Prometheus figure who sets his blaze in defiance of authority.

As we read “Barn Burning” we are reminded of Alfred North Whitehead's comment that tragedy shows us “the remorseless working of things,” an action
that cannot be stopped, partly because the hero, insisting on asserting himself, is determined that it shall not be stopped. We can scarcely like Snopes, but we can scarcely fail to admire (especially in the older sense of “wonder at,” “be awed by”) him. Indeed, if we compare Major de Spain’s justifiable but somewhat fussy anger over the rug (“You must realize you have ruined that rug”) with Snopes’s smoldering rage at any limitations imposed on him, we may feel that Snopes is by far the more vital figure. One notes, too, and cannot dismiss, Snopes’s charge that Major de Spain’s big white house has been built out of “sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain’t white enough to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it.” We may feel that in large measure Snopes’s ruthlessness proceeds from a sense of social inferiority, but we can scarcely deny that he offers a telling criticism of his social superiors.

Finally, a few words about Sarty, the boy. He too is a sort of hero, moved by the most painful kind of conflict—not good with evil but good with good, for he must choose between his sense of decency and his sense of loyalty to the family.

In his entry on “Barn Burning” in A William Faulkner Encyclopedia (1999), Charles A. Peek surveys the range of critical commentary. As he indicates, “Barn Burning” has usually been described as a story about Sarty’s “coming of age.” “Readings of this sort,” says Peek, “emphasize the psychological and mythical implications of Sarty’s conflict with his father. They tend to accept Sarty’s final rebellion as ethically correct and to emphasize the evil—even demonic—aspects of Ab’s behavior.” More recent critics, however, have taken a different approach. As Peek explains, “they have sought to ‘decenter’ the story by emphasizing the social and economic sources of Ab’s anger”:

While not excusing Ab’s behavior, these readings tend to question the ideological sophistication and ethical correctness of Sarty’s rebellion . . . . Critics interested in centering the story have also emphasized how highly the narrator’s negative rendering of Ab Snopes is colored by Sarty’s anxiety and fear. (pp. 28–29)


TOBIAS WOLFF

Powder (p. 1332)

The first paragraph provides the necessary background. The parents are separated, the mother is sensible, and the father is irresponsible—but even at this stage one may wonder if perhaps there isn’t something especially engaging about a father who sneaks his young son into a nightclub in order to see Thelonious Monk.
The father’s irresponsibility is underlined in the second paragraph. He promised to get the boy home to the mother for Christmas Eve dinner, but “he observed some quality [in the snow] that made it necessary for us to get in one last run. We got in several last runs.” The father tries to be reassuring at the diner, but the boy, a worrier, is distressed. He’s a strange kid, as he himself knows, someone who bothers “teachers for homework assignments far ahead of their due dates” so he can make up schedules. But with a father like his, and a mother who clearly is not sympathetic to the father’s adventurous (or childish?) enthusiasms, who can blame the boy? And though the boy in his orderliness is his mother’s son, the last paragraph of the story validates the father. Although the father is “bankrupt of honor,” the ride (or the boy’s experience of the ride) is something so special that it is “impossible to describe. Except maybe to say this: if you haven’t driven fresh powder, you haven’t driven.”

One detail may escape some readers. When the father makes a phone call from the diner, the boy quite reasonably thinks the father must be calling the mother, but this man-child in fact is calling the police, with some sort of bull that causes the officer to drive away and thus gives the father a chance to put aside the barrier and drive home. The evidence? After making the call, the father stares through the window, down the road, and says, “Come on, come on.” (He is impatiently waiting for the result of his call.) As soon as the trooper’s car passes the window, the father hurries the boy out of the diner. When the boy asks the father where the policeman may have gone, the father ignores the question.

“Bankrupt of honor,” yes, and one can easily imagine the impossibility of being married to such a man. But the father desperately wants to keep the family intact, and he wants to get the boy home for dinner with the mother in an effort to buy “a little more time,” though we are not surprised to learn that the mother decides “to make the split final.”

**Anonymous**

*Birmingham Jail* (p. 1335)

Many students are familiar with this song, and we have usually been able to recruit a student to sing it in class. The song reads well on the page, but it is better when sung, even when sung by a singer of no special talent, so we urge you to ask your students, the day before you assign the piece, if any of them will sing it—with a guitar—at the next meeting.

All three questions in the text (the first is about variants, the second is about the lack of explanation for the singer’s plight, and the third is about why sad songs please the singer and the hearer) can lead to lively discussions in the classroom, but the third seems to us to be the most important, and the one that can get the widest variety of responses.

We mention in our headnote that the poem enacts the Crucifixion in a late-nineteenth century guise, and to make certain that students see this connection—since they may not read the headnote—in a footnote we cite some Gospel references. Perhaps the crucial lines in the poem are 19–20: “All the same’s the luck we prove, / Though the midmost hangs for love.” In the New Testament, the Greek words for love are agape and philia—not eros, which signifies sexual love. Jesus exhorts his hearers to love one another and to love God. God’s love for fallen humankind motivated the Incarnation. In Paul’s words, “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while yet we were sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8), i.e., died for our benefit. (The New Revised Standard Version is: “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”) The believer, Paul teaches, is moved not by mere human love but by Christ’s gift of love. Having said this, we quickly add that Paul also bases his concept of love in several passages in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, in Galations 5:14 Paul says: “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” i.e., Paul quotes Leviticus 19:18: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Housman’s poem works perfectly well as a tour de force, a transmutation of the story of the Crucifixion into a hanging in a rural English setting. The cross has become a gallows, but commentary on the Bible often called the cross a tree. Thus, whereas Adam and Eve brought sin into the world by eating fruit from the tree of knowledge, Christ was said to have brought the possibility of salvation by dying on the tree of the cross. Notice, too, in addition to the presence of two thieves, the anger of the mob, which reminds us of the scorn and anger that the Gospels speak of:

Now, you see, they hang me high,
And the people passing by
Stop to shake their fists and curse;
So 'tis come from ill to worse.

It is also worth calling attention to the wry line, “Had I but left ill alone,” which plays on the familiar line about leaving well alone, i.e., the advice not to try to alter a state of affairs that is already satisfactory. (Cf. the commonplace, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”) But what Jesus did, when he saw ill, was to mend it by the sacrifice on the cross.

Surely, then, the poem is about the Crucifixion. But given our knowledge of Housman’s life, it seems reasonable to say that it is also about Housman’s own fate, or at least a fate that he imagines, given his sexual orientation, his special kind of love. As we will see in the third and fourth poems that we reprint, Housman regards homosexuality as inborn, genetic, not something
that one chooses but something comparable to the color of one's hair (the third poem) or even something that is the result of God's "bedevilment" (line 30 in "The laws of God, the laws of man"). For Housman, to be a homosexual was to be in an "ill" situation—not sick, as in the old psychoanalytic view of homosexuality, but something more like cursed, marked, bedeviled by God. The man who is a homosexual has had a bad break, bad luck—"All the same's the luck we prove, / Though the midmost hang for love." ("The luck we prove" is not easily paraphrased, but perhaps "the bad situation that we endure" comes near to the meaning.) But, again, all of this is presented within the form of a poem about Christ, with the evident ironies: Christ taught love but was scorned; he brought new life to mankind, but only at the cost of his own life.

**A. E. Housman**

*Oh who is that young sinner* (p. 1338)

In our headnote we comment on the link between this poem and the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde. As we said in commenting on "The Carpenter's Son," with its talk of "luck" (line 19), Housman sees homosexuality as a matter of bad luck—this was long before the days of Gay Pride—or even as a matter of God's "bedevilment" (line 16 in "The laws of God," though in fact Housman was an atheist from his early years). The form is a Kiplingesque ballad—"Danny Deever" (1890) comes to mind, so we quote the first four lines.

"What are the bugles blowin' for?" said Files-on-Parade.
"To turn you out, to turn you out," the Color-Sergeant said.
"What makes you look so white, so white?" said Files-on-Parade.
"I'm dreadin' what I've got to watch," the Color-Sergeant said.

What is the offense of this prisoner (Wilde, and but for the grace of God, Housman)? "The color of his hair," i.e., some innate quality, something he cannot have wished for or created for himself. Who created him thus? Well, the last line of the poem is, "He can curse the God that made him for the colour of his hair." Few people in Housman's day would have agreed that homosexuality was inborn, and indeed the causes of homosexuality are still hotly debated today, but Housman unambiguously says that it is not a matter of choice. It is something imposed on one.

It's interesting to discuss the speaker of the poem with students. The first line is spoken by some sort of innocent eye, "Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?" That is, the speaker sees a handcuffed man, and, law-abiding fellow that the speaker is, he assumes the man must be guilty of something or other, hence the prisoner is a sinner, but the speaker's tone is not
especially hostile. Between the fourth and fifth lines he has learned what the offense is, and in the fifth line he says, “Oh they’re taking him to prison for the colour of his hair.”

And now, at the start of the second stanza, the reader is in for something of a shock:

'Tis shame to human nature, such a head of hair as his;
In the good old time 'twas hanging for the colour that it is;
Though hanging isn’t bad enough and flaying would be fair
For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair.

That is, once the speaker has learned what the offense is—presumably in the gap between the first and second stanzas—he expresses the horror and rage typical of the time, not horror and rage at the injustice of imprisoning a man for “the colour of his hair,” but horror and rage at a man who dares to have such a head of hair, as though there were an alternative. There are alternatives, dying it or keeping his hat pulled down (i.e., remaining in the closet, from Housman’s point of view), but society will have none of this: they have “pulled the beggar’s hat off for the world to see and stare” (line 11). And now, having exposed the sinner, society righteously is “haling him to justice for the colour of his hair.” Notice, by the way, the phrase “nameless and abominable” in line 8. Wilde’s lover, Alfred Douglas, in “Two Loves” writes, “I am the love that dare not speak its name”; and Leviticus 18:20 says that homosexual activity is described as an “abomination.”

But if the speaker of the two central stanzas represents the mob of the day, the final stanza is somewhat ambivalent. The first three lines (beginning “Now 'tis oakum for his fingers and the treadmill for his feet”) can be spoken with grim satisfaction, with the sense that the sinner is getting his just deserts, or they can be said with just a hint of pity entering into the words, but the last line almost takes us into the mind not of the man who in the first line wondered who the sinner was, or the man (or mob) who has been expressing indignation, but into the mind of the wretched prisoner:

He can curse the God that made him for the colour of his hair.

That is (we labor the point, but we think it is important), here God is blamed, scarcely the view that the hostile observer, or the indignant crowd, would take. The next poem will also connect God with an individual who has the bad luck to be different from others.

Bibliographic note: Christopher Ricks, “A. E. Housman and ‘the colour of his hair,’” Essays in Criticism 47 (1997): 240–255, has an interesting piece in which he points out that Locke, Macaulay, and Sir James Fitzjames Stephen in various treatises on tolerance gave as an analogy to discrimination against certain groups (e.g., Jews) the absurdity of discriminating against people with hair of a certain color. The essay displays Ricks’s customary erudition and elegance, but it does not directly comment on the poem.
In *Black Poets of the United States* (1962, 1973), the critic Jean Wagner states that McKay’s “If We Must Die,” though written in the specific context of American racism, has proven inspirational to people engaged in struggle and protest throughout the world: “Along with the will to resistance of black Americans that it expresses, it voices also the will of oppressed people of every age who, whatever their race and wherever their region, are fighting with their backs against the wall to win their freedom.”

This point has been developed well by James R. Keller, in “‘A Chafing Savage, Down the Decent Street’: The Politics of Compromise in Claude McKay’s Protest Sonnets,” *African American Review* 28:3 (Fall 1994). “McKay’s subversive efforts,” Keller says,

to expose America’s hypocrisy in international affairs were appropriated and contained in ways the poet could not have anticipated. I refer specifically to the public reading of his poem “If We Must Die” by Winston Churchill during the war effort against Germany and Japan. . . . This 1919 poem in which McKay urged oppressed African Americans to rise up against their white persecutors, was employed two decades later by the dominant culture to rally support and, thereby, effect its own salvation in a war that the poet regarded as a blatant manifestation of ideological fraud.

Keller notes, however, that McKay invites this misuse by his own exploitation of Henry V’s famous “St. Crispin Day” speech (4.2.18–67). In Shakespeare’s play, the embattled and worn English troops, hopelessly outnumbered by the French, are urged to fight bravely in the seemingly hopeless battle for nothing but dignity and honor. Their deaths are almost assured. McKay’s reference to his “kinsmen . . . far outnumbered” is reminiscent of King Henry’s promise that all men who fight heroically on St. Crispin Day will be his “brothers.” That Henry V was a rallying point of English nationalism in their fight against Germany during World War II is evidenced by [Laurence] Olivier’s film version, which was released in 1941 and which emphasized the unity of the British people.

There may be other echoes as well. “Inglorious” reminds us of, for example, the use of this somewhat unusual word in Andrew Marvell’s “Horatian Ode”:

So restless Cromwell could not cease
In the inglorious arts of peace,
But through adventurous war
Urged his active star. (lines 9–12)
And perhaps, too, the use of the word in Thomas Gray’s well-known “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”:

Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast  
The little tyrant of his fields withstood,  
Some mute inglorious Milton, here may rest,  
Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country’s blood. (lines 57–60)

McKay is emphasizing that if death is the inescapable fate that “we” must face, then let this death be a noble one, not a scene of brute carnage.

We are not sure, but McKay may, further, be suggesting that the noble death of the men who fight back might possess the sacred splendor of the death of Jesus. Timothy Dwight (1752–1817) begins his poem “Love to the Church”:

I love thy kingdom, Lord,  
The house of thine abode,  
The church our blest Redeemer saved  
With his own precious blood.

This poem (there are many poems, hymns, and sermons where the phrase also is used) is included in The Yale Book of American Verse, published in 1912, a book that McKay might well have been familiar with.

There is at least one other possible or probable secular source (though with a religious grounding) for this same phrase—Whitman’s prayer to the earth in his Civil War poem “Pensive on Her Dead Gazing, I Heard the Mother of All”:

My dead absorb—my young men’s beautiful bodies absorb—and their precious, precious, precious blood;  
Which holding in trust for me, faithfully back again give me, many a year hence,  
In unseen essence and odor of surface and grass, centuries hence;  
In blowing airs from the fields, back again give me my darlings—give my immortal heroes. (lines 11–14)

The year 1919 was a horrifying one for American race relations; more than seventy African Americans were lynched that year, and there were twenty-five race riots, many of them during the hot, oppressive summer months, which, because of the violence, became known as “the Red Summer.” “If We Must Die” was one of a number of sonnets dealing with racial violence that McKay published in the July 1919 issue of the Liberator, a radical magazine founded by Max Eastman and his sister Crystal in March 1918 in order to publish John Reed’s dispatches about the Russian Revolution, which Reed later collected under the title Ten Days That Shook the World.
The worst of the race riots occurred in Chicago in July 1919, when violence broke out between blacks and whites at a segregated beach. Black men and women were attacked and terrorized by white mobs, and blacks in turn battled with both whites and the police and state militia. By the time the riot had ended, after about a week of bloodshed and destruction, forty persons had been killed and hundreds more injured, and most of these casualties were African Americans.


The tone of the poem is desperate and defiant but doom-ridden. The speaker calls on his comrades to be strong, courageous; though they may be hunted down like animals, they will resist and fight back, to their last breath. Inspiring, true, in its historical context, and in the context of later episodes of strife and struggle. But the words themselves are, ultimately, hopeless in their message, and the claim that the other side will feel bound to honor the slain is unduly affirmative.

McKay’s bitter, blazing absorption in brave but futile violence reminds us of the suicidal grandeur in Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade”:

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley’d and thunder’d;
Storm’d at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of hell
Rode the six hundred. (lines 18–26)

**JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA**

*Cloudy Day* (p. 1340)

“Cloudy Day” was first published in Baca’s *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (1979) and then reprinted in *Immigrants in Our Own Land and Selected Early Poems* (1990).

Born in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1952, Baca led a life of crime and drug-taking until he was arrested in his late teens and imprisoned for selling drugs. Illiterate when he entered the maximum-security system, he learned to read and discovered a deep interest in poetry and a vocation as a writer and teacher. Reading and writing saved him; as he explains in *Working in the Dark: Reflections on a Poet in the Barrio* (1992), “I was becoming what society told me I was—prone to drugs and alcohol, unable to control my own life, needing a master to order my affairs, unworthy of opportunity and justice—a senseless beast of labor. I drugged
my pain and drowned my self-hatred in drink, seeking oblivion. I had no future, no plans, no destiny, no regard for my life; I was free falling into bottomless despair. Death seemed the only way out.”

After his release from prison, Baca attended the University of New Mexico, receiving his B.A. in 1984. He has since conducted writing classes and led workshops for children and adults, and taught courses in grammar schools, high schools, colleges and universities, housing projects, and prisons. In A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet (2001), Baca states: “I am a witness, not a victim. . . . My role as a witness is to give voice to the voiceless, hope to the hopeless, of which I am one.”

Baca has won many prizes and awards and published a number of books, including (in addition to those cited above) Black Mesa Poems (1989) and Healing Earthquakes: A Love Story in Poems (2001).

Asked in an interview, published in Callaloo 17:1 (1994), about the origin of “Cloudy Day,” Baca was terse:

Speaker: Tell us when you wrote this [poem].
JSB: Well, I remember I was standing outside, I guess it was about 1977 or '78, something like that.
Speaker: You were in prison?
JSB: Yeah, yeah.
Speaker: Was that written for a person?
JSB: It was written for me.

There are some good questions about style and structure that you can direct to the class. We have invited students to consider, for example, the changes in effect that would result from starting the poem with lines 24–29. Why is the memory placed in the middle and not at the beginning, where it might seem naturally to belong? And why the use of present tense (“It is windy today . . .”)?

It is interesting also to discuss the impact of the “wind,” and the way it causes the speaker to feel powerful enough to break the guardtower. Why is that?

Baca’s poem might be understood, in part at least, as a tough-minded response (or, better, rebuttal) to the imagery of cooling and revivifying breezes that appear so often in the Romantic poets, as in, for example, this passage from Wordsworth:

I wander’d lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils,
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. . . .

Or this, from Wordsworth’s The Recluse, Part First, Home at Grasmere:

He thought of clouds
That sail on winds: of breezes that delight

To play on water, or in endless chase
Pursue each other through the yielding plain
Of grass or corn, over and through and through,
In billow after billow, evermore
Disporting—nor unmindful was the boy
Of sunbeams, shadows, butterflies and birds;
Of fluttering sylphs and softly-gliding Fays,
Genii, and winged angels that are Lords
Without restraint of all which they behold. (lines 24–35)

Baca is working with and against this tradition, placing it in a harsh con-
text, though in the final analysis his poem, too, ends in a scene of renewal and
empowerment—though one marked, to be sure, by the conditional “as if”: “I
feel as if I have everything, everything.”

The emergence of “you” near the end is puzzling. It feels abrupt—which may
be part of the effect that Baca intends. And it feels vague, too, since we know
nothing about the “you” being addressed. Yet this also may be in line with Baca’s
aims; if indeed the poem is one he wrote for himself, the significance of the “you”
is the very personal (and shielded) connection between that person and Baca.

We have on occasion invited students to interpret this poem in the light of
one of the following two quotations:

The human spirit will endure sickness; but a broken spirit—who can bear?
Proverbs 18:14

Out of life’s school of war.—What does not destroy me, makes me stronger.
Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), in Twilight of the Idols, “Maxims and
Arrows,” section 8 (prepared for publication 1888, published 1889)

Students interested in the subject of literature written by prisoners might
consult The Light from Another Country: Poetry from American Prisons,
Joseph Bruchac (1984), and Prison Writing in Twentieth-Century America: A
Collection of Poems, Stories, Essays (1998). For historical background and con-
text: H. Bruce Franklin, The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the

CAROLYN FORCHÉ

The Colonel (p. 1342)

“The Colonel” comes from a book of poems. You may want to talk about the
rather undefined genre of the prose poem. A prose poem looks like prose but is
marked by a strong rhythm (often gained by repetition of grammatical construc-
tions) and sometimes by abundant imagery. (The idea is that the chief charac-
teristics of poetry are rhythm and imagery, and so a short piece of prose with these features can be called a prose poem.) Having said this, we must add that we don’t think there is much point in worrying about whether “The Colonel” is poetry or prose.

Much of “The Colonel” probably is literally true. During one of her stays in El Salvador, Forché may indeed have visited a colonel, and he may have said and done exactly what this colonel says and does. Until we are told that the ear “came alive” when dropped into the glass of water, there is nothing unbelievable in “The Colonel,” partly, of course, because television has informed us that atrocities are committed daily.

Forché’s first sentence (“What you have heard is true”) suggests that the speaker is addressing someone who has just said, “I heard that you visited Colonel ———. Did you really? What was it like?” We get details about what seems to be a comfortable bourgeois existence (“daily papers, pet dogs”) and also some menacing details (“a pistol on the cushion beside him,” “Broken bottles were embedded in the walls”), all told in the same flat, matter-of-fact voice. The sixth sentence uses a metaphor (“The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house”), but even journalists are allowed to use an occasional metaphor, and a reader probably does not think twice about Forché’s metaphor here, except perhaps to notice that it uses the same structure (“The moon swung bare . . .”) as the previous, factual sentences (“I was,” “His wife carried,” “His daughter filed,” “There were”). Again, for the most part the language is flat; when the speaker next uses a metaphor (the ears are “like dried peach halves”) she (or he) flatly apologizes for this flight of fancy: “There is no other way to say this.” But the next-to-last sentence takes us into a metaphorical (or mysterious) world: “Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice.”

Much of the power of “The Colonel” comes from the contrast between the picture of the colonel’s bourgeois private life (pets, television, lamb, wine, etc.) and his brutal public life, a contrast that Forché emphasizes by not commenting on it (i.e., by allowing the reader to make the comment). The piece is masterful in what it doesn’t say. The colonel asks how the visitor “enjoyed the country,” but we don’t hear the response. We can, however, guess it by what follows: “There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern.” Presumably the colonel becomes annoyed with the visitor’s comments, though at first we aren’t told this in so many words. Instead we are told what the colonel did (he got a sack of ears, dumped them on the table, shook one in the faces of his guests, dropped it in a glass of water). Then we hear him: “I am tired of fooling around. . . . As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves.” Irked but (as we see it) enormously confident, he says of the severed ears, “Something for your poetry, no?” Students might be invited to comment on the tone the colonel uses here. Is he complacent, wry, naive, or what?

Students might also be invited to comment on the last two sentences of “The Colonel.” Does the next-to-last sentence indicate (let’s say symbolically) that the oppressed people of the country know what is going on, and will ultimately triumph? Does the last sentence (“Some of the ears on the
floor were pressed to the ground”) mean that (1) some of the ears were pressed, presumably by being stood on, and (2) the dead were listening (and presumably waiting to be avenged)?

Forché is the editor of Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness (1993), a powerful collection of poems on politics, war, torture, repression, death, exile.

**BILLY GODA**

*No Crime* (p. 1343)

In our text, the fifth (i.e., last) question following the play concerns the ethics of defending a person whom the lawyer knows is guilty. We have spoken with several criminal lawyers, and they seem pretty united in holding a view along the lines of what follows.

They more or less say this: “I realize my client is guilty but that’s not the point; it’s not the client who is on trial, it is our system of criminal justice. My obligation is to defend him such that the prosecution must prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt. If the prosecution cannot do that, then the system will let one guilty person go free; better to let a 100 guilty people go free than convict one innocent person. It’s not so much a matter of getting the client off the hook as a matter of keeping the criminal justice system operating at the standard expected.”

You may find it effective to distribute this statement, and let students offer comments on it.

In our third question in the text we ask why Goda gave both of the characters the habit—disgusting, to many people—of chewing and spitting tobacco. It is our guess that he wanted his readers/viewers to be estranged from—alienated from—the characters (this is part of the edginess we allude to in our fourth question), and yet he wants to force the readers/viewers to come to the view that there is some merit to the legal approach these lawyers adhere to.

**SOPHOCLES**

*Antigonê* (p. 1347)

On *Antigonê*, consult two books by H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (1978), and especially *Form and Meaning in Drama* (1964). See also D. W. Lucas, *The Greek Tragic Poets* (1959); Cedric H. Whitman, *Sophocles* (1951); and R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles* (1980). Hegel’s view, most often known through A. C. Bradley’s essay on Hegel in Bradley’s *Oxford Lectures* (1963) (and reprinted in *Hegel on Tragedy* [1975], ed. Anne and Henry Paolucci), claims that both sides are right and that both are also wrong because they assert they are exclusively right. (For a long anti-Hegelian reading, see Brian Vickers, *Toward Greek Tragedy*.)
[1979], which insists that Creon is brutal and Antigonê is thoroughly admirable.)
Bradley says, “In this catastrophe neither the right of the family nor that of the state is denied; what is denied is the absoluteness of the claim of each.”

Most subsequent commentators take sides and either see Creon as a tragic hero (a headstrong girl forces him to act, and action proves ruinous, not only to her but to him) or see Antigonê as a tragic heroine (a young woman does what she must and is destroyed for doing it). The critical conflict shows no sign of terminating. Mostly we get assertions, such as D. W. Lucas’s “There is no doubt that in the eyes of Sophocles Creon is wrong and Antigone right,” and Cedric Whitman’s “Antigone’s famous stubbornness, . . . the fault for which she has been so roundly reproved, is really moral fortitude.” One of the most perceptive remarks on Antigonê is by William Arrowsmith, in Tulane Drama Review 3 (March 1959): 135, where he says that Antigonê, “trying to uphold a principle beyond her own, or human, power to uphold, gradually empties that principle in action, and then, cut off from her humanity by her dreadful heroism, discovers herself and love in the loneliness of her death.” He suggests, too, that the play insists on “not the opposition between Antigone and Creon, but [on] the family resemblance which joins them in a common doom.”

John Ferguson, in A Companion to Greek Tragedy (1972), offers a fairly brief, commonsensical, scene-by-scene commentary on the play. Toward the end he argues that Hegel was utterly wrong in his view that both Creon and Antigonê are right. Ferguson points out that Creon “behaves as a tyrant” and that Creon’s law “is disastrous for the state.” And Antigonê is “wrong,” Ferguson says, because although her “view of the situation is the true one,” as a woman it was her duty to obey Creon. The play is about Antigonê’s hubris, and therefore it is properly titled.

For an excellent extended discussion of the play, see Helene P. Foley, Female Acts in Greek Tragedy (2001).

**Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing**

1. What stage business would you invent for Creon or Antigonê at three points in the play?
2. In an essay of 500 words, compare and contrast Antigonê and Ismenê. In your discussion consider whether Ismenê is overly cautious and whether Antigonê is overly cold in her rejection of Ismenê.
3. Characterize Haimon, considering not only his polite and even loving plea when he urged Creon to change his mind but also his later despair and suicide. In what way is he like his father and also (in other ways) like Antigonê?
Chapter 29

Worlds beyond Worlds

Stephen King

Why We Crave Horror Movies (p. 1373)

King obviously likes to shock people, whether he is writing a horror story (soon to be a major motion picture) or an essay for Playboy. Thus he opens his essay by saying that he thinks “we’re all mentally ill,” and adds (in paragraph 9) that the “potential lyncher is in almost all of us,” and that “most saints have been crazy,” even though his analysis of the appeal of horror movies does not require us to believe any of these unsupported assertions. The analysis he offers—that horror movies test our courage, reassure us of our normalcy, and provide psychic relief from our own violent emotions—are familiar enough to us, to most of our students, and, we would guess, to readers of Playboy. But there is some novelty, and therefore some interest, in hearing these eternal verities spelled out by the master of horror schlock, in an idiom that, to borrow a phrase from him, “appeals to all that is worst in us.” Sophomoric? True. But so, more or less, are our first-year students.

Suggestions for Writing

Questions 1 and 3 following the text work well as in-class writing exercises. Questions 4 and 5 provide topics for essays of 500 words.

Gabriel García Márquez

A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: A Tale for Children (p. 1375)

A neighbor is the first to call the winged man an angel, and then other characters call him an angel—maybe he is, but maybe he is just a winged old man. That is, despite the references to an angel, and even to the somewhat biblical sounding start with its “third day,” its torrent of rain (in the Old Testament such a torrent is symbolic of God’s power), and its “newborn child,” we need not assume that the story is about the human response to the divine.
Most of our students, like most of our colleagues, argue that the story satirizes the inability of people to perceive the spiritual. Thus the angel attracts attention only briefly and is, when not abused, finally neglected. All of this, in the common view, constitutes a satire on humanity, an attack that suggests we are like those contemporaries of Jesus who saw in him only a troublemaker.

But this is to assume that García Márquez, like Flannery O'Connor, subscribes to a Christian view of reality. Such an assumption is highly doubtful. Moreover, the assumption that in this story García Márquez is talking about our inability to perceive and revere the miraculous neglects the fact that he deals in fantasy or, perhaps more precisely, that he employs fantasy in order to write about the individual’s isolation in an unintelligible world. Such worlds as he gives us in his stories and novels are, he would say, projections of his mind rather than pictures of objective reality.

In short, we doubt that the story is about the ways in which human beings ignore, domesticate, or in other ways maltreat the divine. Of course, there is some satire of churchgoers and of the church: the old lady who thinks angels live on meatballs, the inappropriate miracles, and especially the correspondence with the authorities in Rome and the business about the priest who suspects that the winged man is an imposter because he doesn’t speak Latin. But satire in this story is directed less at religious faith than at exploitative capitalism—selfishness, gullibility, etc.

To say that the story is satiric is to say also that it is comic. One ought not to be so concerned with creating a religious allegory that one fails to see the humor, for instance, in the comments on the priest, the mail from Rome, and the “lesson” taught by the spider-woman. (In this last we hear a jibe at the conventional morality of fairy tales and of bourgeois standards.) As in other satire, the vision of human stupidity and cruelty is as unnerving as it is amusing. And what perhaps is especially unnerving is the fact that Pelayo and Elisenda are, at least when they discover the man, not particularly villainous. “[T]hey did not have the heart to club him to death,” and so they at first (kindly, by their standards) plan to set him adrift on a raft for three days and “leave him to his fate on the high seas.” Such is the depth, or rather the shallowness, of decency.

To say that the story is satirical is to say also that it is comic. One ought not to be so concerned with creating a religious allegory that one fails to see the humor, for instance, in the comments on the priest, the mail from Rome, and the “lesson” taught by the spider-woman. (In this last we hear a jibe at the conventional morality of fairy tales and of bourgeois standards.) As in other satire, the vision of human stupidity and cruelty is as unnerving as it is amusing. And what perhaps is especially unnerving is the fact that Pelayo and Elisenda are, at least when they discover the man, not particularly villainous. “[T]hey did not have the heart to club him to death,” and so they at first (kindly, by their standards) plan to set him adrift on a raft for three days and “leave him to his fate on the high seas.” Such is the depth, or rather the shallowness, of decency.

For a good discussion of the story, see John Gerlach, “The Loss of Wings,” in Bridges to Fantasy, ed. George E. Slusser et al. (1982), reprinted in Gabriel García Márquez, ed. Harold Bloom (1989). Rejecting the fairly common view that the story of a feeble old flyer is meant to explode our taste for antiquated myths, Gerlach points out that many passages are puzzling. For instance, a line such as “he answered in an incomprehensible dialect with a strong sailor’s voice” makes the careful reader wonder what a “sailor’s voice” is. Or take, for instance, the last sentence of the story, which says that the old man “was no longer an annoyance in [Elisenda’s] life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea.” First, there is the odd contrast between an “annoyance” (an abstraction) and a “dot” (something barely visible); Gerlach calls the sentence grammatically uncomfortable. Second, Gerlach points out that an “imaginary dot” is strange; Elisenda is simultaneously seeing and imagining. Briefly, Gerlach’s
gist is that although the world of myth seems to be demeaned by this story about a winged old man who looked “like a huge decrepit hen,” the story gives us a world of mystery, partly in the almost miraculous patience of the old man and partly in its puzzling statements. One mystery is that the mysterious, winged old man seems more real (in his behavior) than the others in the story. Drawing heavily on Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic* (1973), Gerlach’s overall point is that this story, like other works of fantasy, evokes “hesitation” (we’d say uncertainty). In Todorov’s view, fantasy is not simply a matter of improbable happenings. The happenings in an allegory are usually improbable, but allegories are not fantasies, Todorov says, because the supernatural events can be interpreted on a naturalistic level. But in “A Very Old Man,” there remains a strong sense of uncertainty, an uncertainty that survives such an allegorical interpretation as “There is a winged aspect of man that can fly despite the lack of appreciation of others.”

**ARTHUR C. CLARKE**

*The Nine Billion Names of God* (p. 1380)

First a few words about the genre, then a few more about literary aspects of the story—characterization, plot, irony—and finally some comments about the power of names.

Is this story an example of science fiction, or, rather, is it an example of fantasy? The writer of this note—not well-versed in either genre—thinks that “The Nine Billion Names of God” is better described as fantasy than as science fiction. Fantasy is a better description because the story does not deal with the implications of any postulated laws of nature. Further, unlike much science fiction (as we understand it), the setting of this story is not the future, not some other world, not outer space. It is very much a story about our world, here and now—although admittedly the heavens are very important in the story.

As we understand it, then, the story belongs to what is called “soft science fiction,” the sort of thing associated with Ursula Le Guin and with Ray Bradbury (we include one story by each of these authors). On the other hand, the stories we use by Bradbury and Le Guin imply much more social criticism than Clarke’s story does. Further, although “The Nine Billion Names” can be classified as apocalyptic literature—a motif common in soft science fiction—we don’t see this story as offering social criticism—other than, perhaps the suggestion that the East may have wisdom that is unknown to the West.

The Caucasians don’t come off especially well. Dr. Wagner, in the first paragraph, speaks with “what he hoped was commendable restraint.” At this stage in the story readers don’t know what the topic of discussion is, and they therefore cannot pass judgment on Dr. Wagner, but even here readers may sense that Wagner is a bit self-satisfied. It’s not that he speaks with “restraint,” but that he speaks with “what he hoped was commendable restraint.” To our ear, “com-
“mendable” suggests he is a bit too pleased with himself. Still, we don’t mean to imply that Wagner is a bad sort of fellow, and compared with George Hanley he has his virtues. We are told in paragraph 31 that George, in Tibet for two months, “was not impressed” by the mountains, and that “he had never bothered to discover” their names. He must seem singularly insensitive to most readers. We don’t get comparable information of this sort about Chuck, but Chuck’s fear that the monks may turn against the visitors, though perhaps understandable, is also a bit limited, a bit ungenerous. Against these figures Clarke shows us the lama, who is consistently courteous, and who seems to move easily not only in Tibet but also in the West: Notice in the second paragraph the passage that describes the lama as “readjusting his silk robe and carefully putting away the slide rule he had been using for currency conversions.”

The plot sets forth the rather obvious (as it turns out) irony of Westerners who are confident in their knowledge, but who in fact know nothing about the ultimate reality, and the monks. Perhaps not until paragraph 20, when Dr. Wagner wonders, “Was there any limit to the follies of mankind?” does the reader pretty clearly feel that the Westerners are going to be in for a big shock, though at this stage readers can’t know what the shock will be.

In paragraphs 40–44 we learn why the monks are engaged in their project, and though we probably are doubtful that when the monks complete their task “God’s purpose will have been accomplished,” still, well, this sounds serious, and readers probably are beginning to sit on the edges of their seats. In 55–61, when Chuck sets forth his fears, tension increases—we know something will happen, and we may even suspect that the happening will not be what Chuck fears, but we do not know with any certainty what will happen. In short, the suspense is high.

In paragraph 60, we get a somewhat romantic picture, when we are told that “buildings were silhouetted against the afterglow of the sunset,” and that “lights gleamed like portholes in the sides of an ocean liner.” These images of light are continued in 65: “The sky overhead was perfectly clear and ablaze with the familiar, friendly stars.” On the other hand, the very next paragraph, 66, offers an ominous image: “This vast arena of mountains, gleaming like whitely hooded ghosts on every side, did not encourage such ebullience.” (Incidentally, though the image is the narrator’s, not George’s, a reader can be pardoned for attributing it to George, who, as the end draws near, now seems more responsive to his surroundings than he had earlier been.)

In the next-to-last paragraph, “George lifted his eyes to heaven”—not “to the skies,” but “to heaven.” That is, Clarke is adding a religious touch to George’s world. And then George sees that, “without any fuss, the stars were going out.”

Now for some talk about names, and about the names of God.

First, names, generally. We can begin with the idea of *nomen omen*, i.e., that the name is an omen, a sign. Thus, people whose last names are suitable to their jobs (e.g., *Butcher, Baker, Carpenter*) will go through a lifetime of affectionate teasing: “Did you really think you had to become a . . . just because your name
is . . .?" Still, in some cases there are indeed grounds for suspecting that the person was—shall we say psychologically, or subliminally?—moved to choose the appropriate job. And surely we take pleasure in the fact that there was a poet named Wordsworth, and that Francine Prose is a writer of novels. Surely, too, the art historian Richard Brilliant in his teaching and in his numerous publications has tried very hard to live up to his name, and the sociologist/philosopher Dennis Wrong has tried equally hard not to live up to his. In our saner moments we know that these names are, so to speak, just accidents, and they do not define the persons who bear them, but, still, . . .

And this gets us to the business of names as having some sort of magic, some sort of power. If we know someone's name, we have a sort of hold on that person, even a magical control over him or her. Some of your students will be familiar with the fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin, the anonymous dwarf who spins straw into gold. When he tries to claim the child of the miller's daughter, she confounds him by uttering his name. In a rage he stamps his foot so far into the ground that he cannot remove it, and he then tears himself in half. (People today whose identity has been stolen need hardly be cautioned about the dangers of letting people know their names.) Or consider those self-help books that tell their readers to ingratiate themselves with their hearer—which is to say, to gain power over their hearers—by using the hearer's name (“Yes, John, indeed, John, that's very true”). When we can name something, we have (or we think we have) control over it.

Some sort of belief that if we know the name of someone it gives us power over that person must be behind the tabus that prohibit speaking the name of God. Consider the biblical tetragrammaton YHWH, a word that scholars agree is derived from a form of the word “to be.” Used several thousand times in the Hebrew Bible, it is conventionally pronounced “Yahweh” (and it gives us the word Jehovah) but in fact the original pronunciation is unknown because it was so rarely uttered. The misuse of God's name is prohibited in Exodus 20:7. Rather than pronounce the name of the deity—and thus possibly mispronounce and thereby seem to defile or diminish the Almighty, or pronounce it correctly and thereby seem to achieve some power over it—readers substituted Adonai (“My Great Lord”). The practice continues: We have fairly often met students who will not write the word “God,” and who instead will write “G-d.” In translations of the Bible, various compounds are used, such as “Most High,” “Lord of Hosts” and “Lord Almighty.” “Elohim,” meaning something like “majesty,” is also found abundantly in the Hebrew Scriptures, as are “Eloah” and “El.” Something of the variety of Hebrew names is found in such English translations as “king,” “shepherd,” “redeemer,” “judge,” but, again, the basic point is that the true name is itself too sacred to be uttered by mere mortals. Indeed, sometimes “name” is used in translation, as in Psalms 68 and 135, and in the Thanksgiving Hymn, which include the line, “Sing praises to His Name.” In the New Testament, which is written in Greek rather than in Hebrew or Aramaic, the usual word for God is theos, but other words are occasionally used (e.g., despotēs [absolute ruler], pantokrator [almighty]) that are translated as “lord,”
“almighty,” “sovereign,” “father,” and so forth. The name of Jesus (Hebrew “Joshua,” meaning “Jehovah is Salvation”) can itself be uttered. “Christ” is Greek, translating the Hebrew Meshiach (Messiah), i.e., “The Anointed One.” Jesus is of course also known by other names, such as the Lamb of God, the King of Kings, and the Second Adam. In Islam, the commonest name for God is “Allah,” meaning “Supreme Creator,” cognate of the Hebrew “Eloah.”

But, to get back to the point, the abundance of names in the Bible probably indicates a desire to avoid saying the true name, lest the speaker seem presumptuously familiar, or, worse, lest the speaker defile the name. In Clarke’s story, we are told (paragraph 42), the monks “believe that when they have listed all His names . . . God’s purpose will have been achieved. The human race will have finished what it was created to do. . . .” If this at first seems odd—this business of naming God in order to fulfill God’s purpose—recollect that many Jews and Christians believe that our purpose on earth is to glorify God. We do this most obviously, many people believe, when we engage in worship, but also, for instance when we act justly, when we act charitably, when we procreate, etc. Presumably the atheist doesn’t fret about why we are here, but the devout person must at least sometimes wonder what the point of existence is, and for such a person, “to do God’s will” is probably an excellent answer.

As we see it, then Clarke’s story draws on the widespread beliefs that to name God is both dangerous and praiseworthy. Clarke reconciles these views by inventing Buddhist monks who do God’s will by naming him. When they have uttered all of his names—a dangerous business according to the common view—a totally unexpected danger (from the Westerners point of view) appears: The stars cease to give light, and presumably the life-giving sun will follow suit.

ANONYMOUS

The Demon Lover (p. 1385)

Not all ballads include supernatural elements, but a good many of them do. This is not to say, however, that these ballads are purely fanciful or escapist. Many of them, including “The Demon Lover,” are deeply rooted also in the passions (which, finally, are mysterious) of this world.

“The Demon Lover” nicely illustrates several of the characteristics mentioned in the note on folk ballads in the text. That is, the process of oral transmission probably has eliminated the dross (the antecedent action may once have been given at length but now it can be gleaned only from the dialogue) and has left us chiefly with memorable speech, swiftly drawn pictures, and strong passions. There is no comment on the action, no reflection on the theme. Rather, whatever “meaning” the poem has is conveyed only through the action. It begins not with the introduction of a speaker but with dialogue. In a similarly abrupt fashion, without telling us that after A spoke B replied, we get the words of the second speaker. As in most ballads (or at least in most of the ballads that
are regarded as the best) the plot is vigorous but highly abbreviated, and the characters—perceived through what they say rather than through description—are sharply drawn, not in the sense that they are rounded but in the sense that they are embodiments of intense passions. (One thinks of Yeats's remark that comedy gives us "characters" but in tragedy we get not character but pure passion, intense versions of ourselves.)

Between lines 28 and 29 (between the seventh and eighth stanzas), the woman decides to go with the demon lover. In the final stanza the lover suddenly appears to become gigantic, striking the topmast (one thinks of him striking the top of the mast) and the foremast simultaneously. That is, his overwhelming power is given a physical dimension that corresponds to its force.

**Anonymous**

*The Wife of Usher's Well* (p. 1387)

The headnote in the text gives some basic information about the nature of popular ballads. Several of our questions seek to help students to notice some of the characteristics of the form—not because a student ought to be able mechanically to recite the three or four or ten or whatever characteristics of a ballad, but because awareness of these characteristics increases one's understanding and enjoyment of the works.

The first two questions concern narration and characterization. Like most other ballads, "The Wife of Usher's Well" gives us little explanatory detail. For instance, it doesn't explain how or why the sons die; a shipwreck seems implied, given the information that they went on a sea voyage, but the song doesn't specify a wreck. It does not tell us why the mother sent her sons "o'er the sea," nor does it include any description of her (other than calling her "wealthy" and a "carline wife") or of the sons. Yet we know the mother quite well, understanding her thoughts by hearing her words (her desperate wish in lines 13–16, and her enthusiastic exhortation to the maidens in lines 25–28) and by watching her solicitous actions (lines 29–32). Similarly, we know almost nothing about the sons, other than that they died, went to paradise, now return to earth but must leave at daybreak.

Actually in the final stanza we learn one additional (and most important) thing about the sons:

"Fare ye weel, my mother dear!  
Fareweel to barn and byre!  
And fare ye weel, the bonny lass  
That kindles my mother’s fire!"

We cannot quite say that the son is in love with the girl, but we can surely say that the son expresses a powerful longing for life—the life of the family.
(mother) and of the farm (barn, byre, servant girl)—and that the sequence, ending with the girl kindling the fire, seems right. The mother’s love, the farm’s implied fertility, and especially the warmth of the girl, and of the fire, all stand in contrast to the coldness of death. Although these elements of life are not described, the deep affection with which they are regarded is evident from the threefold farewell.

JOHN KEATS

*La Belle Dame sans Merci* (p. 1389)

“La Belle Dame” is elaborately discussed in Earl Wasserman, *The Finer Tone* (1953), and more reasonably discussed in books on Keats by Walter Jackson Bate, Douglas Bush, and Charles Patterson, and in Harold Bloom’s *The Visionary Company* (1962). Here are a few points: In the first stanza, nature (“withered”) reflects the condition of the knight (“palely loitering”). The second stanza further establishes the time as autumn, and though nature is abundant (“The squirrel’s granary is full”), the knight seems starved, and the implication is that he is approaching winter, that is, death. Line 22 (“And nothing else saw all day long”) indicates his total absorption in the lady’s song, which (along with “roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild, and manna dew”) nourished him for a while, and brought him to a vision of people who resemble him in his present condition (“pale”).

This vision is presumably a vision of mortality, and he awakes to find himself “On the cold hill’s side”—in the physical world unredeemed by the imagination.

A. E. HOUSMAN

*Shropshire Lad* #27 (“Is My Team Ploughing?”) (p. 1390)

Housman drew on the popular ballad genre for certain elements of technique and style, namely, the use of dialogue, especially the question-and-answer technique; the quatrain; the magical element (here a dead man and a living man engage in conversation); and the motif of individual sorrow versus the general indifference of the rest of the world. Among the obvious ironies are these: the corpse lies “under / The land you used to plough”; despite the corpse, life goes on; the speaker is solicitous of the welfare of the living friend, but the friend has, quite literally, found a better bed than the corpse has found, for he sleeps with the dead man’s sweetheart. Notice that in line 23 the friend—who up to now has obligingly answered all questions—tries to stop the corpse from continuing the dialogue.
Suggestions for Further Reading

For this part of the book, we can only offer the mixed nature of our own experience and invite you to make the decision that feels right to you.

When we teach an introductory course open to all students, we find we usually say little or nothing about critical approaches. We might comment on feminist theory, but we do so within the context of our discussion of a specific literary work. We do not treat the theory in much detail or depth, and about deconstruction and new historicism we are silent. These approaches are too complex for brief comment; the students cannot handle them well and end up feeling mystified or confused. They are, we think, better off focusing on the literary works directly and examining the writer’s uses of language in them.

But when we teach an introductory literature or literature and composition course designed for English majors, then we do make an effort to discuss critical approaches. Feminist theory and criticism: this is an approach that students can begin to grasp fairly quickly—they see its relation to the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s—and can learn to apply themselves. The same holds true for reader-response criticism; students right away can talk about their responses to texts and feel some affinity with the theories that Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Jonathan Culler, and others have proposed. Deconstruction and new historicism are harder; the first greatly depends on continental philosophy, and the second on a wide and dense range of knowledge about history, society, and culture. But we can make some headway if we are patient enough in our explanations and illustrate how deconstruction, for instance, “works” in the case of a Wordsworth lyric or how a new historicist analysis of the monarchy in Shakespeare’s England reveals something new about kingship and the kingdom in Hamlet, Macbeth, or King Lear.

No sooner, however, than we make this distinction between general courses and courses for English majors than we must admit that some of our colleagues hold a different view. Some of them give a good deal of time in all of their literature courses to the subject of critical approaches. Indeed, one or two of our col-
leagues launch their courses with a discussion of critical approaches. When they use our book, they begin with this appendix, taking it as the point of departure for the rest of the course they are teaching. As one of these instructors said to us, “When the students read and write about a poem, they need to have something to look for, and that’s what the critical approaches give them.”

To us, this seems an awkward and unpersuasive formulation. Surely there must be “something” in a literary work that can affect us simply because the work is what it is and we are who we are. Must a reader study literary theory before he or she can be moved by a Shakespeare play, a Hawthorne story, or a Dickinson or Frost poem? But we know the point that our colleague is making. He is saying that, in his view at any rate, students need a critical vocabulary, and one that goes beyond such standard terms as plot, character, setting, theme, tone, and the like. Equip the students with the tools, and they will be able to extract meanings from texts. If we don’t, so the argument goes, the students will not know what to look for, and they will have little to offer in class and in paper assignments.

In some English departments, this claim has become the principle according to which the curriculum is structured. The introductory courses are theory and criticism courses, and it is only after these are taken that students then move to author, period, and other kinds of literature courses. These teachers maintain that students require a set of terms and interpretive procedures in order to know how to speak and write about the literature they study. The theories, the approaches, it is argued, provide students with the power to read critically and productively.

Perhaps what comes into focus from these examples is a question that teachers and critics have been debating for some years now: How much theory, how much study of critical approaches, do the students in literature courses need? Obviously they need a certain amount of basic work on those familiar and inevitable terms such as character and setting. But after that has been done, how much more is necessary?

A good case can be made that a student planning on graduate school needs a lot more. For better or worse, much of the emphasis in graduate training is placed on theory and criticism; a student starting graduate school without some knowledge of deconstruction, feminist theory and criticism, and other approaches will have some serious catching up to do. For English majors in general, we think the case can be made that they, too, will benefit from courses on critical approaches, but we think that these courses should come in the later stages of the students’ undergraduate careers. Why not read many authors and many different kinds of literary works first, and then turn to the project of examining and comparing and contrasting the strengths and limits of critical approaches?

We risk making our point more strongly than we intend. There are many theorists from whom we have learned—Stanley Fish, in his reader-response criticism on Milton’s poetry, immediately comes to mind. Others we have learned from and find well worth disagreeing with include Geoffrey H. Hartman and Harold Bloom. But for us what makes the best theorists valuable, stimulating,
and provocative is that they are engaged, attentive readers. Even as they work with their theories, they strike us as being responsive to the specific works at hand. This differs from mechanically “applying” this or that theory to a literary work from the outside, with no heed paid to whether the work calls for such a theory or not.

Richard Poirier, Helen Vendler, John Hollander, Frank Kermode—these critics, and others we could name, have an approach but not a theory. They are intensely curious about the ways in which a writer and a literary work can challenge and teach them, explore complex ideas and feelings, spark new insights, expand the borders of consciousness. What matters for them is the writer’s relation to the verbal medium—what he or she is doing with words in the literary work—and the reader’s engagement with the work that this author has performed. It is this quality of personal commitment and engagement, and the excitement of it, that we do not find often enough in the books of literary theory that we have read. And it is this quality that we believe is the one above all that should be made vivid and rich for students.

We have one or two suggestions to offer you and your colleagues on the vexed matter of critical approaches. We think it is important—though we concede it is not always easy—to make the discussion of and debate about this issue a “public” one for the students. If you are using this book in a multisection course, you and one or two of your colleagues might select a poem by Wordsworth, Blake, or some other poet and each describe how this or that approach illuminates the text. We have often done something like this ourselves, with the help of a colleague or two who visits a class one day, or else we have done a version of it through a panel discussion in the late afternoon that students are encouraged to attend.

There are other topics you could select for one or more panels or faculty presentations:

- The Critics Who Made Us—this would focus on a critic or critics (or a teacher) who played a central role in your own literary education.
- Literary Theory: For and Against—this would center on the question of what is gained, and what is or might be lost, when the study of literary theory and critical approaches takes center stage.
- Close Reading: What It Is and How It Is Done—this would explore the question of what it means to “read closely” and what the teacher/critics in your department mean by the term “close reading.” What does it mean to be a “close reader” of literature? What makes one close reader better than, or at least different from, another?

We have found that students enjoy these events. It interests them to hear their teachers talking about their own literary experiences and educations. It also helps the students to see connections between the courses they take. Even seeing a difference between one course and another is making a useful connection. And it also clarifies and makes interesting a problem that students often
face and wonder about, a problem that may seem quite natural and minor to us but that is very real to them: “My roommate and I are taking the same course, but we’re enrolled in different sections. My instructor told our class that . . . but my roommate’s instructor said something that sounds completely the opposite. . . .” We should be willing to explain as best we can how and why such situations occur and to explain, furthermore, what would be the consequences for literature and literary study if it turned out instead that instructors and critics were always in agreement.
Index of Authors and Titles

14: a txt msg pom., 30
A & P, 327
About Men, 248
Address at the Dedication of the
Gettysburg National Cemetery, 370
Aesop
Ant and the Grasshopper, The, 174
North Wind and the Sun, The, 177
Aldrich, Thomas Bailey
Unguarded Gates, The, 355
Alexie, Sherman
Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, The, 387
On the Amtrak from Boston to New York City, 218
Allende, Isabel
If You Touched My Heart, 84
Alvarez, Julia
Woman’s Work, 261
American Flamingo, 162
Andersen, Hans Christian
Emperor’s New Clothes, The, 267
André’s Mother, 243
Anonymous
Birmingham Jail, 409
Demon Lover, The, 426
Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel, 225
Higanus, Hogamus, 253
Judgment of Solomon, The, 40
Slavic Women Arrive at Ellis Island in the Winter of 1910 (photograph), 358
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, 225
Western Wind, 234
What Are Little Boys Made Of, 252
Wife of Usher’s Well, The, 427
Ant and the Grasshopper, The, 174
Anthem for Doomed Youth, 75
Antigoné, 419
anyone lived in a pretty how town, 132
Anzaldúa, Gloria
To Live in the Borderlands Means You, 359
Apprently with no surprise, 148
Appointment in Samarra, The, 80
Araby, 268
Armas, José
El Tonto del Barrio, 50
Arnold, Matthew
In Harmony with Nature, 182
Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Dream, 375
Assembly Line, 329
Auden, W. H.
Musée des Beaux Arts, 159
Unknown Citizen, The, 394
August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains, 7
Baca, Jimmy Santiago
Cloudy Day, 415
So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans, 360
Bait, The, 234
Bambara, Toni Cade
Lesson, The, 206
Barbie Doll, 262
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barn Burning</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle Royal</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bean Eaters, The</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty and Sadness</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I could not stop for Death</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedtime Story</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before the Mirror</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behn, Aphra</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song: Love Armed</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bierce, Ambrose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, An</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird, Julia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14: a txt msg pom.,</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham Jail</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop, Elizabeth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanging of the Mouse, The</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Men and Public Space</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Walnut Tree, The</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake, William</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Echoing Green, The</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant Joy</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant Sorrow</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamb, The</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sick Rose, The</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyger, The</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogan, Louise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borges, Jorge Luís</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lottery in Babylon, The</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boyle, T. Corraghessan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greasy Lake</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradbury, Ray</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2026: There Will Come</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Rains</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brontë, Emily</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spellbound</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooks, Gwendolyn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bean Eaters, The</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother, The</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Real Cool</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brownies</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Browning, Robert</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Last Duchess</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruchac III, Joseph</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellis Island</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brueghel's Two Monkeys</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo Bill's</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullet in the Brain</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully, The</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butterflies</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter's Son, The</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carver, Raymond</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathedral</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Things</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mine, The</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casil, Amy Sterling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect Stranger</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cask of Amontillado, The</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat in the Rain</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathedral</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cather, Willa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagner Matinée, A</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cervantes, Lorna Dee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugee Ship</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chang, Diana</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriental Contingent, The</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chekhov, Anton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misery, The</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child of the Americas</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chopin, Kate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Désirée's Baby</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ripe Figs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story of an Hour, The</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Storm</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrysanthemums, The</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City People</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarke, Arthur C.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine Billion Names of God, The</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleghorn, Sarah N.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golf Links, The</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloudy Day</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cofer, Judith Ortiz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Fell in Love, or My Hormones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awakened</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Index of Authors and Titles

Collins, Billy
   Introduction to Poetry, 53
   Names, The, 398
   Sonnet, 130
Colonel, The, 417
Crumb, R.
   Hunger Artist, A, 115
Cullen, Countee
   Incident, 214
Cummings, E. E.
   anyone lived in a pretty how town, 132
   Buffalo Bill's, 93
   in just-, 277
Daddy, 133
Davis, Lydia
   City People, 6
Day I Became a Professional, The, 325
Daystar, 255
De Maupassant, Guy
   Hautot and Son, 13
   Necklace, The, 9
Death of a Salesman, 342
Death of the Ball Turret Gunner, The, 37
Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, 369
Demon Lover, The, 426
Design, 199
Désirée's Baby, 16
Dickinson, Emily
   Apparently with no surprise, 148
   Because I could not stop for Death, 222
   I got so I could hear his name—, 147
   I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—, 140
   narrow Fellow in the Grass, A, 190
   “Nature” is what we see, 188
   Papa above!, 142
   Soul selects her own Society, The, 141
Didion, Joan
   On Going Home, 201
Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel, 225
Digging, 336
Diving into the Wreck, 216
Doll's House, A, 263
Doloff, Steven
   Opposite Sex, The, 247
Donne, John
   Bait, The, 234
   Holy Sonnet XIV (Batter my heart, three-personed God), 34
   Valediction: Forbidding Mourning, A, 238
Dove, Rita
   Daystar, 255
   Dulce et Decorum Est, 74
Echoing Green, The, 274
Ehrenreich, Barbara
   Wal-Mart Orientation Program, 321
Ehrlich, Gretel
   About Men, 248
Eisner, Will
   Day I Became a Professional, The, 325
   El Tonto del Barrio, 50
   Eliot, T. S.
   Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, The, 60
   Ellis Island, 357
   Ellison, Ralph
   Battle Royal, 390
   Emperor's New Clothes, The, 267
   Equal Rites, 71
   Erdrich, Louise
   Ringo's Gold, 172
Index of Authors and Titles

Espada, Martin
   Bully, 56
Ethics, 280
Eveline, 209
Everyday Use, 350
Ex-Basketball Player, 339
Facing It, 396
Far Cry from Africa, A, 217
Faulkner, William
   Barn Burning, 407
   Rose for Emily, A, 69
Flanders, Jane
   Van Gogh's Bed, 150
For Malcolm, a Year After, 134
Forché, Carolyn
   Colonel, The, 417
France, Anatole
   Our Lady's Juggler, 28
Frederick Douglass, 391
Frog Prince, The, 241
Frost, Robert
   Design, 199
   Hardship of Accounting, The, 128
   Mending Wall, 59
   Most of It, The, 199
   Mowing, 195
   Need of Being Versed in Country Things, The, 198
   Oven Bird, The, 197
   Pasture, The, 193
   Road Not Taken, The, 55
   Silken Tent, The, 240
   Span of Life, The, 27
   Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, 59
   Telephone, The, 124
   Wood-Pile, The, 197

Gioia, Dana
   Money, 127
Giovanni, Nikki
   Love in Place, 243
Girl, 27
Glaspell, Susan
   Trifles, 117
Glück, Louise
   Gretel in Darkness, 279
   School Children, The, 278
God's Grandeur, 185
Goda, Billy
   No Crime, 419
   Golf Links, The, 73
Good Man Is Hard to Find, A, 110
Grace, Patricia
   Butterflies, 182
   Greasy Lake, 13
   Great Figure, The, 151
   Gretel in Darkness, 279
Grimm, The Brothers
   Mother Holle, 324
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins
   Yellow Wallpaper, The, 248
Ginsberg, Allen
   Supermarket in California, A, 395

Hemingway, Ernest
  Cat in the Rain, 227
Hempel, Amy
  Today Will Be a Quiet Day, 208
Her Kind, 137
Herrick, Robert
  To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time, 55
  Upon Julia’s Clothes, 129
Hide and Seek, 71
Higamus, Hogamus, 253
Holy Sonnet XIV (Batter my heart, three-personed God), 34
Homosexuality, 257
Hookups Starve the Soul, 102
Hopkins, Gerard Manley
  God’s Grandeur, 185
  Spring and Fall: To a Young Child, 277
Housman, A. E.
  Carpenter’s Son, The, 410
  Oh who is that young sinner, 411
  Shropshire Lad #27 (“Is My Team Ploughing?”), 428
  To an Athlete Dying Young, 223
  How to Become a Writer, 330
Hughes, Langston
  Harlem, 32
  One Friday Morning, 377
  Salvation, 101
  Theme for English B, 361
  Hunger Artist, A, 115
Hurston, Zora Neale
  Sweat, 229
  I Ask My Mother to Sing, 37
  I Fell in Love, or My Hormones Awakened, 227
  I got so I could hear his name—, 147
  I Hear America Singing, 333
  I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—, 140
Ibsen, Henrik
  Doll’s House, A, 263
  If We Must Die, 413
  If You Touched My Heart, 84
  Immigrants, 58
  In Harmony with Nature, 182
  in Just-, 277
  Incident, 214
  Infant Joy, 273
  Infant Sorrow, 273
  Introduction to Poetry, 53
  It’s Hard Enough Being Me, 346
  Ives, David
    Sure Thing, 118
Jackson, Shirley
  Lottery, The, 380
Jarrell, Randall
  Death of the Ball Turret Gunner, The, 37
Jen, Gish
  Who’s Irish?, 106
Jewett, Sarah Orne
  White Heron, A, 179
Jilting of Granny Weatherall, The, 47
Jin, Ha
  Love in the Air, 271
Joyce, James
  Araby, 268
  Eveline, 209
  Judgment of Solomon, The, 40
Keats, John
  La Belle Dame sans Merci, 428
  Ode on a Grecian Urn, 61
  On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer, 211
  To Autumn, 184
Kennedy, X. J.
  Nude Descending a Staircase, 160
Kincaid, Jamaica
  Girl, 27
King, Stephen
  Why We Crave Horror Movies, 421
King Jr., Martin Luther
  Letter from Birmingham Jail, 403
Knight, Etheridge
  For Malcolm, a Year After, 134
438  Index of Authors and Titles

Komunyakaa, Yusef
Facing It, 396

La Belle Dame sans Merci, 428
Lam, Andrew
Who Will Light Incense When Mother's Gone?, 347
Lamb, The, 275
Lazarus, Emma
New Colossus, The, 352
Le Guin, Ursula K.
Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas, The, 406
Lee, Li-Young
I Ask My Mother to Sing, 37
Lesson, The, 206
Letter from Birmingham Jail, 403
Lin, Maya
Vietnam Veterans Memorial (photograph), 397
Lincoln, Abraham
Address at the Dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery, 370
Little Things, 96
London, Jack
To Build a Fire, 178
Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, The, 387
Los Vendidos, 364
Lottery in Babylon, The, 67
Lottery, The, 380
Love in Place, 243
Love in the Air, 271
Love Is Not All: It Is Not Meat nor Drink, 240
Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, The, 60
Luke
Parable of the Prodigal Son, The, 42
Luncheon on the Grass, 164
Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota, 138

Mairowitz, David Zen
Hunger Artist, A, 115
Man He Killed, The, 64
Man to Send Rain Clouds, The, 51
Man Told Me the Story of His Life, A, 381
Mansfield, Katherine
Miss Brill, 77
Marlowe, Christopher
Passionate Shepherd to His Love, The, 234
Márquez, Gabriel García
Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: A Tale for Children, A, 421
Martin, Jane
Rodeo, 340
Marvell, Andrew
To His Coy Mistress, 238
Maugham, W. Somerset
Appointment in Samarra, The, 80
McKay, Claude
If We Must Die, 413
McKibben, Bill
Now or Never, 172
McNally, Terrence
Andre's Mother, 243
Millay, Edna St. Vincent
Love Is Not All: It Is Not Meat nor Drink, 240
Miller, Arthur
Death of a Salesman, 342
Mine, 96
Misery, 19
Miss Brill, 77
Money, 127
Montesquieu (Charles de Secondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu)
Persian Letters, 201
Moore, Lorrie
How to Become a Writer, 330
Mora, Pat
Immigrants, 58
Index of Authors and Titles

Morales, Aurora Levins
   *Child of the Americas*, 358
Most of It, *The*, 199
Mother Holle, 324
Mother, *The*, 64
Moths, *The*, 85
Mourning Picture, 153
Moving Camp Too Far, 363
Mowing, 195
Musée des Beaux Arts, 159
My Last Duchess, 131
My Papa's Waltz, 256
My People, 368

Naipaul, V. S.
   *Night Watchman's Occurrence Book, The*, 21
Names, *The*, 398
Naming of Parts, 76
narrow Fellow in the Grass, *A*, 190
“Nature” is what we see, 188
Necklace, *The*, 9
New Colossus, *The*, 352
Night Watchman's Occurrence Book, *The*, 21
Nine Billion Names of God, *The*, 423
No Crime, 419
Noiseless Patient Spider, *A*, 187
North Wind and the Sun, *The*, 177
northSun, nila
   *Moving Camp Too Far*, 363
Notman, William
   *Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill (photograph)*, 90
Now or Never, 172
Nude Descending a Staircase, 160
Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd, *The*, 234

O'Brien, Tim
   *Things They Carried, The*, 383
O'Connor, Flannery
   *Good Man Is Hard to Find, A*, 110
   *Revelation*, 111
O'Hara, Frank
   *Homosexuality*, 257
Oates, Joyce Carol
   *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?*, 65
   *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, An*, 82
Ode on a Grecian Urn, 61
Oedipus the King, 119
Oh who is that young sinner, 411
Olds, Sharon
   *Rites of Passage*, 256
Oliver, Mary
   *Black Walnut Tree, The*, 192
   *Oliver's Evolution*, 252
   *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*, 211
   *On Going Home*, 201
   *On the Amtrak from Boston to New York City*, 218
   *One Friday Morning*, 377
   *Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas, The*, 406
Opposite Sex, *The*, 247
Oriental Contingent, *The*, 104
Orientation, 326
Orozco, Daniel
   *Orientation*, 326
Orwell, George
   *Shooting an Elephant*, 267
   *Our Lady's Juggler*, 28
Owen, Wilfred
   *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, 75
   *Dulce et Decorum Est*, 74
   *Ozymandias*, 212
Pack, Robert
   *Frog Prince, The*, 241
Packer, ZZ
   *Brownies*, 272

440  Index of Authors and Titles

Paley, Grace
  Man Told Me the Story of His
  Life, A, 381
  Samuel, 103
Papa above!, 142
Pape, Greg
  American Flamingo, 162
Parable of the Prodigal Son, The, 42
Parker, Dorothy
  General Review of the Sex
  Situation, 254
  Résumé, 401
Passionate Shepherd to His Love,
  The, 234
Pastan, Linda
  Ethics, 280
Pasture, The, 193
Perfect Stranger, 389
Persian Letters, 201
Phillips, Carl
  Luncheon on the Grass, 164
Piercy, Marge
  Barbie Doll, 262
  Secretary Chant, The, 338
  To be of use, 337
  What's That Smell in the Kitchen?,
   395
Plants, Mark
  Equal Rites, 71
Plath, Sylvia
  Daddy, 133
Poe, Edgar Allan
  Cask of Amontillado, The, 46
Porter, Katherine Anne
  Jilting of Granny Weatherall, The,
   47
Powder, 408
Raisin in the Sun, A, 365
Raleigh, Sir Walter
  Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd,
   The, 234
Raya, Anna Lisa
  It's Hard Enough Being Me, 346
  Rebirth of Venus, The, 156
Reed, Henry
  Naming of Parts, 76
  Refugee Ship, 392
  Résumé, 401
  Revelation, 111
Rich, Adrienne
  Diving into the Wreck, 216
  Mourning Picture, 153
Richard Cory, 394
Ringo’s Gold, 172
Ripe Figs, 5
Rites of Passage, 256
Road Not Taken, The, 55
Robinson, Edwin Arlington
  Richard Cory, 394
Rodeo, 340
Roethke, Theodore
  My Papa’s Waltz, 256
Rogers, Bruce Holland
  Three Soldiers, 23
Rose for Emily, A, 69
Rossetti, Christina
  Uphill, 221
Ryan, Kay
  Turtle, 192
Sailing to Byzantium, 219
Salter, Mary Jo
  Rebirth of Venus, The, 156
  Salvation, 101
  Samuel, 103
  Sandburg, Carl
  Chicago, 334
  School Children, The, 278
Seattle, Chief
  My People, 368
Secret Life of Walter Mitty, The, 44
Secretary Chant, The, 338
Senior Picture Day, 8
Serros, Michele
  Senior Picture Day, 8
Sexton, Anne
  Her Kind, 137
  Starry Night, The, 157

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index of Authors and Titles</th>
<th>441</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Shakespeare, William

Sonnet 29 (When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes), 236
Sonnet 73 (That time of year thou mayst in me behold), 33
Sonnet 116 (Let me not to the marriage of true minds), 237
Sonnet 130 (My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun), 126
Sonnet 146 (Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth), 124
Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, The, 280

Shelley, Percy Bysshe

Ozymandias, 212
Shooting an Elephant, 267
Shropshire Lad #27 ("Is My Team Ploughing?"), 428
Sick Rose, The, 129
Silken Tent, The, 240
Silko, Leslie Marmon
Man to Send Rain Clouds, The, 51

Silver, Norman
txt commandments, 31
Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill (photograph), 90

Sloven Women Arrive at Ellis Island in the Winter of 1910 (photograph), 358

Snyder, Gary
Hay for the Horses, 335
So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans, 360
Solitary Reaper, The, 332
Song, Cathy
Beauty and Sadness, 155
Song (Go, lovely rose), 128
Song: Love Armed, 46
Sonnet 116 (Let me not to the marriage of true minds), 237
Sonnet 130 (My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun), 126
Sonnet 146 (Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth), 124

These are the days when Birds come back, 142
Things They Carried, The, 383
This World is not Conclusion, 145
Those Winter Sundays, 335
Those—dying, then, 148
Three Soldiers, 23
Thurber, James
   Secret Life of Walter Mitty, The, 44
To an Athlete Dying Young, 223
To Autumn, 184
To be of use, 337
To Build a Fire, 178
To His Coy Mistress, 238
To Live in the Borderlands Means You, 359
To the Lady, 361
To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time, 55
Today Will Be a Quiet Day, 208
Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, The, 280
Transformations, 184
Traveling Through the Dark, 215
Traven, B.
   Assembly Line, 329
Trifles, 117
Turtle, 192
Two Kinds, 348
txt commandments, 31
Tyger, The, 275
Ulysses, 213
Unguarded Gates, The, 355
Unknown Citizen, The, 394
Updike, John
   A & P, 327
   Before the Mirror, 167
   Ex-Basketball Player, 339
   Oliver’s Evolution, 252
Uphill, 221
Upon Julia’s Clothes, 129
Use of Force, The, 378
Valdez, Luis
   Los Vendidos, 364
Valediction: Forbidding Mourning, A, 238
Van Gogh’s Bed, 150
Vanderkam, Laura
   Hookups Starve the Soul, 102
Very Old Man with Enormous Wings: A Tale for Children, A, 421
Vietnam Veterans Memorial (photograph), 397
Viramontes, Helena Maria
   Moths, The, 85
Vision, 191
Vonnegut Jr., Kurt
   Harrison Bergeron, 375
Wagner Matinée, A, 24
Wal-Mart Orientation Program, 321
Walcott, Derek
   Far Cry from Africa, A, 217
Walker, Alice
   Everyday Use, 350
Wallace, Ron
   Worry, 108
Waller, Edmund
   Song (Go, lovely rose), 128
We Real Cool, 134
Welty, Eudora
   Worn Path, A, 205
Western Wind, 234
What Are Little Boys Made Of, 252
What’s That Smell in the Kitchen?, 395
Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?, 65
White Heron, A, 179
Whitman, Walt
   I Hear America Singing, 333
Noiseless Patient Spider, A, 187
Whitmore, Jeffrey
   Bedtime Story, 71
Who Will Light Incense When Mother’s Gone?, 347
Index of Authors and Titles

Who's Irish?, 106
Why We Crave Horror Movies, 421
Wife of Usher's Well, The, 427
Wild Nights—Wild Nights, 122
Williams, William Carlos
  Great Figure, The, 151
  Use of Force, The, 378
Wolff, Tobias
  Bullet in the Brain, 383
  Powder, 408
Woman's Work, 261
Women, 254
Wood-Pile, The, 197
Wordsworth, William
  Solitary Reaper, The, 332

Worn Path, A, 205
Worry, 108
Wright, James
  Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota, 138
Yamada, Mitsuye
  To the Lady, 361
Yeats, William Butler
  Sailing to Byzantium, 219
Yellow Wallpaper, The, 248
Young Goodman Brown, 202