

A night view of a town with colorful lights and a blue sky with glowing blue lights. The town is illuminated with warm orange and yellow lights, while the sky is a deep blue with numerous glowing blue lights of various sizes and shapes, some resembling stars and others like soft, out-of-focus circles. The overall atmosphere is serene and magical.

*This strange  
stillness*

SUMMER 2020  
EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

✦ ASYMPTOTE



## **EDUCATOR'S GUIDE**

### **Summer 2020 | THIS STRANGE STILLNESS**

#### **Table of Contents**

1. Introduction\_\_\_\_\_3
2. Politics in World Literature and Translation: “The Heart of the Scarecrow”  
by Hugh Carillo and “No More Cult of the Dead for Twentieth-Century Italy”  
by Christian Raimo\_\_\_\_\_4  
*For high school students*  
*For university students*
3. Storytelling about Stories: “(In)Finite Models of the Short Story” by Sanja  
Mihajlovik-Kostadinovska\_\_\_\_\_7  
*For high school students*  
*For university students*
4. Memory in Memoir: “The Von Behr Palace” by Judith Schalansky\_\_\_\_\_11  
*For high school students*  
*For university students*
5. The Pandemic, Poetry, and Collective Grief: “Three Poems on the  
Pandemic” by Yu Jian\_\_\_\_\_15  
*For high school students*
6. A Pandemic Diary: “Plague Diary” by Gonalo M. Tavares\_\_\_\_\_18  
*For middle school students*  
*For high school students*
7. Acknowledgments\_\_\_\_\_21

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Summer 2020 issue of the *Asymptote* Educator's Guide!

As the ongoing pandemic shutters schools and changes where and how we teach and learn, world literature remains a vital way to connect students to the wider world. The current educator's guide pairs poems, plays, essays, and stories from "This Strange Stillness," our Summer 2020 issue available at <http://asymptotejournal.com/jul-2020> with lesson plans designed to speak to these uncertain times. The first lesson plan, "Politics in World Literature and Translation," has students explore the intersections of art and politics in world literature, translation, and their own lives. "Stories about Storytelling" exposes students, through close-reading and an imitative writing exercise, to the art of metafiction. The third lesson, "Memory in Memoir," asks students to interrogate the tension between what is remembered and what is forgotten, and to compose their own memoirs around similar themes. "The Pandemic, Poetry, and Collective Grief" encourages students to consider poetry and poetic forms in response to the ongoing pandemic. The final lesson, "A Pandemic Diary," affords students the opportunity to explore diaries as an art form and produce their own diaries documenting the ways the pandemic has affected their lives.

We realize that the age ranges and instructional contexts for each lesson vary, and so we encourage educators to adjust these lessons to meet their needs and to record these modifications. Your classroom and teaching experience are valuable to us, and hearing about them helps us improve our formation of the next guide. Please leave feedback and suggestions here.

Finally, if you like what we do and want to get involved, we would love to hear more from you! We are currently seeking contributors willing to share thoughts and experiences about teaching world literature through the *Asymptote* blog, which can be found here: <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/>. We'd especially love to read and share anecdotes from the lessons you teach based on this guide or using other *Asymptote* content. Let your stories inspire others! *Asymptote for Educators* is interested in publishing student work as well. If your students have produced excellent responses to the assignments offered in this guide, other work to do with *Asymptote* content, or want to participate in the global conversation about translated literature as it relates to them, we are currently accepting submissions.

If you're interested in contributing, collaborating, or if you'd like to give us additional feedback, please contact us at [education@asymptotejournal.com](mailto:education@asymptotejournal.com).

# Politics in World Literature and Translation

“The Heart of the Scarecrow” by Hugo Carillo, translated by Maria Escolán

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/drama/hugo-carrillo-the-heart-of-the-scarecrow/>

“No More Cult of the Dead for Twentieth-Century Italy” by Christian Raimo, translated by Brian Robert Moore

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/fiction/christian-raimo-no-more-cult-of-the-dead-for-twentieth-century-italy/>

Hugo Carillo was a Guatemalan playwright and dramaturge who lived through and dramatized the political upheaval and civil war of his home country in the second half of the twentieth century. Facing the politics of disfunction and austerity from across the world, Christian Raimo is a contemporary Italian writer who often weighs in on political events in both his fictional and non-fictional writing.

Both authors felt the need to publicly address their worlds and the politics of their communities, but what can their works mean for us? For those outside these authors’ specific political contexts, what meaning can we draw from their works? How does an author translate particular political debates, controversies, and discussions into forms that resonate outside an insular world? What obligations does a translator have to an international audience to make such particularities known?

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Discuss and interpret the intersection of art and politics
- Examine and assess questions of world literature and translation, including potential limitations of these concepts
- Identify the role of politics to establish setting, mood, and character
- Survey the ways in which our world, environment, and contemporary society impact artistic representations
- Compare familiar media with course materials and subjects and describe some commonalities

## Assessment

Short literary analysis

Free-write and reflection

## Approximate Grade Level

Advanced high school students

University students

## Materials Needed

“No More Cult of the Dead for Twentieth-Century Italy” by Christian Raimo, translated by Brian Robert Moore

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/fiction/christian-raimo-no-more-cult-of-the-dead-for-twentieth-century-italy/>

“The Heart of the Scarecrow” by Hugo Carillo, translated by Maria Escolán

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/drama/hugo-carrillo-the-heart-of-the-scarecrow/>

## **Approximate Length**

90 minutes (three discussion sessions of roughly 30 minutes each)

## **Lesson One: Literature and Political Conflict** (30 minutes total)

### **Discussion** (25 minutes)

Either in a large discussion section or using an online platform, ask each student to choose two of the questions listed below and prepare a response to each. Have the students preview the readings to consider how these questions relate to the assigned texts as well as other works of art that they feel are important or noteworthy. These questions can be prepared in a quick-write (10 minutes), prepared beforehand, or posted as a discussion response.

#### Discussion questions

- What makes art (including literature, film, etc.) political?
- Can art be apolitical?
- Does art have a duty to address political controversies in times of conflict?
- What are some potential pitfalls of using art to address political controversies in times of conflict?
- Have you ever felt a work of art was diminished as a result of some distance you felt from its subject – for instance, an old movie addressing the politics of the day or a foreign film where you lacked some context?
- In the case of a work of art whose context is unfamiliar to you, what kind of information do you wish you would have had to better understand the work?

This discussion can be done at the end of a longer class session to prepare for Session B.

### **Assign Homework** (5 minutes)

The students will prepare for Session B by reading the two stories (alternatively, you may divide the class in two and assign one of the texts to each group) and take appropriate notes guided by what they learned in the discussion. For the instruction, prepare for session B by reviewing student submissions and by choosing responses that correspond well to these texts. If in person, ask these students some follow up questions that can help frame the two texts and lead into the discussion questions.

## **Lesson Two: Politics in Fiction** (30 minutes total)

The instructor should prepare for session B by reviewing student submissions and by choosing responses that correspond well to the assigned texts. If Session B will be an in-person class, prepare follow-up questions to help frame the two texts and lead into the discussion questions.

### **Discussion** (25 minutes)

In a discussion, try to guide the students to draw contrasts between the two texts. Ask how politics are either foregrounded (as is the case with the political repression in “The Heart of the Scarecrow”) or provided as background and context. If the class was divided into two groups, ask each group to do a little more explication to fill in the others who have not read the text.

#### Discussion questions for “The Heart of the Scarecrow”

- What is the political conflict of the selection? How can we divide the character into different political sides? What does it mean to be a bystander in such a setting?

- How does the medium of theater shape the experience of this kind of work? Why might Carillo feel the need to stage (literally) political conflict?
- Compare the theatrical experience with other kinds of art – consider where it is observed, its constraints, its uniqueness, and why it might be well suited for political art.
- What does a circus represent in terms of a society? Why does Domingo feel the need to get involved?

Discussion questions for “No More Cult of the Dead for Twentieth-Century Italy”

- How are these characters defined by the economic crises and austerity of their time?
- How are narcotics and dreams contrasted with daily life? How do they intersect?
- Do we have enough context to understand the dreams Nicola?

**Assign Homework** (5 minutes)

With these questions and the discussion in mind, ask the students to prepare a 250-word response. Each student should choose one of the two texts and explain how it represents a political milieu to its audience. In either the introduction or conclusion, draw a contrast to the other text in order to draw out the features you hope to emphasize in your submission.

**Free-write:** Students should *privately* write out four key moments of their lives where they feel they were impacted by social or political forces outside of their control. Ask the students to think about the ways that they perceive these forces – did they witness them firsthand, through the news, etc. – and the ways they were insulated from them.

**Lesson Three: Creative Journaling and Reflection** (30 minutes total)

**Reflection:** In-class or prepared after the free-write, students will be asked to write a 250-word reflection on their free-write. Advise the students not to divulge personal information and ask them to reflect on one of these four important moments in their life and to consider how media (fictional, non-fictional, in any medium) reflects this period of time. For instance, a particular film or television series might have featured an economic downturn in a way strikingly different from the student’s own experience.

If possible, have them include and annotate excerpts in their submissions. Ask them to reflect on how these events are represented in this media, and how the reflection encapsulates both the experience and the characters’ insulation from a larger social, political, or other external forces. The students should weigh in on whether a particular piece of media effectively conveys the experience – even if it’s different from their own.

Finally, ask the students to try to identify elements that may require some context or translation. If, for instance, a work reflects a particular time and place, what are the essential details that would be necessary for understanding this work? Have the students consider how much or how little is needed and how best to leave room for discovery and interpretation on the part of an audience.

# Storytelling about Stories

“(In)Finite Models of the Short Story” by Sanja Mihajlovik-Kostadinovska, translated by Igor Popovski

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/sanja-mihajlovik-kostadinovska-infinite-models-of-the-short-story/>

In this lesson, students read “(In)Finite Models of the Short Story” written by Sanja Mihajlovik-Kostadinovska and translated from Macedonian by Igor Popovski. Combining unexpected objects and tongue-in-cheek observations, these vignettes explore the potential of literature. Students will learn about characteristics of poetry, metafiction, and criticism through reading and then writing their own short stories about stories.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Define metafiction
- Identify characteristics of metafiction, criticism, and poetry in the reading
- Compose original models of short stories individually and in a group

## Assessment

Completed drafts of a short story in the style of the reading

## Approximate Grade Level

High school students

University students

## Materials Needed

“(In)Finite Models of the Short Story” by Sanja Mihajlovik-Kostadinovska, translated by Igor Popovski  
<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/sanja-mihajlovik-kostadinovska-infinite-models-of-the-short-story/>

## Approximate Length

Two 60-minute classes

## Lesson One (60 minutes)

### Warm-Up (10 minutes)

Before reading the text, ask students to brainstorm a list of literary genres, then to brainstorm a list of common objects.

Ask students to share their ideas from the brainstorming without repeating any answers. Create a master list and keep it available to students so that they can refer to it later during the group activity.

### Reading (15 minutes)

Distribute the text. For the time being, students will read “*Tiny Short Stories: Doorknob.*”

After reading, students should write notes to the following questions individually and then discuss them with a partner or small group.

- How would you categorize this piece (nonfiction, fiction, poetry)? Why?
- What are the similarities and differences between each tiny short story?
- Which of these tiny short stories do you prefer? Why? Be specific.

### **Group Work** (30 minutes)

Following the structure and style of these stories, write your own short stories with your group members. Refer to the list of literary genres and common objects from the warm-up activity for story ideas. Each group presents their work to the class.

### **Assign Homework** (5 minutes)

Students will read the remaining short stories for homework. While reading, students should highlight the most interesting phrase or sentence in each short story. Also, students should make a note of any stories they've read, watched, or listened to that are similar to the kinds of stories being described. For example, what is an example of a story that traps you or feels like quicksand?

**Note:** To adapt lesson one for remote teaching, students could complete the warm-up activity on the class discussion board. Then students could do the reading and answer the questions as preparation for a synchronous class. During the synchronous class, students could discuss their answers to the questions and then work together in break-out rooms to compose their own stories. The stories could be shared during the synchronous class and/or posted to the class discussion board for classmates to comment on.

## **Lesson Two** (60 minutes)

### **Warm-Up (10-15 minutes)**

Ask students to discuss the phrases or sentences they highlighted from the reading. Why did they choose these particular sentences? Then students should share titles of similar stories that they noted during the homework task.

### **Discussion: Translator's note** (5–10 minutes)

Draw students' attention to the fact that the text has been translated from Macedonian into English. Read the translator's note and then discuss one of the following questions:

- What do you think about the idea that there is "narrative potential in the most trivial elements of our everyday lives"?
- The translator wrote, "A story can easily turn from an easy turn of the key into a suffocating ashtray. Translation is not immune to this experience." What do you think this quotation says about the process of translation?

### **Analyze the Text** (30 minutes)

Focus on the following line from the translator's note: "Each model is a curious mixture of metafiction and criticism, without leaving the world of the poetic."

As a class, ask students to think about the following terms: metafiction, criticism, and poetry. What do they mean? What are the characteristics of each? Review, as needed. Make a list of key points. (See the notes section below for more information.)

Characteristic of poetry, metafiction, and criticism

- Poetry: comparing two dissimilar things, figurative language, images, abstract ideas, etc.



- Metafiction: addressing the reader directly or a looking at the writer or writing process
- Criticism: sharing reactions and responses to literature, evaluating literature

Explain the next activity through the example below from “Trap Short Stories: Quicksand.” Then assign groups of students to work on a specific short story. (“Four leaf clover,” “Notice,” and “Lock” could be assigned to a single group as they are shorter). Ask them to follow the example, identifying specific words or lines in the short story that are indicative of metafiction, criticism, and poetry. (These may overlap.) Each group’s ideas should then be shared with the class.

*Example: Trap Short Stories: Quicksand*

*Poetry:*

- *Compares a short story and quicksand.*
- *“quicksand” and “stories with firm grounds”*
- *“grab onto a story-branch” or wait for a “bulldozer-story” to get you out*

*Metafiction*

- *Addresses the reader*
- *Second person singular pronoun “you”*
- *“There is only one way out: to grab onto a story-branch, given that it is within your reach, as well as resilient enough for inattentive readers such as yourself.”*

*Criticism*

- *This type of story affects readers strongly: they sink into it easily and cannot escape*
- *“... no one has ever returned to tell what it is like beyond these stories—this gives them a transcendental dimension of sorts ...”*

**Whole-Class Discussion** (10–15 minutes)

- Does the text address the reading or the writing process or both? What effect does this have?
- Which short story was your favorite? Why?
- Why do you think the title is “(In)Finite Models of the Short Story”?

**Assign Homework** (5 minutes)

Write a model of a short story individually to be shared in the next lesson. It should be written in the style of the pieces from lesson two and about 125-200 words in length. Aim to include a combination of techniques from poetry (using comparisons, figurative language, etc.), metafiction (referencing the reading or writing process), and criticism (evaluating the literary genre).

**Note:** To adapt lesson two for remote teaching, any of the activities could be conducted asynchronously via the class discussion board or synchronously with video-conferencing software. If desired, the teacher may want pick and choose from these activities or may decide to present the definitions and characteristics of poetry, metafiction, and criticism directly to the students.

**Additional Information**

Metafiction: “Often, it [metafiction] includes a story within a story, but can also feature direct commentary on the art of creating fiction. In either case, metafiction reminds readers that they are reading a book or watching a play or movie as opposed to letting them get lost in the story. Popular in literature, drama and even modern film, metafiction closely examines the processes and products of story creation as part of its plot.”

<https://education.seattlepi.com/examples-metafiction-4949.html>

Criticism: “Literary criticism refers to a genre of writing whereby an author critiques a literary text, either a work of fiction, a play or poetry.”

“Reading and discussing literature can enhance our ability to write. It can sharpen our critical faculties, enabling us to assess works and better understand why literature can have such a powerful effect on our lives”

<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-britlit1/chapter/literary-criticism/>

Poetry: “Poetry is a type of literature based on the interplay of words and rhythm. ... In poetry, words are strung together to form sounds, images, and ideas that might be too complex or abstract to describe directly.”

<https://literaryterms.net/poetry/>

# Memory in Memoir

“The Von Behr Palace” by Judith Schalansky, translated by Jackie Smith

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/judith-schalansky-an-inventory-of-losses/>

Judith Schalansky explores her earliest memories, the unreliability of memory, the way places and their histories shape us, and the way we shape them through memory.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Identify the different uses of verb tense in memoir
- Explore some of the limitations of memory and memoir
- Use sensory details to develop setting in their memoir
- Utilize the past and present tense to craft a memoir reflecting on their earliest childhood memory, interrogating a memory and the process of remembering

## Assessment

Comprehension questions

Peer discussion board posts

Group workshop participation/responses

Completed writing exercises and memoir

## Approximate Grade Level

High school students

University students

## Materials Needed

“The Von Behr Palace” by Judith Schalansky, translated by Jackie Smith.

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/judith-schalansky-an-inventory-of-losses/>

“Of Memoir and Memory: Making a Case for a New Type of Literary Criticism” by Robert Atwan, *Creative Nonfiction*, issue 55. <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/memoir-and-memory>

## Suggested Materials

Learning Management System software such as Canvas or Blackboard with a discussion board feature; or a blog created for the class using free sites such as WordPress, Wix etc.

## Approximate Length

Lesson 1 Reading Comprehension (5–8 hours)

Lesson 2 Writing a Memoir (12–18 hours)

## Lesson One (approx. 5–8 hours)

Reading Comprehension

## Freewriting

Students free write about their earliest memories. Have the students choose 23 memories to explore, centered on a specific place. Where does the memory take place? Why do they think these are their earliest memories?

### Reading and Discussion

Students read Atwan’s “Of Memoir and Memory: Making a Case for a New Type of Literary Criticism” and post on the discussion board responses to one of the following questions and responses to at least two of their peers’ posts.

- Why does Atwan think people are dismissive of memoirs?
- Why does Atwan quote Wordsworth’s conception of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility”?
- How does Atwan interpret Freud’s “screen memories”?
- What does the Piaget example serve to illustrate?
- Why does Atwan say that “memory, the driving force of memoir, may be inherently self-centered”?
- What is Atwan’s prescription to become better readers and writers of memoir? Do you agree with him? Why or why not? Can you think of other, more recent texts, to explore?

Students can be encouraged to reflect on their freewriting exercise and how it relates to Atwan’s essay on memoir.

### Reading and Discussion

Students read “The Von Behr Palace” and post responses to the following questions on the discussion board, or, if in person, discuss them in class.

- What do the first and last sentences of the first paragraph in Schalansky’s memoir say about her view on memory?
- What verb tense is the piece written in? Why do you think she shifts tenses? How does it affect the voice and immediacy of the writing?
- What references are there in the memoir to death and the passing of time? Which stands out to you and why? How does the young narrator react to her first brushes with death?
- What is the significance of the nettles?
- How does Schalansky call into question her own memories?
- What moments create tension and suspense in the memoir?
- What is the significance of the saltpetre?
- How does Schalansky incorporate setting to reflect and enhance the themes?
- What processes turn the mansion into a palace? How does this relate to memory?

### Lesson Two (approx. 10–15 hours)

#### Writing Task

Students write their own memoirs about their earliest memories. To become more familiar with the differences in verb tense, students should use Schalansky’s memoir as a model, using the present tense for scenes in the past, and the past tense to develop a more mature, reflective voice, of them now as compared to who they were in the memory. They should write approximately 1,000–2,000 words.

The multi-phase writing prompt (adapted from “The Earliest Memory” by Brenda Miller, from *Now Write! Nonfiction*, edited by Sherry Ellis) is available below:

## Drafting Process

1. Using first-person and the present tense, compose a scene using one of your earliest memories. Use sensory details to describe what you felt. Develop the setting with concrete, specific details so your reader can visualize the landscape.
2. Looking back at what you've written, focus on the details that stand out. What seems significant? Why? Think back to "The Von Behr Palace." What is your equivalent to her hedgehog moment? Write out possible explanations as to what this memory means to you. Why do you remember it? Is it a "screen memory?"
3. List other memories that might hit on the same emotional theme just as Schalansky describes multiple times when she became aware of death.
4. This is the material for your memoir to explore a recurring theme/idea/emotion important in your life.

## Memoir Prompt

Variation 1: Drawing on the notes from the drafting process outlined above, write about your earliest memory and its "truthfulness." How detailed is your memory? Do you think your recollection of it is reliable? Why or why not?

Variation 2: Write about your earliest memory and then, like Schalansky does when talking with her mother, consult family members or friends who can corroborate your memory. Where do their versions diverge from yours? How has your remembering the event over time in turn shaped, refined, or warped the original memory? What does this say about the event, about you, and about memory?

## Group Workshop (20–45 minutes per memoir)

The instructor should select as many completed first drafts for group workshop as time allows. Students should respond to the memoir, each other, and the instructor's comments.

Possible questions for workshop discussion include the following:

### *Narrator's Voice*

- Does the writer use different verb tenses to describe past scenes and current reflections?
- How does the narrator as a child see the world? Is the vocabulary, syntax, or diction different? How so?

### *Setting*

- Where does the story take place? Are there specific sensory details to help you "see" the setting?
- Does the narrator reveal any history about the setting?

### *Meaning*

- In her book *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* Vivian Gornick claimed that "every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say." Thinking of Gornick, what is the situation in "The Von Behr Palace"? What do you think the underlying story is? What has Schalansky come to say?

**(Optional) Group Workshop Two** (20–45 minutes per memoir)

Students should incorporate peer and instructor comments on their first drafts to revise and complete a second draft of their memoir, using some of the storytelling devices Schalansky employs, such as repetition, symbolism, proper nouns, white space, etc. Time permitting, the instructor can select completed second drafts for another round of group workshop. Students should respond with a focus on how the revisions have improved or changed the memoir.

**Additional Resources**

- *Conducting a Writing Workshop*, Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric.  
<https://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/teaching/first-year-writing-pedagogies-methods-design/conducting-writing-workshops>
  - *How to Be a Good Writing Workshop Participant*, *The Writer*, by Meredith A. Quinn.  
<https://www.writermag.com/improve-your-writing/writing-education/writing-workshop-participant/>
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# The Pandemic, Poetry, and Collective Grief

## "Three Poems on the Pandemic" by Yu Jian, translated by Shuyu Guo

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/yu-jian-three-poems-on-the-pandemic/>

The world has grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic for nearly a year. Yu Jian's dark poetry situates the reader in collective grief and yearns for a different time. As students attempt to make sense of their own pandemic experience, it can be helpful to examine other perspectives. These lessons ask students to consider poetic devices and forms and how they communicate Yu Jian's ideas surrounding death.

### Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Identify Yu Jian's use of themes
- Explore poetic symbols
- Examine Yu Jian's use of form

### Assessment

Participation in group discussion

Comprehension questions

Annotations

Written Reflection

### Approximate Grade Level

High school students

### Materials Needed

"Three Poems on the Pandemic" by Yu Jian, translated by Shuyu Guo

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/yu-jian-three-poems-on-the-pandemic/>

Board of your choice and associated writing tool (or the discussion board feature of a learning management system)

### Approximate Length

Three shorter class periods (30–50 minutes each for a total of 90–150 minutes)

### Lesson One (30–50 minutes)

#### Pre-Class Activity

Ask students to read through all three poems several times and annotate. Students should keep the following questions in mind as they read:

- What kind of imagery does Yu Jian employ? Underline imagery.
- How does Yu Jian use space? Highlight unique use of space or lack of space.
- How does the lack of punctuation affect each poem? Circle punctuation or lack of punctuation.
- What words stand out to you in each poem? Draw a box around words that stand out

**In-Class Activity** (25–45 minutes)

Read “I Have Lost that Sadness” aloud, more than once if time allows. Ask students to share their annotations with a partner. Return to the full class and ask students to share their observations. If your class is engaging in distance learning, ask students to share their observations with the class either through a discussion board or video conferencing software.

Next, ask students to call out keywords from the poem. Make a mind map on the board that clusters similar words together. This activity can be modified for a learning management system by utilizing the discussion board feature.

Then, ask students the following questions:

- What patterns do you notice?
- Why spring? Why white? etc.
- How are these themes related to the title of the poem?
- What do these themes say about the pandemic?

**Assign Homework** (5 minutes)

Ask students to pick a color that describes their pandemic experience and write a short poem about it. The poem can be in the format of the student’s choosing. If students require guidance, they can keep the following questions in mind while composing their poem:

- Who were you with? And where?
- What kind of restrictions were imposed? How did this affect your daily life?
- Were you required to quarantine? If so, how did you pass the time?
- Do you know anyone who contracted the virus? What was that experience like?

**Lesson Two** (30–50 minutes)**In-Class Activity** (25–45 minutes)

If time permits, have students share their homework poems.

Ask students if their thoughts have changed on Yu Jian’s poems from when they first read them to now, keeping the previous class’ discussion in mind.

Read “I Saw Darkness I Never Saw a Crow” aloud, more than once if time allows. Allow students to make observations about the poem from their own annotations. What were their first impressions?

Next, watch the following three-minute video about symbolism, which covers the basics of the device:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jkl6cn8wwgM>

Ask students the following questions:

- What symbols did you notice in this poem?
- What do you think that these symbols represent?
- How does Yu Jian use these symbols to discuss living through the pandemic?

If the questions do not naturally guide the class in this direction, discuss the crow. What do they think that the crow means? If your students are having trouble with this question, point them towards the last two lines, which say “I never saw a crow — / the perfection of darkness.”



**Assign Homework** (5 minutes)

Ask students to read over the last poem several times and make fresh annotations, keeping in mind what they have learned about Yu Jian’s poetry in the previous two class periods.

**Lesson Three** (30–50 minutes)**In-Class Activity** (25–45 minutes)

Once again, ask students if their thoughts have changed on the poems from when they first read them to now, keeping the previous class’ discussions in mind. Discuss their new annotations.

Read “Time Flies” aloud, more than once if time allows.

Write a passage from the poem (or the whole poem if you can) on your board of choice. Ask students what they notice about the form of this poem, and how that affects how the poem is read. Erase and move words closer together to show students how it changes the way the words flow (i.e. “calm and tranquil” becomes “calm and tranquil”). This can be adapted for a learning management system by utilizing the discussion board feature.

Ask students the following questions:

- What do you think the spaces contribute to the poem?
- Conversely, what do the uninterrupted lines contribute to the poem?
- How does the lack of punctuation affect the way that you read the poem?
- Recall the poem’s title. How do these aspects of the poem’s form make “time fly”?

**Assign Homework** (5 minutes)

Ask students to write a reflection on Yu Jian’s three poems, keeping in mind their original annotations, how discussions may have changed their perspective, and answering the following questions:

- What have you learned about poetic devices?
- What have you learned about Yu Jian’s particular style?
- What is Yu Jian trying to convey about living through the COVID-19 pandemic in his work?

# A Pandemic Diary

“Plague Diary” by Gonçalo M. Tavares, translated by Daniel Hahn

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/goncalo-m-tavares-plague-diary/>

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Practice close reading
- Demonstrate an understanding of diary entries
- Demonstrate familiarity with the author’s craft
- Become comfortable with group analysis and critique
- Demonstrate knowledge of previously studied texts
- Produce their own diary entries to reflect on the effects of a pandemic on one’s life
- Develop a writing routine

## Approximate Grade Level

Middle school students

High school students

## Assessment

Participation in group discussion

Comprehension questions

Forum post

Writing assignment

## Materials needed

“Plague Diary” by Gonçalo M. Tavares, translated by Daniel Hahn

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/goncalo-m-tavares-plague-diary/>

Learning management system software with a discussion board feature

## Supplemental Materials

*The Diaries of Franz Kafka: 1910-1913*

<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.499492> (you will need to open a free account)

*The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank

<http://cfile237.uf.daum.net/attach/267F763654DC51C718E5C1>

*The Diary of Anaïs Nin*

<https://archive.org/details/diaryofanaïsnin00nina/page/n5/mode/2up>

## Approximate Length

Lesson One (90 minutes)

Lesson Two (90-120 minutes)

## Lesson One (90 minutes)

### Pre-Class Activity

Activation of prior knowledge and pre-reading activities: Share the translator's note with the students and ask them to read it.

Afterward, ask them to share or write down (depending on your learning setting) in a knowledge dump what they expect to read about in these pieces. The knowledge dump aims to get ideas and mental clutter on a document visible to everyone to promote discussion and conversation.

In a forum post, ask them to answer the following questions:

- How can a diary entry connect you to the present?
- Do you think one tends to write more about the past, the present, or the future?
- Does one write about ordinary daily occurrences or about subjects that are bigger than one's daily life?
- Have you ever read a book that had the structure of a diary? If yes, which one?

### In Class Activity (85 minutes)

Select two entries that are closer and one that is more distant in terms of dates to have a broader approach to the features of these diary entries. Depending of the learning setting, you could either give three entries to each group or assign different entries to different students on your online platform so they are exposed to a more extensive selection of the author's work.

Assign the following close reading tasks (a discussion for synchronous learning or forum posts for asynchronous learning):

First read: Ask the students to integrate their prior knowledge with the text as they read. Focus on the key ideas and details in the text, making sure that students know the main idea, story elements, or key details that the author includes. To encourage a discussion, you could start with the following questions:

- When is the text set?
- Where is the text set?
- Is the first-person or the third-person narration being used for this text?
- Can you identify the genre of these pieces?
- Which topics are mentioned?

Second read: After rereading the text, students discuss or write a post about the language features and organizational patterns of the diary entries. This may include the following:

- Informal language: « Freud's dog »
- Is the vocabulary adapted to the topics?
- Structure of the entries: paragraphs? sections?
- Short sentences: « In the house, window and door. »
- Informal punctuation: dashes, colons, comas or periods missing
- Expressive use of punctuation: !!, ??, ?!

- Questions (addressed to the diary): “Are you one, no one or one hundred thousand?”
- Use of past tense to retell events from the day or the week: “In May 2020, human beings started to walk again.”

**Assign Homework** (5 minutes)

Third read: Let the students know that as a homework assignment, they will have to write a short essay describing the format of these diary entries. For this third read, the students could record in their notes or highlight the part of texts that they think are defining. To keep track of their progress they will email their teacher a list of defining traits prior to writing this essay.

**Lesson Two** (90–120 minutes)

**In Class Activity** (85–115 minutes)

Reconvene as a group and discuss the results of the essays. Gather their definitions of this format on a document accessible to everyone.

Expose them to other diaries, such as the free versions offered in the supplemental materials section at the beginning of the lesson plan, and have them engage in another close reading activity following the prompt provided in the first lesson.

During the third read, ask them to start looking for striking differences between Tavares’ entries and the second diary that was chosen. You can reuse the list of language features and organizational patterns mentioned in the second read of lesson one. If conducting a synchronous learning lesson, write down these differences. If teaching an asynchronous class, use a forum and then gather their findings in one single document.

Assign the following creative writing assignment: The students will write two diary entries using the voice of a previously studied character from a piece covered in class during the school year. To help them, you can remind them that, for example, Tavares’ diary entries display a lot of what’s happening in the rest of the world or in the news or that Anaïs Nin sees her diary as her closest friend and often addresses it. They will write about the experiences of these characters in the time of this pandemic:

- What has changed in their daily life?
- Are there details of their lives they pay more attention to?
- What do they miss? What do they want?
- What crosses their minds when they wake up in the morning?

**Assign Homework** (5 minutes)

All students will take part in a diary challenge. For seven days they will write one diary entry per day as themselves or taking on another identity if they prefer—an influential personality in their lives, for example. These diary entries will be set in the time when the class is taught. They can decide to share their combined entries with the class if they wish to, but they will at least email their daily diary entry to their teacher at the end of every day.

## **FEEDBACK**

Thanks for taking the time to read our Summer 2020 Educator's Guide. We hope you found it useful and engaging.

Have questions, comments, critiques, or testimonials?

Please leave your feedback at <http://tinyurl.com/asymptoteforedu>. We look forward to hearing from you!

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