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INTRODUCTION

Worried that you don’t know inside and out all the literature you are about to assign to your AP students? Nervous about teaching poems you haven’t read since college? Doubtful that you can make classic literature come alive for contemporary readers?

“Don’t panic.”

Douglas Adams’s dictate to hitchhikers in the galaxy is good advice for AP Literature teachers as well, particularly those who travel with experienced AP teachers as their guides. With the Literature & Composition: Reading • Writing • Thinking Teacher’s Manual at your fingertips, you should be able to remain calm and confident from the first day of class through to exam day. The journey you and your students are about to embark on has never been more important. At last count, less than 4 percent of college students major in English, and the number of students who take introductory or survey literature courses as part of their general education requirements is also diminishing. This AP Literature course may be the last opportunity many of your students will have to read challenging works and thus develop a deep understanding and appreciation of literature. This could be the last chance these readers have to talk about poetry, to reflect on how “the world is too much with” them. It might be the only time in their lives when they can safely explore the “heart of darkness.”

Just remember: “Don’t panic.”

All of the materials you will find in this guide have been created by expert AP teachers—individuals with years of experience preparing students both for the AP exam and for a lifelong appreciation of literature. Their love for the poetry and prose shines through in every lesson, as does their knowledge of today’s teenagers. These are teachers who know that on some days you feel like Sisyphus, pushing a rock up a hill only to have it roll back down at you the next morning. While the AP Literature curriculum is a college-level course of study, our AP students—though able and willing—are, nevertheless, just seventeen-year-olds and need lessons that will help them engage with the rigorous content.

This guide is also designed to make the work of teaching AP Literature easier. Given all the demands on a classroom teacher, writing practice questions is not always the best use of your time. We provide suggestions so that you can focus on working with your students and reading their essays. These materials can also serve as models for your own assignments, your own questions. Many of the suggestions are activities that stimulate conversations in both small and full groups—suggestions that embody James Britton’s reminder that “writing float[s] on a sea of talk.”

One of the most wonderful aspects of teaching an AP Literature course is the curricular freedom to lead students via different paths to the same goals: success on the AP exam and a lifelong love of literature. Though this guide offers you a road map that has worked for others, never be afraid to take the road less traveled. What kind of teachers would we be if we encouraged students to take risks in interpretation but never took risks ourselves?

Just remember: “Don’t panic.”

CAROL JAGO
President, National Council of Teachers of English
CHAPTER 5
HOME AND FAMILY

Chapter 5 is the first thematic chapter in the book, and it would probably be a good place to start the year. Since it focuses on the fairly familiar and universal themes of home and family, it is a good way to get students used to analyzing literature before you tackle more abstract topics like “identity” or “tradition.” The terms home and family carry deeply personal associations for individual students as well as broader cultural associations, and the texts in this chapter challenge students to consider the ongoing legacy of parents or parental figures, siblings, extended family, and family traditions. Ultimately these texts explore what family looks like, the struggles that parents face when raising their children, the attempts of children to shake the weight of their past, and what it means to be in a place called home.

Chapter 5, however, starts off with what just might be the most difficult text in the book — “The Dead,” by James Joyce (p. 162). Unless you have an unusually advanced class, it is probably not a good place to start. The chapter offers some great opportunities to build up to Joyce gradually. Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing” (p. 265) offers students a chance to look closely at interior monologue and the way it reveals the emotional response that lies beneath the exterior. To those at the party in “The Dead,” Gabriel is the master orator, eagerly playing his role. Underneath this exterior, however, is an entirely different story. Similarly, the mother’s interior monologue in Olsen’s story reveals her insecurities, regrets, and desire to understand whether she could have done things differently for her daughter. Anne Bradstreet’s “Before the Birth of One of Her Children” (p. 298) begins with a line reminiscent of the sentiment that Gabriel expresses at the end of “The Dead,” offering an opportunity to consider the idea of an ever-fading world in a narrower context. William Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven” (p. 299) can be used to introduce the idea of the influence that remains after someone has faded out of this world. The intellectual intensity of William Butler Yeats’s “A Prayer for My Daughter” (p. 302) makes it a good text on which students can practice close reading before they begin working with “The Dead.” Once students have worked with these texts, they will be better able to approach Joyce’s work. It would be a good idea to begin slowly with “The Dead.” As with Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (p. 369), the brevity can be misleading. Consider modeling close reading with the first few pages before asking students to read the entire story; you may find that the extra day you take to do this will pay off quite considerably by the time students reach the end of the piece.

A number of accessible works in this unit can be helpful as inroads to the issues other works will explore in more detail. Linda Pastan’s poem “Marks” (p. 315) has immediate appeal to students, both for its parallel to public education and for its sharp, humorous tone. Students will undoubtedly bring their individual perspectives to a piece like Jacob Lawrence’s “A Family” (p. 329), which will resemble the experiences of some while conflicting with those of others. A look at Li-Young Lee’s poem “The Hammock” (p. 319) invites students to consider the generational “unknowns” that make up our experiences with parents and children, and how our lives fit between them. Olsen’s short story “I Stand Here Ironing” and Langston Hughes’s poem “Mother to Son” (p. 305) will give students a new perspective to consider: that of a mother preoccupied with thoughts of her child’s development.

Because mothers are the first connections to family, many texts grapple with the mother-child relationship, something with which students will undoubtedly be familiar in one form or another. The mother in Anne Bradstreet’s poem “Before the Birth of One of Her Children” wishes to be reassured that her child will be protected from harm, even if she is not there to provide security. As babies grow into children, maternal concerns become gender specific; this issue will resonate with students, who themselves are being mothered in various ways. The speaker in Sharon Olds’s “Rite of Passage” (p. 313) is concerned about her son’s well-being, particularly as he negotiates a tense discussion with other boys that threatens to result in conflict. This lighthearted poem nevertheless carries greater implications about man’s tendency to violence, and how allies and enemies are formed.
Part 1: Using Literature & Composition

The typical mother-daughter relationship is generally fraught with passion, both positive and negative, as the daughter in question grows into womanhood. The paired poems “The Pomegranate” by Eavan Boland (p. 323) and “The Bistro Styx” by Rita Dove (p. 326) provide an opportunity to explore the complex and fascinating dynamic between mothers and their daughters, especially as these daughters embark on their own young adulthood. “Saving Sourdi” by May-lee Chai (p. 281) shows us a girl who assumes what she believes to be the role of protector over her older sister, convinced that her mother does not know what her daughter needs. In this case, students can reflect on times when they have assumed the role of caregiver over a family member or friend. “The Moths” by Helena María Viramontes (p. 272) also features a precocious young girl, who eventually discovers family and spirituality while taking care of her dying grandmother. Students, both male and female, may be able to relate to the ideas presented in these texts of both being mothered and mothering.

Fathers, of course, are also cornerstones in the formation and maintenance of home and family. As the opening quote of the chapter indicates, it is the families who have problems that are often the most interesting, and many of the interesting families in this chapter revolve around fathers and their children. August Wilson’s Fences (p. 195), a play that leans heavily on sports as a metaphor for life, provides students with a moving and tragic exploration of the ways in which fathers — in this case the complicated and towering father Troy Maxson — can both inspire and impair the journey of a child toward adulthood. Just as the mother-daughter relationship can be turbulent, the father-son relationship can explode during a son’s adolescence, something to which both Troy’s younger son, Cory, and some students will testify. The speaker in “My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke (p. 307) is ambiguous in his recollection of an encounter with his father, either embracing a fond memory or lamenting a past that scarred him, something that students will need to decide for themselves. The speaker in Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays” (p. 308) is unambiguously appreciative of the fires his father used to build on cold winter mornings, giving students an opportunity to reflect on what father figures contribute to a family structure that no other member can quite replace. Finally, Sylvia Plath leaves no doubt of the power a father has to irreversibly harm a child in her devastating poem “Daddy” (p. 310), while F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” (p. 250) traces the steps of a father desperately trying to undo the harm he knows he caused his daughter during a time in his life he wishes he could revisit and change. It’s true that some of the texts in this chapter paint a generally unflattering picture of fatherhood; students will need to decide for themselves how these pieces reflect a modern understanding of fatherhood, and how they do not.

Although the focus of home and family is drawn tightly on parents and children, it is not entirely limited to this scope. The enduring influence of those who have passed is central to Joyce’s intensely drawn image of family and tradition in Ireland at the turn of the last century. In “The Dead,” Joyce explores how those who have died continue to shape how those who are left behind understand their world and their own inevitable end. Similarly, Viramontes’s “The Moths” depicts a girl who better understands her place in her family after spending time with her dying grandmother. Ben Jonson’s “On My First Son” (p. 297) laments the death of a child whose loss teaches the speaker to understand hope differently, while Wordsworth’s evocative “We Are Seven” finds the speaker unable to convince a small girl that her dead siblings are any less present than when they were still alive. These pieces provide students with the opportunity to expand their field of view beyond their immediate families, and to consider how the lives of those who came before have affected who and where they are today.

The Conversation begins with us seated around the table, picking up not only on the Jacob Lawrence painting (p. 329) but on the ideas running throughout the chapter as a whole. Laura Esquivel’s wonderfully imaginative “January: Christmas Rolls” (p. 339), in which smells transport characters through the recesses of memory, is a piece that will encourage students to embrace the fine line between food and metaphor and between who we are in the present and how our past lives on in our daily understanding of life. Finally, Geeta Kothari’s “If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?” (p. 351) examines how food is more than sustenance, in that it transmits culture and shapes how we understand our world.
SUGGESTED APPROACHES

Before Reading

Historical Context

Because this short story is an exploration of Dublin life during Joyce's time (1882–1941), it is helpful for students to have some knowledge of the historical context of Ireland. Consider dividing your class into small research groups, each with a different focus. Some of the possible areas of research include popular culture in Ireland; religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics; details from Joyce's development as a writer; traditional foods of Ireland; political conflicts within Ireland; the relationship between Ireland and England; and Joyce's struggles in getting *Dubliners* published. These need not be exhaustive research reports by any means, but they should be structured in a way that each group can share its findings in a short class presentation.

Epiphany

Joyce is known for characters that experience a sudden new awareness, or epiphany — a literary-criticism term that Joyce introduced. The epiphany refers to a sudden insight into the nature of something, so that the everyday is transformed and its true essence revealed. In order to help students access this important concept, consider some of the following approaches:

- Have students in small groups create a two- to three-minute skit in which a character or characters experience a sudden new awareness. The skit must focus on a specific object, gesture, statement, situation, or moment that brings about this new awareness. Debrief their choices after each group performs.
- Have students divide a piece of paper into two halves. Ask students to draw a picture on one side of their paper of an object as it actually appears, and to draw a picture on the other side that depicts what the object looks like under the surface — in other words, its inner workings, or “essence.” For example, a student might draw a picture of her driver's license on one side of the paper, and draw something that depicts the freedom or responsibility that the new license entails on the other.
- Have students freewrite about a time when they came to a new, sudden understanding about life. What prompted their new understanding, and what objects, images, and feelings do they associate with that sudden change?

After Reading

Epiphany

Revisit paragraph 426, pointing out that this is a moment of epiphany for Gabriel. First ask students to list the factors they believe led up to this moment. In other words, why does this moment happen for Gabriel at this point in the story rather than when he first sees Gretta standing on the landing listening to “The Lass of Aughrim”? Once students have offered their ideas, lead them in a think-aloud reading of the paragraph, working through the paragraph sentence by sentence. Some questions that can be used to guide this think-aloud follow:

Sentence One: What irony is Gabriel referring to, and why is its failure humiliating?
Sentence Two: What contrast is suggested in this sentence? What does Gabriel fear?
Sentence Three: What “shameful consciousness” is Gabriel experiencing?
Sentence Four: Why does Gabriel see himself as “a ludicrous figure”? What are the qualities he sees in himself that lead him to conclude that he is a “pitiable fatuous fellow”?
Sentence Five: Why does *instinct* make him turn his back to the light?
Once you have led students through the think-aloud, have them consider how it has prepared them to better understand Gabriel’s tears in paragraph 450. Ask them whether they believe that Gabriel’s epiphany will lead to significant changes in his behavior, and have them give their reasoning behind their conclusion. You may want students to engage in freewriting or a class discussion.

**Examination of the Public Life**

Joyce asserted that “The Dead” is an examination of the failures of the public life. The public life includes the social, religious, cultural, and political systems that in many ways govern the manner in which people behave. In “The Dead,” Joyce uses the Feast of the Epiphany as a way to comment on each of these systems, either directly through the conversations the characters have or indirectly through Gabriel’s thoughts. Divide students into groups, and assign each group the task of going through the text and finding quotes that address one of these systems. Be prepared for some overlap due to the complex nature of each of these systems. After students have gathered their quotes, ask them to use their evidence to construct what they believe to be Joyce’s commentary about the system. In other words, what exactly is Joyce holding up to scrutiny about each system, and what assertions does he make? Are the criticisms of the systems he is commenting on also relevant in modern America?

**“The Lass of Aughrim”**

The song that Mr. D’Arcy sings is entitled “The Lass of Aughrim,” which is also the song that Michael Furey once sang to Gretta. The town in the title of the song is a village on the main Galway–Dublin road, and it was the site of a famous battle in the 1600s. Read the lyrics (which vary a bit from those printed in Joyce’s story) and then speculate why this song is so poignant for Gretta:

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If you’ll be the lass of Aughrim
As I am taking you mean to be
Tell me the first token
That passed between you and me.

O don’t you remember
That night on yon lean hill
When we both met together
Which I am sorry now to tell.

The rain falls on my yellow locks
And the dew it wets my skin;
My babe lies cold within my arms;
Lord Gregory, let me in.
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**Gretta’s Epiphany?**

While we are privy to Gabriel’s thoughts throughout the evening, we hear little from Gretta. Write a letter from Gretta to Michael Furey explaining how her life has turned out without him. What has Gretta realized about herself or the world around her? Is she as hard on Gabriel as he is on himself? Why or why not? How might her life have been different if Michael Furey had not died? If he hadn’t died, would she have stayed with him? What regrets does she have about how her life turned out?

**Film**

John Huston directed a wonderful version of *The Dead* (rated PG). While you probably wouldn’t want to show the entire film, it is a great resource to use when discussing the traditional food and dance that permeate the story. You may also want to use it for Gabriel’s dinner speech as well as his epiphany, both extremely well-acted by Donal McCann.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. “The Dead” opens with “Lily, the caretaker’s daughter,” taking the guests’ coats. She is the first character with whom Gabriel interacts, and Gabriel is rattled by their conversation. Reread
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the story's first few pages, looking carefully at the way Joyce describes Lily's role in the Morkan household. Why do you think she answers Gabriel so sharply? Why do you think Gabriel gives her money? Why is Gabriel “discomposed by the girl's bitter and sudden retort” (para. 29)?

Lily's sharp response to Gabriel comes after he makes an assumption about her life plans, which also reveals what he perceives as her limited possibilities. Her reply indicates both her frustration with men and her ability to confront her situation without any illusions. From the moment he encounters Lily, whose very name evokes the idea of funerals, Gabriel is appropriately cordial, allowing her to help him off with his overcoat in the pantry, and then smiling to himself when he notices how she pronounces his last name with “three syllables” (para. 12). Both her accent and her duties indicate her social standing. Gabriel's attempt to make small talk with Lily as he gets out of his winter garments leads him first to inquire about her studies, and when she tells him she is “done schooling” (para. 16), Gabriel's immediate response is to assume that she must then be in the process of finding someone to marry. Lily quickly replies that men are “only all palaver and what they can get out of you” (para. 19) with a vehemence that surprises Gabriel. Gabriel's cheeks color, and he feels as if he has “made a mistake” (para. 20), indicating that he recognizes he is taking part in a conversation from a different life perspective than Lily. While she is clearly capable, she is now at a point in her life when she could be preparing for marriage and motherhood, no longer “nursing a rag doll” (para. 12), as she had as a child. However, both Gabriel and Lily recognize in this brief exchange that her social station limits her possibilities and does not afford her the chance to be courted by men who could provide the kind of life in which she would not have to be “run off her feet” on the Feast of the Epiphany (para. 1). In his discomfort Gabriel hands her a coin, a gesture that he believes acknowledges her financial need while masquerading as Christmas largess. He then walks “rapidly towards the door” (para. 24), both to ensure that she keeps the coin, something that could be viewed as a small penance paid to the working class, and to get away from his own discomfort. This brief exchange illustrates the significance of social class in Ireland at the time, and touches on the pain of limited life prospects — issues Joyce continues to address throughout the story.

2. The Morkan sisters' party takes place on the Feast of the Epiphany, celebrated on January 6 and commemorating the visit of the Magi, or Three Kings, to the baby Jesus. Although the feast day has different interpretations and is celebrated in different ways, all churches agree that it commemorates the manifestation of Christ to the world. Why might Joyce have chosen this particular feast day on which to set “The Dead”?

In setting the story on this day, Joyce is able to examine Gabriel's personal epiphany — that one should act boldly in the face of one's mortality — backgrounded against a country that is confined by its traditions, unwilling or unable to adapt to the changes the modern world requires. In the Christian tradition, Christ's manifestation in the world signifies a power over death. In some ways the characters in this story need to overcome the kind of death associated with living lives that are mired in the past, unable to break out of tradition. See question 14 in Questions on Style and Structure for a detailed analysis of Gabriel's personal epiphany. The juxtaposition of Gabriel's epiphany with the Epiphany of Christ works on a number of levels. Ironically, his epiphany implies that cultural traditions — such as the Epiphany party he attended — are dead or dying, and that the petty roles he plays in offering commemorative speeches at events like these or helping his aunts to keep this tradition alive are trivial in the face of mortality and pale in the comparison of real, robust emotional connections. Gabriel's epiphany also seems to be a modern, secular version of the Christian Epiphany. As the Magi saw the savior of the world made manifest to them, Gabriel has a realization of what is basically a post-religious meaning of life.

3. Who do you think the dead are in “The Dead”?

Students will tend toward the literal in their responses to this question, and there are a number of people who have died that play an important role in this story. You may want to challenge them to think not just about the people who have died but also about how deadness as an abstraction is addressed. The dead are those who have passed, but they are also “thoughts of the past, of youth, of changes” (para. 253) that recur in people's minds. Certainly, people who have died are in attendance along with the living on this festive night. Although many of them have long passed, their memories and stories fill the thoughts of those at the party. Even the name of the central character is an allusion to the biblical Gabriel, the angel responsible for blowing the horn that initiates the end of time. Joyce enumerates
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many people who have died or will die in the story. Gabriel remembers his deceased mother (para. 99), Mr. Browne discusses deceased tenors (para. 213), Gretta remembers the death of Michael Furey (para. 432), and Gabriel considers that his aunt will soon die (para. 448).

However, it is most important to think about the dead on a more abstract plane; again, it would be fruitful to look at question 14 in the Questions on Style and Structure section, which treats Gabriel’s revelation in some detail, because the interpretation of the story as a whole hinges on this moment. Broadly speaking, the dead can refer both to Irish cultural traditions — such as the Epiphany party that occupies most of the story — and to the sense of mortality that Gabriel achieves by the end of the story. Gabriel’s realization that traditions both are literally dying and can be personally deadening, and that one must take a bold stand in the face of one’s mortality, makes “The Dead” a fitting title for the story.

4. What are some of the ways in which Gabriel is different from the other party guests? Why is he hesitant to quote Robert Browning in his speech (para. 29)?

Although he is always civil and polite to others, Gabriel holds himself in higher esteem than he does most of the other guests, because he is aware that he is more educated than they are. The first indication of this comes shortly after his initial exchange with Lily, in which he inadvertently causes her some insult by reminding her of the limits of her social station. As soon as he finds a way to get away from Lily, he begins to worry about his upcoming speech. In particular, he fears that the lines he intends to quote from Browning might be “above the heads of his hearers.” Even the sound of the “indelicate clacking of the men’s heels” at the party remind Gabriel that “their grade of culture differed from his.” He clearly sees himself as intellectually superior to those in attendance, and fears “airing his superior education” (para. 29).

The only person he considers his intellectual equal is Miss Ivors, with whom he attended university, who teases Gabriel about being a West Briton. This mild political teasing bothers Gabriel enough that he wants to make a comment about literature being above politics, but he stops himself for fear of sounding grandiose. This exchange with Miss Ivors frustrates Gabriel and forces him to recognize a bit of his own arrogance. He attempts to get back at her through his speech by including a comment about the “hypereducated generation,” a clear dig. He is satisfied with his decision to include the line, and dismisses the fact that he was including it in the portion of the speech meant to praise his aunts by concluding that they are “only two ignorant old women” (para. 155), which is particularly harsh language.

During the time leading up to dinner, Gabriel is more concerned with his speech than he is in interacting with the other guests. He does not fully enter into the various conversations, and when the dinner is ready, he grandstands as the father figure to the entire assembly, making a big production of carving the goose and admitting to the reader that he “liked nothing better than to find himself at the head of a well-laden table” (para. 197). He employs false modesty when he begins his speech, referring to his “poor powers as a speaker” (para. 243). When he does give his carefully worded speech, he seems certain that it is a success, as the guests applaud heartily. Gabriel is at once aware of the role he plays in this yearly drama as the one who must deliver the summative speech of the evening. At the same time he sees himself as perhaps the only one worthy of such a position, not believing the others intelligent or perceptive enough to carry it off well.

5. A look at a map and a review of the historical antagonism between Ireland and England might help you understand what Miss Ivors means when she accuses Gabriel of being a West Briton (para. 111). What evidence does the story provide that makes her accusation both somewhat true and particularly insulting?

Miss Ivors proves to be a person who can force Gabriel to confront some of his own prejudices against his home country of Ireland, which had a long and conflicted relationship with England. The abuses that Ireland suffered over the years at the hands of its British neighbors have historically been a very sensitive and sore subject for the Irish. The proximity of these two countries led to constant political struggles, which continue to some extent into the twenty-first century. Accusing Gabriel of being a West Briton means, at least on one level, allying him squarely with a former foe. Although Gabriel is Irish, and he does mention his respect for the Irish tradition of hospitality in his speech, he also seems in some ways to view himself as a citizen of Great Britain first and Irish second. Miss Ivors first calls him out for not revealing his identity as a weekly book reviewer in the British newspaper the Daily Express,
which Miss Ivors uses as a gently mocking accusation that Gabriel is a West Briton. The fact that he conceals his identity when writing for a British newspaper seems suspect to Miss Ivors, and she delights in teasing him about it. She presses him to confront his Irish roots, reminding him that Gretta is from Connacht, to which Gabriel curtly replies that it is Gretta’s family that is from Connacht, not Gretta (para. 117). He seems to even wish to distance his wife from her Irish roots. His vacation plans involve trips to “France or Belgium or perhaps Germany” (para. 123) rather than to parts of Ireland like the Aran Isles, even though Gretta would “love to see Galway again” (para. 149). He also asserts that Irish is not his language, and finally claims that he is “sick of [his] own country” (para. 130). When Miss Ivors asks him why, he is unable to come up with a response. He seems unwilling to share his reasons behind his current attitude toward Ireland, and Miss Ivors seems to understand that this political conversation with a man who won’t honestly confront his own prejudices will go nowhere. Interestingly, Joyce also struggled with his Irish identity. An expatriate who spent much of his time outside of his native Ireland, Joyce both admired his native home and chastised it for some of its political and religious stances. Like Joyce, Gabriel certainly admires parts of his native land, but he wishes to be counted as a citizen of Great Britain as a whole.

6. In paragraphs 207–24, the party guests discuss the local music scene, past and present. In a way, it is a discussion of high culture versus popular culture. What do the guests’ opinions on music reveal about them? What might Joyce have thought about the conflict between high and popular culture?

In discussing their artistic preferences related to opera, the guests reveal a tendency to idealize the past and a desire to separate the high culture of classic opera from current opera, which has not yet been embraced by purists. It also raises the issue of how art can be evaluated. The conversation reflects the desire on the part of those involved, with the notable exception of Freddy Malins, to associate themselves with what they consider the highest standards of enduring art, and their subsequent need to create a standard against which nothing can possibly compare. Initially the conversation is about the current opera company performing at the Theatre Royal. Mr. D’Arcy praises a member of the company, who is summarily dismissed by Miss Furlong as having a “vulgar style of production” (para. 207), connoting a base quality unacceptable in the world of high art. Mary Jane later moves the conversation away from the current company performing at the Theatre Royal and steers it back to “the legitimate opera” (para. 213). Freddy Malins, the only person in the conversation who actually saw the company perform, mentions “a negro chieftain . . . who had one of the finest tenor voices he had ever heard” (para. 207). Mr. Browne is dismissive in his response to Freddy, who then queries the group about their reason for not admiring the singer being because he is “only a black” (para. 212). Nobody responds to his question, which surfaces their own racist attitudes. Mr. Browne then begins to idealize a past in which an Italian tenor had five encores, “introducing a high C every time” — a feat that is no doubt an exaggeration of the reality, which then begins to establish an impossible past standard against which no current singer could be compared. He even describes the most unlikely and overblown description of people acting as horses pulling the carriage of “some great prima donna” (para. 213). Mr. D’Arcy, no doubt a bit defensive of his own abilities as a current tenor, raises the point that in his opinion, there are still great opera singers.

The conversation primarily casts the past as a time when “there was something like singing to be heard in Dublin” (para. 213), contrasted with a present that struggles to maintain the glory of old opera. While Mr. Browne and Mr. D’Arcy exchange their opinions about well-known singers from the past and present, Aunt Kate reflects on a relatively forgotten tenor who simply had “the purest tenor voice that was ever put into a man’s throat” (para. 221). Her comments are made without any qualification or support from expert opinion. Her frank assessment ultimately raises the question of how high art and popular art can be measured. Does Mr. Browne’s idealized past of the opera render Mr. D’Arcy’s estimation of current singers impossible to evaluate? Is Aunt Kate’s honest and unfiltered response to a tenor that no one remembers as valuable as any expert opinion? The students will come up with a variety of answers regarding Joyce’s opinion. However, it is difficult to argue that he would come down solidly on the side of a blowhard such as Mr. Browne, who is supposedly a traditionalist when it comes to opera. Conversely, it is clear that Joyce admires excellence and does not wish to dispense with past standards completely. In any case, the discussion of the value of popular fiction and that of classics like this short story will no doubt engage your students’ opinions of the relative value of art and entertainment.
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7. Gabriel watches his wife at the top of the stairs: “There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of” (para. 314). Try to answer Gabriel’s question.

This is a difficult question because Joyce is far from explicit here, and students may find evidence for a variety of interpretations. The strongest responses will focus on the specific details in the quote. Gretta is on the stairs, suggesting the possibility that she is in an elevated position, out of the reach of those who still live. She is in shadow, mysteriously obscured yet still familiar. The distant music calls from a place that lies beyond this world, beckoning her and drawing her farther away with each note. From the vantage point of having completed the story, we know what Gabriel does not — that his wife is entertaining the memory that will precipitate his epiphany. (See question 14 in Questions on Style and Structure for a detailed discussion of the epiphany.) Given this, one very plausible interpretation is that she stands for the sort of attitude that one ought to take toward the world: that given the fact of mortality, things only really have value if they are the sorts of things we’d be willing to die for. Gretta is remembering that a boy once died for her, and Gabriel will later come to see his concerns as petty and egotistical in the face of mortality. But at this point in the story, he is still absorbed in the party; that his wife is considering mortality is likely to seem detached from day-to-day concerns, as is the general attitude she symbolizes here. To see one’s life and evaluate one’s actions from the perspective of death is well symbolized by an elevated figure listening to something difficult to hear.

8. Do Gabriel and Gretta seem mismatched? Consider how she interacts with his family, whether he is defensive about her background, and how he responds to finding out that she has a history that she had not previously shared with him. Do you think she should have told him? Explain why “Generous tears filled Gabriel’s eyes” (para. 450). Will Gretta’s revelation change her and Gabriel’s relationship?

On the surface, Gabriel and Gretta seem to be well matched. Their behavior at the party suggests a couple used to proper interaction at social engagements, and their few exchanges do not indicate any deep strife. However, at the end of the story, significant details emerge that suggest their relationship was civil and proper but lacked the kind of passion that the seventeen-year-old Michael Furey held for Gretta, and Gabriel may only be a poor substitute for Michael’s memory.

When Gretta and Gabriel arrive at the party, he immediately offers a humorous remark about the fact that his wife “takes three mortal hours to dress herself” (para. 5), an indication that he and Gretta engage in this kind of harmless banter. He also reveals his protective side when explaining that he and Gretta would not be taking a cab back to Monkstown at the end of the night because he does not want her to catch a cold, as she had the year before. He also comments on her strong will, claiming “she’d walk home in the snow if she were let” (para. 36). Gretta remarks on Gabriel’s tendency to be overprotective, lightheartedly claiming that if he had his way, he would “buy [her] . . . a diving suit” (para. 40) to protect her from the rain. These lighthearted exchanges indicate that Gabriel is perhaps overly protective but that Gretta is able to find the humor in his paternal ways.

As the evening progresses, Gabriel focuses primarily on his speech, reserving his most lively exchange for Miss Ivors, who suggests he and Gretta take a trip to the Aran Isles in the coming summer. Gretta is excited by the idea, but Gabriel’s response is to coldly suggest she go by herself. This elicits one of the open displays of resentment from Gretta, who turns to Mrs. Malins and says, “There’s a nice husband for you” (para. 152). These small exchanges do not indicate a couple who is terribly mismatched, but they do suggest that there is some distance between the proper, overly serious Gabriel and the more playful and adventuresome Gretta. When walking home from the party, the more significant issues begin to unfold. As Gabriel and Gretta walk though the snow-covered streets with Mr. D’Arcy, Gabriel is seized by a sudden passion for Gretta. He wishes to “catch her by the shoulders and say something foolish and affectionate into her ear” (para. 352), and “a wave of . . . tender joy escaped from his heart” (para. 355). This apparent passion seems sudden and out of character for Gabriel. It is at this moment of passion and excitement that he reveals a darker evaluation of their relationship, wishing he could “make her forget the years of their dull existence together and remember only their moments of ecstasy” (para. 355). Rather than being joyful and filled with excitement, the years that Gabriel and Gretta have spent together appear to have been tedious, punctuated by brief, fleeting moments of happiness.
The dreariness of this evaluation is then deepened when Gretta shares the story of Michael Furey, the boy who loved her so much he was willing to risk death for her. Gabriel now understands “how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life” (para. 447), realizing that he was no match for Michael Furey. Furthermore, he realizes that he had never felt the kind of love that Michael Furey had felt for Gretta those many years ago, and that he was probably incapable of this kind of love. Gabriel and Gretta are well matched socially, and seemed willing to play their respective roles as protective husband and supportive wife. However, in the end, they must both confront the lifeless reality of the dullness of their years spent together.

9. What is your impression of Dublin society from this story? Discuss what “The Dead” reveals about class, religion, and gender in early twentieth-century Dublin.

The Dublin society revealed in “The Dead” is one that reflects a country that is holding on to old ideas of class, religion, and gender, even as it tries to be seen as a country that can continue to develop and thrive in the modern world, even embracing new ideas from “the continent.” Joyce was fond of the tradition of “genuine warm-hearted courteous Irish hospitality” (para. 248), and the story’s central character reflects this old Ireland in a number of ways, as he plays his part during the festivities of the evening. Gabriel is mindful of the content of his speech, not wishing to go above the heads of those in attendance. He knows that his aunts rely on him to manage Freddy Malins, who will likely show up at the party a bit inebriated. He takes part in the traditional dance, even though he does not seem to relish the task. When the time for dinner comes, he stoically carves the goose, refusing to eat until all have been properly served and admitting he “liked nothing better than to find himself at the head of a well-laden table” (para. 197). When the time comes for his speech, he delivers it with an apparent humility, declaring that Ireland “has no tradition which does it so much honour and which it should guard so jealously as that of its hospitality” (para. 248). These words are genuine, and even though according to the well-traveled Gabriel some countries consider it a failing, he considers it “a princely failing” that should be cultivated. Those at the party indulge in the bounty of the evening gratefully, making sure that proper admiration and thanks are given to the three hostesses, who sit and radiate in the warm of the evening. This is Ireland at its best and its most generous.

However, there are also those present who do not take part in the festivities but who must wait on everyone else, such as the caretaker, Lily, who is from a different class. Lily’s options seem few, and everything — including her slightly different accent — sets her apart from the guests at the party. But it is not only the working class that is set apart from the guests; even among the guests there seems to be some class differentiation. For example, Gabriel is quick to remind Miss Ivors that it is Gretta’s “people” (para. 117) who come from the less cosmopolitan Connacht, not Gretta herself. He still winces when he thinks of his mother’s comment that Gretta was “country cute,” a description meant to indicate that Gretta was a bit beneath Gabriel’s station, as he had “taken his degree in the Royal University” (para. 99). On the one hand Gabriel is intent on establishing Gretta’s social credentials, while on the other he continues to be rankled by the idea that his mother never truly embraced Gretta as his social equal.

Freddy Malins is someone who seems to not be concerned with the rigid class distinctions. Although he comes from the same class as the other guests, he manages to operate slightly outside of them because of his tendency to drink a bit heavily. In his role as an outsider, Freddy is able to challenge the apparent racism of Mr. D’Arcy and Mr. Browne, who seem ready to dismiss a singer because he is not white. Freddy also is the most sincere in his praise for Aunt Julia after she sings “Arrayed for the Bridal,” while others at the party seem to be merely heaping disingenuous praise.

In addition to the class issue being raised, politics play a subtle role. The exchange between Miss Ivors and Gabriel involving his authorship of a weekly editorial for a British newspaper is playful in some ways, but it carries a serious undertone. Ivors is clearly more interested in Irish traditions and politics than Gabriel is. She demonstrates this by speaking Gaelic, vacationing in the Aran Isles, challenging Gabriel to learn more about his own people, and taking part in the traditional dancing. Her reference to Gabriel as a West Briton is a direct challenge to his Irish ancestry, and he is bothered by the implication. Ivors in some ways represents the more nationalistic side of Irish politics, someone who Gabriel wishes to dismiss as part of a generation that is “new and very serious and hypereducated” (para. 155).

Religion, long a sore and difficult subject in Ireland, also briefly comes up when Aunt Kate works herself into a passion discussing the Pope’s recent decision “to turn out the women out of the [church]
choirs” (para. 170), a conversation that is quickly cut off by Mary Jane, who reproves Aunt Kate for “giving scandal to Mr. Browne who [was] of the other persuasion” (para. 172). The conversation turns to other matters, leaving the impression that religion is still a subject too difficult to manage in polite company.

The issue of gender also is addressed in the story, as the women and men are clearly aware of their respective roles. The women cook, serve, and perform, while the men drink, discuss current events, and manage the significant tasks, such as giving speeches and carving the goose squarely at the head of the table. The three hostesses illustrate the limitations of their station, working with music pupils from “better-class families” (para. 2) and taking most of their pleasure from hosting this annual dance, “gossiping and laughing and fussing” (para. 1) all the while.

10. Joyce said that he added “The Dead” to Dubliners to provide uplift to a collection that many found dreary. Yet its title hardly suggests uplift. What was your emotional response to “The Dead”? In what ways might it be uplifting?

This is a question that will no doubt bring a variety of responses, considering that it asks students to focus on their emotional response to this complex story. One of the challenges is that the story is very subtle, and much of the emotional force comes in the final few pages, when Gabriel reevaluates his life with Gretta and the ultimate fate of everyone. To open up this question, you might ask students to consider some of the more poignant lines, such as when Gabriel contends that it is better to “pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age” (para. 449), or when he realizes that he never experienced the fierce feeling that Michael Furey had for Gretta, “but he knew that such a feeling must be love” (para. 450), or when he considers his own mortality and that his “own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world” (para. 450). Students’ evaluations will largely hinge on their reading of the final few paragraphs of the story and whether they consider Gabriel’s epiphany to be hopeful or bleak. (See question 14 in Questions on Style and Structure.) In any case, many of the party scenes add uplift and levity to the collection.

11. Joyce said that one of the purposes of “The Dead” was to reproduce Dublin’s “ingenuous insularity and its hospitality.” Discuss what he might have meant by “ingenuous insularity” and whether you think the phrase is positive or negative. Find examples in the story that illustrate Dublin’s insularity and hospitality.

It is no coincidence that Joyce linked Ireland’s “ingenuous insularity” with its “hospitality,” and the intricately described feast at the center of the evening illustrates this connection. The feast has many different elements that need to come together in order to be successful, and those elements have been honed and practiced for many years, leaving those who are not a part of it on the outside looking in. Every person at the party arrives knowing exactly what to expect and what role he or she will be playing. This dance has been an annual event for “years and years” (para. 2), indicating the traditional nature of the gathering. When the dancing begins, everyone falls into line and participates. After prefeasting activities have come to an end, everyone gravitates toward the table for the meal. Gabriel, the man who is expected to carve the goose, is momentarily distracted by his conversation with Miss Ivors and is a bit late in joining the other guests. Even this small delay is enough to send Aunt Kate into a frantic state, and she goes to find Gabriel, “almost wringing her hands in despair” (para. 193). When he does show up, he is ready for his part in the grand performance, and he begins carving the goose with great fanfare. The description of the meal not only details the bounty of the food but also conveys another kind of dance, with people passing food and pouring drinks and otherwise fully engaging in the glorious dinner (paras. 196–202). The food and drink is carefully laid out, including “three squads of bottles of stout and ale and minerals drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms” (para. 196). The regimentation suggested by this description seems necessary for such an elaborate affair to actually be carried off. Clearly this is a tradition that is utterly Irish, from the dances to the music to the food, and Joyce’s careful and flattering description indicates that at least in relation to the feast, he views Ireland’s insularity as a positive quality. At the same time, this regimented social structure is stifling — as Gabriel’s eventual shame shows when he sees himself as “a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror” (para. 426).
12. What part do music and dance play in “The Dead”? Consider their importance in both the ways the characters relate to one another and the context of Irish history and culture.

Music and dance are at the heart of this celebration, as the characters sing traditional songs and move to Irish dance steps. The music and dance bring everyone together — the familiar cultural markers momentarily unifying those in attendance regardless of age or political persuasion. There is a sense that no matter what is going on, save for the dinner itself, music is in the background. Aunt Kate thanks Miss Daly for her “beautiful waltz” (para. 60) as she expresses her relief that Gabriel will be tending to Freddy, indicating that music is playing even as the characters engage in conversation. When a “red-faced young woman” (para. 73), no doubt flush from dancing, bursts in to the room where Mr. Browne is engaging his “charges” (para. 66), she announces that quadrilles will soon begin, and Aunt Kate hurriedly begins to set up the dancing teams. When lancers, a set of five quadrilles, are arranged, Gabriel finds himself partnered with Miss Ivors, who is determined to engage him in a conversation he is not prepared to have. He attempts to “cover his agitation by taking part in the dance with great energy” (para. 136). As the evening progresses, Aunt Julia sings “Arrayed for the Bridal” for the assembled guests, and all applaud loudly at her performance. After dinner, the topic turns to the current state of opera in Ireland, something that is of great interest to many in the room. After Gabriel’s speech, the guests break into song as a tribute to their three hostesses, and the song is “renewed time after time” (para. 265) long into the night. Dance and music fill the evening, backgrounding all discussion and activity, providing a cultural touchstone for all who are gathered, and unifying the scene. Yet music in the story also draws to the fore the decline of Irish culture (see Discussion question 6) and serves as a catalyst for Gabriel’s epiphany, in which he achieves distance from Irish culture and tradition (see question 7 in Questions for Discussion).

13. Do you think Joyce judges the characters in “The Dead”? Explain why or why not.

Students will have a variety of opinions regarding whether or not Joyce judges the characters, and the breadth of the question allows them to conclude that he judges some while sparing others. The key for any response is how effectively the student brings specific details to support a particular conclusion. For example, a case could be made that Miss Ivors escapes Joyce’s judgment. She is sharp, well educated, and deeply connected to Irish culture. She challenges Gabriel in a way that no other character can, acting as a foil to his tendency to engage in empty rhetoric. The conversation leaves him flustered and upset, and causes him to add a line to his speech about hypereducated youth, believing that will sting her in some way. All of this suggests that Joyce may be using Miss Ivors to make a larger political point, one that applauds the desire to enliven Irish politics and make Ireland more distinct from England by asserting its cultural and intellectual heritage. There is also a chance that a student may wish to discuss whether or not Joyce judges the characters as an aggregate. In this case, the student would want to first provide specific evidence that all of the guests represent the Irish public, and then discuss whether Joyce is applauding their current state or instead wishes to judge them. This would be a fairly large brush with which to paint the story and may not adequately allow for the complexity it offers. In light of Gabriel’s epiphany, students should consider which characters “pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion” and which “fade and wither dismally with age” (para. 449). Likewise, whether students think that Joyce judges Gabriel will depend on how they view his epiphany (see question 14 in Questions on Style and Structure).

14. As with much of Joyce’s work, “The Dead” has many autobiographical elements. Like Gretta, Joyce’s wife, Nora, was from Galway, in western Ireland. She had two loves before Joyce, both of whom, like Michael Furey, died young. Does this knowledge change your view of the story? Explain.

Students are often interested in the biographical details of the authors they read. Not only will the fact that there is a very specific personal link to the story be of interest to students, but it may also lead them to see the entire story in a different light. They may want to assume that Gabriel is an autobiographical character for Joyce, and that may make it difficult for them to consider Gabriel outside of that context. It may raise an interesting discussion of how much life experience influences writers, and whether or not biographical information is actually even important when analyzing a text. Students may want to consider whether Gabriel’s epiphany is based on an epiphany Joyce himself had, and how this idea
affects their reading of the epiphany. (This would perhaps suggest that the epiphany is a hopeful one, as Joyce can hardly be accused of wiling away his life doing petty, insignificant things.)

Questions on Style and Structure

1. Joyce wrote one play, *My Brilliant Career*, which he sent to William Archer, Ibsen's English translator, for criticism. The play is lost, but in a letter that survived, Archer stated that he was concerned that Joyce began with a large canvas but in the end focused on only a few people. This criticism became a virtue in Joyce's later works. What is the connection between the large canvas of the party — and Dublin — and the focus on Gabriel at the story's end? How does this approach add another level of meaning to the story?

This, along with the meaning of Gabriel's epiphany, is perhaps the most important question that can be asked about "The Dead," because this connection is not obvious. Having come to grips with his epiphany, it is clear that what Gabriel realizes has broad implications, not just for the other characters in the story but for Irish culture as a whole. By beginning with the broader canvas, Joyce is able to embed Gabriel's personal story within the context of Irish society as a whole. Gabriel's final thoughts can then be read in a way that reaches across all of Ireland, allowing his reflections to move beyond a single man's sadness and to comment on an entire nation.

It is Gretta's explanation of the personal significance of the Irish song "The Lass of Aughrim," sung by Mr. D'Arcy late in the evening, that motivates Gabriel's final reflection. He considers the possibility that at a time when he had "hoped to triumph, some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world" (para. 433). He then considers the many who have passed, the many soon to pass, and finally his own identity, which was "fading out into a grey impalpable world" (para. 450). The final image is that of a snow-covered Ireland, filled with souls who have passed and souls who would pass. On one level Gabriel is contemplating his own mortality. But on another level the story can be viewed as a microcosm of Ireland as a whole, a country whose cultural identity must adapt if it wishes to remain relevant in the modern world, no matter how hard the Morkan sisters try to replicate the same experience year after year. (See question 14 in Style and Structure for a more developed discussion of the epiphany.)

2. How does Joyce create the atmosphere of the party? Look carefully at the detailed descriptions of the hostesses, guests, house, music, and food.

The detail with which Joyce describes the characters and setting in "The Dead" is rich, providing a view of the extravagance of the feast and the pomp of the celebration, one which for thirty years had "never once . . . fallen flat" (para. 2). The richness of the party is steeped in tradition, which is ironically what is also keeping the country as a whole from progressing.

The party is set in a "dark gaunt house" (para. 2) with a "wheezy hall-door bell" (para. 1) and "dark stairs" (para. 8), suggesting a home that is approaching the gray years preceding death. The rooms in the house are numerous enough to host a large dance, with a formal dining area and multiple other places where small groups can gather for conversation. The details suggest a very old and roomy house, one that has been home to numerous Irish families and parties over its many years of existence and is perhaps a bit beyond its prime — a place that reflects Ireland itself.

Dance and music permeate every room of the house. From the moment Gabriel arrives, he is aware of the sound of men's heels clacking in another room, and conversations are often interrupted by either a call for dance partners or an invitation to hear someone sing. The references to music and dance are woven into the narrative: Freddy arrives at the same time there is "a clapping of hands and a final flourish of the pianist" (para. 57); as Gabriel ponders his mother's portrait, he hears Mary Jane "playing again the opening melody with runs of scales after every bar" (para. 100); when Miss Ivors irritates Gabriel with her political comments, he "tries[s] to cover his agitation by taking part in the dance with great energy" (para. 136). Even the hostesses are music teachers, playing the piano dutifully for their guests.

When Gabriel is called to carve the goose, he is greeted with a table filled with an abundant feast, described in great detail in paragraph 196. The "fat brown goose" lay on the same table as a "great ham, stripped of its outer skin and peppered over with crust crumbs." There is a "shallow dish full of blocks
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of blancmange,” a traditional Irish food, along with “a large green leaf-shaped dish . . . on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds,” and “chocolates and sweets wrapped in gold and silver papers.” Even the beverages are elaborately described as “three squads of bottles of stout and ale and minerals drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms.” This truly is a feast for the eyes, and the care with which the hostesses prepared their food, and the appreciation with which the guests devour it, create a scene that is utterly Irish.

Not only are descriptions of the food richly detailed, but minor characters like Mrs. Malins are also brought to life. This “stout, feeble old woman” who “live[s] with her married daughter” makes sure that she talks about her daughter’s “beautiful house . . . in Glasgow” and about “all the friends they ha[ve] there” (para. 138). This party marks the one time during the year that Mrs. Malins comes to Ireland, and while there, she proceeds to discuss how much she loves living in Scotland. In a few lines Joyce is able to create a character that, even though she is somewhat pathetic, prefers to spend her life outside of Ireland.

3. How does Joyce use subtle details to create his characters? Find examples in which a gesture, a color, or an item of clothing helps explain a character.

Joyce’s careful descriptions can be lost on students, who may be more used to characters developed over the course of a novel. They must not only pay attention to the descriptions but draw sophisticated inferences based on those details as well. For example, Gabriel is initially described in terms of his clothing selection as well as his carefully groomed appearance. Not one to neglect appropriate attire for a party, Gabriel’s “patent-leather shoes” (para. 20) are carefully protected from the snow by his galoshes, a new fashion from “the continent” (para. 44) — an indication that he is someone who follows trends from outside of Ireland. The “polished lenses and . . . bright gilt rims” of his glasses “screened his delicate and restless eyes” (para. 21), suggesting a scholarly yet somewhat distant bearing, something that will play a role in his speech. His “glossy black hair” is described down to the point of the curl “slightly beneath the groove left by his hat” (para. 21). Physically he is described as “stout tallish” (para. 21) and “plump” (para. 22), all carefully qualified adjectives that avoid hyperbole. He is also highly observant, noticing the “three syllables” (para. 12) Lily gives his name, a pronunciation that separates the two into their respective social classes. He is distracted by the “indelicate clacking of the men’s heels” dancing in the next room, which reminds him that “their grade of culture differed from his” (para. 29); and when Miss Ivors suggests that Gretta is from Connacht, he curtly clarifies that “her people are” (para. 117), suggesting the distance he wishes to maintain between Gretta and what he considers to be a less sophisticated part of Ireland. He ponders the “grace and mystery” (para. 314) of Gretta standing on the stairs listening to “The Lass of Aughrim,” which he considers symbolic of something, although he cannot decide what the image of her standing there symbolizes. When Miss Ivors challenges him about the fact that he has learned such languages as French and German but not Irish, he “glance[s] right and left nervously,” trying to “keep his good humour under the ordeal which was making a blush invade his forehead” (para. 128). Gabriel’s extreme level of discomfort at this mildly teasing exchange surfaces his severe propriety, something that he is later forced to reexamine. Gabriel’s character is carefully drawn, but his complexity comes from the implications of a slightly reddened face, a curt response, or a lack of desire to vacation in the Aran Isles, rather than an overt statement from the narrator.

4. Amid the swirl of the Morkan sisters’ party, several guests come into focus. What roles do characters such as Freddy Malins, his mother, Miss Ivors, Mr. Browne, and the tenor Mr. D’Arcy play in the story?

As different characters come into the story, a larger picture of Ireland is created, allowing Joyce to ask questions about where Ireland has been as well as what the future holds for those who don’t recognize the consequences of cultural stagnation.

Freddy Malins is cause for concern for the Morkan sisters because they are “dreadfully afraid that [he] might turn up screwed” (para. 3). It appears initially as if they are worried that Freddy might make a scene, disrupting the decorum the sisters so desperately wish to maintain. He does show up having had a few drinks, but Gabriel assures Aunt Kate that it is “hardly noticeable” (para. 93). Freddy seems at first to merely play the humorous drunk, loudly telling stories that make him laugh harder than those who are listening. However, when the conversation turns to the current state of Irish opera,
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it is Freddy who brings up the possibility that a singer he believes has a “grand voice” (para. 210) is dismissed by the guests merely because “he’s only a black” (para. 212). Freddy also applauds with great sincerity when Aunt Julia sings — unlike the other guests, who seem to be applauding out of propriety — and rushes to her to claim that he “never heard [her] voice sound so fresh and so . . . so clear” (para. 157). Although there are those who wish to excuse Freddy as a drunk, he is one who speaks with a frankness not found in the other characters. Perhaps the fact that he is somewhat marginalized allows him to step outside of the rigid limits of Irish culture and speak freely.

Mr. Browne is someone caught up in an idealized Irish past, as evidenced by his insistence that only in the past was there “something like singing to be heard in Dublin” (para. 213). He recounts what he considers to be the glory days of a bygone era, referencing a number of singers no longer alive who once sang in Irish opera halls. During Gabriel’s speech, Browne applauds loudly when “the memory of those dead and gone” (para. 251) is raised. For Browne, the past will always overshadow the present, leaving him unable to embrace the possibilities of a new generation.

These characters, along with others such as Mrs. Malins and Mr. D’Arcy, create a scene in which multiple facets of Irish culture are represented: the older generation unwilling to face the present realities, people from the arts struggling to find legitimacy in a culture holding on to the past, and outsiders offering unfiltered commentary. Joyce offers the possibility that Ireland may be struggling with becoming irrelevant, dead to the possibilities of the future.

5. In paragraph 10, Joyce evokes all five senses. Look for other paragraphs or sentences with this kind of vivid imagery. In addition to making the story come to life, what is the effect of these passages? How do the images come together to help Joyce make a bigger statement about Dublin? about the Irish?

Students will have a varying sense of the cumulative effect of these passages, but sensory description in the story evokes the culture and people of a city steeped in tradition by rendering a traditional party in vivid detail. This provides the reader with evidence for what might be good and what might be stifling about Irish traditions. Paragraph 97 provides another excellent example of Joyce’s ability to evoke the senses, in this case focusing on Freddy Malins, who has shown up at the party slightly drunk. The paragraph begins with Freddy “nearing the climax” of his story while waving off a glass of lemonade from Mr. Browne, who has called “attention to a disarray in [Freddy’s] dress.” Joyce creates energy in this moment, with the noise of Freddy’s voice competing with the determination of Mr. Browne to force a glass of whisky into Freddy’s hand. Mr. Browne, whose face is “wrinkling with mirth,” pours himself a glass of whisky just as Freddy’s voice “explode[s] . . . in a kink of high-pitched bronchitic laughter.” The climax of his story leaves Freddy rubbing “the knuckles of his left fist backwards and forwards into his left eye” and trying to repeat the last phrase “as well as his fit of laughter would allow him.” The noise and breathlessness of Freddy’s story conveys not only his enthusiasm but also the sense that he is perhaps a bit too drunk to realize that he is more entertained than his audience. This scene captures the energy of the party but also exemplifies the kinds of interactions taking place among many of the guests, who seem to talk over one another rather than to one another, laughing at their own jokes even while those around them are not fully listening.

6. Once Gabriel arrives at the party, he reports on much of the action, as well as his reaction to certain events. How does Joyce balance Gabriel’s self-criticism with his open-mindedness about his aunts’ party and the other guests?

Shortly after Gabriel arrives, he inadvertently offends Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, when he asks her about her marriage plans. Her harsh reaction surprises him, and he tries to make amends and excuse himself from his own discomfort by hurriedly pressing a coin into her hands and leaving. Already rattled by this encounter with Lily, he begins to consider the content of his speech in paragraph 29. He wants to make sure that he sounds the correct notes, avoiding any further offense. He reconsiders using the Browning quote, fearing it would be “above the heads of his hearers.” As he ponders his choice, he hears men dancing in the next room, reminding him that “their grade of culture differ[s] from his” and that a quote from a more familiar and popular source would be better. It is not arrogance that drives Gabriel’s comments but a realization that he “would only make himself ridiculous by quoting poetry to them which they could not understand.” He realizes that the consequences of such a mistake would be
an audience who would feel as if he were “airing his superior education,” and he does not want to risk this kind of alienation. If he were to do such a thing, it would mean that he had “fail[ed] with them just as he had failed” with Lily. Gabriel knows that he must use the appropriate tone with the guests, who though less educated than he are nonetheless worthy of a speech that uplifts their spirits rather than puts them on the defensive.

7. Joyce injects politics into “The Dead” in the scene in which Gabriel dances with Miss Ivors, an Irish nationalist (paras. 101–37). Trace the way Miss Ivors exposes Gabriel as the anonymous book reviewer G.C. for the *Daily Express*, and the way Gabriel defends himself. How is that conflict revisited in other parts of the story? Explain why Gabriel’s defense is effective or ineffective.

Miss Ivors appears briefly, but her presence stays with Gabriel long after she leaves the party. She and Gabriel “were friends of many years’ standing and their careers had been parallel” (para. 112). She is “a frank-mannered . . . young lady,” who arrives at the party wearing “an Irish device” (para. 101), and she chastises Gabriel immediately for anonymously writing for the *Daily Express*, an English newspaper that she calls a “rag” (para. 111). It is her contention that Gabriel is a West Briton that irks him in particular, an issue that is further exacerbated when she challenges Gabriel for not being more in tune with Irish concerns. The brief exchange that they share drives Gabriel to revisit his speech, trying to come up with a line that he feels will get back at Miss Ivors. He adds a line about a “hypereducated” new generation that “lack[s] those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, . . . which belonged to an older day” (para. 251). However, because she does not stay to hear him deliver his speech, his retort is meaningless. Miss Ivors also challenges Gabriel about his vacation choices, asking why he goes to “France and Belgium . . . instead of visiting [his] own land” (para. 124). Gabriel’s reply that it is to keep up with the languages only gives Miss Ivors a chance to remind him that he should also study his own language, Irish. As she continues to press Gabriel, he grows increasingly frustrated, suggesting that she is hitting a nerve with her political points. This is made clear when he is deeply troubled by her calling him a West Briton, suggesting that he is more sympathetic toward England than Ireland. In her brief appearance, Miss Ivors is able to interject commentary regarding the state of Irish politics and those like Gabriel, who seems too concerned with writing literary columns for the pro-British *Daily Express* and vacationing on the continent to pay attention to the challenges his own country faces.

8. For a story called “The Dead,” there is quite a bit of humor. How does Gabriel’s willingness, for example, to “carve a flock of geese, if necessary” (para. 195) help develop his character and also the character of Dublin society? Find other examples of Joyce’s sly sense of humor.

Although he is a deeply serious man, Gabriel has a healthy sense of humor, which helps balance the earnestness with which he wrestles the big questions in life and his solemn conclusion at the end of the story. The other guests at the party also provide moments of levity, which indicates that although Joyce is certainly critiquing Ireland, he does not do so without a sense of humor.

When Gabriel first arrives to the party late, he jokingly claims that his wife “takes three mortal hours to dress herself” (para. 5) to explain his tardiness. Gretta is not offended by the obviously humorous remark and is in fact able to interject her own wit when she addresses Gabriel’s tendency to be overly protective by claiming that in order to shelter her from the rain, he will eventually buy her a “diving suit” (para. 40). Their playful interactions indicate a couple who are comfortable with each other, but later underscore Gabriel’s humiliation when he hears the story of Michael Furey and realizes “how poor a part” (para. 447) he played in her life.

During the dinner scene, Joyce continues to inject humor into the story. Gabriel follows his hyperbolic pronouncement that he would be willing to “carve a flock of geese” (para. 195) by presiding over a table filled with laughter. He clearly enjoys being at the head of the table, making comically magnanimous gestures, such as serving everyone seconds while only taking a drink of stout to fight the heat of the task of carving. He is most comfortable when fulfilling what he perceives to be his appropriate role, and when he is comfortable, he can allow himself to engage in witty banter.

As the guests continue to eat, Gabriel’s two aunts are “toddling round the table, walking on each other’s heels, getting in each other’s way and giving each other unheeded orders.” Aunt Kate is finally “captur[ed]” by Freddy Malins, who then plumps her “down on her chair amid general laughter” (para. 202). Freddy Malins’s behavior with Aunt Kate is not totally unexpected, as his drinking has been the
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subject of much discussion from the outset of the story. The aunts are worried that he “might turn up screwed” and “would not wish for worlds that any of Mary Jane’s pupils should see him under the influence” (para. 3). When Freddy does show up, his boisterous behavior indicates that although his mother made him “take the pledge on New Year’s Eve” (para. 94), he may indeed be drunk. Here Joyce is playfully mocking the oaths made at times like New Year’s Eve, recognizing the willingness of people to make promises they clearly do not intend to keep.

Mr. Browne is also a man who is portrayed as something of a drunken fool, attempting to entertain a group of young women with a ridiculous quote from “the famous Mrs Cassidy” (para. 71). As he tells the story, his “hot face . . . lean[s] forward a little too confidentially,” which makes the young ladies uncomfortable, and they listen to his speech “in silence.” Having failed to entertain the young women with his story, Mr. Browne abruptly turns his attention to “two young men who were more appreciative” (para. 72). Joyce is able to show the desperate way in which Browne attempts to entertain ladies who are clearly not interested in a man who is something of a lech.

In sum, humor in the story is deeply connected with the traditions of Ireland and accentuates what is best about them.

9. The dinner, which is the centerpiece of “The Dead” (paras. 196–239), is filled with sensuous details. How does Joyce pace the description so that the reader is caught up not only in the food but in the swirl of conversation and conviviality?

Joyce carefully details each moment of the dinner, from the initial cataloging of the bounty of food to the dinner conversation to the dessert, allowing the reader to fully appreciate the separate movements of the evening. The structure and pace of the description of the dinner serve to engage the reader and connect him or her with the traditional Irish experience.

Joyce begins in paragraph 196 with a thoroughly detailed description of the food that awaits the guests, beginning with a “brown goose” on one end of the table and a “great ham” on the other end, which sits on “a bed of creased paper strewn with sprigs of parsley” and is “stripped of its outer skin and peppered over with crust crumbs.” The meats are followed by descriptions of the rest of the repast, including items such “red and yellow” jellies, “purple raisins,” “peeled almonds,” “Smyrna figs,” “custard topped with grated nutmeg,” and “a pyramid of oranges and American apples.” Not only are the food items carefully cataloged, but the dishes on which they sit are included as well. There is a “large green leaf-shaped dish,” sweets “wrapped in gold and silver papers,” “a glass vase,” “two squat old-fashioned decanters of cut glass,” “a huge yellow dish,” and drinks “drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms.” The entire paragraph is solely dedicated to bombarding the senses with images of the food, which is the centerpiece of the celebration. Just as the guests have had to wait the entire day for this feast, the reader is forced to first sit and consider all of the items prepared by the Morkan sisters.

Once the food has been described, Joyce then addresses the carving and serving ritual. Gabriel takes his seat “boldly at the head of the table” and promptly plunges “his fork firmly into the goose,” beginning the service (para. 197). During the carving of the goose, Joyce includes short dialogue in which Gabriel asks each guest which part of the goose they prefer, and guests share their preferences, sometimes with brief commentary. Although no other specific dialogue is mentioned in the paragraph, it is clear that small talk fills the scene, which consists of “a great deal of confusion and laughter and noise, the noise of orders and counter-orders, of knives and forks, of corks and glass-stoppers” (para. 202). Even the exhortation of the guests to Gabriel and the hostesses to join the feast and stop serving is included. Once Gabriel has served everyone seconds, he can finally sit down and eat himself, at which point he asks for the guests to “kindly forget [his] existence . . . for a few minutes” (para. 206). His duties done and the guests fed, Gabriel can now enjoy his dinner.

At this point the scene turns to the small talk that now occupies the guests as Lily removes the plates. They begin with a discussion about the arts, a typical dinner topic. Specifically, they discuss the current and past state of opera in Ireland, something that allows for the kind of nostalgia appropriate for the evening. Although there is some mild disagreement about current versus past singers, the conversation is not one that would bring up any truly uncomfortable issues. The one exception is Freddy Malins’s suggestion that they are being dismissive of a singer because he is black, but this comment is carefully ignored by the guests, ensuring continued civility. Aunt Kate’s contribution is to bring up a
long dead tenor named Parkinson, but since she is the only one who remembers him, it becomes a moment of private reflection rather than public commentary.

The next course, consisting of a huge pudding, also serves as a transition to the next topic of conversation: the monks of Mount Melleray, who never speak, get up at two in the morning, and sleep “in their coffins” (para. 231). This conversation introduces a more somber note to the dinner, which is a bit out of sync with the tenor up to this point, so ultimately it is “buried in a silence” (para. 237). It is at this point that dessert is finally served, and as “the last glasses [are] being filled the conversation cease[s]” (para. 239), in preparation for the final portion of dinner. Joyce has slowed the dinner down from the frenetic energy of the initial food service to a silence that falls naturally as the guests sit satiated, awaiting Gabriel’s highly anticipated speech.

10. Analyze Gabriel’s speech (paras. 242–61). Do you think it is overly sentimental? How do you think Gabriel feels about his audience? In what ways does he pitch the speech to them? What assumptions about the audience drive the speech?

Students will have varying reactions to Gabriel’s speech, but it seems important to think about the speech from the point of view of the epiphany at the end of the story, where he sees himself not only as a “ludicrous figure” and a “nervous well-meaning sentimentalist” but also as “orating to vulgarians” (para. 426) — a direct reference to the speech and its audience. His speech can in some ways be viewed almost as a parody of after-dinner speeches, with his rhetoric striking all of the expected chords and leaving the very guests he felt could not handle a quote from Browning crying and applauding.

From the beginning of the story, Gabriel is obsessed about his speech. He worries that the lines from Browning he was going to include would be “above the heads of his hearers” (para. 29) and considers using the more popular and accessible Shakespeare. He is keenly aware of the possible limitations of his audience and clearly wants their approval, even though he feels he is their intellectual superior.

His encounter with Miss Ivors unsettles him because he knows that she is his intellectual equal and will possibly see through his sentimentality. After she calls him a West Briton and challenges his apparent lack of proper attention to Irish concerns, using the fact that he writes literary reviews for a supposedly pro-British newspaper as proof, Gabriel wants to respond by declaring literature above politics. In another example of how aware Gabriel is of his own rhetoric, he decides against this phrase because it is too “grandiose” (para. 112). He later settles on including a jab in his speech about the new generation being hypereducated, but the line is never heard by its intended audience.

The headings of the speech reveal both his assumptions about his audience and his clear attempt to structure his speech in a manner that relies heavily on the sentimentality of the assembled guests. The headings of the speech, “Irish hospitality, sad memories, the Three Graces, Paris, the quotation from Browning” (para. 155), suggest a plan to provide the kind of after-dinner speech that the guests have obviously come to expect from him, making sure that he is the one who provides the speech year after year. Noticeably absent are any headings that might challenge the guests’ thinking or raise any uncomfortable issues.

He begins with overblown praise for the hostesses, dramatically pausing to draw the attention to them, drawing expected laughter from the guests. This allows him to focus on his first topic: Irish hospitality. His praise seems sincere, but he makes some interesting choices that belie the fact that he is already aware of his own sentimentality. He establishes that he has “visited not a few places abroad” to position Ireland against other “modern nations” (para. 248). He then posits the idea that these other modern nations might consider it a failing but that he considers it a “princely failing” (para. 248), positioning those listening to his speech in a place that is counter to but also superior to other modern nations. The choice of the word “modern” is also interesting, as it sharply contrasts the old-world traditions of Ireland, something represented by the aged Morkan sisters.

He then transitions to a “new generation . . . actuated by new ideas and new principles.” However, he raises the possibility that the new generation is “misdirected” and “will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day” (para. 251). He acknowledges the presence of the new generation, which includes nationalists like Miss Ivors, but then quickly assures the audience that it is the members of the new generation who need to learn about the value of Irish hospitality rather than suggesting that the assembled guests need to become aware of the realities
of the modern world. He continues by lavishing praise on the opera singers of the past, a topic of conversation earlier in the evening that he is eager to capitalize on, eliciting great applause from Mr. Browne. Along with these singers who are no longer alive, Gabriel can bring up "thoughts of the past, of youth, of changes, of absent faces" (para. 253), further sentimentalizing his speech. For his transition, he promises not to "let any gloomy moralising intrude" upon the speech, an irony missed by the audience. However, in light of Gabriel's later epiphany, the ultimate irony of the speech is that in praising the customs of the past — "the dead" — he is participating in the rote, deadening bits of tradition that he comes to see in a negative light.

His final topic is an overly complimentary and even cloying reference to Paris, with his aunts and Mary Jane cast as the Three Graces. This predictably brings tears to their eyes, and the evening is finished with multiple rounds of "For they are jolly gay fellows," led by the drunken Freddy Malins "acting as officer with his fork on high" (para. 265). The group finishes asserting its desire to sing the praises of tradition, willfully ignoring the ideas of the new generation, long into the night.

11. How does the tone of the story shift at the end of the party? Examine the way Joyce makes the transition from the party to Gabriel's very private contemplation of Gretta.

The tone of the dinner is largely one of celebratory appreciation of the tradition of Irish hospitality, fed by a grand dinner and Gabriel's speech. The guests begin to return home, and the party gradually quiets down. When most of the guests have departed, Gabriel stands "in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase" (para. 313) at a woman in shadow, whom he suddenly recognizes is Gretta. Rather than calling out to her, he decides to watch her, captured by the "grace and mystery in her attitude" (para. 314). After a night of being on display, engaging in multiple conversations, and taking care of Freddy Malins, Gabriel is satisfied to have a moment of quiet reflection. Even when Mary Jane joins him in the hall, he motions for her to be silent in an effort to better hear the music. It is both the content of the song about the death of a loved one and Gretta's enraptured listening that stir Gabriel's emotions. As they walk home, the "blood went bounding along his veins; and the thoughts went rioting through his brain, proud, joyful, tender, valorous" (para. 351). Gabriel is now eager to make Gretta "forget the years of their dull existence together and remember only their moments of ecstasy" (para. 355). At this point, the public events of the evening have been completely replaced by an intensely personal reflection, as Gabriel begins to imagine the moment when he is finally alone with Gretta back in their room. The focus has shifted from the interactions of the dinner guests to the private thoughts of Gabriel, and the tone has shifted from one of celebration of the past to anticipation of what is to come. This marks a transition from being caught up in the flow of events to the distanced reflection that will come with Gabriel's epiphany.

12. What do the details of Gabriel's imaginary painting of Gretta reveal about his feelings for his wife (para. 314)?

In paragraph 314, when Gabriel imagines painting the scene of Gretta on the stairs, he first determines that she is "a symbol of something," casting his choices in terms of abstraction rather than realism, so students will take this in a number of interesting directions. It is her "attitude" that most interests Gabriel, suggesting that the emotional content of the painting drives his choices. The "blue felt hat" that covers her head suggests a seriousness and formality to her thoughts. The blue color sets off "the bronze of her hair against the darkness," indicating both her vitality and her Irish roots. The contrasting light and dark panels of her dress suggest a woman who has both lightness and sadness in her thoughts and in her life. Finally, the title Distant Music suggests a woman who hears something calling her from a place far removed, much like the tender words Gabriel wrote to her years before, which he later recalls "like distant music" (para. 356). (See also question 7 in Questions for Discussion.)

13. Identify examples of images of snow and fire in "The Dead," and discuss their effect. How do these image patterns further the development of the themes in the story?

The image of snow falling on Ireland creates a buried world in which both the living and the dead are covered, while fire is implied through the warmth of the great house and those in attendance, and literally shows up in the form of a candle when Gabriel and Gretta get back to their hotel at the end of the
evening. The falling snow covers the land, “falling faintly through the universe” (para. 451), serving as a reminder of everyone’s ultimate end. The fire is found in the intensity of the celebration and the passion for Gretta in Gabriel’s heart, both unable to overcome the steady, insistent snow.

Snow is associated with Gabriel from the moment he arrives with a “light fringe of snow” (para. 10) across the shoulders of his overcoat, already beginning to cover him. Just before he begins his speech, Gabriel imagines people “standing in the snow on the quay outside”; the park in the distance, where the “trees were weighted with snow”; and the Wellington Monument, with a “gleaming cap of snow that flashed westward over the white field of Fifteen Acres” (para. 240), suggesting the inclusion of both the people and the country outside the warm rooms of the Morkan household as part of his audience. After the “pleasure of the walk along the river in the snow” (para. 448), Gabriel is confronted by the story of Michael Furey, changing his thoughts from eager anticipation to his own fading identity. As he contemplates his eventual demise, his attention turns again to the falling snow, which is “general all over Ireland” (para. 451). As he imagines the snow falling on places from the “Bog of Allen” to the “dark mutinous Shannon waves,” he imagines the entire world entombed in snow, which continues to fall “upon all the living and the dead” (para. 451), perhaps awaiting the trumpet call sounding the end of their world.

Contrasting the cold of the snow outside is the warmth of the festive gathering inside. The hallway at the front door is the threshold between the chill of the exterior world and the Morkan household. The dancing makes people’s faces blush with the heat of exertion, the feast is a reminder of the hot kitchen, and the continuous conversation is an indication of the shared warmth of the guests. On their way to the hotel, Gabriel recalls a time when he and Gretta were standing in the cold, “looking in through a grated window at a man making bottles in a roaring furnace” (para. 352), which then sends a “wave of yet more tender joy” through Gabriel, and like the “tender fires of stars moments of their life together . . . broke upon and illumined his memory” (para. 355). Here, fire is equated with a passion that Gabriel wishes to experience.

14. Joyce is famous for having invented epiphany as a literary term. He defined it as the “sudden revelation of the whatness of a thing,” the moment in which “the soul of the commonest object . . . seems to us radiant . . . a sudden spiritual manifestation [either] in the vulgarity of speech or of a gesture or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself.” What is Gabriel’s epiphany? What causes it?

Gabriel’s epiphany is particularly important because it is the crux of “The Dead,” but it is very difficult to explain exactly what is going on in the dense final pages of the story. Critics disagree about the importance of Gabriel’s epiphany; a careful, close reading of the ending is required to fully appreciate what Joyce is doing.

Returning from the party, Gabriel is overtaken with romantic feelings for Gretta (paras. 351–77). Upon arriving at their room, he wonders why she is distant, and grows annoyed and desires to be able to control her mood so that it matches his (paras. 389–93). Suddenly he is filled with happiness, thinking that she is having similar feelings toward him (paras. 395–99). Then Gretta begins to tell the story of the youthful love between her and Michael Furey, brought to her memory by the song from the party, “The Lass of Aughrim” (paras. 401–24). Gabriel grows increasingly annoyed by this story and attempts to defuse the situation by responding ironically. In paragraph 426, his failed attempt at irony in the face of Gretta’s story causes him to feel ashamed. He realizes that all the while he was thinking about their past she was thinking about this man, not him, and that his concerns were paltry when compared with the depth of relationship that she was describing; thus, her concerns could not be defused by his petty irony. Because he is suddenly aware of this fact, he sees himself in a negative light — as ridiculous. And not only is he ashamed of himself in this particular instance, but the feeling radiates throughout his thoughts about himself, and he sees his entire character as ridiculous and low, thinking of himself as a “pennyboy” for his aunts, as a nervous and well-meaning sentimentalist, as an orator to vulgarians, and as someone who idealizes his own clownish lusts. He then hides himself from Gretta, as is instinctual in instances of shame. When her story continues (paras. 429–45), he realizes with a sense of terror that the love of which she speaks was the most real and powerful type — a love that someone was willing to die for.

We later return to Gabriel, who is thinking about himself while Gretta is asleep. He now reflects more coolly on his earlier thoughts. “He watched her while she slept as though he and she had never
lived together as man and wife” (para. 447). He realizes that he has not played nearly as major an emo-
tional role in his wife’s life as another man — a man who has been dead since he barely escaped child-
hood. He wonders why he had felt so happy and romantic that evening, and realizes that this was
attached to insubstantial things — his speech, the wine and dancing, the merrymaking. He begins musing
on mortality — that Aunt Julia will die soon, and that everyone will eventually die (paras. 448–49).

This is important, because it is in relationship to death, which ultimately claims all of us, that
things gain their meaning, and Gretta had had a relationship that was the most meaningful that it could
be — a man was willing to die for her. Considering the ultimateness of death and the finitude of human
life makes Gabriel’s accomplishments seem paltry and ridiculous, and he feels ashamed to have con-
sidered them important. This mirrors what he said in his speech about death, but there it was a trivial
nothing to say at a party, while here he realizes the full seriousness of it, making the speech appear triv-
ial. He concludes: “Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade
and wither dismaly with age” (para. 449). Having realized the triviality of his preoccupations in the
face of death and the sort of deep, emotional connections that he has never known, he comes to the
conclusion that it is worth dying for something meaningful rather than ending up after a long life with
nothing but safe trivialities to show for it.

But what is the importance of this epiphany? Does Gabriel simply realize that his life is a miserable
failure, or does he come to a greater self-awareness that will enable him to live a fulfilling life? The final
two paragraphs are especially cryptic and are open to numerous interpretations; students will certainly
have different takes on what is going on here. In paragraph 450, Gabriel feels his identity dissolving. “His
own identity,” Joyce writes, “was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which
these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling.” And in the final paragraph,
he watches snow falling “upon all the living and the dead.” The loss of identity appears at once disturbing
and liberating. Gabriel has realized that the connection to traditions that have structured his identity are
petty and trivial in the face of death, and the snow falling on everyone seems to emphasize this fact.
Whether he takes this as a liberating moment or whether he feels that everything he has lived for up to
this moment has been snatched out from under him should be a lively topic for classroom discussion.

Fences
AUGUST WILSON

SUGGESTED APPROACHES

Because Troy Maxson’s baseball experience is so critical to the themes of the play, and because Major
League Baseball’s current image is so utterly inclusive, it would be interesting for students to do
research on the Negro League. The league had a rich tradition filled with amazing athletes, compelling
stories, and fascinating names and uniforms that reflected both the defiance of the men playing and the
racism of the culture in which the league was born. Students may find it startling, for example, that
there was a team called the New York Black Yankees. Rather than having students merely research the
facts of the league, challenge them to discuss the implications of every aspect of the league, from the
imagery of the uniforms to the fact that it ever needed to be created in the first place. You might also
have students research specific players from the Negro League whose names show up in the play.

Some of the characters in this play undergo significant changes. Challenge students to decide
how they would use costuming to indicate a change in a particular character. For example, they could
trace Rose’s changes, and create costumes for her at different stages. Where in the play does a change
occur, and how would the costuming differ before and after the change? Also have students explain why
their choices reflect that change.

Because this is a play, there is a great opportunity to have students plan a production of it, as if
they were the director. They do not need to actually act the play out, because having them prepare even
a portion of one scene can be very time-consuming. However, much about the students’ understanding
of the play can be assessed through the choices they would make. The advantage to this approach is
that it can be elaborate (students create an actual actor’s notebook, for example) or simple (students
block a scene and act it out on the spot).
Chapter 5: Home and Family

If students were to block a scene, it’s important to select one in which there is significant action rather than one of Troy’s extended pronouncements. For example, the agitated exchange between Troy and Cory when Troy throws Cory out of the house is a good choice. Staging and lighting questions (set design) also provide ample opportunity for students to express their reading of the play. You may want them to sketch out the set elements based on the script and their own interpretation of the play. Push them to be symbolic as well as literal in their staging, and have them share their staging as well as the reasons behind their choices.

Listening to blues and gospel songs (Jim Jackson performing “Old Dog Blue” is available on YouTube) will give students a chance to hear the music that addresses the same injustices that Troy rails against. It will also give them a sense of the defiance and strength present in the African Americans who struggled alongside Troy and his contemporaries. You may also have your students research blues singers and music from the 1950s on their own and create a presentation using names, songs, and lyrics from this uniquely American type of music.

Show students photographs from W. Eugene Smith’s Pittsburgh project — iconic photography from 1950s Pittsburgh — in order to give them a sense of the city in which the play is set. The stark photos can help students get a sense of the landscape the characters are traversing.

Modern connection: use scenes from The Wrestler for comparison and contrast with the play. The movie is not appropriate to show in its entirety, but there are several scenes in which the main character (played by Mickey Rourke) — a wrestler past his prime but still struggling to remain relevant and strong in a world that has passed him by — mirrors the rage and confusion that Troy experiences. Of course, Death of a Salesman is a great companion piece to this play.

Questions for Discussion

1. Troy Maxson’s last name makes subtle reference to the Mason-Dixon Line — the imaginary line that in the 1820s divided slave states from free states. How does this allusion to history help prepare you for the play’s themes? What are the connotations of other characters’ names — for example, Rose and Gabriel?

Maxson (Mason-Dixon Line): Troy’s last name alludes to a line between slave and free states, which was an invisible “fence” of sorts between worlds that treated African Americans differently. The play deals with how racism affects the lives of the people who experience it, and how past experiences can influence how a person considers his or her options for the future. The Mason-Dixon Line marked the boundary between where slavery was practiced and where it was not, just as the generation gap between Troy and Cory marks the boundary between legal racial segregation and integration. Troy’s youthful experience with segregation in baseball influences how he feels about Cory’s prospects as a football player, and although times have changed and Cory has more opportunities than Troy did, Troy can’t help but reflect on his own disappointments and missed opportunities. Troy’s life has been divided over two sides of a racial line, just as the Mason-Dixon Line divided two sides of a racial issue.

Rose: named for a beautiful but hardy flower. The character of Rose serves as the caring and nurturing element of the story. Rose always takes care of her family, but she needs care as well, and does not necessarily receive the care she craves from her husband — both for herself and for the rest of the family. She tries to make up for her husband’s lack of tenderness by tending to her family’s needs in whatever ways she can, which is mostly to provide them with home-cooked meals and clean clothes. A rose is a beautiful flower that must be handled gently to avoid damaging it. Troy learns this when he mishandles Rose (by sleeping with Alberta) and she banishes him to the state of being a “womanless man” (II.3.23–24). However, true to her nurturing persona, Rose cares for Troy’s child after Alberta dies in childbirth.

Gabriel: named for the angel messenger of the same name. Gabriel is a character who seems to speak in riddles but, upon closer scrutiny, is revealed to have some insight into the people around him and events to come. His namesake, the archangel Gabriel, appears in the Gospel of Luke and foretells the coming of both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Gabriel Maxson seems to foresee Troy’s fate and tries to warn him of the coming judgment that he will meet after his death. The play closes with Gabriel attempting to blow his trumpet, and in Western tradition, the image of the archangel Gabriel blowing his trumpet indicates the final judgment day, to which Gabriel Maxson so often refers.
2. What is the significance of the biblical and supernatural allusions that appear throughout the play? Consider the story of Troy getting furniture from the devil, and the behavior and history of Gabriel.

The biblical and supernatural allusions both heighten and comment on the action in the play. They are at once organic to the culture of southern African Americans depicted in the play and symbolic, so that they draw out the themes in the play. Shortly into act I, Troy personifies Death and then challenges Death’s ability to have dominion over him. One of the central aspects of the Christian religion is the idea that death can no longer hurt a believer because Christ has atoned for all of humankind’s sin. Troy is not afraid of death either, but his lack of fear is rooted in his belief in his own abilities to overcome trials. He speaks of “wrass[ling]” (I.1.174) with death and then compares death to a “fastball on the outside corner” (I.1.175), something Troy in his days as a baseball player had been able to overcome handily. In addition to his lack of fear of death, Troy has met the devil, a white man who rents furniture to Troy on the single condition that every month Troy send ten dollars in payment. This kind of practice was popular during the time period and resulted in African Americans being trapped in long-term payment scams that were in many ways inescapable. High-interest terms meant that the furniture could never be paid off entirely, and substandard furnishings ended up costing much more than they were worth. This long-term agreement with the “devil” was emblematic of the inequity that African Americans faced in a world that refused to provide the same kinds of opportunities for professional advancement that were available at the time to white citizens. Troy’s “deal with the devil” parallels the continuing struggle he endures in a culture that has everything set against him. This inequity is mirrored in his experience with baseball, where the color of his skin excluded him from playing in a league that, at least according to Troy, he would have dominated. In order for things to ever change, Troy must ultimately meet death head on again and either be defeated by it or walk away with new authority. Ironically, when Troy does die, Gabriel’s horn cannot play. Like the unequal treatment Troy has raged against his entire life, the angel that is supposed to announce Troy’s victory is hampered by a trumpet with no mouthpiece.

3. In the stage directions for act I, scene 1, Wilson describes Troy as “a large man with thick, heavy hands; it is this largeness that he strives to fill out and make an accommodation with.” How does this description establish the character of Troy? Consider also Troy’s encounters with Death — the way he taunts Death to come and get him, asserting that he will go down swinging. What might Wilson be saying about Troy’s character with these descriptions?

Troy Maxson is a physically imposing figure, and he has spent his life trying to provide for his family by exploiting this stature and strength. He has worked for years with his “thick, heavy hands” to do what he can to put food on the table and pay the bills each month, although he is resentful of his limited employment options as an African American with little formal education. His long-standing employment as a garbage collector has been steady work, but it provides little opportunity for financial advancement or personal growth. Thus, Troy “strives to fill out and make an accommodation with [this largeness]” because he knows that although he may be physically large, he will never be a man of real status and importance. Aside from his weekly routines of work and attempts at escape and relaxation, Troy has very little to fill up his life and his soul. He tells tall tales to make up for this truth in an attempt to “fill out and . . . accommodat[e]” his empty reality. For example, he pontificates to Bono about his undying love for and dedication to Rose, while secretly having an affair with a woman who lives down the road. Troy also tells many stories about his encounters with Death, always painting himself as antagonistic and fearless in the face of his own demise. Troy tells Death that he will go down swinging because this is the only approach to any challenge or conflict that Troy knows. Every obstacle in Troy’s life has been met with aggression, and his professed fearlessness masks his inability to approach life in any other way. Troy’s size and aggressive tendencies give us a character who works hard to provide for the physical needs of his family, but who is unable to provide for their emotional needs because he is not aware of his own emotions or internal world.

4. How does Rose’s assertion in act I, scene 1, that “Times have changed” (l. 153) set the mood for the action that follows? How does it anticipate the themes Wilson will explore more specifically through his characters and the action of the play?
Rose’s statement is a recurrent theme of the play that touches on almost every character’s life. Rose’s acknowledgment of the passage of time, and the changes it has brought, is juxtaposed with Troy’s resistance to the same idea. Troy, having experienced the racism that kept him from fulfilling his dream of playing baseball, holds tight to a paradigm that no longer applies to the present of the play. He believes that Cory will never be allowed to fulfill his own dreams in the sports world, so he forbids Cory to take a football scholarship and demands that he keep his part-time job, finish high school, and learn a trade. Cory, having been ironically deprived of both a college education and a chance at playing football, joins the military. If Troy had entertained the idea that “times have changed,” Cory’s life could have been quite different. In his own line of work, Troy insists that racist practices have kept him out of the driver’s seat on garbage routes, regardless of the fact that he didn’t know how to drive. Once Troy expresses his displeasure to management, however, they offer him a driving job. Troy also holds tight to the idea that Rose is the only woman in the world for him. But, as Rose states, “times have changed,” and Troy has an affair with another woman and fathers a child.

5. How do you interpret Lyons’s response to his father’s criticism of his lifestyle: “I know I got to eat. But I got to live too. I need something that gonna help me to get out of the bed in the morning. Make me feel like I belong in the world” (I.1.340–41)? Discuss what it is that makes each of the central characters feel some sense of belonging in the world: Troy, Rose, Lyons, and Cory.

Lyons’s response to his father indicates that he wants to spend his life doing something that holds significance for him beyond making money, something that can give him a sense of purpose in life. For each of the characters, a sense of belonging is engendered by something different. For Lyons, music gives him a sense of purpose and an outlet for his creativity. Cory’s sense of belonging was found in his success as a football player with a bright future. Rose found her place by doing whatever she could to keep her family together and care for their needs, even when it was difficult. And Troy, in his own way, attempted to find a sense of belonging by providing for his family by earning a paycheck and dedicating that paycheck to his family’s welfare. But Troy’s dissatisfaction with the fact that he never made it as the baseball player he wished to be means he can’t be satisfied with the life he has. This reverberates throughout the play, especially in Troy’s insistence that Cory not dream of being a professional athlete and in his cheating on Rose.

6. What role does Bono play in the development of Troy’s character? Pick a scene that you think shows Bono’s role most clearly, and then explain.

Jim Bono, Troy’s longtime friend, presents a foil to Troy’s character. Bono and Troy share a long history together and know each other well, but they have very different personalities. In many ways, Bono serves as a kind of external conscience to Troy, gently questioning Troy’s actions and motives, and voicing his opposition at times. Also, Bono often provides the supportive words to Troy’s sons that Troy refuses to offer, challenging Troy to think about his sons in a more positive way. In addition, Bono extends the most companionship and compassion to Troy, giving him the positive affirmation that he rarely gets from others in his life. Whereas others repeatedly tell Troy that they don’t want to hear his stories, Bono encourages him in his storytelling and validates many of the claims Troy makes, regardless of their actual validity. Additionally, as the breadwinner of his own household, Bono can relate to Troy’s obstacles and complaints in a way that no other character can. In this way, Bono builds Troy’s self-esteem in a unique way.

Act I, scene 1: In this scene, Bono challenges Troy’s motives in fostering a relationship with Alberta. Bono gently suggests that there is something suspicious about the way that Troy has been interacting with Alberta, and reminds Troy that his actions are on display. In addition, Bono offers positive words about Cory’s future in football — an endeavor met with scorn from Troy.

Act I, scene 4: In this scene, Bono challenges Troy’s pursuit of a driver’s job at work, reminding him that he doesn’t actually possess a driver’s license. Bono reveals the truth that Troy is not qualified for the job he claims he hasn’t been offered because he’s black, a point that Troy believes is secondary to his skin color. In addition, Bono supports Lyons’s dream of becoming a successful musician by commenting that anyone landing a gig at the Crawford Grill, Lyons’s current performance venue, must be talented.
Act II, scene 1: In this scene, Bono again presses Troy about his relationship with Alberta. In this later scene, Bono is more forceful, reminding Troy that Rose is a good woman who deserves a faithful and dutiful husband. Bono warns Troy of the great risk he's taking with his marriage, and warns Troy to quit before Rose finds out. In addition, Bono challenges Troy to finish the fence he's been promising Rose for so long.

In each of these scenes, Bono presents Troy with gentle challenges coupled with affirmation. He voices ideas that Troy refuses to acknowledge on his own, and provides an alternative reaction to various aspects of Troy's life, whether it be his relationships with his sons, his treatment of his wife, or his own ego.

7. At the opening of act I, scene 2, Rose is hanging up clothes in the early morning, humming and singing to herself. Her song imploring Jesus to “be a fence all around me every day” reflects one of the play’s important themes. How do different characters relate to and define fences? Whom do fences keep out, and whom do they enclose? Consider also how fences relate to baseball. Explain why this is an appropriate title for the play.

The fence is a rich image that stands for numerous things throughout the play.

For Bono, the fence represents a caring gesture that Troy makes to Rose. Bono knows that Rose wants Troy to build the fence and that Troy had been procrastinating the job. He offers Troy a challenge: if he finishes the job, Bono will buy his wife, Lucille, a new refrigerator. Throughout the play, Bono has encouraged Troy to be true to Rose and warned him about his affair with Alberta. In Bono’s view, Troy's achievement of completing the fence would be a symbol of his dedication to Rose and his desire to unite his family.

For Rose, fences represent protection and inclusion. Rose is concerned with who resides inside the fence, meaning her family. Her life’s work has been centered on keeping her family together by whatever means is possible, and her desire for a fence supports this goal. It is significant that she asks Troy to build this fence for her, because she knows that without his help her family will never stay together. It is also significant that although Rose asks Troy to build the fence, he attempts (unsuccessfully) to force Cory to do the work. Because Troy seems incapable of building either a fence or a relationship with his son, it seems as if Rose’s vision of a unified family will not be realized.

In understanding Troy’s character, readers should consider the saying “swing for the fences,” which originates with baseball. Literally, to swing for the fences means to aim to hit a home run — the best hit a batter can make — by knocking the ball beyond the fence at the end of the outfield. The expression has, however, been adapted to life in general and is synonymous with “shoot for the stars,” meaning to aim for the highest accomplishment possible. This is important because Troy attempted to swing for the fences not just literally, as a baseball player; but metaphorically, in attempting to become a professional athlete, and he failed — largely, he believes, because of prejudice. This sours him on all types of dreams and gives rise to the conflicts with Lyons and Cory, who want to become a musician and an athlete respectively. Furthermore, in act I, scene 1, when Rose brings up Jackie Robinson's breaking the color barrier, Troy scoffs: “I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn’t even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn’t nobody” (ll. 167–69).

In regard to his own home, the fence seems to represent a boundary between what belongs to Troy and what does not. After his argument with Cory, Troy kicks him out of the house, telling him to stay on the other side of the fence. Knowing that he cannot completely control his son, Troy banishes Cory to the world outside the fence, where Troy’s will is not the only deciding factor in how things transpire.

For Cory, fences represent a separation between familiar obligation and uncertain freedom. Within the fence bordering his father’s domain, Cory received both support and ridicule: support in terms of basic survival and Rose’s care, but ridicule and criticism from his father. Beyond that place, Cory encountered a world that was both unfamiliar and full of possibility. After being kicked out of the house, Cory did not have Rose to care for him, but he did not have to answer to his father’s expectations either.

With all of these rich meanings in the play, it should come as no surprise that August Wilson chose to title the play Fences in order to focus his audiences’ minds on this central symbol.
8. In act I, scene 3, Troy explains why he refuses to sign Cory's recruitment papers: “The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage” (ll. 123–28). Could there be more to his refusal than the explanation he offers? Explain.

Troy's refusal to sign Cory's recruitment papers stems from a number of motivating factors. The reason Troy articulates most often is his disbelief that Cory will ever be allowed to make something of himself by pursuing football. This skepticism is borne out of Troy's own experience in baseball. Although he was an accomplished baseball player, Troy's skills atrophied with time and imprisonment as the nation moved slowly toward racial integration, too slowly for Troy's generation to exploit its opportunities. Troy's past makes him leery of Cory's present, and Troy wants Cory to master a trade that will ensure employment for the rest of his life without depending on the whims of "the white man." Troy himself has settled for a lifetime collecting garbage, a fate he doesn't want his son to suffer. Therefore, Troy's refusal to sign is an indication of his own tainted attitude that has not changed with time. It could be argued, however, that a part of Troy is jealous of Cory's opportunity and resents the fact that something that was refused to him is now being extended to his son. Troy insists that Cory get "book-learning" and yet refuses to allow Cory to pursue more education in college. Troy's pride, in addition to his prior experience, influences his decision not to sign the papers.

9. What is the significance of Troy's triumph at work, earning the right to drive the garbage truck (act I, scene 4)? What is ironic about this victory? How and why does his promotion affect his relationship with Bono?

Troy's triumph at work is significant because it calls into question his original theory that driving jobs were offered only to white workers. This theory is congruent with Troy's general worldview, which is that African Americans will never be offered the same kinds of opportunities as white Americans. However, by questioning the status quo, Troy has been able to achieve something that he initially didn't believe was possible because of racial prejudice on the part of his employers. Unfortunately for Cory, this experience does not change Troy's mind about other possibilities, as he continues to disapprove of Cory's football and college scholarship dreams. The irony of Troy's triumph is that he earns the opportunity to be a driver without even being legally able to drive. He complains to his boss that the jobs seem to be assigned on racial criteria, and although he is clearly upset about not being employed as a driver, he does not have a driver's license when he asks to be considered for the job. Thus, he is definitely not the most qualified person to fulfill the position, no matter what his race. Troy's promotion affects his friendship with Bono in significant ways. The most immediate change is that they no longer spend their days together now that Troy is working different routes, so their usual routine is broken, and they don't see each other nearly as often. More importantly, however, their relationship is changed because their status in the workplace is no longer equal. At the play's opening, Troy and Bono are friendly companions, and their similarities in job and family keep them closely knit as peers. Now that Troy has been promoted, he and Bono are no longer at the same level of earnings or status in the workplace, and this has added friction to their relationship. Their long friendship hasn't weathered this change very well, and we see from their exchange in act I, scene 4, that there is a distance between them after Troy's promotion.

10. Why do you think the playwright chose not to have Alberta make an appearance on stage? How does she appear in your imagination? How would you describe her?

The playwright chooses not to have Alberta appear onstage because she is the "other woman." The audience is closely tuned to Troy's home life, seeing everything play out in his home and yard. Everything else, Alberta included, is learned through the discussions of the characters. Because the audience is intended to sympathize with Rose, Alberta is kept separate and distant from the audience to prevent them from developing any real sympathy for Alberta. In this way, Rose remains the admirable and suffering mother figure, and Alberta is painted as a temptress or a home wrecker; when in fact she may be every bit as likable and hardworking as Rose. By keeping Alberta from appearing onstage, the playwright is able to rob her character of a human presence in the audience's experience; they must use their
imaginations to envision her. Based on Troy's comments, the audience could envision Alberta as a larger woman, with features of both African American and Native American influence ("You can look at her and tell she one of them Florida gals. They got some big healthy women down there . . . Got a little bit of Indian in her" [I.1.65–66]). Moreover, Troy explains that Alberta is more accepting and tolerant of Troy than Rose is. "I can step out of this house and get away from the pressures and problems. . . . I can sit up in her house and laugh . . . and it feels good" (II.1.196–202). By remaining offstage, Alberta functions as more of a symbol than a full-fledged character; she is the epitome of Troy's negative attributes that, while they remain at a distance, can never be fully fenced out by either Troy or Rose.

11. Is Troy a hypocrite? Do his relationships with Alberta and Cory make his assertions regarding family responsibilities and duty ring false?

Assessing Troy's character is one of the most fruitful discussions to be had about Fences, and students will have varying opinions on this point. When viewing the role of father and husband from a traditional standpoint, Troy is a hypocrite. He claims to be true to his wife yet has an affair with another woman, which results in a child. His parenting style toward both sons is very abrasive and negative, and he demands respectful treatment from them while not extending them the courtesy of civil treatment. By traditional standards, Troy is far from an ideal family man.

However, as tempting as it might be to label him so, Troy is not a hypocrite when measured against his own standards for fulfilling family obligations. His understanding of responsibilities and duty toward family is different from what is commonly accepted in that his does not include love or affection. Troy's understanding of family duty, formed by the example set by his own father, is that of financial and material support. Troy believes that if a father provides money and goods to his family, he is under no obligation to show them any tenderness or love. He explains to Cory, "A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house . . . sleep you behind on my bedclothes . . . fill you belly up with my food . . . cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. . . . Let's get this straight right here . . . I ain't got to like you" (I.3.181–86). Although Troy does express love and affection for Rose, he does not view this as the duty of a husband. Instead, he fulfills his sense of duty by handing over his paycheck to Rose, trusting her to manage the finances of the household. In his view, his primary duty as the head of the household is to provide the family with financial support, and his sense of duty compels him to live a life of toil, from which he continually seeks relief. Additionally, and especially with regard to his relationship with Cory, students will have different interpretations of Troy's status as a hypocrite; they may think that he is honestly trying to look out for his son's future but holds ideals that he can't himself adhere to, or they may think that he is jealous — consciously or unconsciously — of Cory's opportunities and is merely exercising his power from this motive.

12. When Cory returns after Troy's death, he tells Rose, "I can't drag Papa with me everywhere I go. I've got to say no to him" (II.5.110). What finally convinces Cory to attend Troy's funeral? What does his attending the funeral suggest about what Cory's future might hold and what kind of home and family he will have? Has he said "no" to his father?

Cory decides to attend Troy's funeral after speaking with Rose and, later, singing with Raynell. In act II, scene 5, Rose explains to Cory that part of what went wrong in her marriage is that she didn't do enough to keep her own sense of self separate from that of her husband, and that she allowed herself to become completely absorbed by the momentum of Troy's needs and personality. This parallels Cory's life, because he too was carried along by his father's influence, and the trajectory of Cory's life was largely determined by the inability of father and son to find a compromise of wills. Nevertheless, Rose reminds Cory that despite his many flaws, Troy meant well as a father and a husband. "Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn't . . . and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was. I don't know if he was right or wrong . . . but I do know he meant to do more good than he meant to do harm" (II.5.133–36). After speaking with Rose, Cory sits down to sing a song with Raynell, a song that they were both taught by Troy. The song, "Old Blue," tells the tale of a hardworking dog who was finally laid to rest. The dog, symbolic of Troy's laborious life, reminds Cory that his father was a hard worker and always did his best to provide for his family. Additionally, the song itself reminds Cory that his father tried to teach his children what he knew. Cory decides to attend the funeral after all, which
suggests that he will be able to let go of the resentment he has harbored toward his father for so long. The home and family life that Cory may have one day will most likely be more forgiving than that of his own upbringing because Cory has a better understanding of Troy than Troy did of his own father. Troy's lack of understanding led to his reinvention of himself in his father's image. Cory, on the other hand, has found the understanding and forgiveness to say no to his father, and thus can emerge as his own man rather than a re-creation of Troy.

Chapter 5: Home and Family

Questions on Style and Structure

1. Three texts, all written by Wilson, precede the actual opening of the play: a four-line poem, a description of the setting, and a more discursive piece entitled “The Play.” Although these texts provide specific information, they also raise larger issues. What are some of these? Pay particular attention to the language Wilson uses (“in His Largeness and Laws,” “the porch lacks congruence,” “The city devoured them,” “new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel”).

Taken together, these segments raise central themes that will be explored in the play, especially how children deal with their father’s sins and how African Americans dealt with aspirations to the American dream in light of their shifting fortunes in America.

“in his Largeness and Laws”: The four-line stanza at the start of the play introduces the overarching idea of the sins of the father being visited on the children, which is a theme of the play. The stanza has a hopeful tone, suggesting that we have the power to accept or reject the influence of our parents on our lives. However, it is also suggested that rejecting the influence of our fathers’ sins is not an easy task because we must behave “as God, in His Largeness and Laws” if we are to “banish them with forgiveness,” as Cory does at the close of the play.

“the porch lacks congruence”: The description of the porch can be seen as a metaphor for Troy’s influence on the family. We learn that the porch is “[a] relatively recent addition,” signifying Troy’s continuing work to provide for his family. While the porch is “sturdy,” it “lacks congruence.” This suggests that while Troy is a dependable contributor to his family’s welfare, he is not in tune with his family members as individual human beings. He is present, he does his job, but he doesn’t connect with the family as a husband and father in a loving sense.

“The city devoured them”: This phrase has an ironic double meaning. The European immigrants were at once welcomed and given opportunity in America, and became fodder for the industries in the country’s giant urban centers, such as Pittsburgh, fueling industrial growth. This was not the experience of African Americans, who, although they worked just as hard (“They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies”), did not get an opportunity to be part of the growing economic prosperity. This information is provided to remind us that the story of the play is not the story of all working-class families in 1950s Pittsburgh. This is important, because it forms the core of Troy’s experience. He was not allowed to succeed in baseball, and this makes him wary of his children’s desire to succeed by white standards.

“in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream”: Wilson juxtaposes the immigrant experience with that of descendants of African slaves, who were not included in the opportunities offered by the industrial momentum of the urban setting. Instead, African Americans had to pursue “their own dream,” which came in the forms of domestic help, manual labor, and menial service jobs. Their dream simply involved the ability to “breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life” however they could manage. This group, of course, includes the Maxson family and the other characters in the play.

“new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel”: The wars that fueled America’s emergence as an industrial giant were themselves fueled by the patriotism and loyalty of hardworking Americans who dedicated time and energy to the war efforts while stateside. However, Wilson suggests that what was painted as righteous acts of sacrifice and loyalty to country were really designed to benefit the economic progress of the United States, allowing for the American fiscal success of the 1950s and 1960s, the setting of the play.

2. In act I, scene 1, Troy’s friend Bono chides him about “that Alberta gal” (l. 35). What is significant about the introduction of this complicating element before we meet Troy’s wife? What
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might this foreshadow in the play? How does this teasing introduce a complication within the play’s exposition?

In act I, scene 1, Troy’s friend Bono chides him about “that Alberta gal” before Rose is introduced to the audience. This is significant because it hints very early in the play that Troy may have a woman on the side, influencing the audience’s perception of Troy as a husband. Later in the same scene, Troy professes his strong love for Rose, stating, “I love this woman so much it hurts” (I.1.375–76). However, the audience already knows that Troy may not be completely devoted to Rose, so these words affect the audience differently than if Alberta had not been previously mentioned. Clearly, this chiding foreshadows the later rift between Rose and Troy, which is caused by Alberta’s pregnancy and the birth of Raynell. What begins as gentle teasing by Bono about the attention Troy is paying Alberta eventually develops into a major complication in the lives of Troy and Rose.

3. Early in the play (act I, scene 1), Wilson’s stage direction for Rose indicates that she “alters between the porch and the kitchen.” Throughout the play, she is associated with food and preparation. Examine specific passages and examples, and discuss how Wilson uses this association to develop the character of Rose.

Throughout act I, Rose is known to be in the process of preparing one meal or another. Rarely does a scene go by when she doesn’t offer to fix a plate of food for one or more of the men in her family. Cory, it seems, is the only one who is told to fix his own food. In act 1, scene 3, Cory declares that he is hungry, and Rose directs him to make his own meatloaf sandwich (ll. 12–14). There is a change in Rose’s behavior; however, after she learns of Troy’s infidelity. In act II, scene 4, Rose is still busy preparing food, but this time her care goes to the church rather than to Troy. She tells Troy to warm up his supper while she’s away and to stay away from the cakes she’s made for the bake sale. This is the first time we see Rose step out of the yard, and we see that she is paying attention to things and people other than her husband. Rose’s nurturing character remains relatively unaltered toward the other men in her family, however; in the final scene of Troy’s funeral, Rose again offers to make a meal for Lyons and Cory. Lyons accepts but Cory refuses, suggesting that he’ll be a different man than his father was and will be more appreciative and less demanding of the doting care of his own wife.

4. Why do you think Wilson holds off until the end of act I to have Troy reveal his past and his own confrontation with his father at age fourteen? Why does Wilson have Troy tell the story as a flashback to Lyons and Bono rather than to Cory? Pay special attention to Troy’s tone; how does this section contribute to your understanding of his character?

Wilson waits until the end of act I to reveal Troy’s past with his father because he wants the audience to first see Troy’s parenting style in action. When the audience sees the disdain with which Troy treats Lyons about borrowing money and playing music, it is tempting to judge him as an unsupportive and pessimistic father. When the audience hears Troy chastise Cory about not having to “like” him, it is tempting to judge Troy as a cold, unfeeling parent. But when the audience learns of the episode that took place between Troy and his own father at the age of fourteen, the harm he’s done to his own sons earlier in the act pales in comparison. Now the audience is able to see that Troy is a better father to his children than his own father was, and the audience is forced to reevaluate Troy as a parent with this new information concerning the kind of example he was given. Wilson has Troy tell this story to Lyons and Bono rather than to Cory because Lyons and Bono are better positioned to understand the story. As adults, they can put the story into perspective in a way that Cory might not be able to. Additionally, it is important that Cory’s character maintain a level of resentment toward his father that might be mitigated by this story, so Wilson keeps Cory ignorant of it. Troy’s tone in describing the occurrence is matter-of-fact, a fairly straightforward retelling of events that is atypical of Troy’s storytelling style. We learn that Troy “bec[a]me a man” (I.4.224) that day and left his father’s house. However, we also learn that Troy always feared his father, a word he doesn’t use often. This reveals that Troy’s arrogant attitude is, in part, a façade that covers his long-standing fear and resentment of his father. Troy claims that his father “was the devil himself” (I.4.228–29). Subsequently, all Troy’s tall tales about defeating the devil are his way of working out the shame and abandonment he still feels about the way in which he left his father’s house.
5. Much of the play is concerned with money: earning it, owing it, paying for things. Yet Wilson alerts us to a metaphorical level when Troy insists, “Life don’t owe you nothing. You owe it to yourself” (I.1.334–35). Discuss how the language of commerce — debt, payment, purchase, cheating — develops important themes in the play.

Troy Maxson is concerned — some would say, obsessed — with the ways in which the system is set up to keep African Americans from realizing financial success. He understands that in a capitalistic culture such as the one in America, access to the possibility of financial advancement is critical for success. One of the central themes in the play, then, is the question of how a community of people can rise above their current disadvantaged position when the system itself is setting up unfair roadblocks to that possibility. The nagging question of whether Troy’s own meager successes are based on his merits is brought to the forefront whenever characters wonder whether it was legitimate for Troy to use Gabriel’s money to buy a house. This idea returns at the end of the play, when Rose suggests that Troy has sent Gabe to the hospital to get half his money — thematically paralleling the revelation about Troy having impregnated his mistress, which undermines his character. Troy’s life seems concerned with making a paycheck so that he can be relieved of his responsibilities; he gives Rose the paycheck and goes to have a bit of fun drinking. Lyons’s attempt to follow his dream is seen as incompatible with making money and seems to be a hollow, illusory path, as he ends up in jail. But on the flip side, Cory does what his father says, making a solid living in the Marines, but he is not doing what he loves; that he may soon be worse off than Lyons is suggested by the fact that the play ends just as the Vietnam War is starting to heat up.

Troy describes beating the system in terms of making a deal with the devil. In this case, Troy must make a deal with the “devil” in order to furnish his home in a manner that creates an illusion of financial success. His monthly payment of ten dollars is enough to keep the furniture from being repossessed, but it also ensures that he will never have enough money to actually get ahead. He is trapped in a no-win situation, with a thin veneer of success masking the reality. Money is the key to true equality in Troy’s mind, and access to the possibility of earning enough money to get ahead is something that he does not believe he will ever have because of the color of his skin.

6. What do you think is the climax of *Fences*? Explain your reasoning.

The climax of any story is the point at which the conflict reaches its pinnacle and, for better or for worse, a resolution begins to emerge. Therefore, the climax of *Fences* occurs at the end of act II, scene 4, when Troy kicks Cory out of the house for good. The father-son conflict that had been building since the start of the play finally reaches its apex at this point, and the resolution of that conflict is simply that the two will never see each other again. Because they cannot resolve their conflicting interests and personalities, they opt instead to put distance between them. In Troy’s mind, this is a variation on the way in which he and his own father parted ways, and the cycle is now complete because he has driven off his own son in a manner similar to the one in which his own father dismissed him. It is important to note, however, that while Troy was angry enough to want to strike Cory, he didn’t beat his son the way his own father had beaten him. Cory’s departure marks the climax of the story, leaving Troy with only death to confront. The next scene opens years later, after Troy has died, and Cory’s return is his first visit home since the heated argument that resulted in his departure so long ago.

7. Much of *Fences* is written in dialect, depicting the natural speech patterns of the characters in the play. In one example, Troy teases Rose with: “I’m studying you . . . fixing to do my homework!” (I.3.23). In other instances, Wilson brings in dialect through songs the characters recall or sing. How does the dialect affect your understanding of the play? Do you find that the style of the characters’ language, which reflects the period when the action occurs, dates the play for contemporary viewers?

This question raises many issues around language, and those students who struggle with the way in which Wilson crafts dialogue will definitely be at something of a disadvantage. However, the rhythms of the language are also one of the play’s compelling features and should be something that students explore in ways that encourage them to unlock the cadence and diction the characters employ. The question of whether or not the dialect dates the play will be a matter of perspective. The play should be dated, because it is meant to capture a decade that occurred long before the students were born. The
personal response to studying a piece that is not from the latter twentieth or early twenty-first century will depend in some ways on how the discussions are framed. The injustices that Troy rails against have not completely disappeared for American culture, nor have dialects. Focusing on both the richness the dialects provide and the authenticity of the interactions between characters may help students overcome their initial unfamiliarity with the dialect.

8. In act II, scene 1, Troy uses baseball metaphors (“steal second,” “stood on first base for eighteen years”) to explain his affair with Alberta to Rose. How is this use of language consistent with Troy’s character? On what basis does Rose reject the comparison? Consider the metaphor she chooses as she counters with an explanation of how she has tried to live her life.

Troy’s use of baseball metaphors to explain his affair with Alberta is consistent with his character because he often leans on such metaphors to explain his worldview and his take on life. He also uses baseball metaphors to explain his relationship with Cory and his own fear of death. Because Troy sees himself as someone who was disadvantaged from the start (“born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate” [ll. 213–14]), he believes he can’t let an opportunity go by, since not many will come his way. He sees his life as comparable to the batter’s progress around the bases, and although he “fooled them” (l. 217) and ended up safely on first base with Rose, Cory, and a job, he began to see himself as stuck on first base indefinitely. He waited and waited for “one of them boys to knock [him] in” (l. 220), but when that didn’t happen, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He risked his marriage to be with Alberta because she reminded him of what he had once been, and she gave him back some of his motivation to move forward. His life had grown stagnant (“I stood on first base for eighteen years” [l. 227]), and Alberta made Troy feel that he “just might be able to steal second” (l. 224). This continued use of baseball language emphasizes not only the important role that baseball played in shaping his life but how his failure to succeed at baseball still shapes the way he thinks about the world. He thinks about his wooing of Alberta as some sort of accomplishment rather than a betrayal of Rose.

Rose counters with “We’re not talking about baseball” (l. 229), the subtext being that they aren’t talking about whether or not Troy feels satisfied with what he has accomplished but about his clear violation of his marital commitments. Rose rejects Troy’s complaints about “standing in the same place for eighteen years” (l. 233), reminding him that she’s been right next to him all along, and that she too has seen some of her hopes and dreams compromised. Unlike Troy, Rose sees her life as comparable to that of a gardener rather than an athlete, and she likens her wants and needs, even herself, to seeds that she planted inside Troy and “waited to bloom” (l. 243). Instead of turning away from her spouse when she felt as desperate about the elusive nature of her goals as her husband did, Rose turned to Troy and put all her hopes and dreams in his hands. She reveals that she’s been disappointed at his lack of care for what she planted: “And it didn’t take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn’t never gonna bloom” (ll. 243–44). Nevertheless, Rose clung to her investment and continued to pour her everything into Troy, even as she began to realize that Troy “wasn’t the finest man in the world” (l. 248).

9. Wilson has described Fences as having a “blues aesthetic.” Songs, and particularly the blues, play an important role in Wilson’s plays. Where do you see the influence of the blues on Fences? Is it in the diction? the syntax? the themes? the structure? Or does it show itself in some other way?

The diction and syntax of the blues is certainly reflected in the play as a whole. The song that Troy sings throughout the play is a clear example of the influence of the blues, something that is emphasized at the end when the song becomes as much about Troy as it is about the dog Blue (the name also acting as a reference to the music). The dialogue also reflects both the cadence and the themes of the blues. In act II, scene 3, for example, Troy holds his child and speaks of being scared, homeless, and alone, and finds solace in a song about riding a train. The long discussions about fighting death, having strikes against him, and teaching lessons to Cory about what it means to be an African American male all reflect common themes in blues songs. The fact that Lyons is a jazz musician also allows us a glimpse into how music in general and blues in particular are a part of Troy’s community. Jazz, which is deeply connected to and informed by the blues, has often been called the only truly American music — a form that did not borrow from other Western traditions but was formed by those who struggled mightily in
a culture that for many years did not view African Americans as an equal part of the cultural landscape. Finally, like many blues songs, the play is concerned with musing on unfortunate life events.

10. The character of Gabriel has puzzled readers, audiences, and even directors; one even suggested that he be dropped from the script to keep from confusing audiences. Some see him as a spiritual presence with a visible link to the African past. What elements of plot and character depend on him? Explain how you do or do not see Gabriel as essential to *Fences*. Include the final scene in your interpretation.

Gabriel is a character who is both an insider and someone who can make observations free from the restrictions of what others would consider inappropriate. In this way, he is a bit like the traditional fool, accused of speaking nonsense that is actually the unspoken truth. He can speak the truth in ways that others cannot because he has a condition that allows those around him to ignore or dismiss his comments. In another way he represents the African American male whose development has been impeded by forces outside of himself — in Gabriel’s case, the war. However, his head wound from the war is also a reminder of the legacy of the prohibition on educating African Americans, which goes back to the time of slavery. One way to keep a people oppressed is to make sure they never receive an education, and Gabriel is an example of how devastating the effects of an inability to develop mentally are on an individual — and on a culture as well.

The payment that Gabriel receives from the government, which Troy steals to buy his home, is important in a couple of ways. First, it represents how ineffectual the government’s attempts are to pay off those who have been crushed by the system. The money is sent to Gabriel, who is unaware that Troy is stealing it from him to advance his own desires rather than using it to help his damaged brother. The irony of that reality is underscored by the fact that it is Troy who is aiding in this scam. Wilson makes sure to explore not only the ways in which American culture at the time held African Americans at a distinct disadvantage but also the ways in which Troy and others from the African American community contribute to those struggles.

Gabriel’s final act in the play is critical in expressing how completely Troy has been held back by American culture at the time. He was a man among men, gifted both physically and mentally, yet on the day of his funeral the trumpet meant to sound his arrival in heaven is muted, incapable of producing any noise. Much as Troy’s rantings over the years have failed to produce any change, the trumpet sounding his arrival to a place where he can find peace and solace is mute.

**FICTION**

Babylon Revisited  
F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

**Exploring the Text**

1. Babylon is an ancient city famous for hedonistic behavior and luxury. In what ways is Charlie “revisiting” Babylon? Identify details in the first section of the story that contrast the way things are in Paris upon Charlie’s return and how they were three years earlier. Note both literal changes and changes in perception.

In the three years since Charlie left Paris, a stillness has descended on the once-vibrant city due to the economic downturn that dried up all of the extravagance that fueled the previous frenzied atmosphere. Charlie’s sobriety also colors his impressions of the city, especially those related to the establishments he once frequented during his wild drunken days. The Ritz bar is the first place Charlie revisits, noting that its stillness is “strange and portentous” and indicating that it is “not an American bar any more,” its calm atmosphere lending a certain civility to Charlie and making him feel “polite” (para. 9). The quiet of the bar, once filled with wealthy and inebriated Americans, indicates not only the difference in the bar’s atmosphere but also the change in the city itself. The bar has “gone back into France” (para. 9), indicating that three years earlier the bar was so overwhelmed with Americans that it had, in a sense, left the city. As Charlie walks through the corridor, he hears a “single, bored voice” in the
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“once-clamorous women’s room”; and in the bar itself, he encounters a “single pair of eyes” peering up behind a newspaper (para. 10). The emptiness and quiet of the bar are contrasted in Charlie’s memory of the place as a loud and boisterous venue filled with drunken patrons flush with money from the stock market. The bartender Alix knows him well as a former patron, recalling that Charlie’s drinking was “going pretty strong a couple of years ago” (para. 12). In spite of the fact that he knows Charlie well enough to exchange stories of the old days, he is unaware that Charlie has a daughter. This detail reinforces the old lifestyle that Charlie led, where bartenders knew his name and his preferred drink yet were unaware of significant details related to his life as a father. When Charlie strolls toward Montmartre, a place where “all the catering to vice and waste was on an utterly childish scale” (para. 56), he finds that it is a shadow of its former self. Montmartre’s current state helps Charlie appreciate the “meaning of the word ‘dissipate’ — to dissipate into thin air” (para. 56). All of the old vitality, as childish and wasteful as it was, had vanished and been replaced by a subdued and quiet city, just as Charlie has stopped his own lavish and drunken ways and replaced them with sobriety and a desire to raise his daughter. Charlie’s walk down Montmartre also emphasizes the fact that the change is not just in the city but in him. He is now sober and serious about raising a child, and he looks at former haunts from this new vantage point. Fitzgerald writes, “He was curious to see Paris by night with clearer and more judicious eyes than those of other days” (para. 52). Peeking into a place he once frequented, Charlie realizes that you’d need to be “damn drunk” (para. 54) to enjoy it. He sees hotels as “bleak,” “sinister,” and “cheap” (para. 55). He concludes: “So much for the effort and ingenuity of Montmartre” (para. 56); it has lost its luster because he is a different person.

2. What significance do you attach to Fitzgerald’s choice of Honoria as a name for Charlie’s daughter? In what ways is her age and the fact that she is “an individual with a code of her own” (para. 118) important in this story? In what other ways does Fitzgerald raise questions about youth and maturity?

Just as Charlie is attempting to reclaim his daughter, Honoria, he is also attempting to reclaim his own sense of honor, which he lost during his decadent, drunken days in Paris. Charlie’s primary purpose for returning to Paris is to secure permission to bring his daughter back with him to Prague. Much attention is paid to his behavior a few years earlier, when Honoria was still living with him. It is clear that during that time, Charlie was almost exclusively interested in living a lavish, irresponsible, drunken lifestyle, with little consideration given for his young daughter. He ponders his behavior at that time both as a father and as a husband, wondering “[h]ow many weeks or months of dissipation” it took for him “to arrive at that condition of utter irresponsibility” (para. 210). He admits his failings freely, and still grapples with how he could ever have behaved so irresponsibly. His daughter represents Charlie’s desire to be the father he was before the wild times in Paris. In his effort to make a case to Marion, he reminds her that even when he and his wife “weren’t getting along well [they] never let anything that happened touch Honoria” (para. 152). Charlie was a good father once, and he wishes to reclaim that.

The child’s age is significant because at nine she is old enough to recall the good times before her father’s lapse and yet young enough to not be irrevocably scarred by an awareness of what actually went on three years earlier. Thus, she will not hold Charlie’s dubious past behavior against him, and the two of them will have sufficient time to reestablish their former close relationship. As a girl who has a “code of her own” (para. 118), she is not caught up as the adults are in the implications of Charlie’s past. She shows a willingness to forgive her father and expresses a desire to live with him. Her maturity at times seems greater than Charlie’s, even initially declining an invitation to the toy store, knowing that her father was “not rich any more” (para. 75). Charlie is struck by his daughter’s strength of character, and he desires to put “a little of himself into her before she crystallized utterly” (para. 118) so that the two would be more closely connected.

3. What does Fitzgerald let us know about Helen? Besides being Honoria’s mother, in what ways does her character contribute to the story’s themes? Why is she described as having “escaped to a grave in Vermont” (para. 59)?

Few specifics are given about Helen’s actual behavior during the time that Charlie was carousing in Paris, but she was not merely an innocent bystander who waited at home for him to return from his wild evenings. In a conversation with Marion and Lincoln, Charlie hints at the fact that he and Helen
were partners in their escapades. He is cut off by Marion when he brings up the time when he and Helen "began to run around" after he "gave up business" (para. 159) and they moved to Paris. Marion's demand that he "leave Helen out of it" (para. 160) suggests that although Helen accompanied Charlie during his riotous evenings in Paris, the topic of her involvement was not welcome. While Marion obviously knows that Helen also behaved poorly, she will not look honestly at that reality and instead focuses on the "morning when Helen knocked at [her] door, soaked to the skin and shivering" (para. 169), after Charlie had locked her out of their apartment. Marion will not allow the topic of Helen's behavior to be a part of the discussion, indicating her unwillingness to admit her sister's role in the choices that were made. Charlie does give a bit more information about his wife, providing information that allows for a more objective view than Marion is able to maintain. In paragraph 198, he provides a number of specific details indicating Helen's own poor past behavior. Helen had kissed "young Webb" on "that terrible February night" he locked her out, suggesting that she had her own wild tendencies. He recalls that night beginning with a "slow quarrel [that] had gone on for hours." He reveals that when he locked her out of the apartment, he would never have imagined that she would return an hour later, only to wander in the snow in just her slippers — a choice that indicates that she must have been far too drunk that evening to make wise choices. It is possibly for these reasons that Marion does not want to talk about her sister's behavior, choosing instead to lay the blame solely at Charlie's feet. However, that does not overshadow the fact that Helen did participate in the excessive drinking. Her "escape" to her grave may be that it was a way out of needing to seek redemption, leaving Charlie behind to face their shared past by himself.

The full story of Helen's behavior is left to the imagination, but she is part of a troubling past that Charlie wishes to overcome. She, like Charlie, was caught up in the exuberance of excessive wealth and the opportunities it provided for those who wished to enjoy the kind of unbridled life that Paris had to offer. Helen ultimately died of "heart trouble" (para. 189), an indication that, like Charlie, she carried the burden of the choices she made, and they ultimately proved too heavy for her to manage. That her "escape" from the wild life of Paris was not through sobriety is thematically important in a number of ways: her death was the cause for Honoría to be taken away; for Charlie, presumably, to reevaluate his life; and for him to return to Paris and attempt to get his daughter back. But it is more — it represents the darker, natural terminus of the wild twenties atmosphere very literally, underscoring all the other types of death that are seen through the eyes of a character who can now see how destructive his behavior was: the economic decline of a city, the death of emotional and family life, the continued decline of characters who can't break out of a cycle of drinking and partying.

4. How does Fitzgerald's use of a third-person limited point of view affect your reading of this story? How would the use of a first-person narrator have altered your reading — that is, if the story had been told from the point of view of Charlie or Marion or an older Honoría remembering the situation?

The narrative mode of the story allows the reader to make judgments about the objectivity of a character more easily, and students will no doubt have varying degrees of trust in Charlie's ability to convey the veracity of his memories and the reality of his current situation. He does give a number of indications that cast doubt on how clearly he sees himself. For example, it is curious that considering Charlie's assertion that he has moved past his troubles with alcohol he would choose to first visit the Ritz, a place where he formerly spent so much time and money drinking. He continues to be interested in seeking out former haunts, including "Bricktop's, where he had parted with so many hours and so much money" (para. 53). He seems fascinated with his old history, an indication that he has not entirely left his desire for his old life behind. His vacillation between being depressed and being happy also indicates a personality that is difficult to depend on in some ways. Sections II and IV both indicate that Charlie awakens in a mood better than that of the day before, with little indication that it was something other than a good night's rest that changed his mental state. Speculation about a different narrative perspective can move in many directions and should reflect the creativity with which students manage the resulting levels of reliability and the kind of information to which certain characters would be privy. For example, Marion is far less able to deal with the possibility that Helen may also have behaved quite badly three years earlier. Her ability to judge Charlie or Helen is affected by her attachment to her sister.
5. Analyze the character of Marion in section III. How does Fitzgerald describe her appearance, her actions, her relationship with her husband? Why is it “necessary for her to believe in tangible villainy and a tangible villain” (para. 183)?

Section III opens with Marion wearing a black dress that “faintly suggest[s] mourning” (para. 143), which hints at the fact that she is still very much fixated on her sister’s death as well as what she believes to be Charlie’s role in Helen’s early demise. From the very beginning of his relationship with Marion, “there had been an instinctive antipathy between them” (para. 38). However, the moment that primarily defines Marion’s relationship with Charlie is the night when Helen showed up at her door, “soaked to the skin and shivering” (para. 169). In her mind, the events of that night proved that Charlie was a terrible man who greatly contributed to her sister’s death, and since that evening, Charlie hasn’t “really existed” (para. 165) for Marion. Although he did lock her out on a snowy evening, Helen was culpable as well. She had consumed enough alcohol that night to be “too confused to find a taxi” (para. 198). Even though the cold evening had not directly resulted in any physical harm to Helen, Marion is closed to any possibility other than the conclusion that everything that night was solely Charlie’s fault. His attempts to talk about that night are cut off twice by Marion, who doesn’t feel like “going over that [night] again” (para. 170). Eventually, Marion declares that she has still not settled on how much Charlie was “responsible for Helen’s death” (para. 184), which is an accusation that Charlie simply cannot defend. His reminder that Helen died of heart trouble is merely repeated by Marion, the weight of the repetition reinforcing her belief that Charlie was primarily to blame. Marion has been embittered by Helen’s death and refuses to consider the possibility that her sister contributed in any way to her own death. Having wrested guardianship of Honoria from Charlie when he was “flat on [his] back in a sanitarium” (para. 175), Marion enjoys complete control that she is loath to relinquish. Her controlling nature, plus her unwillingness to reconsider the past actions of Helen or Charlie, all contribute to a character that allows herself to remain resentful of Charlie’s wealth and cover her own jealousies with a veneer of concern for her niece’s well-being. (Marion’s husband clearly knows that she is sometimes emotional or one-sided and is more open to Charlie, but he is also devoted to his wife.)

6. What role do Lorraine and Duncan play in the story? Pay special attention to section II, where they first meet up with Charlie.

Duncan and Lorraine, two people who had “helped them make months into days in the lavish times of three years ago,” appear as “sudden ghosts out of the past” (p. 101), making every effort to draw Charlie back into the lifestyle he does not wish to relive. These two represent Charlie’s ongoing struggle with his past, a time in his life when he did enjoy the cavorting he did with them. Lorraine is especially challenging for Charlie, as he continues to feel her “passionate, provocative” attention, even though “his own rhythm was different now” (para. 104). He is aware that these are not the best people for him to associate with as he tries to both maintain sobriety and convince Marion that he is a fit father for Honoria. This explains why he is evasive when asked where he is staying, not wanting them to be able to track him down at his hotel room when they are heading out for a night on the town. Lorraine’s note to him hints at former times that “crazy spring” that are “always . . . in the back of [her] mind” (para. 209), suggesting the possibility that Charlie and Lorraine’s relationship was more than a mere friendship. She goes on to express that although everyone else seems old, she doesn’t “feel old a bit” (para. 209), indicating that she is still in the same immature place emotionally that they all were three years previous. Her lack of maturation is reinforced when she and Duncan show up drunk at Marion and Lincoln’s home, destroying Charlie’s plan to return to Prague with Honoria. Ironically, they know that Charlie is “stronger than” them, even as they try to cajole him into going out; they want to “draw a certain sustenance from his strength” (para. 117), even as they try to get him to succumb. The pair continue to live a chaotic life fueled by alcohol and late-night parties, representing those forces from Charlie’s past that will always be challenging his resolve to stay sober and live life in a manner responsible enough to bring his daughter back into his full-time care.

7. Explain the irony in the following exchange between Paul and Charlie:

“I heard that you lost a lot in the crash.”

“I did,” and he added grimly, “but I lost everything I wanted in the boom.” (paras. 261–62)
Find other examples of self-effacing irony that characters in this story use to cope with difficulties they are facing or have faced.

The irony in the statement is at the center of the story in that the times when the stock market was at its height and Charlie had the most money with the least responsibility should have been some of the best times of his life, but they ended up being the most troubling. It was precisely the lack of a need to work coupled with a new accumulation of wealth that allowed Charlie to make the choices that ultimately ended with the loss of his wife and daughter. Charlie understands that his former decadent lifestyle, in which he spent untold thousands of francs drinking, eating, and going to lavish parties, directly contributed to his current separation from his family. His wife died of heart trouble, but Charlie knows that their choices during their years in Paris contributed to her poor health. He never indicates that her death was a direct result of those days, but he knows without a doubt that it was an unhealthy way to live. The loss of his daughter is more directly tied to his former undisciplined days. His drinking went unabated until he “collapsed” (para. 162), causing him to consent to Marion’s guardianship while convalescing in a sanitarium, having lost his health and his money in the stock market crash. It takes the disaster of losing his wife and daughter for him to realize that it was his indulgences during the high times of the stock market that led him to lose everything, not the eventual crash.

Other examples of this self-effacing irony include Marion’s remark that she is “delighted” with the crash because it has emptied Paris of Americans and allowed her to go into a store without Parisians assuming she’s “a millionaire” (para. 43). Lincoln also comments on the irony that even though the money disappeared from the bank accounts of those who used to spend nights cavorting around Paris, “a lot of it stayed in the hands of chasseurs and saxophone players and maîtres d’hôtel” (para. 208). These were people who, unlike the wealthy businessmen who were enjoying their newfound wealth, were smart enough to know that the party would soon have to end.

8. Were you surprised by the ending? Do you agree with Marion’s decision? Cite specific passages to explain your response.

The degree to which students are surprised by the ending will depend on how much antipathy they saw in Charlie’s relationship with Marion, and how concerned they were by Lorraine’s and Duncan’s obvious efforts to drag Charlie back into his former lifestyle. In support of their responses, they should point to moments in the text that indicate either Lorraine’s and Duncan’s tenacity in seeking out Charlie, or Marion’s repeated unwillingness to discuss Helen’s past. Both foreshadow the unexpected drunken call of Lorraine and Duncan at the Peters’s home and Marion’s seemingly strident response to their brief but obnoxious visit.

9. Fitzgerald divides the story into five sections, which could be considered chapters. What do you think is the structural principle of this division?

The structural principle of each section follows stages in Charlie’s attempt to acknowledge his past and move on, ultimately beginning a new life with Honoria and with a renewed reputation. It begins with Charlie revisiting the establishments he used to frequent; moves to his reconnection with his daughter; and continues as he attempts to regain the confidence of Marion and secure guardianship of his daughter, is thwarted by his past, and faces his return to Prague without Honoria. Each step brings him closer to his daughter as well as his past, with the past finally consuming his desire to move forward with the company of his daughter. In the first section, Charlie must face the places in which he spent so much time carousing and carelessly expending his wealth, and he must reconnect with his daughter, the primary purpose for his return. He begins at the Ritz, a place where he spent so much time that the bartender is still on a first-name basis with him. He leaves the Ritz and goes to the Peters’s home, where he is reunited with his daughter. On his way there, he takes a taxi to the Left Bank, where he realizes that he has “spoiled this city for [himself]” (para. 28). After dinner with the Peters’s, he travels toward Montmartre, continuing to surreptitiously check out the bars and restaurants he once frequented. After seeing many of them empty and falling into sullen disrepair, he “suddenly realize[s] the meaning of the word ‘dissipate’” (para. 56). The second section finds him moving closer toward his goal of reconnecting with his daughter, a person he probably neglected to a great degree when she was still living with
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him. The section focuses on the wonderful day he has with Honoria, and her ending their day together by telling him that she loves him “better than anybody” (para. 136) and that she wants to live with him. By this point, Charlie’s plans are progressing nicely, but now that he has seen the empty bars of his past and has reconnected with Honoria, he must convince his daughter’s guardians to release her to his care. The third section focuses on his goal of getting Marion’s permission to take Honoria back to Prague with him. This requires him to face his past in the context of how it affected his family, specifically the degree to which his sister-in-law holds him responsible for Helen’s death. The conversation he has with Marion makes no secret of her disapproval of Charlie’s past actions and her current distrust that he has truly changed. Although he does not gain any kind of pardon from Marion, he does gain her begrudging permission to take Honoria back to Prague. Although their conversation ultimately secures Marion’s permission to bring Honoria back to his home, it also raises the ghost of Helen’s memory, sending him into an extended reflection about his life with her. It is at this moment that the past he has attempted to confront and leave behind comes back to subvert all of his plans. When his friends from his earlier days in Paris, Lorraine and Duncan, show up drunk at the Peters’s home, they put an end to the progress he has made with Marion. She sees that neither have made the transition past their raucous days spent with Charlie, and she believes this to be an indication that Charlie is not yet free from his own past. In section five, all of Charlie’s efforts to move on come crashing down as Lincoln makes it clear that Marion is in too fragile a state to allow Honoria to leave with Charlie, and he is left exactly where he started.

I Stand Here Ironing

TILLIE OLSEN

Exploring the Text

1. How is the setting of the story’s frame, a woman standing at an ironing board, critical to the story’s themes?

During the early part of the twentieth century, when this story takes place, ironing was often specifically associated with women. This was perhaps even truer during World War II, when many of the males were off fighting in Europe. As a working mother who at times was alone either because of her divorce or because of her second husband’s deployment in Europe, the duty to maintain all aspects of the household would have fallen to her. Ironing, then, is an act that typifies the mother’s responsibility to be the caretaker of the household. In this way, it becomes symbolic of all of the things she did to address the needs of her children. Emily jokingly tells her mother that if she were an artist like Whistler, she would have to paint her mother “standing over an ironing board” (para. 51), indicating that her mother was often engaged in these caretaking tasks. These constant attempts on the part of the mother to tend to the responsibilities of parenthood highlight her consternation with the fact that although she has been able to manage the physical tasks, she is ultimately unable to address Emily’s critical emotional needs. Just as she repeatedly goes over and over the dress with the iron, attempting to get out the wrinkles, she also goes over the same stories and memories from her past that she cannot seem to smooth over. The last sentence serves as a final comment from the mother, who fears that like the dress, which is defenseless against the iron, Emily will become someone who believes she is helpless against the crushing forces outside of her.

2. What structural purpose do the interruptions in the narrator’s interior monologue serve in the story? For instance, “Ronnie is calling. He is wet and I change him” in paragraph 43. Notice, too, how the speaker’s use of run-on sentences and made-up words — such as “four-year-oldness” (para. 16) — contrasts with short declarative sentences such as “She was a beautiful baby” (paras. 5 and 8), “I was nineteen” (para. 9), and “She was two” (para. 12). What is the effect of this juxtaposition?

The interruptions to the interior monologue, such as “Ronnie is calling” and Emily’s running up the stairs and mentioning on her mother’s position in front of the ironing board, serve to emphasize the fact that life continues to relentlessly move forward regardless of how much the mother may wish it to
slow down long enough for her to answer the many questions she has about her relationship with her daughter. The interior conversation is positioned against a world that continuously imposes itself on the mother’s thoughts, not allowing her the peace necessary to fully grasp how she can address her concerns. This is true of the mother not only at the moment of the conversation but throughout her life in general. Between a husband leaving her suddenly, to the necessity to work, to her second husband leaving to fight, to the demands of younger children, the mother never has the time to fully address the events in her life. At one point she says that even if she were able to start to “sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total” “there [would] be an interruption and [she would] have to gather it all together again” (para. 4). The juxtaposition of the run-on sentences with the short declarative sentences mirror her thoughts as they move from poetic musings, such as her remembering “all those years [her daughter] was thought homely” (para. 5), to her later declarative conclusion that all “the baby loveliness [was] gone” (para. 11). The imagination of made-up words and run-on sentences mirrors the complexity of her thoughts, while the prosaic nature of the declarative sentences highlights the limited answers her musings bring. The interruptions also make the story feel more like an interior monologue occurring in real time and less like a traditional short story.

3. The “you” the narrator addresses at the beginning of the story refers to a teacher concerned about Emily’s welfare. At first the narrator seems somewhat defensive (as in the third paragraph, when she sarcastically responds to the teacher’s request). How does the relationship between the narrator and the teacher evolve over the course of the story, so that by the end the narrator beseeches, “Only help her to know — help make it so there is cause for her to know” (para. 56)? To what extent might the narrator be addressing the reader as well as the teacher?

The call from the teacher sends Emily’s mother into a long reminiscence of major influences in her daughter’s development, including nursery school, which the mother characterizes as merely providing “parking places for children” (para. 12); eight months in a convalescent home, where Emily claims the people who run it “don’t like you to love anybody” (para. 29); school, where “glibness and quickness were easily confused with ability to learn” (para. 37); and a sister who was “everything in appearance and manner Emily was not” (para. 41). As she revisits these influences, the teacher’s comments (if there are any) are not provided. There is a sense that the mother gets caught up in the retelling of Emily’s story, and the teacher on the phone becomes merely someone who allows her to say these things out loud. As she continues the narrative, there are moments when she sounds as if she is sharing an important specific detail with the teacher but then invariably moves to a more introspective tone. For example, she shares the fact that she would sometimes keep the children home from school, and Emily and Susan “would play Kingdom, setting up landscapes and furniture” (para. 39), but then quickly moves to a more personal and complex admission that she has ultimately “edged away from . . . that poison-ous feeling between them, that terrible balancing of hurts and needs [she] had to do between the two, and did so badly” (para. 40). It is this progression from a specific detail to a relating of her own sense of guilt associated with that detail that ultimately brings the mother to a point where she has confessed to the teacher all of her fears about the poor choices she feels she made as a mother. At the end, having finished her confession, she can only beseech the teacher to help her daughter understand. It’s interesting that the people in Emily’s life who have been in caretaker positions seem to have neglected their duties in significant ways, but now this teacher begins the phone call by saying “I’m deeply interested in helping.” This is perhaps why the mother is so detailed in her narrative about Emily’s life to date. As the mother pours out her heart, reader and teacher share the role of listener, placing both in the position of a stranger hearing the painful and private confessions of a mother who feels as if she has failed her daughter.

4. What do you make of the repeated references to quantitative matters in this story — for instance, “to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total” in paragraph 4? Find other examples of this motif in the story, and explain its significance.

The motif developed through repeated references to things that are quantifiable tends to be associated with painful moments in Emily’s life. The mother recounts that Emily called her “three times” (para. 22) one night when she was alone and frightened. When she speaks of the convalescent home, she recalls the exact number of months it took before Emily was allowed to return home (para. 33), as
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well as the six-week time period they were not allowed to visit (para. 27). And at school there was “a boy she loved painfully through two school semesters” (para. 36). She can quantify how long certain things took and the exact year, but she cannot quantify the pain that Emily has endured. She attempts to understand through those things that she can quantify, tying her complex anguish to something real and tangible. It seems as if she is trying to find the equation that will solve the mystery of the anguish she feels as a mother for not doing things differently. In paragraph 55, she begins by saying that she “will never total it all,” language that specifically evokes mathematics. She then goes on to attempt to do just that: determine the sum total of Emily’s struggles. The motif addresses the issue of trying to grasp the complexity of human sadness through the more concrete medium of numbers, equations, and sums — an endeavor that is ultimately unsuccessful.

5. In the final lines of the story, the narrator calls her daughter “a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear” (para. 55). How have historical events affected Emily’s development? How have they imposed limitations on her? How have they made her strong?

The Great Depression and World War II changed the America psyche in untold ways, and Emily reflects many of these changes. The poverty of the time forces the mother to take a job after the father has left and to leave Emily with her biological father’s family when she cannot afford to feed her any longer. The separation from her mother is lengthened when Emily gets the chicken pox. These separations take away all of Emily’s “baby loveliness” (para. 11). Emily is then placed into a terrible nursery school, as the mother must continue to work long hours for meager wages, further taxing the mother-child bond. Emily, for reasons unknown to the mother, never directly protests or rebels, like all of the other children do. The mother realizes that she must have somehow demanded that goodness and asks, “what was the cost . . . of such goodness?” (para. 16). The medical establishments of the time were also inadequate in treating Emily. The convalescent home is a joyless place where “[t]hey don’t like you to love anybody” (para. 29). Parents are forced to yell to their children, like loved ones visiting convicts; the food is terrible; and the care is minimal. All of the misconceptions at the time concerning what constituted proper care led to a harrowing experience for Emily, which only ended after she had not improved after eight months of being there (para. 33). Emily demonstrated an incredible strength of spirit, but she ultimately turned inward for comfort, knowing that it was not available in her father’s care, in the convalescent home, or in school. This can be seen as a strength in many ways but also as a weakness, as Emily slowly becomes unable to ask her mother or others for support. She becomes as stoic as those waiting on soup lines for food or facing deployment in Europe. The war also weighs on Emily’s consciousness, although not as heavily as the consequences of growing up relatively poor during the Depression. She cavalierly waves off the importance of upcoming midterms, saying, “in a couple of years when we’ll all be atom-dead they won’t matter a bit” (para. 53). This can be attributed to a youthful ploy to avoid work, but it also could be a very real insight into Emily’s belief that the world will be ending soon, so worrying about little things like school midterms is a waste of energy. Her own natural comedic ability, perhaps borne out of her personal struggles, would also be an indication of a basic irreverence on her part. The question remains: is her stoicism and belief in the absurdity of worrying a strength that will allow her to endure or merely a defense mechanism that allows her to avoid the reality of her own pain?

6. Why does Olsen give us so much specific detail about Emily’s appearance? How do these descriptions contribute to her characterization? How is her appearance related to the choices she makes to distinguish herself, to stand out? What does the narrator mean when she says of Emily, “Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity” (para. 47)?

Olsen spends an ample amount of time describing Emily’s changing appearance as a metaphor for Emily’s emotional well-being. We first hear that she “was a beautiful baby” (para. 5) in the days before her first obligatory stay with her father’s relatives. When she returns from that stay at age two, however, “all the baby loveliness [is] gone” (para. 11), suggesting that she has experienced her first taste of unhappiness at an early age. Her recovery from the red measles was slow, and she “stayed skeleton thin” (para. 24), starved for attention after her mother returned home from the hospital with new baby Susan. Emily only grows frailer at the convalescent home, suggesting an intensified lack of emotional
support in a place where they “don’t like you to love anybody” (para. 29). After returning home, she “had physical lightness and brightness,” which indicates emotional recovery, however “momentary” (para. 34). Her appearance, “thin and dark and foreign-looking” (para. 35), gives Emily consternation and reveals her place as somehow distant or outside the mainstream. Her mother describes her “slow physical development” (para. 42), indicating the roadblocks she endured in her emotional maturation. Only when she begins to feel more comfortable in the busy world of her growing family does she develop an “enormous appetite” (para. 45) and begin to reap the rewards of a more stable and reliable home environment, giving her the confidence to enter a school amateur show and win top prize. “Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity (para. 47): Her mother views this notoriety as a limitation, but the fact that her beauty, once inborn and later hidden, reemerges in her young adulthood after she finds some attention and validation on the stage suggests otherwise. In the end, the narrator asserts that “she is so lovely” (para. 52), and although Emily is “uneasy . . . in her now-loveliness” (para. 5), it is suggested that she is finally beginning to blossom under the warmth of emotional support that was lacking for so many years.

7. What, finally, is the narrator’s assessment of her own performance as a mother? Do you think she believes she has been a good mother to her children? Overall, is the story hopeful or hopeless?

It is difficult to determine whether the mother is willing to accept her own culpability in Emily’s suffering, or if she merely thinks that it was inevitable. On the one hand, throughout the better part of the narrative, the mother is bemoaning her own actions, wondering why she made the choices she made. On the other hand, the story reads like a rebuke to the teacher, who doesn’t understand the mitigating circumstances, and in paragraph 55 the mother lists all of the reasons why she should not be held accountable. Ultimately, the mother admits that her “wisdom came too late” while also calling her daughter a “child of her age” (para. 55), seemingly absolving her of any responsibility. The story may be viewed as hopeless if the mother remains locked in her denial of responsibility and Emily continues to live life believing that it will all just end up being shortened by an atomic blast. The story can also be viewed as hopeful, considering the fact that the mother continues to face her past and Emily seems to have developed not only a calling in comedy but also a newfound confidence and a healthy skepticism.

8. Rarely do we hear Emily speak in this story. Instead, we hear others’ comments about and reactions to her, including her mother’s. How do you think Emily would characterize her relationship with her mother? Do you think she would blame her mother or circumstances beyond their control for the difficulties she has experienced?

Students will have various answers to this question. Though Emily does not say much, there is still quite a bit of information concerning what she went through growing up. The mother reveals that “with all the fierce rigidity of first motherhood,” she “waited till the clock decreed” to feed Emily, even though she cried with hunger (para. 6). Though little detail is given about her stay with her father’s family, when she returns, all her “baby loveliness” (para. 11) is gone. Then Emily is placed in an inadequate nursery school, where the inattention continues. The mother “knew the teacher . . . was evil” and that “Emily hated it,” yet Emily “did not clutch and implore” (para. 14) her mother to stay, already developing a tendency to suffer in silence rather than lash out at her mother. She did attempt to avoid school by claiming illness, which her mother allowed her to do often. However, the mother sees the pain that the lack of protests and rebellion must have had on Emily, and asks herself why she demand that kind of goodness from Emily, and “what was the cost . . . to [Emily] of such goodness?” (para. 16). Later, when the mother has remarried, she starts leaving Emily home alone some evenings, telling herself Emily “was old enough” (para. 20), in spite of the fact that Emily is scared. Emily tells her mother that she “didn’t cry” but did call “three times . . . and then ran downstairs to open the door” so the mother would “come home faster” (para. 22). When Emily is sent to the convalescent home, the neglect continues, as she is discouraged from making any friends among the other children at the home and can only “shriek” down to her parents on visiting days across an “invisible wall” (para. 28). After she returns home, she still finds little comfort. The boy she likes in school does not return her affection, and her sister Susan is everything that Emily is not. All the while, Emily does not rail against her circumstances but suffers quietly. Eventually, she finds an escape in performing, adopting a persona that is different from the quiet child she had become. All of this suggests that while Emily was indeed hurt by the
actions of her mother and her experiences growing up, she has found a way to cope with her sadness and prevail. She did not ever indicate any malice toward her mother, even at her worst times. In fact, she seemed to face life with open eyes, not clinging to a hope that things could really change. Once they did, she embraced her newfound aptitude for performance. Taking all of this into account, it does not seem likely that Emily would waste much time trying to lay blame on her mother. She has consistently endured everything life threw at her without raising objections or lodging complaints. Emily sees her mother for who she is, bad choices and all. Near the end of the narrative, the mother tells us that Emily, seeing her mother ironing, says that were she to paint a picture of her, she would "have to paint [her] standing over an ironing board" (para. 51), an indication that the mother knows that though she has failed her daughter in some ways, she has always done what she could to keep the family going. Perhaps this also indicates that Emily understands her mother enough to forgive her for any of the poor choices she may have made when raising her, or perhaps this is intended more as a jab at the mother. Emily's suggestion that tests are not important because atomic disaster is impending is also telling but opaque — clearly she has learned to cope humorously with the fact that she has fallen through the cracks in the school system. But she hasn’t escaped her misfortunes, and this seems less like a genuine attempt to make the best of things than the sort of coping that thinly masks a deep bitterness.

The Moths

HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES

Exploring the Text

1. The story opens with the narrator's grandmother applying potato slices to the narrator's fevered brow. Compare this opening with the conclusion of the story. What is the significance of the contrast between the gentleness at the beginning and end of the story, and the rough treatment the narrator typically gives to family members ("I hit Teresa on the forehead," para. 2) and receives from them ("He would grab my arm and dig his nails into me," para. 8)?

The beginning and end of the story both revolve around the caregiving that occurs between the narrator and her grandmother, a kind of physical and spiritual care that is absent in the narrator's family. At her home, the narrator faces sisters who threaten to "kick the holy shit out of [her]" (para. 8), an apparently distant mother, and an angry father. The story begins and ends in her Abuelita's home, a place where the narrator is cared for and where she learns how to nurture.

When the narrator falls ill, it is Abuelita who pulls her through "the rages of scarlet fever by placing, removing and replacing potato slices" on her temples (para. 1). This remedy seems to come from a more natural, spiritual source, indicating that Abuelita is connected to older ways of understanding care and healing. The narrator is not fully certain of Abuelita's ability to heal until her grandmother heals her swollen hands with a balm made out of "dried moth wings and Vicks" (para. 3). She describes her Abuelita shaping her hands "back to size" through figurative language, saying it felt like "bones melting" or like "sun shining through the darkness of [her] eyelids" (para. 3). Both of these descriptions indicate a kind of spiritual component to the care that Abuelita gives the narrator. It is at Mama Luna's house — away from her sisters, mother, and father — that the narrator escapes the strife of her home life and helps Abuelita "plant her wild lilies or jasmine or heliotrope or cilantro or hierbabuena" and avoids "another fight and another whipping" (para. 4). Although they do not speak much, she always feels her grandmother's "gray eye" on her, which makes her feel "safe and guarded and not alone" (para. 4). For the narrator, this is how "God was supposed to make you feel" (para. 4), indicating again the spiritual component of the care her Abuelita gives her.

By the end of the story, the caretaking has become the responsibility of the narrator, as the mother seems unwilling or unprepared to take care of Abuelita. The narrator has learned from her grandmother, and when Abuelita dies, the narrator shows her the kind of love, care, and respect she has been shown. Rather than shying away from Abuelita's body, which has been ravaged by cancer, she goes about washing her. This care indicates the narrator's new understanding of what it means to care for someone, as she uses her "bull hands" (para. 2) to carefully prepare her grandmother's body for its final cleansing. The story ends with the narrator and Abuelita reversing caretaking roles, the granddaughter gently holding Abuelita in her arms, rocking her back and forth and saying, “There, there” (para. 16).
Chapter 5: Home and Family

Being with Abuelita has taught the narrator true spirituality, a selfless ability to care for someone else, and the understanding of the cyclical nature of life. The narrator’s unwelcoming home life serves to emphasize this development by presenting a contrasting environment in which these lessons were never learned.

2. How does the work Abuelita asks the narrator to do — planting, cooking — help the teenager deal with her pent-up anger?

Both the gardening and the cooking are physical, tactile activities that facilitate continued growth. As the narrator prepares coffee cans for seedlings and crushes chiles at Abuelita’s home, she finds a way to work through her anger using the physicality of the work, which will ultimately result in something that sustains or promotes life.

The procedure for planting seedlings is described in paragraph 5 and begins with the narrator puncturing holes “in the bottom of the coffee cans with a nail and a precise hit of a hammer” as Abuelita watches silently. This first step allows the narrator to begin with an aggressive act, one that is in its own way violent but does not lead to any harm, allowing her to release frustration. The steps that follow the puncturing of the cans are also physical, but not violent. The narrator fills the cans with red clay mud, “packing it softly, then making a perfect hole, four fingers round, to nest a sprouting avocado pit.” Each step brings the narrator’s hand in contact with the earth and with the growing process. This eventually leads to roots that “burst out of the rusted coffee cans,” searching for “a place to connect.” Like the roots, the narrator is also searching for a place to connect through this process, and she finds it with Abuelita. It is that connection that helps her fight her anger.

Cooking with Abuelita also provides an opportunity for the narrator to release frustration and find connection. Upon entering Mama Luna’s home, the narrator is greeted by the “gagging scent of toasting chile on the placa” (para. 9). Entering the “sala” and calling out for Abuelita, she is immediately overwhelmed by the aromas of the traditional food being prepared. As the smell of toasting chiles assails her, making her “eyes water” (para. 9), she is given an opportunity for tears to flow. Once she begins to help Abuelita prepare the chiles, she can also physically work through some of her anger. As she begins to “crush and twist and crush the heart out of the tomato, the clove of garlic, the stupid chiles that made [her] cry,” she is able to work through her anger and frustration. To crush the food she uses her “bull hand” (para. 9), something that alienates her in her own home, keeping her from engaging in the “fineries of crocheting or embroidery” (para. 2). Here, her perceived deficit becomes a strength, and her anger can be directed at the tomatoes, garlic, and chiles. When the crushing is done, she can use a wooden spoon to scrape out the liquid, which she does “hard to destroy the guilt” (para. 9). It is at this point that her tears are now gone, as she has had a chance to vent her frustration and her tears. Her anger diffused, she can sit and eat a traditional meal of menudo and chile while a “fine Sunday breeze enter[s] the kitchen” and a rose petal “calmly” falls to the table (para. 9).

3. As the narrator cares for her dying grandmother, she begins to ask herself, “when do you stop giving when do you start giving” (para. 12), continuing the repetition of the word “when” throughout the following paragraph. What is the significance of this repetition for the fourteen-year-old narrator? What might she be questioning in her own life?

As a fourteen-year-old, the narrator is at a place in life where she seems to be waiting to move past the many frustrations of her teen years as well as the pain of watching her Abuelita slowly succumbing to cancer. On the one hand, she is still a child, answerable to her mother, father, and even her older sisters, all of whom she seems unable to communicate with or connect with on an emotional level. On the other hand, she must suddenly find the patience and maturity required to be the primary caretaker for her Abuelita, the woman who has been a strong support for her and who is now physically deteriorating before her eyes. The repetition of “when” emphasizes this time in her life, a time that is so painful that she wishes to know when it will pass but also a time that she knows is teaching her much about life.

As she sits on the porch swing waiting for her mother to leave Abuelita’s house, the narrator begins to repeat the question “when do you stop giving when do you start giving” over and over “like rosary prayers” (para. 12). This is her own prayer, not one she learned in catechism. It is the central question that relates both to her family and to her slowly dying grandmother. Her family has clearly
stopped giving to Abuelita, in the narrator’s estimation. She has been the main caretaker and is more aware of Mama Luna’s condition than her own daughter is, who must ask how she is doing. The narrator has been told that this is her time to start giving, and she is frustrated by a mother who has decided to stop giving. The narrator, who is “angry and just so tired of the quarrels and beatings” (para. 12) at home, pushes her mother away with a harsh response.

As the sun sets, the narrator awakens and begins to consider her Abuelita’s current state through metaphor in paragraph 13. The repetition of “when” is now focused on the cycle of the sun. The narrator considers “a time when the sun is defiant,” perhaps seeing herself approaching that time. She had been separating herself from her family and has found a way to assert her individuality with her Abuelita. However, she also understands that there is a “minute or second when the sun is finally defeated,” like her grandmother who is in her room dying at that moment. Her death cannot be stopped, and for Mama Luna, it will answer the question of when she will stop giving. For the narrator, her grandmother’s death is linked with the rising and setting of the sun, and she realizes that “although endings are inevitable, they are necessary for rebirths, and when that time came . . . it was probably then that she died.” There is an interesting ambiguity in this sentence related to the word “when,” as the narrator could be referring either to the moment when the sun literally set or to the point when she has her epiphany about endings. In either case, she understands that it is a time when she must start the process of taking care of her Abuelita’s body, as well as a time when she has become an adult; she realizes she has grown up.

4. Trace the references to hands in this story. How do you interpret the poultice balm of moth wings that Abuelita uses to shape the narrator’s hands back into shape? What is the significance of this act?

One of the first things the narrator reveals about herself is the fact that her “bull hands” were “too big to handle the fineries” (para. 2) that her sisters’ hands could manage, and that they laughed at her because of it. It is this teasing that drives her to lash out at her sisters, further separating her from her family. It is those same hands that, after being soothed by Abuelita with a moth balm, become willing tools that can handle the tasks her Abuelita sets out for her; connecting the narrator to her grandmother.

When the narrator questions whether or not her grandmother’s remedy of potato slices on the forehead for her fever actually worked, Abuelita’s response accompanied by her gray eye “burning holes in [her] suspicions” (para. 3) shames her so much she cannot look her in the eyes. When her hands begin to swell, she does not question Abuelita when she makes a “balm out of dried moth wings and Vicks” and soothingly “shape[s] them back to size” (para. 3). It is as if her grandmother can mold the bones, reshaping the narrator’s hands for purposes more substantive than embroidery or crocheting. The sensation is described as “sun shining through the darkness of your eyelids,” and from that point forward she does not mind helping her grandmother. This is the moment when she and her Abuelita connect on a new level, one in which her hands change from something to be ashamed of to something that will nurture plants, crush chiles, and ultimately lovingly prepare her grandmother’s body after she passes away.

Once her hands have been “shaped” by her grandmother, she spends much of her time using them to help her grow plants and make food. Her hands are now one of her most valuable assets, and she uses them with confidence. It is only when Abuelita is dying and the narrator’s mother is looking to her for consolation that her hands hang “helplessly by [her] side” (para. 12). The mother who has provided so little support is now looking for help, and the narrator, weary from her quarrelsome life back at her house, cannot provide it. Her hands are for her grandmother right now, not for her mother.

It is when Abuelita does pass away, the mother having already left, that the narrator’s hands become the central focus of the story. She sees that her Abuelita has died and speaks to her, “stroking her cheek.” She then “open[s] the windows of the house,” “turn[s] the stove off,” and “fill[s]” and “carr[ies]” a basin of water to the room to begin preparation of the body (para. 14). Each act is deliberate and without haste or panic, the hands steady. She continues, with “the sacredness of a priest preparing his vestments,” meticulously and tenderly preparing her grandmother’s body for its final cleaning (para. 14). The care she takes with Mama Luna shows a delicacy that certainly rivals the requirements of embroidery and carries much more significance. The hands, once an object of ridicule, have become strong enough to carry Abuelita to the other side, gently rocking her all the way.
5. What is the role of religion and spirituality in this story? Why does the narrator think to herself when she is in the chapel, “I was alone. I knew why I had never returned” (para. 7)? What conflicts does religion cause in her family?

Religion and spirituality are distinct from each other in this story. Religion is an obligation put upon the narrator that feels empty, filled with cold “marble pillars” and “frozen statues” (para. 7). Spirituality, on the other hand, is the communion she finds with Abuelita as she is passing, a communion symbolized by moths who come “from her soul and out through her mouth fluttering to light” (para. 16).

When the narrator leaves her sleeping Abuelita to go to the market, she stops by a chapel to search for candles, as a practicing Catholic might light a candle in prayer. She doesn’t find any candles, suggesting an absence of any spiritual comfort she might have sought, but she does find a “high ceiling” inside the vast chapel, one that is unwelcoming and cold. She leaves with her impressions of religion unchanged. Her infrequent visits to church have already been a source of conflict at home, as her father has screamed at her that she must “go to mass every Sunday to save [her] goddamn sinning soul” and her sisters threatened to “kick the holy shit” out of her if she did not attend (para. 8). These pronouncements become comical in their irony, as both her father and her sisters engage in behavior not befitting religious ideals in order to coerce her into compliance. This incident is not just another example of the narrator’s dislike for organized religion but an important sign of her maturation process in the story. In the past, her refusal to go to church appears at one with both an adolescent rejection of authority and her unhappiness with her family life in general. Here religious questions arise in a more serious context, as she shows herself to be much more mature on a number of levels. Her relationship to religion is much more serious, as she is dealing with issues of mortality brought on by her grandmother’s dying. She seriously rejects organized religion because it makes her feel alone, not for the flip-pant, adolescent reasons that a reader might have initially suspected. At the same time, she has now found a rich dimension to life outside of organized religion.

Unwillingness to go to church does not mean that the narrator is without sensitivity to spiritual matters. Although initially skeptical of her Abuelita’s remedy for scarlet fever, she is later moved to recognize the healing power of the balm made from a mixture of moth wings and Vicks. Moth wings, fragile and soft, introduce her to the idea of something ethereal; as the relationship develops, she feels the way she thinks she is supposed to feel at church. When the time comes for her grandmother’s passing, the narrator is repeating a phrase “like rosary prayers” (para. 12), wrestling with the idea of when someone stops giving and when someone starts. The question, which she repeats until she falls asleep on the porch swing, is answered for Abuelita. When she awakens and knows her grandmother has passed, the narrator considers the cyclical nature of life as expressed by the setting sun. She realizes that “although endings are inevitable, they are necessary for rebirths” (para. 13). This is the spirituality she understands, how death feeds life. As she holds the body of Abuelita, small moths come “from her soul and out through her mouth fluttering to light,” and she wants to learn more about “the moths that lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up” (para. 16), signaling both an understanding about the spiritual side of life and a desire to know more.

6. Note the references throughout to Amá, the narrator’s mother. When Amá is crying in Abuelita’s kitchen, why does the narrator choose not to kiss her? Why at the end does the narrator say, “I wanted. I wanted my Amá” (para. 16)? What is the nature of the relationship among these three generations of women? What does the narrator want it to be?

The narrator’s relationship with her mother initially seems distant. Rather than have her daughter around the house, the mother chooses to routinely send her away to her grandmother’s to “avoid another fight and another whipping” (para. 4). When she’d be at her grandmother’s, the two “hardly spoke, hardly looked at each other,” and she “always felt her gray eye” on her (para. 4). The communion she shares with her grandmother; however, transcends small talk and warm glances and makes her feel “safe and guarded and not alone,” like “God was supposed to make you feel” (para. 4). The narrator’s relationship with Abuelita is one that both allows her to forget the fact that her family in large part marginalizes her and opens her up to her own capacity to nurture and love. The narrator’s mother, on the other hand, has not shown her the affection necessary to help her feel as if she is worthy of love.

When she finds her mother sobbing in her grandmother’s kitchen, she pointedly does not kiss her but makes a halfhearted attempt to comfort her by “patt[ing] her on the back” (para. 11). She is
unwilling to comfort the woman who has neglected both her and Abuelita. When the mother then asks the narrator how Abuelita is doing, her resentment of her mother's neglect compels her to tell her that Abuelita had fallen off her bed twice the day before, knowing it would cause her mother to sob even harder. This is an act of cruelty, but one that she knows she shouldn't have done. However, she is tired of the treatment at home and is unable to stop herself from hurting her mother when she gets the chance. After Abuelita has passed and the narrator has wrestled with the reality of death, she is more pensive and less desirous of hurting her mother. After preparing her grandmother’s body for a final bath, the narrator is vulnerable and wants to “return to the waters of the womb with her [grandmother] so that [they] would never be alone again” (para. 16). It is at this moment, when the safety of her Abuelita has been taken away, that she is willing to call out for her mother.

Although she is initially upset with her mother, her relationship with her grandmother opens her up to the possibility of something different. Rather than the distant relationship she has with her mother, the narrator craves the closeness of the kind of relationship she had with her Abuelita. She has found out what it is like to have a deep emotional and spiritual connection with another human being, and she wishes that she could have that sort of relationship with her mother.

7. What do the moths represent in the story?
The moths, which fly out of Abuelita’s mouth once the narrator places her in the tub, represent spirituality and the soul itself, which, once the body has died, flies upward toward the light. In this way, the moths become a symbol of both death and spiritual renewal, a continuation of the cycle of endings and beginnings the narrator considers at the moment of Abuelita’s death.

The moths are first mentioned when Abuelita uses a balm made of dried moth wings to heal the narrator’s swollen hands. At first the narrator is skeptical of the home remedies that her grandmother uses, not wanting to believe in an approach that seems somewhat mystical. However, when the balm works and Abuelita has “shaped [her hands] back to size” (para. 3), the narrator begins to be more open to the mystical qualities of her grandmother. She describes the feeling of being healed as “bones melting” and like “sun shining through the darkness of [her] eyelids” (para. 3). Both of these descriptions are an indication that the healing is more than just a physical experience; it is spiritual as well.

The moths reinforce this idea of spirituality again when Abuelita dies. The narrator has gently and lovingly prepared Abuelita’s body for its final bath, with “the sacredness of a priest preparing his vestments” (para. 14), indicating the narrator’s understanding of the spirituality of the moment. This is not the sterility and coldness of the religion the narrator has rejected but an intimate moment during which the narrator shows her deep respect for Abuelita, one that she was incapable of showing earlier in her life. After she prepares the body, she undresses and carries Abuelita in her arms to the bathtub. As she places her grandmother in the tub, her “hair fell back and spread across the water like eagle’s wings” (para. 16), suggesting that Abuelita is ready for a kind of flight. It is at this moment that the moths “come from her soul and out through her mouth fluttering to [the] light” (para. 16). The moths have become the physical manifestation of Abuelita’s soul and are carrying that soul upward toward the light, indicating a kind of ascension into heaven. The narrator sits in the tub with Abuelita, wanting to know “about the moths that lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up” (para. 16). Here the narrator still struggles to understand spirituality and looks to her grandmother for that wisdom. Naked and sitting in the overflowing tub with Abuelita cradled in her arms, she wishes to “return to the waters of the womb with her” (para. 16), a literal reference to rebirth. The rebirth that the narrator finds, however, is not physical but spiritual. Her earlier insight that the sun’s setting was a reminder that “endings are inevitable, they are necessary for rebirths” (para. 13) help her understand her own developing spirituality but does not keep her from sobbing at this moment, crying “from the depths of anguish, the misery of feeling half born” (para. 16), as moths fill the room, representing the spirituality that fills the entire scene. As the moths fill the room, the narrator cries for “the first time in a long time” (para. 16), overwhelmed by the reality that her Abuelita’s soul is ascending toward the light, leaving her to continue her journey without her grandmother. She ultimately comes to a point of “sadness and relief” (para. 16), knowing that although she still has much to learn, Abuelita has given her the gift of spirituality and rebirth.

8. Describe the ways in which the narrator is an outcast in her own family. What does her grandmother seem to understand that the girl’s immediate family members do not?
For the narrator, her home is a place where her faults separate her from her older sisters. Her hands are too big to "handle the fineries of crocheting or embroidery," and her sisters taunt her with their "cute waterlike voices" (para. 2). The narrator's hands are clearly a liability, too large to handle the delicate work valued by her parents. Her "bull hands" and the fact that she isn't "pretty or nice" (para. 2) separate her from the family's good graces. Her defense against her sisters' teasing is to strike out violently, something that earns her multiple "whippings" (para. 2). Her father rails against her apparent lack of piety, telling her she needs to go to Mass to "save [her] goddamn sinning soul" (para. 8) while digging his nails into her arms. Her mother, rather than dealing with her daughter, routinely sends her away to her Abuelita. There seems to be no place for the narrator in her home, so she finds solace at her Abuelita's house, helping her nurture her numerous plants and prepare traditional Mexican food in her kitchen. It is at Mama Luna's house — away from her sisters, mother, and father — that the narrator's hands become an asset, as she "help[s] Abuelita plant her wild lilies or jasmine or heliotrope or cilantro or hierbabuena" and avoids "another fight and another whipping" (para. 4). Her grandmother understands that although the narrator initially "wasn't respectful" and goes "so far as to doubt" Abuelita's power to heal (para. 3), she has a capacity for doing the kind of work that will eventually lead to a greater spirituality. Both gardening and cooking are nurturing acts that help sustain life, and it is those endeavors that bond the narrator and Mama Luna, who makes her feel "safe and guarded and not alone" (para. 4). When she is eventually called to help her dying grandmother, it "seem[s] only fair" that the "hands she had melted and formed" find use in "rubbing [Abuelita's] caving body with alcohol and marihuana" (para. 6), returning the kind of care she had received. It is clear that the grandmother sees in the narrator the capacity to be a kind of healer, like her. Once again the narrator's hands are viewed as something of great value rather than a detriment.

9. Does the narrator's fearlessness about death strike you as unusual? Why do you think she is comfortable enough to bathe her dead Abuelita? Consider the sensuous descriptions throughout the story.

Students, who all have very different experiences with death, will respond quite differently to this question. For some, this scene will seem highly unusual and even disturbing in its detail and the narrator's apparent ease in handling it. For others, personal experience with loved ones who have faced cancer may bring up strong emotional responses. In any case, the narrator does go about the cleaning with a fearlessness that is surprising in many ways. No detail is spared, from the fact that Abuelita defecated and vomited when she died, to the cleaning of lint between her toes, to the discovery of a birthmark on Abuelita's buttock. These graphic details pull back the veil on the physical realities of dying from cancer, and the narrator does not balk. Instead, she stays focused on caring for Abuelita, understanding the spiritual significance of the moment. Already open to the connection between the physical and the spiritual through gardening and cooking, the narrator understands that her loving care of Abuelita's body is connecting her in a way to her transformation. It is the sacredness of Abuelita's passing that holds the narrator's attention, rather than the graphic details of the cleaning, in part because she has come to a new understanding of the necessity of death. Although deeply saddened, the narrator knows that endings are necessary for rebirths, and the narrator wishes to honor the ending of a woman who has taught her so much about life. The fearlessness is doubtless also connected to the deep bond that the two had formed.

HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES ON WRITING

The interview gives students a chance to consider literature from the point of view of the author, who is writing about a very familiar subject. Students will probably all have heard the classic advice, "write what you know." And, though students will have had very different family backgrounds and experiences, they will be able to relate to Viramontes's work because of the simple fact that the family plays a huge role in everyone's life; we could all take family as a subject for a story, were we inclined to write one.

Before students read the interview, have them speculate about the relationship Viramontes had with her own grandmother based on the short story. Which details do they think were probably most closely related to Viramontes's actual experience, and which details do they think are purely artistic inventions? Then have students explain their choices, focusing on how they think writers make these
Part 1: Using Literature & Composition

decisions. Once they have discussed their ideas, have them read the interview to see if Viramontes
affirms or contradicts their expectations.

Students may also want to think about their own family stories. Put them in the position of the
writer and ask them to consider what stories they would tell if they were to write about their own expe-
rience with their families. Would they focus on a particular family member or experience, or would
they avoid any details related to their real family altogether? What would be the primary factors guid-
ing their choice? Those students who decided they would write about a family member specifically
could also discuss how they think their family member would react. Would it cause strife, or would the
family member be supportive of the endeavor? This allows for an interesting discussion about why
writers are comfortable writing about certain topics, and why they avoid others.

Viramontes says that “the by-product of the writing exercise is that you develop compassion”
(para. 12). Have students consider the significance of this idea and how it might be true. Can human
beings write themselves into a more compassionate place, or do they merely create a world that does
not exist but matches what they would like to see? Have them share moments when they have read
something that made them feel more compassionate toward another person or group of people. This
will give them a chance to articulate how reading about someone else’s life can in some ways connect
them to the larger human experience.

Saving Sourdi
MAY-LEE CHAI

Exploring the Text

1. How is the narrator’s opening statement that she stabbed a man when she was eleven a clue
to her character? How does it prepare the reader for later events in the story?

By opening with the statement that at age eleven Nea stabbed a man, Chai immediately establishes the
kind of impulsiveness, tenacity, and independence of mind that drives many of the choices Nea makes
throughout the rest of the narrative, as she struggles to find justice in a world that she believes is ulti-
mately unfair. Her mother understands the boundaries in which she has to operate, but Nea does not.
In fact, Nea is unrepentant for her actions and even wishes she had “killed that sucker!” (para. 18); even
when her sister tells her that she shouldn’t wish this, she can’t shake the feeling. Although Sourdi does
not openly share her feelings like Nea, she does make an expression that looks like “a big bomb was
ticking behind her eyes (para. 19). Unlike Sourdi, Nea is unwilling to close off her rage to the outside
world, choosing instead to fight.

This trait is demonstrated again when she believes that Sourdi’s husband is beating her. Her
mother apparently knows that there is trouble in Sourdi’s household, but she focuses on the comfort-
able life her daughter has, complete with a Sony big-screen television and Maytag appliances. When
Nea suggests that her sister “might be in trouble” (para. 121) and wants to do something about it, her
mother tells her that she needs to be more like her sister, who knows “how to bear things” (para. 122).
Like the confrontation with the men in the restaurant, Nea chooses once again to take up a fight that
should be Sourdi’s. Rather than a paring knife, Nea brings Duke to the fight, imagining that she can get
Sourdi to flee from life with Mr. Chhay. This encounter, like the opening scene, includes a moment of
violence that ultimately turns back on Nea. Rather than taking flight with Nea, Sourdi chooses to stay
with her husband, and Nea understands that she cannot “trust [her] sister to take [her] side anymore”
(para. 225). Nea’s belief that she can overcome the injustices she perceives is once again defeated by the
realities of a world that easily fends off her challenges.

2. “Saving Sourdi” is told from the point of view of Nea, one of the main characters in the story.
How much time do you think has passed since the events Nea recounts and her telling of the
story? What evidence can you find to support your view? How does this particular narrative
voice contribute to the story’s impact?

Because this is a speculative question, students will need to focus on finding evidence that supports
their claims. Nea reveals that she is five years younger than Sourdi when she briefly relates the story
of her family’s escape from Cambodia (para. 176). Nea must then be fifteen by the end of the story, as
she reminds Sourdi that she is “only twenty” (para. 216) when trying to make her case for an escape. There is quite a bit of youthfulness in her dialogue, such as when she chastises Duke for thinking she and Sourdi would like “hick stuff” (para. 51) and dismissing the steak dinner Mr. Chhay buys the family as “Midwest cowboy stuff” (para. 71). Her impetuousness also indicates her youth, as she believes that problems can be solved with a paring knife or by fleeing in a beat-up truck. However, this story is told in retrospect, so the choices reflect those a young girl would make. There are lines, however, in which the narrator makes insightful comments that are far beyond the thoughts of a teenager. For example, when Sourdi first starts seeing Duke, Nea reveals that she “used to think of him as something . . . holding a certain space in [Sourdi’s] life until it was time for her to move on” (para. 35). She goes on to understand that Duke was actually “a fork in the road, dividing [her] life with Sourdi from Sourdi’s life with men” (para. 35). She concludes that “[i]n those days, [she] didn’t understand anything” (para. 36). This demonstrates a distance from the events and a knowledge that now surpasses that of her more youthful days. These lines indicate a narrator who has had some time to reflect on the events of the past and put them into a larger context. There are also moments in the text that reveal an insightful narrator who uses phrasing far beyond the ability of a teenager. For example, she refers to her sister as having an “incense-sweet voice” (para. 3) and Duke showing up at the wedding in a navy-blue suit that made him look “like a teenage undertaker” (para. 74). She understands that Mr. Chhay “might have been handsome once, decades ago” (para. 190), a sentiment that even a woman in her early twenties would not usually express. However, exactly how far removed she is from the events of the story is hard to tell. There are no details about whether her sister ever did return to school, even though Sourdi mentions she wants to return when her children “start pre-school” (para. 217). She does not recount any of her own relationships, even in passing, nor does she talk about her life after high school. The impact of this narrative perspective, one in which the narrator is looking back but whose current age is not revealed, allows for there to be enough distance between the events and their recounting while maintaining the immediacy of the impact on the narrator. Nea knows enough about her experiences to understand how futile her attempts were to really “save” Sourdi, yet she still recalls the story of the Naga — the magic serpent with a mouth so large it could swallow entire armies — and wishes she could do the same. In some ways, this helps retain the view of the narrator as someone who, in spite of experience, remains defiantly hopeful that she can find justice.

3. What effect does the flashback to the time when Sourdi carried Nea across a minefield have on your judgment of Nea’s behavior (para. 176)? How does it help explain her relationship with her sister? Why do you think the author placed the flashback later on in the story rather than after the stabbing incident, for instance?

From the beginning of the story, it is clear that Nea has had experiences that are not typical for a young girl. Even at the age of eleven, she has already endured moving to another country and hopes that the latest move will help them finally find “the life [her family] deserved” (para. 4). However, when she describes her family’s escape, Sourdi walking through a minefield and stepping on the bodies of the dead with Nea on her back, the arduousness of their journey is fully revealed. Up until this point, it is difficult to picture what brought Nea’s family to the states, and her own dissatisfaction with Texas and South Dakota make it hard to understand why they remain in the United States. In a brief flashback, one that contains only a few details about the shocking sights that must have faced them as they walked across rotting corpses, the strength of Nea’s family is revealed. This helps explain both Nea’s naiveté in her confrontational approach, as she can only recollect through the eyes of a four-year-old the horrific consequences Cambodians faced when trying to stand up to the Khmer Rouge, and her deep devotion to her sister. It also helps explain the strength of her young character, considering what she has already endured by the age of four. In addition, it provides a context for Sourdi’s choice to stay with her husband, creating the image of the life that her mother risked everything to find for her daughters. Placing it here rather than earlier in the story, Chai allows for a tension to build up related to how harshly Nea is judged. Up until this point there are no indications of the severity of the circumstances from which Nea and her family fled, so it is possible to form judgments without the larger context. In many ways, this is exactly what other immigrant families face, being judged unfairly by an American culture that is in many ways ignorant of the struggles people underwent to get to the States. Once this story from the
past is revealed, there is a greater appreciation for the complexity of her situation, and the original judgments have to be reevaluated.

4. What does Nea, at fourteen, still have to learn about family? What does the following exchange between Nea and her mother reveal about her current viewpoint?

“Maybe Sourdi should come back home for a while,” I suggested.

“She’s a married woman. She has her own family now.”

“She’s still part of our family.” (paras. 118–20)

Nea still has to learn that the concept of family must always shift and adapt to new circumstances, like her sister's marriage. Sourdi has always been a deeply significant part of Nea's life, even to the point where they could “communicate without words” (para. 195). Nea is also fiercely protective of her sister, as evidenced by her willingness to lunge at a grown man with a paring knife in order to defend her. When Sourdi begins dating Duke, Nea sees him initially as nothing more than “something like a bookmark, just holding a certain space in her life until it was time for her to move on” (para. 35). The bond that these sisters share is so powerful that at one point Nea says she would “walk on bones” (para. 178) for her sister, a reference to what Sourdi did for her years earlier. Given her youth and her intense bond with her sister, it is understandable that she does not fully appreciate the fact that Sourdi has already made the decision to endure what she must in order to have her own family. Mr. Chhay is not someone who Nea cares for, and the baby is of no interest to her either. It is Sourdi alone who maintains Nea's love and loyalty, yet she has started the next chapter of her life. Sourdi now has her own family to care for and can no longer give Nea the kind of attention she craves. The exchange indicates Nea's unwillingness to accept this change and adjust her understanding of family.

5. Chai uses simile and metaphor liberally throughout the story. Identify several instances, and consider the effect that each one has. For instance, the sky was “smooth as an empty rice bowl” (para. 45); the wind whipped Nea’s hair “about [her] face like a widow’s veil” (para. 82).

Students have many to choose from, but in each case the challenge is to get them past merely identifying the similes and metaphors, and convincingly discussing the effect. For example, after Sourdi’s wedding, Nea leaves the reception to escape a celebration that she cannot tolerate. As she throws up the wedding cake and wine cooler she had consumed earlier, Duke holds back her hair. In this moment, she is comforted by the boy who had been the first male to begin to take Sourdi’s attention away from her. With her sister’s first boyfriend next to her, and her newly married sister in the building across the parking lot with her new husband, Nea is confronted with the reality that her relationship with her sister will never be the same. In this moment, she experiences a kind of passing of that relationship. It is at this point that her hair is being whipped about, “like a widow’s veil” (para. 82), emphasizing the mourning that Nea is going through over the symbolic death of her old relationship with her sister.

6. One theme of this story is Nea’s effort to find security within her family. Why does she feel insecure? Consider Nea’s actions and responses in light of this theme.

For Nea, her family is her protection from a world that often poses threats. From a corpse-ridden minefield she must cross to leave Cambodia, to “angry boys in cars” who “played loud music and shot guns at each other in the night” (para. 4), to drunken men who harass her sister, to a brother-in-law who she fears is abusing her sister, Nea is often confronted by a dangerous world. It is understandable that she would seek safety and security in the one place that has always protected her. Her sister is especially important in this regard, literally carrying her across a minefield and building the kind of intimate and safe relationship that sustains Nea. Sourdi is in many ways more of a mother to Nea than her actual mother, in part because her mother has had to spend her life taking care of them, always working “two jobs” (para. 88) to support them. This is why she so fiercely holds on to her relationship with her sister, trying to keep it from being taken away by anything, men included. The story opens with Sourdi being menaced by a group of men in a sexual manner. This foreshadows Nea’s fear of Sourdi being taken away from her and helps explain her violent response. When Duke starts showing an interest in Sourdi, Nea thinks of him as something that will only temporarily have any kind of impact on her life. She is right, as her uncle fires him on a pretense as soon as her mother finds out about the relationship. To
Nea’s horror, Duke is quickly replaced as a suitor by a man who comes with the family blessing and enough money to provide a home for Sourd. Nea is immediately aware that Mr. Chhay’s request for her to call him “Older Brother” was “the beginning of the end,” and she ruefully states that she “should have stabbed this man, too” (para. 73). Though she is not necessarily serious, her comment highlights her anger over the fact that she cannot stop Sourd from getting into a relationship with this man. For Nea, stability and security lie within the protective arms of her sister. Anything that threatens to change that, especially men, is understandably met with strong, even violent, resistance.

7. What is the function of the final section of the story? Why do you think Chai chose not to end with the line “She had made her choice, and she hadn’t chosen me” (para. 228)?

The final section of the story emphasizes the extent to which Nea feels helpless to “save” her older sister while connecting her personal frustration to a story from her native Cambodia. Just as she did earlier in the story, when she recounted her escape from Cambodia, Nea gives the reader insight about her larger cultural context through a brief but vivid description of the ancestral story of army-devouring Naga. The story of the magic serpent that could “swallow people whole” and whose very image carved in stone could “scare away demons” (para. 229) illustrates just how desperate Nea is for her sister’s choice to be somehow changed or negated and how she continues to wish she could control the world and set things right, even as she realizes she has “no magic powers” (para. 231)—that is, she can’t set things right just by acting on her impulses. Earlier she had mused about wishing she had stabbed Mr. Chhay, but now she reaches for something greater, more fantastic. Her one real attempt to stab a man had been ineffectual and had earned her an admonishment from her mother. Her plan to take Sourd away from her husband had ended in embarrassing apologies from Duke and a request from Nea to not tell their mother. She is unable to use force or rhetoric to pry her sister away from Mr. Chhay, even though she sees so clearly what she believes to be a desperate situation for Sourd. Ultimately it is Sourd who sends Duke and Nea away in “matching his-and-hers Donald and Daisy Duck sweatshirts” (para. 223), forcing them to return in clothes more suitable for children than for adults, making their attempt at rescue seem even more childish. Nea initially believes she can save Sourd from Mr. Chhay, but she finally realizes that her powers are not sufficient to do so. Having exhausted her own options, she reflects on the stories of the Naga that Sourd used to tell her. This creature, so powerful it could overcome demons as well as the armies of men, highlights the limitations of Nea’s abilities. She can then let go of any hope that she can change her sister’s situation and think instead of the mythical creature her ancestors carved into the rock of Angkor Wat. Resigned to her own inability to save her sister, Nea imagines the supernatural strength of the Naga and decides that she would swallow “the whole world in one gulp” were she to possess the same abilities. In ending here instead of with the previous section, Chai suggests that the fact that Sourd had not chosen to leave with Nea did not stop her from wanting to “save” her sister. Although the age of the narrator is ambiguous in the final paragraph, there is a sense that this reflection takes place some time after the day she and Duke tried to take Sourd from her husband. Nea is still troubled by the events of that day as well as her inability to change the outcome, even though years may have passed. This emphasizes the significance of Sourd’s choice for Nea, a significance that won’t necessarily wane with age. This also reflects a desire to change the world coupled with the admission, finally, that she can’t.

8. Early in the story, Nea describes her feelings about the family’s move from Texas to South Dakota: “I thought we’d find the real America” (para. 4). What does she mean? Do they ever find this desired destination? By the end of the story, what does “the real America” mean to Nea?

As for many immigrants, the “real America” is the one that fits the mythology of the American Dream, where everyone who is willing to work hard is rewarded with a life that includes safety from tyranny, freedom to pursue one’s dreams, a secure income, and eventually a large house. While Nea does not say this specifically, the inferences can be made by contrasting what she has experienced in Texas, where they lived “packed together in an apartment with bars on the windows” (para. 4), an indication of the imprisonment she felt by both the size of the apartment and the bars on the windows. Her mother’s “crummy jobs” (para. 4) had held no promise for future financial stability. Their neighborhood was not a place of peace but a place where “angry boys in cars played loud music,” with no concern for the disruption they were causing, and “shot guns at each other in the night” (para. 4), indicating the imminent danger Nea must have felt as she huddled in that tiny apartment.
Moving to South Dakota brings Nea a little closer to the dream. Her family now finds pride in working in their own restaurant, but that does not ensure safety from violence. Nea must still defend her sister from the unwanted advances of some drunken men, and her attempted knifing is met with disapproval from both her mother and her sister. Sourdi must remind Nea of the threat of a foster home in order to get her to relent even a little, but she still concludes that "life [is] so unfair" (para. 32). In spite of the improved circumstances, life is still at its core unsatisfying for Nea. This lack of satisfaction is further revealed when she tells of her dreams of running away with Sourdi, when they would "go to California to see the stars" (para. 33) or even to other countries. For Nea, life in South Dakota is not what she imagined when she thought of the "real America," as she holds on to a romanticized version of the country. By the end of the story, the America she had romanticized has largely lost its luster. Her sister has achieved the dream in terms of financial freedom and a home with the latest amenities, such as name-brand appliances, but that life does not hold any charm for Nea. In fact, she accuses her sister of "sounding like an old lady" (para. 216) when Sourdi informs her that she is going to have another baby. The reality of America does not live up to the dream for Nea. Returning from her effort to take Sourdi away from her husband and family, Nea wears a Disney sweatshirt, representing a place that exemplifies a perfect fantasy world that she will never find. In broad terms, the real America seems to be about the freedom to choose one's path, not to have to “bear things” (para. 122). Through the story, Nea comes to accept that even in America it would take the superhuman powers of the Naga (a character from the old world) to make everything turn out the way one desires. The “real America” is illusory.

9. Does Sourdi need “saving”? Chai gives us a literal explanation for Nea’s motivation, but what other dimensions do you find to the idea of “saving,” and why is it a fitting title for this story?

Students will have a number of interesting ideas of what it means to save someone. If they look at it as rescuing someone from harm, then they might consider many of Nea’s actions as “saving” Sourdi. This might include Nea’s stabbing of the drunken man, who clearly poses an immediate physical threat, although it seems fueled more by beer than by violent intention. Both Sourdi and Nea’s mother are not pleased with her actions, rejecting her first attempt to save her sister. Her attempt to convince Sourdi to run away from Mr. Chhay is at least in part motivated by the fact that she thinks he is beating her, a suspicion that is reinforced when she visits Sourdi unannounced and finds her with “a bruise across her cheekbone and the purple remains of a black eye” (para. 192). Although Duke seems satisfied with Sourdi’s explanation that an “economy-size box of baby wipes had fallen . . . and struck her full in the eye” (para. 209), there is sufficient ambiguity about the details of the situation to leave a reasonable doubt as to how she was injured. Students who pick up on this ambiguity may use it as evidence that Sourdi does need to be taken away from Mr. Chhay. Students might also see Sourdi as accepting a marriage and life that is dreary, consisting of an older husband, no immediate chance for an education, and a house filled with name-brand appliances. Sourdi again refuses her sister’s help. In this case, Nea’s attempt to get her to flee may be seen as a type of saving, yet it is another example of Sourdi rejecting Nea’s efforts to save her. The question then becomes whether or not anyone should attempt to save someone who does not believe they require any saving at all. It is a fitting title because the story is about the literal act of trying to save someone as well as the implications of taking the attitude that one can actually solve someone else’s problems.

POETRY

De Puerro Balbutiente
THOMAS BASTARD

Exploring the Text

1. What does the speaker mean when he describes a child’s mouth as “yet undefiled” (l. 2)? What does this description tell you about the stammering boy? What does the “yet” suggest?

Describing the mouth as “yet undefiled” indicates the current innocence of the stammering boy. The speaker’s subsequent diction, such as “tender” (l. 3), “soft” (l. 5), and “sweet” (l. 6), reinforces the idea
that the boy is still untouched by experience. Qualifying the description with the word “yet” suggests that though the boy is innocent right now, as he grows older, he will no doubt lose that quality and one day speak in ways that corrupt that current innocence.

2. How do the alliteration, assonance, and rhyme used to portray the child’s speech reflect the speech itself? How do these aspects of the poem provide a clue to the speaker’s attitude toward the child’s stammering?

The alliteration, assonance, and rhyme are all devices that involve the repetition of sound, in a way mimicking the stammering of the young boy, trying to get the words out and repeating a sound numerous times until the word finally comes out. The speaker’s own tendency to engage in this kind of repetition throughout the poem suggests sympathy toward the young boy, as the speaker mirrors similar speech patterns. Alliterative examples include “racquet rudely” (l. 3) and “bandied . . . back” (l. 4); assonant examples include “soft . . . softer . . . doth” (l. 5) and “sweet” (l. 6) and “teeth” (l. 8); and every two lines culminate with a perfect end rhyme.

3. What effect does the enjambment of “the white rank / Of teeth” (ll. 7–8) have on your reading of these two lines?

The enjambed line pushes the reader from line 7 to line 8 without the pause that the more complete thoughts of the other lines provide. This creates the longest phrase in the poem, which also happens to be about the mouth of the child. The effect is that it draws greater attention to the child’s mouth as he tries but fails to make a sound. The entire poem focuses on the anticipation created when waiting for the words to completely form.

4. Select at least two words that are either unfamiliar or used in an unfamiliar way, such as “pretty” (l. 1), “sport” (l. 1), “rudely” (l. 3), “bandied” (l. 4), “rank” (l. 7), or “nice” (l. 11). Explain the function of that type of diction within the poem. For instance, if it sets up a metaphor, what is the purpose of the metaphor?

Students are given multiple choices for this question, so the key as always is that they connect their selected words to the effect. For example, the word “sport” introduces an interesting metaphor related to a game involving racquets. The tender “racquet . . . plays” (l. 3) a sound, indicating that the boy is making an attempt at a word, like someone swinging for a shuttlecock in midair. The sound is weakly “bandied,” or tossed back and forth, much like the shuttlecock flits from one side of the net to the other. The attempt to speak has become a game in which the boy makes repeated attempts to connect with a word, only to have the attempts end in a “pretty miss” (l. 6).

5. What does the comparison in the final couplet achieve? Pay attention to the simile. Does it change the tone from the previous lines? Complicate it?

The simile that compares the eventual word spoken with a man walking across the ice suggests a speech that is uncertain and careful. Like the man attempting not to fall as he makes his way across an icy patch, the word from the boy slides out slowly and deliberately. Just as moving too quickly on ice could bring the man crashing down, moving too quickly in an attempt to speak could also lead to failure. There is a firmness and certainty to ice, just as there is to a word that is well pronounced. However, the danger to slip is always present. The tone has changed from one of gentle encouragement to one that reflects the caution of a man walking on ice. The word has been spoken, but as the speaker has noted, the confidence behind the spoken word is not yet present.

6. How would you describe the overall attitude of the speaker toward the child? Cite specific language and images that support your description.

The speaker’s attitude toward the child is one of gentle, though at times playful, observation. The speaker begins by describing watching the boy’s attempt to learn words as a “pretty sport” (l. 1), introducing the playfulness with which the speaker treats the subject. The speaker first describes the boy’s mouth as “undefiled” (l. 2), indicating a respect for the youth and innocence of the boy. The metaphor of the racquet game continues the playfulness with which the speaker describes the boy’s stammering.
attempts to speak, even characterizing the failure of the boy as a “pretty miss” (l. 6). As the boy continues to speak, his search for “letters soft” (l. 9) reinforces the gentle manner in which the speaker describes the boy, someone who is incapable of making harsh sounds. Throughout the poem, the speaker does not make judgments about the boy’s stammering but fondly observes the earnest attempts at speech.

On My First Son
BEN JONSON

Exploring the Text

1. In line 2 the speaker calls hope a “sin.” How can this be?
The speaker’s indication that he has “too much hope” (l. 2) for his son could be viewed as a sin in a few ways. As a religious man in the Christian tradition, the speaker could be admitting that he was storing up too much hope for his son in an earthly context, thereby taking the focus off of the rewards that would await a pious person in heaven. The speaker is reminded that this is a world in which death is the only constant, and holding too much hope for anything else will yield only disappointment and sadness. Also, the speaker may be chastising himself for building unreasonable expectations for his son and forgetting that it is not within his power to control the “fate” of his son, who was taken “on the just day” (l. 4). The speaker acknowledges that humans aren’t in control, and that having too much hope for someone is in a sense a form of forgetting that it is God’s plan that has supremacy.

2. How do you interpret the metaphor in lines 3–4, in which Jonson compares his son’s life to a loan? What does this comparison suggest about the speaker’s faith and his resulting views on life?
The speaker’s words imply the Christian belief that earthly life is only one portion of an eternal existence, with time on earth as a kind of preparation for an eternal afterlife. The speaker believes that the body is a vessel in which the soul is housed until death, at which point the soul leaves the body for the afterlife. Consequently, the speaker is acknowledging that his son’s life, though precious, is nonetheless a temporary gift, or loan, from God. Having had the blessing of his son for seven years, the speaker must “pay” (l. 3) back what God has given him. The speaker is conceding that although he wishes his son had not died at such an early age, he was first and foremost a loan from God, who has reclaimed the child.

3. How does the speaker attempt to console himself over the loss of his son? Identify language in the poem that demonstrates your point.
Though his son’s death has caused the speaker quite a bit of grief, he contemplates the nature of life and concludes that it is his son who should be envied for dying before he had to face the myriad difficulties life entails. The speaker consoles himself by considering the “world’s and flesh’s rage” (l. 7), a reference to the struggles brought by the world itself as well as those of the flesh. The world’s rage suggests political and religious strife, something that Jonson would have been exposed to during the bloody struggles between the Catholic Church and the Church of England as well as the wars fought in the name of the different monarchs. The rage of the flesh, in the religious sense, is the fight between the desires of the body and the life of the spirit. The speaker goes on to say that even if one were to put all this aside, there is still another “misery” that everyone faces, that of “age” (l. 8), or growing old. The speaker has identified the many elements of life that make it difficult, such as political strife, temptation, and the physical complications associated with growing old. Taking all of this into account, the speaker asks why he should “lament the state he should envy” (l. 6). By dying young, his son has escaped the tribulations of life and, in that regard, is in a more desirous position than the speaker.

4. What does the speaker mean when he asks, “O could I lose all father now!” (l. 5)?
In wanting to “lose all father now,” the speaker is asking to be released from the pain of being a man who has lost his son and instead focus on the fortune of his son having escaped the difficulties of life.
The speaker is grieving for the loss of his son and therefore thinking about the death in terms of his own suffering. He recognizes that the pain he is feeling has to do with his own desire to have seen his child grow up, which would have exposed him to many challenges along the way. Rather than focus on his loss, the speaker wishes to “lose” that part of him that is a father in order to find solace in the idea that the boy is fortunate to have missed out on life’s miseries.

5. Why do you think the speaker calls his son “his best piece of poetry” (l. 10)? What does this suggest about the value he places on his poetry?

Writing poetry is not only an act of imagination but one of creation as well. The speaker is acknowledging his own profession as a writer and linking his ability to create poetry with fatherhood. He is also suggesting that although he may have written excellent verse, his son stands as “his best piece of poetry” — a recognition of the beauty he sees in his son’s life. The fact that the speaker sees his son’s life as superior to all of his verse suggests that his greatest accomplishment was not a product of his mind but of his heart.

6. What do you make of the final lines of the epitaph? To whom does the “his” in line 11 refer to? What is the difference between the words “love” and “like” in the last line? What does the speaker vow in that line?

The final lines are a commitment from the speaker to avoid becoming too attached to something that can ultimately be taken away. The “his” in line 11 is a reference to Ben Jonson, who is mentioned in the preceding line. It is Jonson who is suffering the loss of his son, and it is for his own sake that from this point forward, or “henceforth” (l. 11), he vows to keep in mind the lesson he has learned. To do this, Jonson must not “like too much” what he “loves” (l. 12). The paradox expresses the speaker’s newfound understanding that becoming attached to something’s availability in this life (or “liking” it), if it is something we really value (or “love”), makes us emotionally vulnerable, because of the very transitory nature of earthly existence. He concludes that from now on he will love with the understanding that the affection he holds for someone will not cause him to forget the fragile nature of life.

Before the Birth of One of Her Children
ANNE BRADSTREET

Exploring the Text

1. Anne Bradstreet had borne eight children, had lost two, and was battling tuberculosis when she wrote this poem. How are those circumstances reflected in the sentiments expressed in the poem? How is the poem itself not only last wishes but also a legacy to her children?

There are numerous indications that the speaker is aware that she is in peril of dying and wishes those who will remain to remember her virtues while taking care of her children. The speaker addresses death as both “common” and “inevitable” (l. 6), indicating an acceptance of her possible fate. The speaker then warns that “death may . . . attend” (l. 7) her soon, giving the remaining lines a sense of urgency. These cautions serve as “farewell lines” (l. 10) and look to a time of her passing when the “knot’s untied that made [them] one” (l. 11). The first twelve lines are in effect an extended effort to prepare the speaker’s husband for her possible departure. Having established death as a possibility, the speaker then asks that her husband “look to [her] little babes” (l. 22) and protect them “from stepdame’s injury” (l. 24) should she pass. The speaker, aware that she may die, does not engage in self-pity but admonishes her husband to ensure the safety of her children. This stands as a legacy for her children, demonstrating the selfless nature of her love and her desire for their well-being.

2. Restate the following line into simple language: “Adversity doth still our joys attend” (l. 2). What might the speaker mean by that statement in general, and how might it apply to her situation in particular?

This statement might be rendered: “Joy is never experienced without sorrow and pain as well.” Joy must always be experienced with the knowledge that everything “within this fading world hath end” (l. 1). The speaker provides examples of the things that are powerless to overcome the reality
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of death, including “ties so strong” and “friends so dear and sweet” (l. 3), focusing on the kinds of joys that are subject to the inevitability of death. These first lines express the speaker’s belief that the happiness of any given moment is always accompanied by the various problems that are ubiquitous in life, so that we shouldn’t expect to ever experience joy pure and simple. The title indicates that the speaker is a pregnant mother about to give birth, casting the statements about joy in the specific light of childbirth. During the time when this poem was written, the high chance of dying while giving birth was a reality that all women faced. The speaker is balancing the joy of having a child with the very real possibility that giving birth might mean her death.

3. How do you interpret the paradox in line 21? Explain the double meaning of “remains” in line 22.

The loss that the speaker is referring to is her own death, and the gains would be the relationship the father would have with the child to whom she gave birth. This paradox is at the center of the poem’s message as a whole: great happiness sometimes comes at a great cost. The remains that the speaker refers to can be read in two ways. First, the remains could be read as her literal remains, or body, after her death. However, the remains can also be her children, or those who remain behind after her death. The adjective “dear” (l. 22) reinforces this particular reading, as it is clear that the speaker loves her children dearly.

4. Why do you think Bradstreet adds “if thou love thyself” to her qualification “or loved’st me” (l. 23)? What additional power does the “or” invoke?

The qualification is a way of the speaker assuring that the husband realizes the importance of the request to look to her “little babes” (l. 22) if she dies by invoking his love not only of himself but of her as well. The speaker first calls on the husband to watch after the children and protect them from any “stepdame” (l. 24) if he loves himself. There is then an additional plea to think about the love he had for the speaker and to consider the care of the children as tantamount to honoring that memory. This brings the weight of her memory and the memory of their relationship to this request. In effect, the speaker is challenging the husband to remember his love for her by taking care of the children.

5. Although the poem is presented without stanza breaks, it falls into sections. What are they? How do they form a sort of argument that the speaker is making?

The poem can be divided into four sections of six lines each, ending with one four-line section. The first six lines establish the inevitability of death. The speaker's argument begins by stating that death is common to all and is inevitable. She then recognizes that the time death comes is unpredictable, so she is writing the lines so that the husband may remember her clearly. The speaker then asks that in remembering her, the husband focus on her virtues rather than her faults. The speaker then looks ahead to a time when the husband’s grief has subsided some, admonishing him to protect the children from any harm a stepmother might wish to inflict. The speaker concludes with a hope that should the husband come across the lines she wrote in the future, he remember fondly and kiss the paper on which the verse was written.

Beginning with the fact that “[a]ll things . . . hath end” (l. 1), the speaker establishes the central argument of these six lines. Nothing escapes death, including strong ties or “friends so dear and sweet” (l. 3). The six-line section concludes with the sentiment that death is “common,” which has the double meaning of something that is commonplace as well as something that is common to us all. The final word in line 6 refers to death as “inevitable,” reinforcing once again the idea that nothing can elude the final end. In lines 7–12, the speaker focuses on the unpredictability of the moment that death arrives and the hope that the husband will remember the speaker once she has passed. The first two lines of this section begin with “How soon,” indicating the uncertainty of when death will come. These are nonetheless “farewell lines” (l. 10), intended to remind the speaker’s husband of their love even after the “knot’s untied that made [them] one” (l. 11). Knowing that she stands the chance of dying while giving birth, the speaker hopes that when reading the lines she has left behind, the husband will remember their bond. In lines 13–18, the speaker acknowledges her “many faults” (l. 15) but hopes that the husband will not dwell on those. Instead, she hopes her faults will be buried with her, while her virtues will “live freshly in [his] memory” (l. 18). These lines focus on her wish to be remembered favorably by her husband once she is gone. The next section, lines 19–24, look forward to a time when the grieving has
subsided and the husband is perhaps ready to marry once again. There is no resentment of this probability, merely a desire that if and when this does occur the husband will protect the children from "stepdame's injury" (l. 24). The speaker does not focus on the father's treatment of the children but expresses her concern that the father make certain he protect them from any mistreatment by a stepmother. The last four lines conclude by referring to the poem itself. The speaker imagines a time long after her death when the husband by "chance" (l. 25) comes across the lines she is writing. She expresses the hope that he will honor her with some "sad sighs" (l. 26) and kiss the paper on which the words were written while the speaker shed "salt tears" (l. 28).

6. How would you describe the tone of this poem? Try using a pair of words, such as “cautiously optimistic” or “fearful yet hopeful.”

Students will have many different possible responses to this question. The key is that they consider the attitude of the speaker toward the possibility that she might die, leaving her husband to raise the children without her.

We Are Seven
WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Exploring the Text
1. What concrete details help the reader picture the “little cottage Girl”? For instance, what does the speaker mean in line 11 when he says, “Her eyes were fair, and very fair”? Why is the setting important to the tale being told?

The details that describe the girl emphasize her youth and her connection to the natural world, both of which support the larger exploration of innocence. She is described as having hair that is “thick with many a curl” (l. 7), qualities that suggest both abundance and vigor. Her “fair” (l. 11) eyes suggest innocence and clarity of vision. Her dress is wild, indicating that she is comfortable in the natural world, preferring to be outside rather than inside wearing dainty dresses. She also has a “rustic, woodland air” (l. 9) about her, connecting her to the simple and authentic life of the country. The repetition of the word “fair” in her description serves to emphasize her natural beauty and innocence, which is enough to make the speaker “glad” (l. 12).

2. In the first stanza, the speaker raises a question that is explored in subsequent stanzas through a dialogue between him and the little girl. Note how the speaker asks again and again how many children are in the little girl’s family and how her answer never waivers. What effect does this repetition have on your understanding of the poem?

Because this question has to do with how the repetition influenced or shaped the students’ understanding of the poem, responses will vary. Certainly the girl’s repeated insistence that there are seven in her family, even though two of her siblings have died and lie buried in the churchyard near her home, emphasizes her steadfast unwillingness to accept the view that once someone has died they are no longer a part of the world of the living. Students may find this perplexing, they might consider the girl too young to understand the nature of death, or they might consider that in her innocence she wisely resists a forced distinction between the living and the dead.

3. How would you characterize the little girl’s attitude toward her dead sister and brother? What is the logic leading to her conclusion that “we are seven”? Does Wordsworth present the girl sympathetically or critically?

The girl’s matter-of-fact attitude is one that rejects any possibility that her dead brother and sister are any less a part of her family than her other four siblings who are still alive. She reveals to the speaker that two of her siblings “in the church-yard lie” (l. 21), while also recounting the two at Conway and the two who have gone off to sea. She does not make a distinction between the four siblings who are alive and the two who have been buried in the churchyard, introducing the attitude she carries throughout the poem. The brother and sister who have died are still very much a part of the little girl’s life. She knits by their graveside, at times sings songs to them, and at others eats her porridge by their graveside. They
are silent playmates for the little girl, and she spends more time with them than the other siblings who are away at Conway and at sea. The girl's logic is that because there is a place where the bodies lie that she can visit on a daily basis, the brother and sister are still a part of her everyday life. In that regard, they are as "alive" as the other four siblings. This is a kind of logic that must suspend the reality of death on some level, but it does acknowledge the power of those who have passed to continue to live on in memory. Wordsworth presents the girl at once sympathetically and critically. The speaker clearly finds her inability to recognize the difference between her siblings who are alive and those who are dead upsetting, because he presses her on this continually throughout the poem; her innocence appears perhaps as naiveté. But she also appears as an innocent who understands the world in a manner that is perhaps enviable. Her beauty is such that it makes the speaker glad, and she chooses to spend her time in ways that are not negative or destructive. She knits and sings, and when it snows she goes outside to "run and slide" (l. 58). She is an energetic girl who is comfortable in nature and is not easily swayed by others to alter her view of the world. Wordsworth values the qualities reflected in this young girl. She appears to understand the connectedness of the living and the dead through nature and memory in ways that the mature among us cannot. (See the next question as well.)

4. What does the girl understand about the nature of family and the death of family members that the ostensibly more experienced speaker has yet to learn? By the end, has she altered the speaker's view?

The girl understands the enduring influence family members have on one another, even beyond death. The speaker is insistent on making the girl admit that if two of her siblings have died, she should no longer consider them among the family members who remain living. The speaker wishes her to accept the notion that there only five brothers and sisters but is repeatedly rebuffed by the little girl. She is unwilling to be influenced by an older person and remains true to her initial belief that there are seven children in the family. In so doing, the girl recognizes the truth that although her brother and sister might no longer be physically present, their memories live on in her. In this way, they are as alive to her as her other siblings. The speaker remains unwilling to accept the girl's insistence that there are seven in her family, admitting that he is "throwing words away" (l. 67) trying to convince her otherwise. The speaker doesn't seem irritated by her refusal to adopt his logic, but he also makes no indication that his mind has changed in any significant way.

5. In his preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802), Wordsworth states that he wants his poetry to be written in "the real language of men," not the more elaborate language associated with elevated literary efforts. How well does “We Are Seven” achieve this goal? Is the regular rhyme and rhythm scheme in keeping with this goal? What about the repetition? What examples of figurative language do you find?

Students will perhaps not find the poem written in “real language” because although the diction is all very accessible, the regular rhythm and rhyme scheme is not a part of everyday discourse. For students, “real language” is probably far different from the language Wordsworth was referring to in his preface. The repetition will more likely seem like natural language, especially given the context in which the speaker keeps coming back to the central question in order to try to convince the girl to think differently. If viewed as a kind of debate with the child, repetition of the main question would be expected. The rhyme scheme by its very nature is something that students clearly place in the realm of poetic language rather than natural language. Perhaps they will link the idea that children often learn language through nursery rhymes, which provides an opportunity to connect the rhyme and rhythm of the conversation and the girl's youth. The poem, like common speech, is almost entirely devoid of figurative language.

A Prayer for My Daughter

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Exploring the Text

1. What contrasts does the opening stanza establish? Consider the settings inside and outside, as well as the speaker's frame of mind.
The central contrast the opening stanza establishes is between a stormy and dangerous world outside and the tranquility and safety of the daughter inside the house, nestled in her cradle. The speaker is troubled with a "great gloom" (l. 8), rooted in the concern he has for what his daughter will be like when she grows up. Outside the house, the "storm is howling" (l. 1), and few obstacles protect the home from the potentially damaging wind. Contrasted with this threatening exterior world is the safety of his sleeping daughter, who is "half hid" (l. 1) in her cradle. The setting establishes the central contrast of the poem between what the speaker perceives to be a dangerous world that threatens to eventually mar his daughter's currently innocent character and his protection and guidance within the confines of their home. The storm that blows outside "[o]nce more" (l. 1) both suggests that this has happened before and mirrors the troubled thoughts racing through the speaker's mind.

2. Why is the speaker skeptical of "Being made beautiful overmuch" (l. 20)? What does he see as the dangers of extraordinary beauty? How do the allusions to Helen of Troy and Aphrodite ("that great Queen, that rose out of the spray," l. 27) support the speaker's views on beauty?

The speaker is concerned that a woman who has great beauty will consider her looks a "sufficient end" (l. 21) and in so doing will "[l]ose natural kindness" (l. 22). He is afraid that his daughter will become overly reliant on her beauty, neglecting the important aspects of being a well-rounded person who "chooses right" (l. 24). He argues that if his daughter considers her beauty alone adequate, then she may lose the ability to relate well to others and "never find a friend" (l. 24). The allusions to Helen of Troy and Aphrodite support the speaker's concern about what he believes to be the dangers of extraordinary beauty. Helen's beauty is often cited as the primary cause of the Trojan War, and Aphrodite's beauty led to bickering and jealousy among the gods. Over the course of her life, Helen endures rape, abduction, and long-term separation from her husband and country. Zeus's concern over the possibility that Aphrodite's beauty would cause conflict among the gods led him to marry her off to the humorless and deformed god Hephaestus. In each case, their celebrated beauty directly contributed to great conflict and destruction, as well as their own misery. In alluding to these two female characters, the speaker reinforces his own concerns about beauty's ability to undermine morality and lead to the downfall of both the woman who has the great beauty and those around her.

3. What does the speaker mean when he wishes for his daughter to "become a flourishing hidden tree" with thoughts "like the linnet be" (ll. 41–42)? What does this wish suggest about the future he envisions for his child? How do you interpret his desire that she be "Rooted in one dear perpetual place" (l. 48)? What are the alternatives to being a hidden tree with thoughts like a linnet?

The speaker desires his daughter to be shielded from the world and any controversy associated with it, and to be free from all disturbing thoughts. By wishing his daughter to flourish like a "hidden tree" (l. 41), he indicates that he does wish her to thrive but to do so without being overly exposed to humankind's influence. The imagery reinforces the seclusion from the prying influence of the world that the speaker seems to be seeking for his daughter. Her thoughts are also to be sheltered, undisturbed by strife or negativity. Like the linnet, a small songbird that does nothing but share "magnanimities of sound" (l. 44), the speaker wishes for his daughter's thoughts to be equally innocent and joyful, untroubled by the strife of the world and only in "merriment" engaging in a "chase" (l. 45) or a "quarrel" (l. 46). Ultimately, the father desires to shelter his daughter from what he sees as a dangerous and violent world, as exemplified by the storm that rages outside the house. He even goes so far as to wish her "[r]ooted in one dear perpetual place" (l. 48), never leaving the protection of her father's home. The entire stanza focuses on the father's desire to protect his daughter from what he perceives to be the negative influence of the world. While the speaker's thoughts can certainly be interpreted as decidedly sexist, somehow suggesting that the daughter would be easily swayed by exterior forces, it is perhaps important to remember that this is a father who is meditating on thoughts of his infant daughter, and his overprotective stance is possibly reinforced by her current vulnerability.

4. What is the effect of the repeated construction "May she" (ll. 17, 41, 47)? What difference would it have made if Yeats had written "I hope she"?

The construction "May she," which is repeated throughout the poem, is used to express a wish or a prayer, which is different from a hope. A wish or a prayer evokes an outside source that can aid in the
realization of the desire, whereas a hope leaves everything up to forces outside the speaker’s control. The speaker indicates a desire to take an active role in making sure his daughter leads what he believes to be a fulfilling life. However, he knows that he cannot control every contingency, even if at times he conveys a desire to do so. The repetition of the construction “May she” allows the speaker to call on forces greater than he to fulfill the dreams he has for his daughter.

5. In stanza 5, the speaker says, “In courtesy I’d have her chiefly learned” (l. 33). What is the meaning he attaches to the term “courtesy”? How might his concept of courtesy sum up the qualities he believes lead to a satisfying life?

In context, the meaning that the speaker attaches to the term “courtesy” is primarily rooted in the notion of kindness toward others. The speaker asserts that “hearts are earned” (l. 34), thus implying that one is not born with the ability to be kind to others but must nurture that quality. The speaker makes a somewhat provocative suggestion that those who “are not entirely beautiful” (l. 35) are the ones who are best suited to learn the gift of courtesy, again suggesting that beauty can get in the way of a woman relating warmly to others. He concludes the stanza by asserting that even in the face of great beauty, a man cannot take his eyes from a “glad kindness” (l. 40), making yet another case for why the quality of courtesy is so important to cultivate.

6. Examine Yeats’s use of figurative language. How do you interpret the image of the “Horn of Plenty” (l. 32), for instance, or “like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place” (ll. 47–48)? What does the oxymoron “murderous innocence” (l. 16) mean? What effect does the personification of nature have?

Yeats’s use of figurative language reinforces what he sees as the paradoxical nature of beauty as both a desirable attribute and a destructive force that must be mitigated by learning what he calls courtesy. The connection to nature, which is personified throughout the poem, serves to reinforce the speaker’s contention that people’s response to beauty is rooted in their nature and therefore needs to be guarded against all the more vigorously. The “Horn of Plenty” that is “undone” (l. 32) is a reference to Aphrodite, whose beauty, and by extension excessive sensuality, is unchecked and therefore leads to her own undoing. His reference to Aphrodite reflects his concerns about his daughter’s future, as he considers her growing into a woman and meditates on the world that is to come. The future will be “[d]ancing to a frenzied drum” (l. 15), also indicating a kind of unbridled sensuality that the speaker wants to hold at bay. The “murderous innocence of the sea” (l. 16) is the sensuality that his daughter is born with, a quality that he desperately wants to keep from directing her future choices. For the speaker, nature is both the storm of sensuality and the innocence of the linnet. He knows that his daughter is a part of nature, born with the capacity for embracing all of its elements. The personification of nature reinforces this capacity, connecting the daughter both to the raging storm and to the contented linnet.

7. What are the values the speaker wants his daughter to embrace? Which ones does he want her to avoid?

The values he wishes her to embrace are those of a “radical innocence” (l. 66) or a kind of willful rejection of the perils of beauty and “intellectual hatred” (l. 57). In stanza 3, the speaker does not wish his daughter to be “beautiful overmuch” (l. 20), fearing it will lead to arrogance and aloneness. The speaker also wishes her to “think opinions are accursed” (l. 58) in order to preserve a quiet nature and maintain a state of innocence. In both cases, the speaker desires his daughter to not assert herself too much, think of herself as exceedingly beautiful, or develop too many personal opinions. He is in many ways creating a demure ideal, a woman who may be beautiful but who nonetheless maintains her innocence and does not desire to create controversy by asserting personal opinions. The speaker claims that these desires are rooted in his hope for her to “be happy still” (l. 72), but the condescending tone certainly makes his ideas controversial; students are sure to have mixed reactions to the poem.

8. Based on the poem’s final two stanzas, how would you describe the father’s vision of an ideal woman? Pay careful attention to his use of the word “innocence” in these stanzas.

The father’s vision of an ideal woman is a person who is secure in her own happiness and content with traditional custom and ceremonies, desiring to be married to a man who will sustain those traditions.
The innocence that the “ideal” woman maintains is one in which “all hatred [is] driven hence” (l. 65), leaving her capable of recapturing a “radical innocence” (l. 66). This innocence is radical because it is utterly self-reliant and unaltered by the world outside the home. It is “arrogance and hatred” (l. 75) that exist “in the thoroughfares” (l. 76) outside the security of the home that the ideal woman must ignore, concentrating instead on “custom and . . . ceremony” (l. 77). The ideal woman must be somehow disconnected from the realities of a corrupted world, instead maintaining the kind of home life dictated by ceremony and tradition. This innocence is more complex than it may appear — especially to today’s students, for whom Yeats’s very antiquated (to say the least) views of femininity may stand in the way of an adequate understanding of the subtleties at play in the poem. This “radical innocence” is clearly not the same “murderous innocence” (l. 16) of sexual desire, and it is radical especially in the sense that it requires effort to achieve. The “ideal” woman needs to put real effort into not falling into the trap of relying on her body to attract men, not developing intellectual hatreds, and cultivating a kind approach toward others. In that sense it is an “innocence” of the darker aspects of the world that paradoxically takes a lot to achieve in that it is good for humans (so says Yeats) but is hardly natural in the way that passions are, and is found throughout human ceremony and custom (which Yeats equates with certain images he has been using throughout the poem in the final lines).

9. What might the setting of this poem represent? How does this setting affect the tone of this poem?

The setting of the poem represents the way in which the home acts as a kind of buffer against a chaotic and fallen world. Outside a storm rages on, while inside a young baby girl sleeps, protected from the elements in her cradle. The setting affects the tone by creating a contrast between the perils of the outside world and the security and innocence of the home. The speaker wants his daughter to maintain this innocent state yet frets for her, praying for “an hour” (l. 9) for her protection from the “sea-wind” (l. 10). The setting reinforces the interior struggle that individuals face against the exterior forces of a powerful, raging, and dangerous world.

10. Why is this poem entitled “A Prayer”? What elements of prayer are embodied here?

The entire poem is a kind of prayer in the sense that it does what a traditional prayer (or at least one type of traditional prayer) does — it asks for the future to turn out some way that the speaker desires it to turn out. The elements of prayer include the repeated use of the word “may,” a word that indicates the speaker’s understanding that he can only make requests, not demands, of a superior power. However, the poem is thoroughly marked by the absence of any supernatural power, replacing traditional religious imagery with images of nature. Yet unlike the God of the New Testament, nature is not a benevolent superior being, and so the images Yeats chooses carry both positive and negative connotations. Nature can be very bad (the murderous innocence of the sea), and sometimes human custom is the only thing that enables us to take on the characteristics of nature that Yeats approves of (the spreading laurel tree). Nature is just plain powerful (something to be feared and rejoiced at), and in this poem, Yeats invokes human practices (custom and ceremony) that are traditionally part of religion in order to harness certain beneficial parts of nature. Perhaps this is what prayer looks like in a post Judeo-Christian world.

11. Is the vision that Yeats favors for his daughter one that reflects stereotypical views of women? What elements of the poem might lend themselves to such an interpretation? What is your interpretation?

The views of females as deferential and pretty are in ways stereotypical for the time period, but have very much fallen out of favor since the time the poem was first published. In the third stanza, the father makes several comments about wanting his daughter to not be too beautiful, fearing that too much beauty will “make a stranger’s eye distraught” (l. 18). This attitude, which blames the woman for being beautiful rather than a stranger for not being able to control his own response to her beauty, is clearly sexist in tone and does not align with current thought. In stanza 6, the father expresses his desire that his daughter’s thoughts never bring controversy but only bring the same delight a bird’s song would bring. This is another attitude that most would find objectionable, even if it does reflect the notion of a polite woman who sits quietly and makes innocuous comments in the company of others. The final two
stanzas, which suggest that the daughter will be best served if she “recovers radical innocence” (l. 66) and is ultimately “[s]elf-appeasing” (l. 68), puts the female once again in a role that is deferential to that of her husband, never making any requests for herself. Again, while this timidity is a quaint reminder of the past, most people today would find it not only antiquated but offensive as well. Students, many of whom will be female, will undoubtedly challenge the stereotypical notions of femininity offered in this poem. On the other hand, some students may see the poem in broader terms — as the fear a father has about being unable to totally control his child’s future, and the worries that ensue knowing the many difficulties that it takes to figure out how to be happy, especially in a world in which divine intercession doesn’t seem to play any role. Students may differ in how Yeats’s strikingly antiquated views of women color the more universal theme he is pursuing; you may have to work hard to get students to see the formal beauty of Yeats’s poem and the subtleties of some of his hopes.

Mother to Son
LANGSTON HUGHES

Exploring the Text

1. What is the overall message the mother is trying to convey to her son?
The overall message is a challenge for her son to persevere and continue the hard walk the mother has been taking her entire life. The mother makes it clear from the beginning that life for her has not been easy, or a “crystal stair” (l. 2), but has been fraught with hardships. The stairs are an extended metaphor, indicating the uphill nature of the battles the mother has been fighting for many years. Her progress has been slow, and the struggles many, but she has managed to keep going. She is at once asserting her own will to continue the climb while also encouraging her son to make his own metaphorical journey up the stairs, continuing the journey upward. The mother represents an older generation trying to pass its perseverance and determination to succeed on to the next generation.

2. Based on details in the poem, how would you characterize the mother?
The mother is a woman of great personal strength and vision. Her strength is exemplified by her ability to overcome the hardships on her journey upward, including the “tacks” (l. 3), “splinters” (l. 4), and “boards torn up” (l. 5), all of which stand for the challenges she has faced along her journey. She is also a woman who cares deeply for her son, trying to pass on her wisdom and her ability to persevere through both her counsel and her example. She blends a tone of firm admonishment at the beginning, addressing her boy as “son” (l. 1), and then later addresses him using the more tender “honey” (l. 18). She is aware of her role as a model for her son and of the strength he will need to get from her to continue the climb.

3. The poem’s speaker employs an extended metaphor to explain her life to her son. What do you think the “crystal stair” symbolizes (l. 2)? Why do you think the poet has chosen to repeat this image in the final line? What might the details of tacks, splinters, landings, and corners represent? What does the inclusion of these images suggest about the mother’s relationship with her son?
The extended metaphor of the stairs expresses the idea of a life’s journey that is a constant but slow progression upward. The “crystal stair” represents a journey upward as well, but not one that is available to the mother. The crystal stairway is one that involves privilege, one that is unavailable to African Americans during the time period in which the poem was written (1922). It evokes an ethereal, almost luminescent quality, suggesting light and a destination that is above the clouds; that it is crystal also suggests that it is easy to climb, because it would have no imperfections that might make progress difficult. The stairway that the mother walks, in contrast, is rife with all the imperfections a stairway might have: “tacks” (l. 3), “splinters” (l. 4), “boards torn up” (l. 5), and “places with no carpet” (l. 6). All of these images reflect the physical and emotional hardships of the mother’s journey, with the sharp sting of tacks and splinters representing the physical pain her body has no doubt endured, the boards that threaten to collapse on her representing the lack of support, and the bare floor representing the scarcity of goods she faces. The landings are those brief moments of respite along the way; the corners are those times when the direction must change in order to maintain progress; and the times when she...
travels in the dark are those moments when the steps are most tenuous, times when she could advance only with the greatest care. By including all of these details, the mother shows that she is trying to help her son understand the reality of the extent of the challenges he will face as he takes his own journey, and that she believes he is capable of taking the journey.

4. What effect do colloquial expressions and dialect have on your understanding of the speaker? What effect do they have on the meaning of the poem?

The effect of the colloquial expressions on students’ understanding of the speaker will depend somewhat on their own experiences. Hughes creates a speaker whose language is bound to her experience, one that communicates directly to her son. The effect is that it lends an authenticity to the advice she is offering her son, and positions her as someone who speaks with authority about the struggles her son will face. The meaning of the poem is dependent on this authenticity because it reinforces the reality of what the mother has faced. It also seems to mark the mother as someone from an earlier, less privileged, less educated generation, imparting wisdom from a long struggle on to the next generation — who, although he will start off in a better position than she did, will still have to struggle.

5. How old is the son being addressed? Does he seem to be at some sort of crossroads? Cite specific textual evidence to support your viewpoint.

Students will come up with a range of ages, so the challenge is for them to make an argument that is rooted in the text. The speaker is someone whose life has been long enough to experience many challenges yet who is still climbing the metaphorical stairs; she is neither a new mother nor a woman old enough to need her son to take up the fight for her because she is “still climbin’” (l. 19). The mother must believe that her son is old enough to really hear what she is saying, which suggests that he may be in his late teens. The son has started his journey because she tells him not to “turn back” (l. 14) or “set down on the steps” (l. 15), suggesting that he may be on his own already. This is reinforced by her admonition to not “fall now” (l. 17), the word “now” indicating that his journey has already progressed to a point where he has made some progress. All of these details suggest that he is a young man in his late teens or early twenties who has begun his progression up the metaphorical stairs on his own, and his mother wishes to support him by letting him know just how difficult and important his journey will be.

6. Is the mother in this poem lecturing, apologizing, advising, pleading, showing affection, criticizing? How would you characterize the tone of the poem?

The speaker begins with an explanation of the challenges she has faced so far in her life, letting her son know that her life “ain’t been no crystal stair” (l. 2). She introduces the extended metaphor of life as stairs, explaining that hers have been burdened with tacks, splinters, torn-up boards, and bare spots, creating a beleaguered and rueful tone. After establishing the difficulty of her journey in the first seven lines, there is a shift. The speaker tells her son that she has endured much, “[b]ut all the time” (l. 8) she has continued climbing. The shift in line 8 changes the tone to one of embattled tenacity. The mother explains that she has been “reachin’ landin’s” (l. 10), “turnin’ corners” (l. 11), and sometimes even “goin’ in the dark” (l. 12) the whole time, the verbs each reflecting the aggression and energy with which the speaker is fighting this battle. In line 14 there is another shift, as the speaker moves her attention away from her own journey and addresses her son and his journey. With a cautionary and directive tone, she admonishes her son to not “turn back” (l. 14), “set down on the steps” (l. 15), or “fall” (l. 17), as he continues his journey. Here she uses the imperative, leaving her son no room to equivocate. There is a final shift in line 18, when the speaker turns her son’s attention to the fact that she is “still goin’” (l. 18) and “still climbin’” (l. 19). Here the tone shifts to one of defiant determination both for her continuing journey and the nascent journey of her son.

7. Even though the poem is presented without stanza breaks, there are “turns,” or shifts. What are they? Try reciting or performing the poem; where would you emphasize the pauses? How do these breaks influence or emphasize meaning?

There are shifts in lines 8, 14, and 18, but students may find other places where they see a more subtle shift. When reading this poem aloud, students may confuse pausing with a poetic shift, which could invite a very interesting discussion. The key is to access their understanding through a discussion of their choices.
Exploring the Text

1. How would you characterize the relationship between the father and the son in this poem?
   The speaker's relationship with his father is difficult to characterize without deciding first if the father is physically abusive or if he is unaware of the pain he is causing his son. The speaker does not make any specific statements about how he feels during the “waltzes” with his father; he merely recounts some of the consequences, such as pans falling off a shelf and a scraped ear. The fact that he tenaciously clings to his father all through the dance until his father carries him off to bed indicates a desire to connect with his father, even if it is at his own physical peril. The speaker knows that his father drinks enough for his breath to “make a small boy dizzy” (l. 2), but that cannot be read as a harsh condemnation. He remembers the “battered” (l. 10) knuckle and the “palm caked hard by dirt” (l. 14), both indications that he noticed the marks of a man who endured difficult physical labor. The mother is frowning, not yelling or trying to pry the son away from the father, suggesting that this “dance” has happened before. The details of the poem reveal a son who has vivid memories of times when his father’s drinking led to episodes of destructive interactions with the speaker. Whether the relationship is between a father who is loving but too rough when drunk and a son grateful for the attention or between an abusive father and a resentful son depends on how the individual student interprets the ambiguities of the poem.

2. Consider the two figures of speech in the poem: the simile of “hung on like death” (l. 3) and the metaphor of “waltzing” throughout the poem. What do they add to the story line of the poem?
   Imagine, for instance, if the title were changed to “My Papa” or “Dancing with My Father.”
   A waltz is a dance that involves constant contact and coordination between the two dancers. The dance is formal, with steps that are measured and precise. These qualities introduce an irony to the poem that would be missing if it were simply called “Dancing with My Father.” There is constant contact between the father and the boy, but the waltz is specifically his father’s dance. Gone are the rules that guide the formal waltz that is danced at fine galas; the steps for this dance are more erratic. Whether it’s pans falling off a shelf or an ear being scraped, this is a dance that lacks the decorum that typifies the traditional waltz, but one in which the steps are familiar. The boy is a partner in his father’s dance, clinging “like death” (l. 3), indicating the unshakable manner in which the boy holds on to his father. This description also turns the idiom “hold on for dear life” on its head, emphasizing the danger the father may be posing. This controlling metaphor introduces the irony of the formality and precision associated with a waltz contrasted with the recklessness and informality of the drunken father’s dance with his small son.

3. How do you interpret the lines “My mother’s countenance / Could not unfrown itself” (ll. 7–8)? Is she angry? jealous? worried? frightened? disapproving? Why doesn’t she take action or step in?
   The mother is not pleased with the dance, but her level of anger or fear would depend on how a student chose to interpret the dance. If the father is an abusive alcoholic beating his son, fear and anger would be choices that would reinforce that interpretation. If this is a father who merely gets overly gregarious when he is drunk and is showing affection in a manner that is unintentionally destructive, then the mother may simply be disapproving and worried. Her decision not to step in also depends on the direction the student takes the interpretation. She may be too afraid to get beaten herself, or she may be shaking her head in mild disapproval.

4. Manuscripts show that Roethke started writing this poem as a portrait of a daughter and her father. Explain why you think having a girl at the center of this poem would or would not affect your response to it.
   Changing the gender would make the speaker seem a little more vulnerable in some ways. The dynamic between a father swinging a girl around and scraping her ear on his buckle is a little more difficult to
imagine as anything but frightening for a young girl. It also brings in possible sexual overtones, with the mother frowning and the father carrying the child off to her bedroom. Those overtones are not necessarily entirely absent with a male speaker, but the likelihood is a bit greater if the gender of the speaker were changed.

5. What is the effect of the regular rhyme and rhythm scheme of the poem? In what ways does it mimic a waltz?
The predictability of the rhythm and rhyme scheme mirrors the regimentation of the steps in a waltz in order to highlight the impulsiveness of the father’s actions. The boy can only hold on “like death” (l. 3) as his father swings him around, a partner in a dance that, unlike a traditional waltz, has no rules. There is a formality that accompanies both a waltz and the rhyme scheme in the poem because both involve following patterns. The speaker and his father “romped” (l. 5) until pans fell, and the boy’s ear was scraped with “every step [his father] missed” (l. 11). The elegance of a traditional waltz is absent, replaced by the recklessness and chaos of the father’s waltz. The rhythm of a waltz and the regular rhythm scheme of the poem are contrasted by the father “beat[ing] time” (l. 13) on the boy’s head. All of these differences serve to highlight the unpredictability of the father’s actions, leaving the boy no choice but to cling to his father for the duration of the dance.

6. Some interpret this poem to be about an abusive father-son relationship, while others read it quite differently. How do you interpret it? Use textual evidence from the poem to explain your reading.
The question of the relationship between the father and the son is sure to be somewhat controversial with students. One possible reading is of a son who is aware that his father is an alcoholic, yet he still craves the attention and contact his father’s drunken “waltzing” (l. 4) provides. In this case, the relationship is one in which the son relishes the rough physical interaction with his father, hanging on him “like death” (l. 3) during the dance and still “clinging” (l. 16) to his father’s shirt as he “waltzed [him] off to bed” (l. 15). An alternative reading casts the relationship in a different light. Rather than wanting the attention from his father, the speaker uses waltzing as a metaphor to describe an abusive alcoholic man who terrifies him. In this reading, the mother looks on in despair as her husband with “battered” (l. 10) knuckles throws his son around “until the pans / Slid from the kitchen shelf” (ll. 5–6). The father scrapes the son’s ear and “beat[s] time on [his] head” (l. 13), all very physical and even injurious acts if done with harmful intent. Students will present a variety of interpretations, which is fine. This is a wonderful poem to address the subject of ambiguity, and the challenge for the instructor is to avoid providing a single correct reading but to allow students to explore the richness of the poem.

Those Winter Sundays
ROBERT HAYDEN

Exploring the Text
1. What are the different time frames of this poem, and when does the poem shift from flashback to present day? How does Hayden keep this shift from seeming abrupt?
There are two points where the poem shifts from past to present, contrasting a father who is unappreciated in the past by those he is caring for and a speaker who finally understands the selfless acts of love. The first stanza is primarily devoted to the speaker’s recollection of his father getting up “early” (l. 1) in the “blueblack cold” (l. 2) and making a fire with “cracked hands” (l. 3). The time shifts to present in the second half of the fifth line when the speaker declares that “[n]o one ever thanked him” (l. 5). It is the word “ever” in the line that brings in the larger perspective, with the speaker looking over the many days his father got up to make a fire and realizing that neither he nor anyone else ever thanked him. The time shifts again from past to present in line 13, when the speaker adopts a mildly reproachful tone and asks himself “what did I know / of love’s austere and lonely offices?” (ll. 13–14). In both instances, the time shift takes place within a stanza that focuses first on actions of the speaker’s father in the past. Just as the mind can move smoothly from thinking about the past to the present, the
speaker moves deftly from focusing on the past to considering the implications of the past in the present. Furthermore, Hayden's shift doesn't seem abrupt because once readers are aware that the poem is being written from the point of view of a speaker in the present, it becomes clear that the events being described in the past are being viewed from the present. Hayden describes in all three stanzas how his father got up even on the weekends to perform labor-intensive, thankless tasks, and he uses the negative “indifferently” (l. 10) to describe his reaction to his father, who he acknowledges not only heated the house but did other good things for him, like polishing his shoes (l. 12). It is not likely that in his youth the speaker of this poem would have singled out these particular events as worth discussing or would have described his own actions in negative terms, so in a sense the entire poem is pervaded by the speaker's present perspective, and so the shift seems less abrupt.

2. What does the line “fearing the chronic angers of that house” (l. 9) suggest about the son’s relationship with his father and the kind of home he grew up in?
The line suggests that the speaker grew up in a house that was in a constant state of conflict, with a father whom he also struggled with. The word “chronic” indicates an anger that was always present, and that the speaker lived in a state of constant trepidation. This also explains why he speaks “indifferently” (l. 10) to his father, an indication of a distant relationship formed by years of anger. It is only after he has been away from the incessant rage of the household for enough years that he is able to look past his father’s anger to see the ways in which he did show love for the family.

3. What is the meaning of “love’s austere and lonely offices” (l. 14)? What effect does Hayden achieve by choosing such an uncommon, somewhat archaic term as “offices”?
The final line of the poem emphasizes the physical hardships the father endured alone every day to build a morning fire, a task that stood as a testament to a kind of love that the speaker can now appreciate. The speaker begins defining love by recounting how his father built fires for his family during the early-morning hours every day, including Sundays. His father built these fires in the “blueblack cold” (l. 2) with hands that “ached / from labor” (ll. 3–4), in a house where everyone still slept. The speaker now recognizes the arduousness of this act as he recalls the sound of the “cold splintering, breaking” (l. 6) of the logs. This imagery relates not only to the logs but to the “cracked hands” (l. 3) of his father building the fire. The physical hardships his father endured, though unimportant to the speaker as a child, now stand testament to a kind of love that the father was otherwise incapable of showing. The solitude of the task is highlighted by the fact that “[n]o one ever thanked him” (l. 5) during the years he made these morning fires. All of these details illustrate what the speaker now understands about love. The “austere” (l. 14) nature of his father’s morning ritual is emphasized by the cold biting his cracked hands as he splinters the wood each day for the fire. The speaker also considers the “lonely offices” (l. 14) of love, an archaic use of the term “office,” which is a service or task to be performed. This definition emphasizes the speaker’s understanding that his father saw this as part of his duty to his family, a service that he alone needed to perform, which he carried out without complaint or help. The effect of using this archaic term is both to emphasize the time that has passed since those winter Sundays and to connect his father to others who have spent their days performing the small unappreciated tasks that have kept families going for generations. These final lines also emphasize the distance from what we commonly think of love being to the love that the speaker is just now realizing his father had for his family. Normally, we think that love is the opposite of austere and lonely; life is austere and lonely unless we find love, and love — if it really is love — is not a job or an office. But the speaker emphasizes here that he realizes that his father loved the family in a way that doesn’t fit with naive conceptions of love but which was love nonetheless.

4. What is the tone of this poem? How do the specific details of the setting the speaker describes contribute to that tone? Consider also how the literal descriptions act as metaphors. What, for instance, is “blueblack cold” (l. 2)?
There is a regretful tone as the speaker reflects on the fact that “[n]o one ever thanked” (l. 5) his father for his work in the “blueblack cold” (l. 2), suggesting both the severity of the cold and the bruising nature of the task. There is also a tone of belated gratitude as the speaker notes that his father had

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“driven out the cold” (l. 11) each morning with his fires, and “polished [his] good shoes as well” (l. 12). At the time the speaker could only speak “indifferently to him” (l. 10) rather than appreciate what his father did. However, the tone of the final two lines is one of sincere self-reproach as he asks rhetorically, “What did I know” (l. 13) about love, indicating that he has come to a new understanding of love and is able to see past the “chronic angers” (l. 9) of the house enough to see that his father offered the kind of love expressed through service to family.

5. Notice the poem’s shift between father and son, from “him” to “I.” How does this alternation contribute to your understanding of the poem?

The poem’s shift between father and son sets up the speaker’s self-recrimination in the final two lines. The first stanza focuses on the memory of the father building fires every morning in the winter, concluding with the recognition that he did this without thanks from anyone. Revealing the father through his actions rather than his words allows for a careful consideration of the implications of his actions without bias. When the poem shifts to the speaker in the second stanza, he reveals his fear of the “chronic angers” (l. 9) but does not provide any detail supporting his trepidation. In the third stanza, there are more references to the father’s actions but still no reference to anything the father said. The focus remains on the speaker, who reveals his indifferent tone when speaking to his father, indicating a remembered distance between the two of them. Shifting between the father’s actions and the speaker’s expressed indifference sets up the final two lines, in which the speaker rebuffs himself for not better understanding the implications of his father’s actions as a child. The father is revealed only through what he has done in the past, allowing for an appreciation of his actions without the bias the speaker feels. The weight of the negative experiences of childhood has been momentarily lifted through distance, allowing the speaker to appreciate the actions without personal bias and to recognize the limitations of his earlier understanding.

6. What contrasts do you see in the poem? Identify at least three, and discuss how they work individually and collectively.

There is a contrast in the first stanza between the “blueblack cold” (l. 2) and the “banked fires” (l. 5) blazing in the fireplace. There is another contrast in stanza 2 between the “cold splintering” (l. 6) of the wood and the “warm” (l. 7) rooms. There is an implied contrast in the final stanza between the cold indifference with which the speaker talks to his father and the warm appreciation he now has for him. These contrasts between cold and warmth collectively reinforce the change in how the speaker perceives his father’s actions. He still recollects the bad memories of the “chronic angers” (l. 9) that made him get up “slowly” (l. 8) each morning. However, he now also embraces warm memories of his father rising early and driving out the cold.

7. What is the son’s feeling about his father? Could this poem be read as a son’s belated thank-you? Explain your answer. What does the adult speaker in the poem understand about his father that he did not as a child? What is the effect of the repetition in the last two lines?

The speaker understands that while his relationship with his father may not have been perfect, his father did demonstrate love through specific actions. In this way, the poem can be read as a belated thank-you from the son. The speaker provides no specific source for his recollection of “chronic anger” (l. 9) from his past but provides two specific examples of ways in which the father demonstrated his love. Through building fires on cold winter mornings and polishing his son’s shoes, the father demonstrates his love through action. The speaker acknowledges that at the time he was indifferent to his father and unable to appreciate his father’s labors, but now he holds a different view. The speaker’s repetition of the question “what did I know” (l. 13) both emphasizes his realization of the significance of his father’s actions now that he too is a man and reinforces his greater understanding of his own ignorance as a young boy. It also seems to emphasize his regret; it is true that as a boy he had not yet reached the maturity level to understand that his father was demonstrating his love through action, but the repetition gives the line a feeling of a conclusion one would like to accept but cannot quite and so must repeat it over and over; because feelings of guilt or regret will not go away. The speaker appears unable to get rid of the feeling that he should have appreciated his father more and had a better relationship with him.
Part 1: Using Literature & Composition

8. In poetry, the lyric is usually a short poem expressing personal feelings and may take the form of a song set to music. What music would you choose to convey the tone and themes of “Those Winter Sundays”?

The students’ musical choices will no doubt be wide-ranging. The key is to make sure they can provide a specific connection between the song they choose and the themes in the poem.

Daddy
SYLVIA PLATH

Exploring the Text

1. How would you characterize the father in this poem? Pay attention to specific comparisons that the speaker makes — either literally or through metaphor — between historical events and figures and her father. Examine the repeated allusions to Nazis, Hitler, and death camps.

The poem gives students a lot to work with in answering this question. The father in this poem can be characterized as a cold, stern, and corrupt disciplinarian — a “[g]hastly statue” (l. 9) that frightens and alienates the speaker, who states, “I never could talk to you” (l. 24) and “I have always been scared of you” (l. 41). He’s described as “a devil” (l. 54) and “the black man” (l. 55) with a “[b]rute heart” (l. 50) who would offer a “boot in the face” (l. 49), signifying that the speaker recognizes something cruel in her father. Additionally, the speaker makes multiple comparisons between her father and the forces of Nazi Germany. “The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna / Are not very pure or true” (ll. 36–37) metaphorically suggests the speaker’s view of her father’s character as one that is tainted or corrupted.

The speaker goes on to state that her father was a frightening figure with his “Luftwaffe, [his] gobbledygoo. / And [his] neat moustache / And [his] Aryan eye, bright blue. /Panzer-man” (ll. 42–45). The speaker, in turn, assumes the position of a Jewish prisoner, remarking that the German language was “obscene / An engine, an engine / Chuffing [her] off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen” (ll. 30–33) — World War II concentration camps that held and killed Jewish prisoners. This repeated comparison between the speaker’s father and Nazis is hyperbolic in the extreme, going beyond the initial characterization that suggests that the father is worse than the run-of-the-mill disciplinarian and that the speaker in the poem is psychologically troubled, making it hard to pin down an accurate characterization of the father.

2. What images in the poem suggest the speaker’s attempts to accommodate expectations of her father or her feeling that she lacks value? Note especially any imagery that suggests restraint against movement or speech.

Terrified that any action may result in her father’s disappointment or stern correction, the speaker of this poem tries to accommodate her father’s expectations by simply doing as little as possible to draw attention. She says, “I never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck in my jaw. / It stuck in a barb wire snare” (ll. 24–26). Instead, she “began to talk like a Jew” (l. 34), a detail that reveals her estimation of her worth in her Nazi father’s eyes. She grew up feeling as if she were trapped in the “black shoe” (l. 2) of her father’s control, “Barely daring to breathe or Achoo” (l. 5). Ten years after his death, the speaker “tried to die / And get back, back, back to [him]” (ll. 58–59) because she still felt his loss, but she later discovered that choosing a mate similar to her father was an apt substitute. She chose a “man in black with a Meinkampf look / And a love of the rack and the screw” (ll. 65–66) and, in letting him go, is also able to let go of her father’s grip.

3. The poem opens and closes with the speaker claiming to reject the memory of her father. How do these bookends point the way to the poem’s theme? Does the speaker reach resolution?

There are a couple of ways to view the function of these bookends in the poem. That an obsessed, vitriolic poem about a father opens and closes with the speaker claiming to reject the continued power that memories of her father have over her suggests that quite the opposite is true — that the speaker is haunted by these memories and cannot get rid of them. Both the opening and the closing are indeed strong rejections of her father. In the opening, the speaker suggests that she lived like a foot — pale and
unable to breathe in a black shoe — smothered by her father. Here, she intones the resolute rejection: “You do not do, you do not do / Any more” (ll. 1–2). At the end, the image of a stake being driven through a vampire father’s heart is coupled with a similar, resolute conclusion: “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” (l. 80). Yet these bookend conclusions seem to be belied by the obsession with and hyperbolically negative descriptions of the father that run through the poem, which suggest that the speaker cannot rid herself of these memories. The poem is filled with the speaker’s attempts to get her father back — for example, “I used to pray to recover you” (l. 14) and “At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you” (ll. 58–59). And, as lines 64–67 suggest, she marries a man like her father. That the poem ends quite like it opens only emphasizes how powerless the speaker is to shake her father.

However, Plath said that she considered the poem to be about a girl with an Electra complex who “has to act out the awful little allegory before she is free of it” (see question 6 for more on this specifically). This suggests that the reader is meant to see the repeated rejection of the father as reemphasis of the initial rejection, culminating with a stake being driven through the father’s heart. If this is the case, the obsession with the father in the poem and the hyperbolic comparisons appear here as cathartic rather than as evidence of the speaker’s inability to escape the memories of her father.

4. Is this a poem about abandonment? grief? rage? all of these? Discuss what feelings the speaker has toward her father (and herself) as a result of her father’s influence on — and absence from — her life.

The speaker of this poem expresses deeply conflicted feelings about her father. While he was alive, she clearly feared him, but she revered him as well, seeing him as “Not God but a swastika” (l. 46). She later states that “Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face” (l. 48), and this strange attachment, in part, compels the speaker to long for her father after his death. As a result, this poem is also about anger: anger that the speaker feels about the lack of affection and attention she received from her father when he was alive, and anger that she feels about losing him while she was so young. She states, “I never could tell where you / Put your foot, your root” (ll. 22–23), suggesting that her father did not share much about himself with his daughter. After his death, she craves even a part of him, thinking, “even the bones would do” (l. 60). Both his behavior when he was alive and his death “[b]lit [her] pretty red heart in two” (l. 56). The speaker suggests in line 4 that this influence has resulted in a fearful and haunted existence for the first thirty years of her life.

5. The only way we know the speaker’s father is through her perceptions. Is she an unreliable narrator? Do we trust her? Does she contradict herself or give hints of ambivalence? Cite specific images and passages to illustrate why you do or do not trust her perceptions.

The speaker’s status as a reliable narrator must be questioned for a number of reasons. First, there is the straightforward fact that the poem is about memory; a long time has passed between the speaker’s present and her childhood. Her memories of her father have been aging for two decades, and it is likely that many of them have changed over time in her own recollection. Her memories seem vague, even faded at times; she refers to a photo she has rather than a vivid memory of her father’s face. However, the most overwhelming reason to distrust the speaker in this poem is the excessive nature of her harsh condemnation of her father; she feels very strongly about her memories of her father, and clearly those feelings have influenced the details she’s included and the language she’s chosen to illustrate them. For example, her repeated use of comparisons between her father and Nazi figures are hyperbolic in their negativity. Plus, they are mixed with odd and opaque reverential images — “a bag full of God” (l. 8). The cumulative effect of the large number of very harsh metaphors and similes mixed with reverential images is likely to be that students will question the speaker’s reliability — and, perhaps, her sanity. Furthermore, as discussed in question 3, while the author claims on the surface to be ridding herself of memories of her father, she seems unable to do this in the poem, which can be taken as another reason not to take her statements at face value. This is a great jumping-off point for discussing different reasons for doubting the reliability of narrators.

6. Plath has said of “Daddy”: “The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part-Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and
paralyze each other — she has to act out the awful little allegory before she is free of it.” How does this commentary by the poet influence your reading of the poem?

Sylvia Plath’s commentary about “Daddy” influences a reading of the poem in two significant ways. First, Plath validates the attachment of the speaker to her father by explaining that the speaker has an Electra complex. This suggests that she will idolize his memory because she lost him at a crucial time in her development, and yet she will continue to remember him as a fearful authoritarian because that strong impression was shaped over time. This helps explain the positive physical characterizations of the father, who is described as having a “neat moustache” (l. 43), “bright blue” eyes (l. 44), and a “cleft in [his] chin” (l. 53), and it also helps explain why she felt she needed to “get back, back, back” to him long after his death (l. 59). Second, Plath’s commentary influences a reading of this poem by further highlighting the use of the Holocaust as a metaphor for the speaker’s relationship with her father. When the aggressive language of her father seemed “obscene” to her (l. 30), she felt herself gravitating toward her mother’s culture, her “gypsy-ancestress” (l. 38) that convinced her she “may well be a Jew” (l. 35). In the end, the speaker “had to kill” (l. 6) her father in her own way, even though he had already died, because she had to reverse the pattern that history had established. She had to stop letting the Nazi hold her, the Jew, in the concentration camp. Instead, she had to rise up like the villagers and stab the vampire through the heart. Considering this comment by Plath may cause readers to have a less negative view of the poem’s conclusion, which they may view as cathartic, since Plath claims that the speaker “has to act out the awful little allegory before she is free of it.” (See question 3 for a more extended discussion of this issue.)

Rite of Passage

SHARON OLDS

Exploring the Text

1. The first two lines of “Rite of Passage” establish the setting and the speaker’s relationship to the children in the poem. How does the setting contribute to the poem’s meaning?

The first two lines, in which the young boys arrive for a birthday party and convene in the living room, provide a familiar and innocuous context in which Olds can explore the implications of the socialization of boys in a competitive and sometimes brutal world. The familiarity of the scene is contrasted with a darker subtext as the poem progresses from recounting an innocent event to reporting on the boys’ conversation and its ominous implications. This celebration of another year of life and maturity for the speaker’s son is held in the living room, a place of refuge and peace. This setting reinforces the overarching irony that while the boys celebrate life in the safety of a living room, their discussion reveals a capacity for aggression that could lead to the destruction of both.

2. What is ironic about calling first grade boys “short men” (l. 3)? What later details contribute to this image? What point is Olds trying to make with this irony?

The irony of calling the party guests “short men” emphasizes that even though first grade boys are still very young and innocent, they are nonetheless familiar and even comfortable with their future role as aggressors. Other details, such as when the boys “clear their throats” (ll. 10–11) like a group of “small bankers” (l. 11) who “fold their arms and frown” (l. 12), reinforce this image, turning them from a group of first graders enjoying a birthday party to a serious group of old men worrying about their most recent balance sheets. The boys also discuss in hypothetical terms how they “could easily kill a two-year-old” (l. 22), all agreeing while clearing their throats “like Generals” (l. 25). The boys have been recast as players in financial and military institutions, two areas historically dominated by men, and both involving competition of sorts. Through irony, Olds is making the point that the boys, while still young, are already demonstrating the kinds of attitudes that will follow them to adulthood, adopting the roles society seems determined to have them play.

3. Identify the similes in the poem. Why are they especially fitting to “Rite of Passage”? What is their collective effect?
There are a number of similes that transform the boy's birthday party into a kind of battleground, with the boys playing the role of generals in their pretend war. The “dark cake” (l. 14), a symbol of the celebration of someone’s birth, is described as “round and heavy as a / turret” (ll. 14–15). The cake sits behind the boys, a defense against the foes that threaten to attack their gathering. The centerpiece of the party has become weaponized, and it looms over the party. The speaker's son's chest is as "narrow as the balsa keel of a / model boat" (ll. 17–18), a child's toy that mimics the ships of a naval force. The boy has become a ship in his own navy, albeit a balsa-wood navy that poses no real threat. Once the party is fully under way, the boys "clear their throats / like Generals" (ll. 24–25), considering who they have the strength to beat up and who they "could easily kill" (l. 22). These similes are especially fitting to “Rite of Passage” because they connect a childhood rite of passage — a birthday party — with an early adulthood rite of passage — going off to war. Alternatively, one could identify the rite of passage occurring in the poem as the bullying and fantasizing about violence that is typical of six- and seven-year-old boys, which has its natural terminus in adulthood — in war or perhaps the institutionalized exploitation of industry. The collective effect of these similes is to take the safe and familiar scene of a birthday party taking place in the comfort of a living room and turn it into a kind of strategic planning session, during which the participants discuss possible targets. These are only first grade boys, yet their conversation reveals a fascination with their capacity for violence.

4. Three lines in the poem — “How old are you? Six. I’m seven. So?” (l. 8); “I could beat you up” (ll. 12–13); and “We could easily kill a two-year-old” (l. 22) — appear in italics. What purpose do the italics serve? Why is it important that the speaker’s own son speaks line 22?

The italics serve to call attention to the fact that these comments are public, made unabashedly for anyone to hear. The italics also draw the reader’s attention to those lines, highlighting the struggle for dominance underlying the verbal exchanges among the children at the party. These comments reflect the competitive nature the boys are demonstrating at a very early age, one that Olds is perhaps suggesting is innate. These first graders do not spend their time talking about the gifts they are about to give, or the cake they are about to eat. Instead, they are most interested in measuring themselves against one another. One gauge is their relative ages, which establish a kind of pecking order. Being younger than the others could be perceived as a weakness, which is why the six-year-old, upon hearing that another guest is seven, quickly replies "So?" (l. 8). His defensiveness is evident as he attempts to mitigate the damage of being younger by pretending it doesn’t matter to him. The implications of the age difference among the boys at the party are emphasized when a seven-year-old tells a six-year-old that he could “beat [him] up” (ll. 12–13). The age difference has now turned into a way for one boy to assert his physical dominance over another. The speaker’s son then takes the discussion to a more extreme level, claiming they “could easily kill a two-year-old” (l. 22). Both the violence of the act as well as the youth of their hypothetical target are shocking, but the fact that it is the speaker’s son who makes the morbid observation ensures that the remark is understood in its proper context. The speaker knows her child very well, and her reaction indicates her understanding that this is not a serious threat but merely a moment of bravado.

5. What do you make of the juxtaposition of “playing war” and “celebrating my son’s life” in the final line? What other contrasts does Olds emphasize through juxtaposition? How are these contrasts a commentary on rites of passage in children’s lives?

The poet’s juxtaposition of “playing war” and “celebrating my son’s life” underscores the irony of the boys’ conversations about who they could “easily kill” (l. 22) while they prepare to eat a cake in honor of someone who is being recognized for another year of life. Olds also describes the boys as “men in first grade” (l. 3), juxtaposing the maturity of manhood with the youth of first graders — a technique she continues throughout the poem, referring to them as “small bankers” (l. 11), “men” (l. 24), and “Generals” (l. 25). In each case, the boys are understood not in terms of their youth but as people who will grow into the men who will control the financial and martial world. They are still too young to be any kind of serious threat, but as the birthday marks the son’s continued growth toward maturity, all of the boys are aware that they too are getting older. The contrast between the youth of the children and the men they will become highlights the idea that children in some ways demonstrate innate attitudes toward life that will inform them as adults. Olds does not delve into the question of where these
attitudes come from, but she does suggest that boys as young as six or seven exhibit the kind of competitiveness that may play out in more dangerous ways when they become adults.

6. Is Olds being serious with this title or ironic?
Given that the poem is set during a birthday party, the title is on one level serious. The boy is turning a year older and is celebrating what is at least understood to be a passage from one age to the next. While there is no immediate change that occurs on the day of the party, the boy no doubt believes that adding a year to his age affords him opportunities and privileges not previously available to him. In this sense, the party is a kind of rite marking this change. Also, for a six- or seven-year-old, a birthday party is a perfect time to assert the sort of social dominance that children of that age crave, which the narrator’s son does when he “speaks up as a host / for the sake of the group” (ll. 20–21). On another level, however, the title is ironic. This is a simple birthday party, lacking the formality suggested by the title. The boy is not enduring any kind of challenge other than having lived for another year, so the “rite” of the party is relatively inconsequential. It is also ironic in the sense that Olds appears to be extending the notion of a “rite of passage” beyond its traditional usage. The boys are only playing at going to war — a rite of passage for young men from time immemorial — but Olds puts her finger on something that also is a sort of rite of passage: the struggle for domination over other children that boys ages six and seven go through. This both comically and ominously prefigures more serious rites of passage, such as going to war. The mother is also, ironically, experiencing a rite of passage, one in which she must come to terms with the power of a culture to impress on young boys the idea that their value is ultimately connected to their ability to do harm.

7. What is the speaker’s attitude toward the rite of passage she is observing? Does her attitude toward her son differ from her attitude toward the whole situation? What overall tone results?
The attitude of the speaker can be characterized as showing a slightly ironic acceptance of behavior that she does not find particularly desirable, leading to an overall wry tone. The speaker gives no indication that she is seriously troubled by the banter among the boys, finding it even somewhat humorous at times. She refers to the “small fights” (l. 6) that break out, and the boys seeing each other’s reflection in their “tiny . . . pupils” (l. 10). Everything about the first grade boys is characterized as small, contrasting with the seriousness with which the boys seem to regard themselves. The speaker understands that these boys who look like “small bankers” (l. 11) are engaging in a kind of posturing that is part of their growing understanding of the competitiveness that society wishes them to embrace. She wryly notes the irony of the boys “playing war” while they are “celebrating [her] son’s life” (l. 26), but she does not directly comment on their actions or conversations. She describes her son as a boy who has “freckles like specks of nutmeg on his cheeks” (l. 16), the imagery evoking a sense of youth and innocence. However, her son is the one who says that the boys “could easily kill a two-year-old” (l. 22), a statement with diplomatic intent that seems to belie this innocence. Her lack of response to this seemingly outrageous comment indicates that she is keeping the seriousness of the children's words in perspective, understanding that the jockeying for supremacy among boys is merely a part of life.

Marks
LINDA PASTAN

Exploring the Text
1. What do the assigned marks and the type of grading system reveal about the relationship the speaker believes she has with each family member?
The assigned marks and the type of grading system reveal a lot about how the speaker feels about her relationships with members of her family. At the most general level, they reveal that she feels judged, albeit in different ways, by everyone in her family. The marks that the speaker receives from her family reveal a husband who focuses exclusively on her role as a dutiful wife, a son whose self-involvement precludes him from understanding the impact his comments may have, and a daughter who chooses to diplomatically avoid any observation that may seem less than complimentary. The marks she receives
from her husband all center on traditional antiquated notions of what it means to be a wife. He gives her an “A / for . . . supper” (ll. 1–2), praising her ability to cook. He marks her “incomplete” (l. 3) for ironing, a domestic task that he apparently feels is not his job. Her performance in bed earns her a “B plus” (l. 4). She clearly feels that her husband views her only in terms of his own needs and doesn’t feel any qualms about this; the fact that she can assign such precise grades to these tasks suggests that she feels her husband has been very forthcoming in his judgment of her as a wife. How she feels about her son is more ambiguous; clearly she feels as if he doesn’t appreciate her or rank her highly, but she can’t assign precise grades for how her son feels about her. This suggests that perhaps their relationship is distant, that perhaps her son is going through an angry teenage phase in which he doesn’t want to associate with his parents, and his mother gets the sense that he hasn’t done enough for him. The daughter, who “believes / in Pass/Fail” (ll. 9–10), gives her mother the most general grade, one that is the most difficult to gauge. The speaker obviously feels somewhat better about her relationship with her daughter than about those with her husband and son. However, while the grade Pass is marginally positive, it suggests that, as with her son, there is some ambivalence. Perhaps the daughter is also distant, and though she doesn’t feel judged in the way she does by her husband and son, she doesn’t feel praised or respected either.

2. How do the denotations and connotations of the word marks contribute to the meaning of the poem? Why do you think Linda Pastan called her poem “Marks” rather than “Report Card” or “Grades”?

The denotation of the word marks as meaning “grades” sets up the central conceit of the poem. In this case, the mother’s performance is being assessed by her family in the same manner that she would have had course work graded by a teacher. This establishes a power relationship in the poem, in which the mother is there to serve the family, and the grades she receives are the way in which they assert their dominance over her. Mark, however, has an important connotation that the other words don’t. Mark also denotes something left behind as a result of physical or emotional harm, and so using “Marks” rather than “Grades” or “Report Card” for a title gestures to the emotional effects that her relationship with her family has had. There is no text that indicates she has actually been physically mistreated, but perhaps she has been marked by a lack of appreciation for what she has done for her family. The fact that she is “dropping out” (l. 12) indicates a desire to leave or at least change the situation, possibly motivated by the “marks” she has endured.

3. How do you interpret the speaker’s warning that she is “dropping out” (l. 12)? What do you think the speaker would like to change in her home and family life? How does the fact that she refers to family members by their relationship rather than their name contribute to the point she is making?

The speaker’s warning that she is “dropping out” indicates that she is no longer willing to passively accept the role as mother that her family has given her. Dropping out is an act of departure. Whether this means that she will be leaving the family and setting out on her own, or simply that she is no longer willing to be taken for granted and is abandoning her given role is unclear. What is clear is that she resents the limitations of her current position in the family and is going to make considerable changes. Those changes may include a greater shared responsibility by the other family members, or simply a demand that she be treated as an equal and appreciated outside of how well she fulfills their idea of her role as mother and wife. By referring to the family members by their relationship, she is drawing attention to the fact that everyone has reduced her to her function as a mother or wife rather than seeing her as someone with a complete identity. Perhaps if they recoil at being reduced to a single label, they will begin to understand the speaker’s frustration.

4. How does Pastan inject sly humor into the poem? For instance, what is the effect of the repetition “average, / an average mother” (ll. 5–6)? Find other examples of humor that are amusing or sarcastic. What purpose might the speaker achieve by approaching her situation with some measure of humor?

The humor in the poem comes largely from how the different types of relationships that the speaker is unhappy with are cleverly described in language that a teacher would use to evaluate a student. The husband giving tasks his wife performs for him numerical grades (ll. 1–4) captures perfectly the way
Part 1: Using Literature & Composition

Wild Geese

MARY OLIVER

Exploring the Text

1. Why do you think Mary Oliver chose to address readers directly as “You” in the opening lines of her poem? What effect does this have on your reading of the poem?

By addressing the reader as “You” (l. 1), Oliver creates a relationship between the speaker and the reader in which the ideas are intended to be embraced on a personal level. The distance between the ideas within the poem and the reader is collapsed, as the reader is invited to announce her or his place “in the family of things” (l. 17). The speaker also invites the reader to tell about his or her “despair” (l. 5) and promises to do the same, creating an even more personal connection. Oliver’s development of this sort of relationship between the speaker and the unknown reader suggests that she believes the predicaments described in the poem — the desire “to be good” (l. 1) while being in despair; the impulse to beat despair by “repenting” (l. 3), feeling “lonely” (l. 13) — to be universal or at least widely experienced; the somewhat cryptic solution — “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves” (l. 4) — is similarly aimed at all readers. Because this question asks for the effect of this technique on a personal level, students will react in a variety of ways, depending on how comfortable they are with the idea of an individual invitation to an exploration of their relative position in the natural world.

2. Even in the absence of a regular rhyme scheme or rhythm, the language of this poem seems to have an incantatory or hypnotic quality. How does Oliver achieve this effect?

The principal literary device Oliver employs to create the incantatory or hypnotic quality is the literary device anaphora, or the exact repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of successive lines. In the first two lines, the phrase “You do not have to” is repeated, explaining to the reader that neither being good nor repenting is required. The fourth line echoes the anaphora in the first two lines, but this time the phrase is slightly altered to the directive “You only have to.” The anaphora “Meanwhile” is repeated in lines 6, 7, and 11, each time describing the continual flow of natural events outside the reader’s personal experience: “the world goes on” (l. 6), “the sun and . . . the rain / [move] across the landscapes”
(ll. 7–8), and “the wild geese . . . / [head] home” (ll. 11–12). The natural world, including “prairies” (l. 9) and “mountains and . . . rivers” (l. 10), continues to be in motion around the reader, the continual movement accentuated by the anaphora Oliver employs. Once the reader has been positioned in the swirling incessant motion of nature, the speaker references the calls of the geese, “over and over announcing [the reader’s] place / in the family of things” (ll. 16–17). The fact that the calls are repeated again and again reinforces the anaphora earlier in the poem, which, taken with the incessant call of the geese trumpeting a return to a deeper connectedness to the world, helps create the overall hypnotic effect.

3. Why does Oliver compare the way the world calls to us with the call of wild geese? What do wild geese represent in this poem? Why is it important that they “are heading home again” (l. 12)? Are the geese metaphorical? What might Oliver be suggesting about homing instincts in both birds and humans?

Oliver compares the way the world calls us with the call of wild geese for a number of reasons. First and most important, the call is both “harsh and exciting” (l. 15). The dissonance of their call compels all to listen, but the negative connotations of the description of their call are mitigated by the thrill of the possibility of reconnecting to a greater concept of home: the natural world. Thus, Oliver points to the fact that the way the world calls to us can be jarring, can interrupt our day-to-day lives, but at the same time offers great promise. The geese also “are heading home again” (l. 12) and call “over and over” (l. 16), emphasizing the fact that even as we are caught in despair, the world goes on and returns to call to us again. The geese are at once metaphorical and very literal. They are metaphorical in the sense that they can be seen to represent both the way that nature calls out to us and our cycle of drifting away from nature and into despair and then our return to it. However, after recommending that we get in touch with what our animal nature desires in line 4, Oliver’s descriptions of the beauty of nature suggest that she believes that experiencing natural beauty — not treating the world like a desert of obstacles to overcome in repentance, as Judeo-Christian ethical codes are often taken to command — is a paramount example of what our animal nature wants. The geese are very literally part of this natural beauty. With reference to homing instincts, Oliver suggests that just as geese migrate far but know where to return, “you” (or we humans), lost in despair and loneliness, only need to remember to “let the soft animal of your body love what it loves” (l. 4), because the world is constantly “announcing your place / in the family of things” (ll. 16–17) — that is, making clear what is good for us for those who seek it.

4. What does the phrase “no matter how lonely” (l. 13) suggest about the speaker’s assumptions regarding her audience? What does the phrase suggest about the poem’s purpose? How does that description link to the opening sentence?

The speaker implies that her audience is experiencing a sense of disconnectedness from the world, which can be alleviated through the realization that there is indeed a place for everyone in the larger “family of things” (l. 17). The phrase “no matter how lonely” is important because it suggests that the author assumes the audience is lonely. This is not a question; the only question is the degree to which any individual reader is lonely. Oliver is aiming her poem to address a universal problem. Why Oliver thinks we all are or have been lonely is suggested in the opening lines of the poem. The opening phrase tells readers that they “do not have to be good.” What Oliver is getting at with this is made clearer in lines 2 and 3, where goodness is further developed as an impulse toward extreme and ascetic acts of repentance, perhaps those typified by traditional Judeo-Christian ethical codes. The opening of the poem suggests that the reader has these impulses, and in connecting this with the reader’s assumed loneliness, Oliver suggests that this idea of goodness is responsible for loneliness and despair. This sort of goodness is in opposition to the animal instincts of love introduced in the fourth line. We see two competing visions of nature: the beautiful world that our animal nature loves, and the desert that is an obstacle to be overcome in our repentance.

5. How do you interpret the line “the world offers itself to your imagination” (l. 14)?

The imagination is boundless, and the speaker offers her audience a chance to discover their individual connections to the infinite possibilities the world offers. Structurally the poem begins by referencing the self-imposed limitations of the reader, suggesting that it is not necessary to abide by traditional norms of what it means to be good. Nor does the audience need to “walk on [their] knees / . . . through
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the desert, repenting” (ll. 2–3). Having started by releasing the need for forgiveness, the speaker then directs the reader to “[t]ell [her] about despair” (l. 5), offering to do the same in return. This exchange is intended to release the reader from the bonds of the definitions of “good” that are tied up solely in the human experience. Instead, the speaker urges the audience to listen to the calls of the “wild geese, harsh and exciting” (l. 15), to awaken the awareness of what the natural world offers. According to the speaker, the world presents an opportunity to eschew self-imposed bonds of right and wrong and instead embrace nature — both figuratively (endorsing our more animalistic passions, which violate traditional taboos) and literally.

6. How does the nature imagery throughout this poem help us understand what Oliver means by “the family of things” (l. 17)? Overall, do you find this poem sad or hopeful?

The “family of things” (l. 17) is established primarily through the natural imagery that encompasses the sun, rain, earth, and sky. The speaker first urges her audience to let the “soft animal of [the] body love what it loves” (l. 4), in an effort to point out the inborn connection she sees between human beings and nature. The speaker then describes “the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain” (l. 7), which move across the world touching “landscapes” (l. 8), “prairies” (l. 9), “deep trees” (l. 9), and “the mountains and the rivers” (l. 10). The totality of the natural world, constantly fed by the sun and the rain, carries on uninterrupted by ideas of what constitutes good and bad. In addition to life on earth, the geese fly “high in the clean blue air” (l. 11), oblivious to the world of humankind. As the geese travel in the direction of their home, guided by instinct, their “harsh and exciting” (l. 15) calls fill the air. It is in this scene of mountains and rivers and geese flying overhead that the audience is meant to see where they fit in to this “family of things” (l. 17). It is not the world of humankind that beckons but a kind of family that operates outside the artificial boundaries people construct. Some students may find this merely an escapist fantasy of people who cannot manage the challenges posed by living in the world of humankind. Others will find the call to see the connection between the larger “family” as hopeful.

Pause

EAMON GRENNAN

Exploring the Text

1. Who is doing the pausing referred to in the title of Grennan’s poem? Why is this important to the poem’s meaning? Would a different title — such as “Father-in-Waiting” — have changed your reading?

A father who awaits his daughter’s return from a day at school is the person who is pausing. It is during that moment of silence just before she comes through the door, sending the stillness into “bits” (l. 13), that he considers the implications of the choices he has made in his life, in particular the decision to become a father. The pause is important because it is the moment “between the silence of almost infinite possibilities” (l. 20) that life holds and the “explosion of things as they are” (l. 21). Parenthood now shapes his life, and the possibilities are in some ways limited by that fact. If the title focused on the father rather than the pause, then the poem might more likely seem to be about the character of the father and the challenges of fatherhood rather than the moment in time that the poem focuses on. Reading the poem in light of the fact that it is fundamentally about a pause — not about the father waiting or any particular father, for that matter — draws out the universal applicability of the event that Grennan animates in this poem. The pause should seem familiar not only to all parents but to anyone who has felt such a pause of anticipation and reflected on what it said about their choices in life. It would be fruitful to ask students to share examples in their lives of pauses similar to the one that Grennan discusses.

2. What is the “weird containing stillness” (l. 1) that sets the scene for the rest of the poem? How does this description along with the repetition of “just” and its derivatives establish an atmosphere? Where does the poem shift from “a moment / of pure waiting” (ll. 3–4) to action?

The “weird containing stillness” is the quiet, the lack of activity, and the feeling of something impending that pervades the scene just before the children of the neighborhood are due home. The fact that it
is strange indicates that the norm when the children are home from school is a steady stream of the noise of children at play, and that any real silence can only be found in their complete absence — such as in the late morning, when they are safely ensconced in school. This moment for the father is one “of pure waiting, anticipation, before the outbreak of anything” (l. 4). It is this moment, when the world is momentarily still, that sets up the contrast later in the poem, when the father pictures his daughter bursting through the front door, shattering the silence. It is at the moment “between the silence of almost infinite possibility” (l. 20) and the sudden eruption of noise that the poem is primarily situated, a moment of reflection for the father. Highlighting this moment is the repetition of the word “just.” The speaker meditates on this word, first using it to describe the moment “just before the school bus” (l. 2) arrives, bringing all of the neighborhood children home. In this case, the word “just” connects this impending event with the pause the father is describing. The speaker then considers how at this moment “everything seems just, seems justified” (l. 5), as he awaits his daughter’s return. The definition has shifted from a place in time to a value judgment of the moment itself. In the stillness before his daughter’s return, the father considers the calm silence of his home as justification of his place as a “father-in-waiting” (l. 13). It is in this moment that the father knows “something / about the shape of the life” (ll. 18–19) he’s chosen to live. The atmosphere that is established is one of anticipation of the moment of arrival and fond acceptance of the consequences of parenthood. The father’s moment of quiet reflection will suddenly be burst when the “front door flies open” (l. 12) and the daughter finds him behind the door, waiting. The “stillness” will then be “in bits” (l. 13), and the “common world restored” (l. 14), as the father welcomes his daughter home.

3. How do the denotations and connotations of the words “outbreak” (l. 4), “explosion” (l. 21), and “disaster” (l. 22) contribute to a reader’s sense that this is more than a poem about a parent meeting a daughter at the front door after school? What might Grennan be suggesting with these words?

These three words denote events with lots of effects, and they all connote immensity and lack of control. These denotations and connotations all reinforce the speaker’s complex understanding of the realities of parenthood. The word “outbreak” conjures images of an unstoppable and incurable plague besetting the quiet homes with the noise of children. The “explosion of things as they are” (l. 21) creates a world in which the father has no ability to stop the realities of life, which include the “intrusions of love and disaster” (l. 22). The word “intrusions” (l. 22) emphasizes the manner in which outside forces beyond the father’s control impose upon his life. These intrusions, however, include both love as well as disaster, indicating that in spite of the chaos that children invite into parents’ lives, the father can still appreciate the love that also accompanies parenthood. Students will probably have many plausible explanations for why Grennan uses these jarring and hyperbolic words to describe the return of a daughter from school, but they clearly have to do with how events seem from the perspective of someone who is a parent. The return of the children is an “outbreak” — a huge event — because for him being a parent is central to his identity. Likewise, while the “explosion of things as they are” seems to be overkill for describing the mundane, day-to-day affairs of rearing children — “the casual scatter” (l. 22) of clothing on the floor — it accurately describes how things like this feel to a father. Finally, in a similar vein, “disaster” accurately describes what may affect his relationship with his daughter in the sense that this relationship is central to “the shape of the life” (l. 19) he’s chosen. These words also express how momentous even mundane things feel when we reflect on “almost infinite possibility” (l. 20) — the fact that things in our lives could have gone many different ways and that an innumerable number of these possibilities are now closed off. There is almost an “explosion” of facts when we stop thinking of the open possibilities that once were and remember what is.

4. Why do you think Grennan uses “amber” and “scarlet” (l. 7) to describe the lights of the school bus rather than the more commonplace “yellow” and “red”? What about the word “sapphire” (l. 8) rather than “blue” to describe the girl’s hat? What do the connotations of these words suggest about the poem’s theme?

The colors “amber,” “scarlet,” and “sapphire” are much more vibrant than the more pedestrian choices of “yellow,” “red,” and “blue,” and they connote the dazzling energy that underlies what is an otherwise common experience. The lights of the bus “flare amber to scarlet” (l. 7) as children disembark. The
word “amber” connotes something ancient as well as decorative, highlighted by the scarlet of the second flashing light, connoting elegance and authority. The sapphire hat that the daughter wears connotes precious gems embedded in a kind of crown. Taken together, the colors celebrate the arrival of the daughter as a kind of princess who steps “gingerly down” (l. 9) out of the bus, whose door “sighs shut” (l. 11), lamenting her departure. The daughter is in many ways the royalty of the family, for it is her needs that drive and shape the father’s life. By surrounding the daughter with an air of royalty, Grennan explores the father’s complex consideration of the “almost infinite possibility” (l. 20) life could have offered before the “explosion of things as they are” (l. 21) once his daughter arrives.

5. Why does the speaker use the second-person point of view in this poem? It is not direct address, yet he writes about “your daughter” (l. 7) and “as you bend” (l. 14). What is the effect? In only one place does he use the first person, “our” (l. 9). What does this shift suggest?

The second-person point of view in this poem is not a typical treatment of this narrative perspective. It does put the reader in the position of the waiting father, but it can also be read as the speaker considering his own situation in the abstract. The first seven lines of the poem establish a scene that plays out in neighborhoods across the country “just before the school bus brings the neighbourhood kids / home” (ll. 2–3). The father awaits his daughter’s return, imagining the “flashing lights” (l. 7) of the bus carrying her home. It is at this point that the daughter is referred to as “your daughter,” which presents two ways to consider the arrival. First, there is a limited omniscient speaker, who is providing both the overview of the scene and the father’s thoughts about the moment before his daughter comes through the door. Second, the perspective can be read as all parents who have waited for a child to come home from school. Any parent reading the poem then becomes the “you” (l. 6) in the poem, drawing on the shared experience that Grennan is referencing and put in the same reflective moment as the speaker. The use of “our” in line 9 can be used to bolster either reading. It suggests that the poem is being addressed to parents in general, but it could also be read as the father in the poem reflecting on the situation of parents like him.

6. Notice how Grennan juxtaposes the most concrete details with abstractions. What effect does this contrast have on the tone of the poem?

The concrete details anchor the abstractions in familiar experience, creating an exploration of parenthood that reaches beyond the reflection of one father and captures the realities of what it means to make the choice of becoming a parent. The concrete details of waiting on a “cold afternoon” (l. 3) for the return from school of one’s child, who arrives on a bus with “flashing lights” (l. 7), create a familiar, even prosaic, scene. In that picture, the father engages in the abstract consideration of this as a moment of “pure waiting” (l. 4), when “everything seems just” (l. 5). The moment is now brought into the larger context of the significance of living a life in which the child is the one who drives many of the choices a parent makes. The father imagines the child’s arrival, the details of which disrupt the silence of the afternoon, as he sees the “front door fl[ys] open” (l. 12) and his daughter drop her “winter clothes on the hall floor” (l. 23). Her impending arrival is described as an “explosion of things as they are” (l. 21), taking these concrete details and turning them into a kind of destructive force that the father cannot ignore. The clothes on the floor, another familiar experience for parents, serve as a reminder that becoming a parent is a choice that yields daily consequences, both challenging and mundane. These contrasts between the concrete reality of a child’s return and the accompanying chaos, as well as the abstract consideration of the implications of what it means to be a parent, illustrate “the shape of the life” (l. 19) he has chosen to live.

7. What is the speaker referring to when he talks of “the shape of the life you’ve chosen to live” (l. 19)? Do you find this poem a celebration of being a parent or a warning? If it’s a warning, what is it trying to warn us about?

The shape of life is what has been determined by those parameters that guide the majority of an individual’s choices once that person has a child. On the one hand, there is the “silence of almost infinite possibility” (l. 20), or the consideration of the directions life could have taken before the choice was made to become a parent. The pause before the daughter’s return allows the father to reflect momentarily on those options that are now limited by his daughter’s presence in his life. On the other hand,
there is the “explosion of things as they are” (l. 21) — the daily routines, such as waiting for a child to come home — that create “vast unanswerable / intrusions of love and disaster” (ll. 21–22), like a daughter’s return from school and clothes scattered on the floor. On one level, the poem’s loving depiction of the daughter “in her blue jacket and white-fringed sapphire hat” (l. 8) stepping “gingerly” (l. 9) off the bus, whose door “sighs shut” (l. 11), celebrates the simple joys of parenthood, including the return of a child from a day at school. On another level, there is a kind of warning that life’s choices will inevitably be shaped by the many requirements of parenthood.

8. Why is this a poem and not prose? It consists of two sentences broken into lines, so what makes it a poem?

This is a question that students will take in a number of interesting directions because it gets at the heart of the question of genre. In many ways, the distinction between prose and poetry is precarious once the issue of structure is eliminated. Some features that students may offer as evidence that “Pause” is poetry include the length and structure of the sentences; the more esoteric phrases, such as “the shape of the life” (l. 19) and “intrusions of love and disaster” (l. 22); and the interesting descriptions, such as the bus door “sigh[ing] shut” (l. 11) and the daughter’s voice “filling every crack” (l. 17) of the “stillness” (l. 13).

The Hammock

LI-YOUNG LEE

Exploring the Text

1. What are the connotations of the word hammock? How do these connotations contribute to your understanding of the poem?

A hammock suspends an individual above the earth between two points and is a place of sanctuary and meditation. The connotations reinforce the idea of the speaker being suspended in a moment of reflection between the two unknowns of his “mother’s hopes” (l. 17) and his “child’s wishes” (l. 18), as well as the “two great rests” (l. 22) that await us all; in his thoughts he is suspended like a hammock between the past and the future. For the speaker, who lives “[b]etween [the] two unknowns” (l. 16) of his mother’s expectations and his son’s desires, the connotations reinforce the meditative nature of his questions about life. The connotations also reinforce the protective image of the speaker laying his head in his mother’s lap and the parallel image of the speaker’s son laying his head in his father’s lap. He ponders a time when he “lay hidden . . . , waiting / inside [his] mother’s singing to herself” (ll. 3–4), a line whose ambiguity suggests both his time in her womb and a kind of refuge he once took from her singing. The speaker wishes to provide the same feeling of security for his son, kissing him to “keep his father’s worries / from becoming his” (ll. 10–11). In both of these cases, a child rests his head quietly on his parent’s lap, and both parent and child are engaged in their own moments of reflection. The speaker introduces a brief discussion of what happens after death when he considers his child’s wishes “outliving [him]” (l. 19), asking whether it is a metaphorical “door” (l. 20) or a “window” (l. 21) to the other side. The conclusion is that it is perhaps both, with a “little singing between two great rests” (l. 22). Like a hammock holding a child, the speaker is ultimately suspended in song between “two great rests” (l. 22).

2. Find the visual and tactile images in the poem. What do these images suggest about the relationships described? Pay careful attention to the descriptions of physical positions.

The visual and tactile images center on the parents in some way holding their children, suggesting a relationship that is supportive and protective. The speaker remembers laying his “head in [his] mother’s lap” (l. 1) as well as the times she “carried [him] on her back / between home and the kindergarten” (ll. 5–6). In each case, the mother is lovingly taking care of the speaker, ensuring safety both at home and in school. The speaker’s son also “lays his head in [his father’s] lap” (l. 9), quietly receiving “his father’s kisses” (l. 10). The mother first held her small boy and carried him on her back, helping him navigate the world. The speaker now tries to do the same with his son, trying to keep his own “worries / from becoming his” (ll. 10–11). In both cases, the parents are holding their children, cradling their heads in their laps in a manner that bespeaks protection and sanctuary against the uncertainties of the world.
3. Why do you think the poet chose to italicize the words “Dear God” (l. 11) and “Amen” (l. 13)?
What does this tell you about the speaker’s attitude toward his subject? How does this point the way to the poem’s tone?

The poet italicizes the words “Dear God” and “Amen” in order to frame a moment of anxiety in which the speaker ponders whether or not he is passing on his “worries” (l. 10) to his son. While holding his son’s head in his lap, the speaker wonders about his legacy for his son, specifically whether he is passing the thoughts that trouble him to his son. Momentarily overwhelmed by the thought, he calls out a kind of prayer to God. It is at this moment that the speaker remembers that there “are stars we haven’t heard from yet” (l. 12), and this thought brings his prayer to an abrupt end, as he is “almost comforted” (l. 14). This brief prayerful contemplation indicates that the speaker is still seeking responses to the unanswered questions in his life but is willing to accept the broader reality that many answers lie beyond his temporal reality, an idea that helps create a tone of resigned curiosity.

4. Why do the stars “have so far to arrive” (l. 13)? Those stars are in the same stanza as the father’s “kisses” and “worries” (l. 10). How might the three be related?

In both the first and the third stanzas, stars are in some way hidden, indicating a truth that is always there but has yet to reveal itself fully to the speaker. The stars are first obscured by daylight, which “hides the stars” (l. 2) in the same way the speaker was “hidden once” (l. 3). The speaker later considers whether his “kisses” keep his “worries” from becoming his son’s worries. These kisses are his attempt to allow his son to experience life on his own terms, absent his father’s list of concerns. Uncertain of their effect, he calls out to God, only to remember that there “are stars we haven’t heard from yet” (l. 12), which still “have so far to arrive” (l. 13). This thought connects to his desire to comfort his son and helps him realize all that he has yet to understand about life. The speaker is “almost comforted” (l. 14) by this awareness about the limitations of his own understanding, and realizes that he must live his life between the “two unknowns” (l. 16) of what his mother wanted for him and what his own child desires in life. In this way, the stars that have not yet revealed themselves are the truths that have yet to be discovered by both the speaker and his son. In the same way that the “day hides the stars” (l. 2) that are nonetheless there, the answers to his questions must await the proper moment when they will reveal themselves.

5. What evidence is there in the poem — both words and images — of the speaker’s tentativeness? For example, he feels “almost comforted” in line 14. He asks two questions at the very end and replies, “Yes” (l. 22) — but which question is he responding to? What is the source of this uncertainty? Does the speaker ultimately get beyond it, embrace it, or resign himself to it?

There are a number of examples in which the speaker responds tentatively to a world that offers no specific answers to his questions, leaving him only to accept the ambiguity of existence. The two people who are of main concern to the speaker in the poem, his mother and his son, are something of a mystery to him. The fact that he has no idea what either of them is thinking indicates a certain tentativeness in both of those relationships. He wonders if he is passing his “worries” (l. 10) along to his son, an indication that he is unsure of the kind of influence he has on his child. He concludes that he lives his life between “two unknowns” (l. 16), indicating the precariousness of being unable to determine whether he is living up to his mother’s “hopes” (l. 17), which predated his own existence, or his son’s “wishes” (l. 18), which will outlive him. The source of this ambiguity is the mystery of existence itself, which is expressed through the cycle of childhood passing into adulthood. The speaker’s mother once held the speaker in her lap, just as he now holds his son. This ultimately prompts the speaker to question whether death is a door with a “good-bye on either side” (l. 20) or a window with “eternity on either side” (l. 21). The single response of “Yes” is a speculative conclusion that it is both, reinforcing the speaker’s unwillingness to accept a single definitive answer to such a profound question.

6. How did you interpret the poem’s final stanza? What are the “two unknowns” (l. 16)? What are the “two great rests” (l. 22)? What do these images suggest about how the speaker lives his life?

The “two unknowns” between which the speaker must live his life are the aspirations his mother has for him and his son’s dreams, both of which must be realized during life, “between [the] two great rests”
The first unknown is “older than” (l. 17) the speaker, his mother’s dreams for her son predating his birth. The speaker has already indicated an inability to divine his mother’s thoughts, which is reinforced by the uncertainty he holds about his “mother’s hopes” (l. 17). His “child’s wishes” (l. 18) are the second unknown for the speaker, which he recognizes as also being “older” (l. 18) than he is because they will end up “outliving [him]” (l. 19). His mother’s hopes and his child’s wishes both speak to a sense of purpose for himself as well as his son, but each remain unknown to the speaker. It is between these two unknowns that he is currently suspended. When the speaker thinks about his son’s wishes outlasting him, he begins to contemplate what happens before life and after death. If the great question of purpose is to remain a mystery to the speaker, what greater mystery must those other points hold? The speaker then engages in metaphor to explore this question, with each expressing a distinct possibility. If it is “a door,” and on either side of the door there is nothing but “good-bye” (l. 20), then the question of existence before and after death remains an unknowable void. If it is a “window,” through which one views “eternity on either side” (l. 21), then life is but a passing from one state to the next. The speaker’s answer to his question is that it is both. The “two great rests,” then, are those millennia before and after our physical existence on earth, of which we can truly know nothing. The speaker concludes his paradoxical resolution with one certainty: while on earth we will not necessarily get specific answers to the big questions, but we can expect “a little singing” (l. 22) for comfort while we are here.

7. Examine the structure of this poem by comparing stanzas one and three to stanzas two and four. How does the shape of the poem reflect its title and theme?

Stanzas two and four are single lines around which larger stanzas are suspended, creating a structure that suggests the hammock from the title. Just as the speaker accepts that he must live between “two unknowns” (l. 16) — the enigma of what precedes existence and what comes after — stanzas two and four present unknowns between which the poem is situated. The content of these two stanzas, in which the speaker concludes that he does not know the thoughts of his mother or his son, introduces interior worlds that the speaker realizes he cannot ever fully comprehend. He accepts this reality and in the final stanza engages in a metaphorical exploration of existence, also ending with an acceptance of the limitations of his own understanding. What he does know is that his mother’s hopes came before his existence and his son’s wishes will live long after he passes. Stanzas two and four, therefore, are positioned at opposite ends of the speaker’s philosophical contemplation about the inscrutable nature of time, and he is suspended between the two.
2. Young takes us from what seems to be an affectionate remembrance of a big family to a traumatic event. Why? What effect does he achieve by this surprise? Explain why you think this strategy makes the suicide seem either commonplace or more shocking.

The fond reminiscences of the first two stanzas are suddenly if only briefly eclipsed by the mention of Keith’s suicide, introducing the full range of experiences that the speaker’s family has gone through, from the lighthearted to the traumatic. The speaker brings in this detail unexpectedly as a reminder that heartbreak happens suddenly and is a part of what families go through every day. It also sets up the fourth stanza, in which Keith’s sister Jamie, “pigtailed & crying at his grave” (l. 29), is left behind to deal with the loss of her older brother, just as all family members who lose a loved one must carry on in spite of their grief. Whether the suddenness of the introduction of this detail makes the suicide seem commonplace or more shocking will depend on the individual reading. Those who find it commonplace may reference the fact that the detail is included at the end of the stanza, right after a more mundane discussion of whether or not Indiana Jones would “get deaded” (l. 23), thereby downplaying its significance. Those who find it more shocking may reference the continued focus on what Keith left behind in the fourth stanza, including a grief-stricken sister and a grandmother who still keeps “the paintings he masterpieced” (l. 26) hanging on her wood-paneled walls.

3. How old do you think the speaker is? What period of his life is he remembering?

The speaker reflects on a time far enough in the past that he can recall Tonia learning how to ride a boy’s bike; Jarvis breaking toys the speaker was “too old to own” (l. 17); Nikki being worried that Indiana Jones would “get deaded” (l. 23); and a child being named after Keith, the cousin who killed himself. All of these memories indicate that the speaker has lived long enough to see quite a bit of family history. In addition, the maturity of the speaker’s reflections about Brittany, a “womanish / four-year-old going on forty” (ll. 37–38), and a word that was spoken “before the story of ships” (l. 41) indicate a perspective that has been informed by experience. He does not seem to be middle aged yet, as his memories center on cousins who are still growing up, with no indication that any are adults. It would be reasonable to conclude, then, that the speaker is perhaps in early adulthood and is reflecting on a time not too far in his past, perhaps when he was in his early twenties. It is worth considering, however, that Young was thirty-eight the year that Dear Darkness, the book containing “Cousins,” was published.

4. Consider Young’s close examination of the word cousin — its sound and shape. How is its meaning slightly different each time he uses it? What is the effect of the unusual syntax of “I am cousin / to her little brother” (ll. 38–39); “this word, cousin, that once / rested on our tongues before the story of ships” (ll. 40–41); and “cuz, say it till it buzzes the blood” (l. 44)?

The word cousin doesn’t immediately appear in Young’s poem, though considering the title, it is not hard to jump to the conclusion that the people being introduced are the speaker’s cousins. Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, that when the word is first introduced, it is used to explicitly mark a relationship that has so far been implicit in the poem. “That’s your cousin, / boy” (ll. 13–14) is a bit of dialogue that points out to the unsuspecting speaker that the local girls he is interested in are related to him. The word here carries with it a sense of being scolded but also surprise and discovery. The reader can almost hear the word cousin roll off the tongue of a relative with disgust, warning the speaker against a transgression that he should have been aware of. At the same time, the word carries the sense of the surprise the speaker must have felt at learning this, which resonates through the poem as a broader sort of surprise. The relatives he has introduced so far are being given a term that describes them, and the speaker is becoming aware of a chain of relations, which he will explore in greater and greater depth as the poem progresses.

The next occurrences of the word cousin in lines 31 and 35 display a deepening in understanding of what it means to be a cousin. Once Kevin was just “the older cousin never seen” (l. 31) who Jamie refused to sit by, but now she affirms her relationship with the speaker, saying “Kevin’s my cousin” (l. 35). Here there is discovery from the vantage point of a younger generation of cousins, finding out what it means to have an older cousin, but the tone appears to be primarily one of prizing a possession. Jamie almost appears to be bragging or savoring the word cousin because she loves having an older cousin to look up to. The term feels deeper here, because much has happened since the word last appeared. The speaker understands being a cousin now, not just in terms of having a wide network of
relations but in terms of the seriousness and importance of family. His cousin Keith killed himself, and Kevin has established an older-brother-like bond with Jamie, Keith’s younger sister. Her proudly calling Kevin “cousin” — as she might have called Keith “brother” — indicates the depth of the meaning of this relationship to Young. This is extended with the syntactically strange “I am cousin / to her little brother” (ll. 38–39). This statement, reminiscent of “I am Batman to his Robin” and similar statements, highlights the importance of his role as a cousin.

With the final “cousin” in line 40, Young at last isolates the word as a word, which makes it feel slightly strange — not a part of the flow as it was in the rest of the poem — and serves as a bridge into the final stanza, where Young will step back and consider the depthness of family relationships at a distance. Cuz, which appears in line 44, is a rich term in that it suggests an intimacy that has not yet been employed in the poem — the closest cousin is perhaps the one you would call “cuz” — but also a more primitive, less refined noise, which, combined with Young’s references to slave ships and Africa, suggests how deep these networks of intimate connections run.

5. What do you think the speaker is referring to with “ships” (l. 41) and “tribes” (l. 42)? What does this historical dimension add to a poem that begins as a personal remembrance?

The references to ships and tribes connect the speaker’s remembrances about his family to their shared past as descendants of former slaves. The effects of slave traders’ intentional and methodical destruction of the families of Africans and their progeny still carry on into the present, obscuring and complicating the history of any family connected to that past. The speaker focuses on the idea of cousins as a reminder of the fact that the original tribes were torn apart, leaving people to form new familial connections. The links that the speaker makes between his current cousins and the history of his family to the slave ships that carried their ancestors away from their native lands reinforce the significance of the word that serves to connect his family and his ancestors in spite of a past that attempted to break them apart.

6. Discuss unusual uses of language in this poem, such as turning a noun into a verb, or including slang. What do these examples contribute to your understanding of the poem?

As a remembrance of family, the poem takes on a kind of conversational tone, which includes slang and creative approaches to language. Young also translates the spoken word directly, such as when Jarvis asks, “Who broke dat car?” (l. 18). In addition, he uses a series of ampersands to connect a string of actions his cousin Jamie performs as she warms up to him, creating a narrative quality in which the actions are related rapidly in succession. All of these create a speechlike impression that reinforces the familiar and informal reflection of a personal remembrance, taking the poem from an abstract contemplation of family to an authentic recounting of direct experience.

7. The poem concludes with a return to the immediate family. How do you interpret the simile in the final three lines?

Students will surely have different thoughts about the opaque closing image of the poem, which conjures up a sense of inevitability and pervasiveness. One possible response is that the persistence of the wasps mirrors the persistence of memory as it presses into the present. The “grandmother’s gaping house” offers little resistance to the returning wasps, which press “against screens” (l. 46), determined to get back into the house. Like the wasps, the memories of the past, figuratively described as “the steady hum / of cuz” (ll. 43–44), press against the barriers trying mightily to keep them at bay. However, it is futile to try and shield the present from memories of the distant past, and the wasps will return “no matter how often we let them out” (l. 47).

8. The poem has six sections, though the divisions are often in midsentence. What sequence of ideas or images do you see in this division? Consider why Young stops us where he does. Is he asking us to look back, pause, or connect? How does the poem build?

The first section is a memory of three individuals: Tonia, Angela, and Big Red. Each individual is connected with a specific memory, including Tonia, “who learned to ride / a boy’s bike at four” (ll. 1–2); Angela, who taught the speaker how to kiss “but denies even remembering it” (l. 5); and Big Red, who was “born the color of Louisiana / dust” (ll. 6–7). The specificity of the memories begin to build the
connections between the speaker and his extended family. The second section focuses on “two towns full of folks” (l. 11) that he is “related to / or soon will be” (ll. 11–12). Here the speaker indicates the continual growth of his extended family, adding to the already long list of cousins, who are so numerous that the speaker has unknowingly found some to be “cute” (l. 13) until being informed that they are relations. These cousins include Jarvis, “who broke toys [the speaker] was too old to own” (l. 17), only to deny it. In this second section, the speaker continues to add to the discussion of his extended family, including those individuals whom he knows less well but to whom he is nonetheless related. The third section begins at the end of line 19, where Nikki is introduced. This is a cousin with whom the speaker is close enough to take to the movies, calming her fears about Indiana Jones. The fourth section begins near the end of line 24, where the focus is now on Keith, the cousin who “hanged / himself” (ll. 25–26). The speaker has moved from fond memories to a family tragedy, introducing the kinds of trials that families can face. This reference leads the speaker to memories of Keith’s “little sister Jamie” (l. 28), who warms to the speaker only after he has peeled crawfish for her, leading her to announce that “Kevin’s my cousin” (l. 35). The speaker’s affirmation of that fact begins the fifth section, in which he adds that he is also “Phyllis’s & her baby Brittany’s” (l. 36) cousin. The final section is introduced in line 40, where the speaker begins to connect the word “cousin” to a time before “the story of ships” (l. 41) — a time before his ancestors were enslaved. The speaker is referencing the family that existed before all of the cousins that now make up his family. This last stanza builds the connection between past and present families, asserting that “the steady hum / of cuz” (ll. 43–44) still “buzzes the blood” (l. 44).

PAIRED POEMS

Although the myth is glossed for the students, consider introducing the paired poems by giving students a moment to invent a company that takes its name from Greek mythology to reinforce the company’s product. (Note: these poems mix together Roman and Greek mythology, but it makes the most sense to stick with the Greek names, as they are more familiar.) For example, a company that builds ships might call itself the Poseidon Group, instilling the idea that its ships would dominate the sea. This can be done very quickly and leads easily into a general discussion of one way in which allusions can reinforce a larger idea. It’s relatively clear why allusions are used to sell products through positive associations, but students often cannot clearly articulate the effect of allusions in writing. Ask students to take a moment to share their current understanding of how and why writers use allusions with a partner or in a small group, and then have the pairs or groups share some of their ideas with the class as a whole. This will give students a chance to think about the poems’ central device as a tool with which writers produce a particular effect, and to eventually discuss whether or not the two writers used their chosen allusions with similar goals in mind.

Images related to the two myths are also a powerful way into the discussion of the ideas raised in the poems. Numerous images can be found with a quick Internet search. Some particularly useful images are a section from the myth in a fresco by Cosimo Tura in Palazzo Schifanoia, the vase painting of Demeter and Plutus from the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the bell-krater attributed to the Persephone Painter at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Select a few, and for each image, ask the following questions:

1. What do you see? (the actual details)
2. What does it mean? (what is the story or message)
3. How do you know? (the analysis, connecting detail to effect)

Once students have had a chance to explore the myths through your selected images, it is possible to discuss why they resonate with writers and artists. In other words, students can discuss why writers and artists in particular and people in general are drawn to these myths. What do they convey about the human experience? This experience will provide a richer context in which students can study the paired poems.

Because both poems deal with mothers contending with a daughter’s maturation and the accompanying challenges, consider having students in small groups or pairs generate a Venn diagram for each poem, in which they list on one side the issues related to the mother’s struggle to come to terms with her daughter’s maturation and, on the other side, the issues related to the daughter’s desire to
separate from her mother. The points of intersection between mother and daughter should be listed in the center of the diagram. After each poem has been diagrammed, have students create a list of areas of agreement between the two poems. In other words, have students focus on the center of each diagram to see if there are similarities among these points in the two poems. Once that has been completed, students can discuss the areas of similarity as well as the areas in which the two poems present conflicting ideas.

The Pomegranate
EAVAN BOLAND

Exploring the Text
1. How does the line “Love and blackmail are the gist of it” (l. 4) suggest that the speaker interprets this myth?
That one can distill from the myth a “gist” — that the myth tells us something about the interrelationship of love and blackmail, ideas that are still familiar to us — suggests that the speaker interprets the myth as offering very relevant insights into human existence. The primary focus of the myth for the speaker is the intense love the mother has for her daughter and the lengths to which she will go, including starving all of humankind, to get her back from the underworld. The willingness of Ceres to go to extreme lengths to pressure Zeus to order Hades to release Persephone, essentially committing blackmail, is something the speaker admires, because it is a reflection of the kind of familial love that disregards all other consequences in its fervor. For the speaker, love that is willing to go to these extreme lengths, even if they appear irrational, parallels the kind of love a parent has for her child.

2. In what ways has the speaker “enter[ed]” (l. 7) the myth in her own life?
The speaker enters the myth initially as Persephone, a child lost in the underworld. As the poem progresses, the speaker becomes Ceres, at first struggling to keep her daughter from the underworld but eventually accepting the inevitability of having to let her go. The speaker sets up the allusion to the myth as that of “a daughter lost in hell” (l. 2). Here the speaker reflects on a time when she was “a child in exile in / a city of fogs and strange consonants” (ll. 8–9), a possible reference to Boland’s childhood in England, away from her native Ireland. It is here that the speaker lives in “the crackling dusk of / the underworld, the stars blighted” (ll. 11–12), just as Persephone was banished to the underworld. In line 12, the word “Later” indicates a shift, and the speaker is no longer Persephone but Ceres, “searching for [her] daughter at bed-time” (l. 14). When she finds her daughter, who is still young enough to be “carried” (l. 17) back home, she is “ready / to make any bargain to keep her” (ll. 15–16). There is another shift in line 24, and the speaker’s daughter now sleeps on her bed amid “teen magazines” (l. 27), indicating that she is now the age when she must think about leaving her home. Winter is approaching, and her daughter has “plucked a pomegranate” (l. 33), ensuring that the “legend will be hers as well as [the speaker’s]” (l. 50). The allusion has now come full circle, and the daughter will now enter a place where her mother cannot reach her, just as the speaker had when she was young.

3. What turn does the word “But” signal (l. 19)? Even though the poem is not divided into verses, what shift does this word mark?
The word “But” in line 19 indicates the shift from the speaker’s earlier perspective as the child, Persephone, to that of the mother, Ceres. This shift is foreshadowed in line 12 when the speaker moves from her childhood to a time “Later,” when she is a parent “searching for [her] daughter” (l. 14). In line 19, the speaker openly declares that she “was Ceres then” and knew that “winter was in store for every leaf / on every tree” (ll. 20–21). Rather than the child lost in the underworld, the speaker has become the parent who is in jeopardy of losing her child to that fate.

4. What are the “beautiful rifts in time” (l. 48)?
The “beautiful rifts in time” are those seasons of loss that must accompany growth. The speaker initially contemplates shielding her daughter from a visit to “the underworld,” thinking to herself, “I could
warn her” (l. 42) of the perils of eating the pomegranate. The daughter could be convinced, the speaker argues, because the “suburb” in which they live “has cars and cable television” (l. 44). The speaker is considering how she might keep her daughter close to home in the safety and predictability of suburban life. But trying to keep her daughter away from the experience of Hades — metaphorically speaking — would also mean that she is attempting to preserve her daughter's youth, sheltering her from adulthood. When the time comes for the daughter to “hold / the papery flushed skin” (ll. 52–53) of the pomegranate, the speaker concludes that she “will say nothing” (l. 54), indicating that she will allow her daughter to know the kind of growth she can experience only through becoming an adult and separating from the mother. The “beautiful rifts in time,” then, are those seasons of growth and change that necessitate a child's separation from the safety of home and the protection of parental figures.

5. How do you interpret the description in lines 36–42, detailing the conditions under which a child can still be hungry?
The description of the underworld as a “place of death, / at the heart of legend” (ll. 37–38) paradoxically warns and entices those who would venture into its realm, representing those places that draw us away from the familiar into realms beyond our current reality. There is the knowledge that this is a place of mystery that one enters only after dying, an eternal place in which “rocks full of unshed tears” (l. 39) are eventually “ready to be diamonds” (l. 40). Yet the mystery and legend are not enough to keep hunger at bay for those who travel its depths, and the speaker is aware that her “child can be / hungry” (ll. 41–42) in this place. For the speaker, the underworld represents those distant places her daughter will travel to as she grows up, places distant not necessarily in terms of miles but in terms of their relative separation from life at the mother's home. These places of separation — necessary for the daughter's maturation into adulthood — will become part of her life, a result of her having become hungry and eaten the pomegranate, ensuring her return.

6. What does the speaker suggest about the role of a parent, particularly a mother, when she concludes, “I will say nothing” (l. 54)?
The speaker suggests that the role of a mother is to allow her daughter to experience life in the manner necessary for maturation, even though that involves making some of the same mistakes the mother has made. By saying nothing, the mother is making it possible for her daughter to metaphorically travel to the underworld, a place that is completely disconnected from the protection of her mother and home. The speaker understands that there will be “grief” (l. 49), but she also knows that to defer this grief would “diminish the gift” (l. 49) of growth. Growing up involves pain, and the speaker knows that she could warn her daughter; who could then “have come home and been safe” (l. 30). However, the speaker knows that it is in enduring that pain and moving past it that the gift of adulthood is achieved. In order for the “legend” (l. 50) to be her daughter's as well, the speaker must allow her to travel alone, without warning her of the effect of the pomegranate. Boland is suggesting that the role of the parent is one that initially protects the child from the dangers of the world but eventually lets go enough to allow the child to develop into maturity, regardless of the perils that adulthood entails.

7. Of what significance is the age of the daughter in this poem?
The significance of the teenage daughter's age is that it is the time during which she is beginning to face the prospect of adulthood, looking through “teen magazines” (l. 27) that express the kind of life she is now leading, including interests that are not shared by the mother. This teen world, like the underworld, is a place where the daughter must travel alone, absent the speaker. However, the daughter still lives at home in the care of her mother, who continues to have influence in that capacity. This time of life is complicated for both the daughter and the mother, who are trying to learn their new roles. The daughter still lives at home but is differentiating herself from her family as she prepares for adulthood. The mother knows that she still holds great influence over her teenage daughter but is aware that part of what she must now do is allow her daughter to make more choices without her guidance and perspective.

8. Note how skillfully Boland shuttles between short sentences — even fragments — and longer, more descriptive sentences. Which dominates the ending of the poem? What is the effect of this pattern?
The ending of the poem is dominated by shorter sentences and fragments, indicating the resignation of the mother to her decision to let her daughter eat the pomegranate, regardless of the consequences. Longer sentences in the poem occur when the mother is describing her protective relationship with her daughter. For example, she talks of carrying her daughter “past whitebeams / and wasps and honey-scented buddleias” (ll. 17–18) while thinking of how she could make a bargain to “keep her” (l. 16). Longer sentences also appear when the mother, imagining her daughter reaching for the pomegranate, contemplates warning her daughter away from the fruit’s appeal. By the end of the poem, the speaker has made the decision not to try to keep her daughter from eating the fruit, knowing that it is ultimately a kind of “gift” (l. 49). The short sentences reflect her resignation, as the speaker accepts the reality that her daughter will “wake up” (l. 52) and hold the pomegranate “to her lips,” and she “will say nothing” (l. 54). This matter-of-fact account of the mother's eventual decision to let her daughter eat the fruit is mirrored by the brevity of the sentences, each one stating the reality without comment.

The Bistro Styx
RITA DOVE

Exploring the Text

1. What does the title tell you right away? Is Dove mocking the myth? playing with it? trying to deny its power?

The title suggests that Dove is playfully referencing the myth, transposing it from a mysterious and ominous crossing point into Hades to a busy café in Paris. The allusion to the River Styx conjures a landscape of darkness and the bony hand of Charon reaching for his coins, but the fearsomeness of this dark image is mitigated by the bright lights and “parquet” (l. 6) floors of the bistro, where people are talking loudly and eating Chateaubriand. The choice of setting the poem in a bistro rather than in an expensive, formal restaurant suggests a playfulness that would otherwise be absent.

2. What does the speaker mean by her description of her daughter as “my blighted child, this wary aristocratic mole” (l. 14)? What specific details further on add to the speaker’s perception of her daughter?

The description of the daughter as “blighted” reflects the mother’s opinion that her daughter has been spoiled or damaged by her relationship with the man the mother sarcastically refers to as the “Great Artist” (l. 24), believing that her daughter is only a spy, or “mole,” in the aristocratic art world rather than a true member. The mother is clearly not convinced that her daughter’s relationship with a man whom she believes to be a marginally talented artist is in any way beneficial, wondering to herself whether her daughter is content to “conduct [her] life / as a cliché and . . . / an anachronism, the brooding artist’s demimonde” (ll. 17–19). Both of these descriptions convey the sheer distaste and revulsion the mother feels about her daughter’s current situation. In the mother’s eyes, her daughter is confusing her association with a failed and inept artist with the cliché of the starving artist, as yet unrecognized for his brilliance. The gallery that they have opened is, according to the mother, nothing more than a “souvenir shop” (l. 21). This estimation is unwittingly affirmed by the daughter, who tells her mother, “Tourists love us” (l. 26). Additionally, the mother is appalled by her daughter’s willingness to act as a sort of kept woman, or “demimonde” (l. 19). This description connotes a class of woman not entirely respectable, reinforcing the earlier idea that the daughter is an interloper into the aristocratic world of fine art. The mother’s aversion to her daughter’s life with the artist is reinforced later in the poem when she concludes that her daughter has been convinced to “pose nude for his appalling canvases” (l. 38). Here, again, the mother makes plain her feelings about the artist’s work, as well as her disapproval of her daughter’s involvement as a model for his “faintly futuristic landscapes” (l. 39). The mother is highly critical of her daughter’s relationship with the artist and feels as if her association with him has in many ways spoiled her character irrevocably.

3. Why do you think Dove set this poem in a restaurant, where the visiting mother meets her daughter — and pays the bill? Consider what different effect setting it in the daughter’s apartment or the mother’s hotel room might have had.
One effect of setting the poem in a restaurant is to reinforce the daughter’s naiveté and financial position relative to that of the mother, who knows that the only opportunities her daughter has to eat out are those times it is funded by someone else. The mother knows her daughter is struggling financially due in part to her continued association with a mediocre artist, and she is barely able to choke back her concern when she asks, “How’s business?” (l. 15). Her daughter’s attempt to portray the situation as positive by informing her mother that the tourists love them is quickly overshadowed by the additional information that the Parisians “are amused” (l. 27). The mother knows that the good meals are few and far between, and that she will eventually pay for the meal that her daughter cannot herself afford. The daughter is still being taken care of by others, both her mother and to a certain extent the artist, an indication that she is not yet responsible enough to care properly for herself. Furthermore, the restaurant’s function parallels the mythic Styx of the poem’s title interestingly. The restaurant is a meeting place that forms a border between the mother’s world and the daughter’s world, as the River Styx formed a boundary between earth and the underworld in Greek mythology. The mother’s call for the bill and exasperated thought, “I’ve lost her” (l. 71), evokes the paying of Charon, the boatman on the River Styx, to bring the daughter back to the underworld; this mother feels she has lost her daughter to a seedy, pseudo-artistic life, as Demeter (or Ceres) lost Persephone to Hades.

4. What is the mother’s opinion of the daughter’s boyfriend/artist? Cite specific passages to support your response.

The mother’s disdain for the daughter’s boyfriend is evident throughout the poem, although she shields her daughter from her most critical remarks, electing instead to keep them to herself. The first indication of the mother’s attitude is when she hazards “a motherly smile to keep from crying out” (l. 16) when she inquires about the artist’s business. The mother knows it is not going well, but she hides her concern beneath a strained smile. The mother sarcastically refers to the boyfriend as “the Great Artist” (l. 24) when she imagines the “miniature / gargoyle” (ll. 23–24) he had no doubt “carved at breakfast with a pocket knife” (l. 25). The capitalization creates a mocking tone as she imagines the sad figurines he creates sitting beside his “appalling canvases” (l. 38), all of which he sells not to people with artistic taste but to tourists looking for gaudy souvenirs.

5. Consider the descriptions of the food — the Chateaubriand, wine, Camembert, bread, parsley, and pear. Do you think these are simply colorful details Dove chose, or do they work together to create a particular effect?

All of the descriptions are of food that are typically French, adding to the sense of the culture surrounding the daughter. France is associated with the arts, with many masters contributing to the status of the country as a hub of artistic creativity. The food described in the poem is uniquely French: Chateaubriand, ripe Camembert, Pinot Noir, and French bread. These foods are the culinary equivalent of paintings by great French artists like Monet and grand cathedrals like Notre Dame, and they create a scene in which the daughter is surrounded by reminders of her boyfriend’s mediocrity. The effect is to emphasize the mother’s low estimation of the boyfriend’s abilities as an artist as well as her daughter’s apparent obliviousness to her boyfriend’s lack of any real talent. They can also be taken as props serving to create emotional resonance with the myth on which the poem is based. In the myth, Demeter (or Ceres) ceases to allow the earth to bear fruit while mourning the loss of her daughter, Persephone, to Hades. Here, eating luxurious foods in a meeting ground between their two worlds evokes the loss that both characters are experiencing. Like Demeter, the mother no longer gets to share the good things in life with her daughter; and like Persephone, the daughter is unable to partake of these things with any regularity either — in this case, not because of any literal exile but because of her self-imposed poverty. The meal is akin to (but obviously much shorter than) the bounteous part of the year, when Persephone would return to earth.

6. Since only two lines in the poem are italicized — “What’s this” (l. 4) and “I’ve lost her” (l. 71) — they seem to be tied together. How? Try describing the point these few words make.

These two lines are tied together in that they frame the poem, beginning with the mother’s growing awareness of changes in her daughter and concluding with her coming to terms with the fact that her
daughter's life choices have separated her from her mother and realigned her with her artist boyfriend. When the mother first sees her daughter walking through the double doors in a "silvery cape" (l. 3), she is taken aback by her daughter's appearance. The cape, which is "billowing dramatically" (l. 4) behind her, initially puzzles the mother. The cape is apparently a recent addition, and her "What's this" indicates surprise and a hint of bemusement at her daughter's new manner of dress. When the mother gets a chance to lean back and look her daughter over, she tellingly refers to her as "blighted" and as an "aristocratic mole" (l. 14), indicating an air of condescension for her daughter and her daughter's "Great Artist" (l. 24) boyfriend. This is reinforced when the mother keeps herself from asking her daughter if she is content to live her life "as a cliché" (l. 18). The mother's disapproving tone toward her daughter and her daughter's life choices is not because she does not love her daughter but because she believes that her daughter could do much better than opening a "gallery cum souvenir shop" (l. 21) for tourists with a boyfriend who paints "appalling canvases" (l. 38). At the end of the poem, the mother gathers enough courage to ask her daughter if she is happy living this life. The daughter's choice to change the subject rather than answer her mother's direct question sets up the second italicized sentence, with the mother realizing "I've lost her" (l. 71), bringing full circle the distance between mother and daughter introduced in line 4. Initially, it is the affectation of a billowy cape that signals to the mother that her daughter is changing. By the end of the poem, it is clear that much more than the daughter's clothing choices have changed, and the mother realizes that she has "lost" her daughter to a life with her artist boyfriend.

7. The poem describes how the speaker "hazarded / a motherly smile" (ll. 15–16) and “ventured” (l. 42) to elicit an invitation to the artist's studio. Why does she do these things? What do these verbs suggest about the mother's relationship with her daughter?

The hesitant nature of the mother's interactions with her daughter reflect a strained and tentative relationship in which she is coming to terms with her adult daughter's life choices and the fact that her daughter is asserting her independence. During their lunch, it is clear that the mother does not approve of her daughter's relationship with the man she sarcastically refers to as the "Great Artist" (l. 24). The mother's "hazarded" smile is an attempt to keep her from "crying out" (l. 16) her belief that her daughter is living a cliché, masking her desire to express disapproval. The mother picks up on the fact that the Parisians are "not without / a certain admiration" (ll. 27–28) for the art in the gallery. Her blunt question "Admiration for what?" (l. 34) indicates surprise or perhaps doubt that Parisians would actually find anything admirable in the gallery, further highlighting the disapproval the mother holds for the daughter's current life. When she finally suggests a visit to the studio, she does so in a tentative way, earning a "delicate rebuff" (l. 43) from the daughter, who does not want her mother's obvious disapproval to be visited upon her boyfriend. Throughout the poem, the cautious interactions indicate the mother's desire for her daughter to make different life choices with the knowledge that telling her daughter to do so would only result in acrimony, even though the daughter knows that her current choices are understandably difficult for her mother to accept.

8. How old do you imagine the daughter in this poem to be? Why is her age significant?

The daughter is most likely in her early to mid-twenties, based on the fact that she is living in Paris with her boyfriend and running a small gallery, but she has yet to settle down or to worry very much about the more practical aspects of adult life. The daughter's age is significant because she is at a point when her mother must face letting go of control over her and allow her to make her own choices, even if they do not meet the mother's approval. The poem is in part about the moment when a parent knows that choices are being made by the child that are perhaps going to make life difficult but is not in a position to do anything about it.

Focus on Comparison and Contrast

1. In both poems, the mother — who is the speaker — identifies with the mythological mother Demeter/Ceres. What common concerns about their daughters do these mothers share?

The central common concern is the idea of mothers losing their daughters in a figurative sense, as their daughters grow older and lead independent lives. In the myth, the daughter is lost to Demeter for six
months out of every year. In both poems, the mothers are also dealing with losing their daughters in a way. In Boland’s poem, the mother first reflects on the time when she played the role of Persephone, remembering being “a child in exile” (l. 8) in “the crackling dusk of / the underworld” (ll. 11–12). In this poem, the mother can closely identify with the lost daughter, and can eventually come to terms with the idea that her daughter will also be “lost” to her one day, as she grows into an adult. In Dove’s poem, the mother does not see the metaphorical trip to the underworld as a gift, but sees the daughter’s boyfriend as a kind of Hades, trying to steal her daughter away to a place from where she will never completely return. In this poem, the mother focuses on her daughter being taken away from her by the boyfriend, and wishes to control this choice rather than accept her daughter’s decision.

2. How do the two mothers’ responses to their daughters differ? What do you think these differences reflect in terms of each mother’s character?

In Boland’s poem, the mother’s reaction is bittersweet. She is upset that her daughter is growing up and will leave her, but she understands that this is part of the progression of life and remembers that she too passed through these stages. The mother initially laments the fact that she forgot about the pomegranate, asking, “How did I forget it?” (l. 29). She frets that her daughter “could have come home and been safe” (l. 30) if the mother had warned her before she “plucked a pomegranate” (l. 33). Although she hates that her daughter will have to face the trials of growing up, she understands that her daughter must eventually leave and that the “legend will be hers as well as” the mother’s (l. 50). She begins to see the daughter’s separation as a gift, albeit one that is initially difficult for the mother to endure. In Dove’s poem, the mother also experiences a moment when she wants to “[cry] out” (l. 16) in an effort to keep her daughter from living her life “as a cliche” (l. 18) with her artist boyfriend. She stops herself before the words are out, knowing how futile it would be to try to change her daughter’s mind. Both mothers wish to hold on to a time before their daughters were old enough to make decisions that would lead them away from home and into their own independent lives. In Boland’s poem, the mother is more focused on the time in which her daughter will inevitably separate from the family and move away, and she can see that separation as a kind of “gift” (l. 49), which is an inevitable part of maturation. In Dove’s poem, the daughter has already moved away, but the mother still wishes to exert the kind of influence she used to have in order to prevent her daughter from making what she believes to be decisions that will lead her in the wrong direction in life. This mother sees her daughter as someone who is “lost” (l. 71) to her, a “spookily insubstantial” (l. 50) woman whom the mother can no longer protect. The mother in Boland’s poem seems protective, but not in a way that makes her want to shield her daughter from the choices she will have to make as an adult. In Dove’s poem, the mother is very demeaning whenever she refers to her daughter’s boyfriend and seems intent on trying to control her daughter to the point where she will make choices that please the mother rather than thinking for herself.

3. What role does food and eating play in the two poems?

In both poems, the food the daughter eats separates her from her mother. In Boland’s poem, the pomegranate is directly referenced as the mythological fruit that the daughter will eat in preparation for experiencing the “legend” (l. 50) herself. In Dove’s poem, food is used to establish the French setting, immersing the daughter in a world far away from that of the mother. In The Pomegranate, the daughter has “plucked a pomegranate” (l. 33), a reference to the fruit in the myth, and the mother is left with the decision of whether to warn her of the consequences of eating it. The mother knows that the daughter will hold “the papery flushed skin” (l. 53) of the pomegranate, yet she is willing to let her daughter experience the separation it will lead to without trying to convince her to do otherwise. In The Bistro Styx, there are no references to a pomegranate; instead, all of the food mentioned — including Chateaubriand, Pinot Noir, and a particularly ripe Camembert — are all French in origin. This French feast highlights the connection the daughter has to her adopted country as well as the gallery she has opened with her boyfriend. Each dish serves as a reminder to the mother that her daughter has chosen France as her new home, regardless of the mother’s desires. Readers might also make the connection between the meal at the restaurant and the bounteous seasons that occur when Persephone returns to earth from the underworld. This return — like the meal — is temporary and is a reminder of the daughter’s departure.
4. How are these two mother-daughter relationships reflected in the tone of the poems? Consider the following lines: “If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift” (l. 49) from “Pomegranate,” and “I’ve lost her, I thought, and called for the bill” (l. 71) from “The Bistro Styx.” Both lines indicate the difference in the tone of the relationships between the mothers and daughters in the two poems, one in which the mother accepts the separation she must face between her and her daughter, and the other in which the mother agonizes over the choices her daughter makes that she cannot control. In Boland’s poem, the mother knows that if she “defer[s] the grief” of letting her daughter go into the metaphorical underworld of separation from her, she will only “diminish the gift” of letting her daughter explore life on her own terms. The tone is bittersweet, as the mother knows that independence is a gift that necessarily involves her letting go of her daughter. In Dove’s poem, the mother is still trying to find a way to keep her daughter from continuing the life she is making with her mediocre artist boyfriend. She keeps herself from saying anything, but both she and her daughter are aware of the tension in the conversation. When the mother finally asks her daughter if she is “‘happy’” (l. 67), the daughter does not answer and quickly changes the subject, suggesting that her mother “try the fruit here” (l. 70), which drives the mother to conclude, “I’ve lost her” (l. 71). At first the tone is desperate, as the mother tries to find ways to warn her daughter away from a life that she believes is shallow and undesirable. By the end of the poem, the tone is one of resignation, as the mother can do no more than call for the bill.

5. Imagine that these two mothers met over a cup of coffee. What would they say to each other? Construct a brief dialogue, or break off into pairs and role-play the conversation. This creative exercise will encourage a number of creative responses. The key will be that the dialogue reflects the difference in the attitudes of the two mothers toward their daughters’ situations, in spite of the similarity of the circumstance of reconciling their own desires with the choices their daughters will make as independent adults.

VISUAL TEXT

A Family
JACOB LAWRENCE

You and your students can view a color version of A Family by visiting bedfordstmartins.com/litandcomp.

Exploring the Text

1. Look at the Jacob Lawrence painting, A Family, for five full minutes. Notice every detail and object, and consider how each detail contributes to the whole. What is the mood of this painting? How does it make you feel?
The description of the mood of the painting will be driven both by the details in the painting and by individual students’ experiences. The wood stove, bare yet colorful walls, and relatively sparse meal all indicate that this family is not wealthy yet is not wallowing in poverty either. The father sits at the head of the table, and the children sit with their heads bent, focusing on dinner. The mother tends to a small baby, her own dinner on hold for the moment. The mood can be described as both genial and unassuming, with the image of a strong family at its center.

2. Study the iconography (the objects in the painting) to find clues to the kind of life this family leads within these four walls. What do the broom and dustpan suggest? the pans hanging neatly over the stove? the coat hanging on a peg? The simple eating utensils? the food on the serving platter?
All of the details suggest the relatively austere life the family leads, devoid of the amenities that would indicate wealth. Even though the scene does not indicate a luxurious lifestyle, it does depict a family intent on maintaining their household in a manner that respects and appreciates the humbly appointed
Part 1: Using Literature & Composition

life they are living. Each detail supports the hard work and care with which they approach their family life. The coat is hanging carefully on a peg rather than strewn on a chair back. The dustpan and broom are at the ready, and everything related to the food is simple but orderly. The curtains that symmetrically frame the window are most likely the handiwork of the mother. The dinner is composed of a single platter of food, again indicating a lack of any kind of excess. The scene reflects the hard work that is a part of everyday life for the family, as well as the central role the mother plays in maintaining the household, from caring for the children to providing meals.

3. Lawrence employed a tempera technique (pigment mixed with a binder of egg yolk and water) with a cubist-like style. Though modern, his work was grounded in realism and traditional techniques of painting the human figure. What do the stylized images of the parents and children suggest about the family Lawrence depicts here?

Each member of the family is focused on his or her own particular endeavor, almost unaware of the other family members at the table. The two children and the father are looking directly at their food, while the mother concentrates on the baby she holds lovingly in her arms. The fact that the family members are not looking at one another does not suggest isolation or that they do not have a close bond; it suggests how at ease they are in this scene, each individual comfortable in the role he or she has taken on. The father sits at the head of the table, his hunched shoulders possibly indicating the effects of years of hard labor. The son reaches for more food, feeding his perpetually hungry, growing body. The daughter demurely eats her food, while speaking with her father. The mother cradles the baby, raising this littlest one just as she did the other children. This is a family brought close by the necessities of a hardworking life, each member no doubt appreciative of the bond they share yet feeling no need to be overly animated during their meal together.

4. In a posthumous review of Lawrence’s work, Michael Kimmelman, art critic for the *New York Times*, commented on both the formal rigor and the painting’s “emotional authenticity.” How would you characterize the emotions of this family meal? What do the mother looking down at the baby, the boy reaching across the table for food, and the girl talking with the father imply about relationships in this family?

The tone of the painting is one of stoic contentment. The mother lovingly holds her baby, cradling its innocent head in her hands, knowing that a life of hard work awaits this child. The son reaches for food; his focus is on quenching the hunger that always sits at the corner of his mind. The daughter talks demurely to her father, most likely a response to a question about her day. The father presides regally over his family, knowing that each one is grateful for the warmth of their home and this meal, but also knowing that life will never be easy for any of them.

CONVERSATION
The Lure and Language of Food

The texts in the Conversation include everything from magical realism to nonfiction, which provides an interesting opportunity for students to experiment with the genres. Begin by getting students to reflect on their own traditions that involve food. Certainly the holidays will come to mind for many, but try to move them beyond the meals that mark an occasion and ask them instead to think about the everyday role that food plays in their home and family life. You might suggest they keep an informal log for a week, noting their families’ approach to eating. Once they have gathered observations and ideas about the role food plays in their families’ lives, they are ready to plan the event. Question 7 in Entering the Conversation asks students to plan the menu for a party for four of the authors in the Conversation—you might even expand this to include all seven—and here is how you might approach this exercise. Challenge students to become inventive party planners. A good party planner spends lots of time figuring out who should be seated together at each table, taking into consideration how the various personalities would interact over a five-course meal, including appetizer, soup, salad, entrée, and dessert. Students must then select a theme related to home and family that is addressed by all of the texts either directly or indirectly. Assign each student one table with eight seats—one seat for a character or person from each text, including one of the people in the van Gogh painting, and one seat for the student. The student must first plan the
meal,” which may include literal as well as symbolic food. The readings provide examples of how food is often used by writers in ways that move beyond the ingredients themselves. For example, in “Snapping Beans,” the time spent preparing the beans is more about the speaker’s connection with her grandmother and the South than about simply preparing food for cooking. Once students have decided on their five courses, they need to create conversations among the characters for each course, making sure that all characters speak at least three times over the course of the meal. The purpose of this activity is to get students to creatively reveal the personalities of the characters in the various texts, and then have those characters engage in a conversation about a theme the student feels is relevant to the readings as a whole. This is a creative form of synthesis that requires each student to articulate a central theme and then reveal how each character is positioned relative to that theme. It also challenges each student to take a personal position about the identified theme, connecting the text to the student’s personal worldview.

STUDENT WRITING
Comparison and Contrast

When students are faced with the challenge of writing a comparison and contrast essay, they are often at a loss about how to synthesize the two pieces. As a result, they often write about the poems in isolation, focusing solely on one piece in the first few paragraphs and on the second piece in the remaining paragraphs. They then sometimes try to compare the two poems in the final paragraph, but the comparison is often perfunctory or unconvincing. In order to help them avoid this mistake, have them think about the structure of their essays before they begin writing. The challenge is to have them look for interesting intersections and divergences that reveal a larger point. Here are a few ideas they can keep in mind when looking at the student example of a comparison and contrast essay:

a. Did the writer construct the discussion in a way that deals with the two pieces together rather than writing about one piece and then the other? A comparison and contrast essay should focus on the conversation between the two pieces rather than be a stand-alone analysis of each poem. Students should think about what they could not discuss were they looking at only one poem, and then focus on those issues when looking at the student sample.

b. Texts that students are asked to compare will sometimes address multiple points and ideas. Ask students to decide whether the writer selected those ideas that the poems each address and focused primarily on those.

c. Direct students to pay attention to whether the writer gave careful consideration to what’s missing from one poem when comparing it with the other. This will often be a clue about the tone of the poem as well as the goals of the speaker in each poem.

d. When you compare pieces, you are trying to gain a clearer understanding of each one rather than merely discussing how they are similar and different. Think of them almost as foils, but not necessarily as opposites. Just as foils serve to highlight the qualities of the other character, so should one poem serve to highlight the qualities of the other. Did the student sample use one poem to clarify the other or merely discuss two poems in the same essay?

When students are responding to these general questions, challenge them to find specific points within each poem that support their conclusions. Then ask them to create a short writer’s conference with the author of the essay. If they could provide four suggestions for a revision, what would they be?

THE WRITER’S CRAFT — CLOSE READING
Connotation

Connotation is a device that students recognize in their own use of language but often do not pay close attention to when it comes to the writer’s craft. A good place to begin is to have them consider the scene from the classic movie Star Wars in which Darth Vader confronts Luke and says to him in high dramatic fashion, “Luke, I am your father.” Have students imagine how different that scene would have been had Vader said, “Luke, I am your daddy.” Substituting “daddy” for “father” completely changes the dynamic of the scene, even though the denotation of each word is the same. While this example will
elicit some laughter, it is a great way into the discussion of the power that writers have to change the entire tone of a selection with only one word. Considering how one word can change a moment will help open up a discussion of the power of connotation in general.

The list of words in Exercise 1 provides an opportunity for students to create a short set of skits to illustrate the power of connotation. First have them get into small groups and decide which words are negative, which are positive, and which are neutral. Of course each word relies on context to determine its tone, which leads to the next step. Once they have made their decisions, have them create two short skits: one that employs the words from the list that they have determined to be negative, and another that uses the words they have deemed positive or neutral. These skits will be very short, but having a few of them performed will illustrate the concept of connotation.

You may also want them to take the position of a writer by providing them with a short paragraph that they can then revise by changing words that have the same denotation but carry different connotations, just as in the sample paragraphs provided. This is another activity that should not be overly formal but be lively and even humorous. The key is to encourage students to be playful with language and approach the idea of connotation from the writer's standpoint rather than the reader's angle.

**Exercise 1**

Challenge students to take each set of words and try to categorize them in some manner. They may initially choose to categorize the words as positive, negative, or neutral, but they will soon discover that they can be organized in a number of ways, depending on the context. For example, the first set of words may look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>slender</td>
<td>skinny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>svelte</td>
<td>gaunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lithe</td>
<td>slim</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, there may be some students who claim that “skinny” actually has positive connotations, depending on the individual. They may even bring up the idea that “skinny” may generally be positive for females and negative for males, but that “gaunt” is almost exclusively negative, regardless of gender. The point is to have them pay attention both to the words themselves and to the influence of context.

**Exercise 2**

A. Taken together, the underlined words and phrases in this paragraph convey a sense of careful watchfulness on the part of the parents and the resulting feeling of security in the children.

B. The words and phrases whose connotations most directly contribute to the feelings of loss and entrapment in the passage are “becoming shades,” “fade,” “wither dismally,” and “locked.”

**Exercise 3**

The example given in the exercise already conveys the ominous sense of impending total chaos within the poem. The speaker’s position as a parent who is overwhelmed to a certain extent by the experience of his daughter arriving home is emphasized by the selected words.

**Exercise 4**

Words that students might select from Oliver’s poem include “desert,” “repenting,” “despair,” “clear pebbles,” “deep trees,” “wild,” “clean blue air,” “home,” “lonely,” “imagination,” “harsh” “exciting,” “your place,” and “family.” Taken together, they emphasize the call from the speaker to the individual to see his or her place in the world.

**Exercise 5**

Students will come up with some highly entertaining paragraphs because of the topics. Consider letting those students who are willing read their paragraphs to the class.