



Beings in Time

Fall 2021 educator's guide



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

Fall 2021 | BEINGS IN TIME

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Fall 2021 issue of the *Asymptote* Educator's Guide!

Our latest guide has five lesson plans to help you bring exciting, translated literature into your classroom. Each lesson is paired with poems, essays, and stories from "Beings in Time," our Fall 2021 issue, which is available here: <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/oct-2021>

Our first lesson, "Oral Storytelling: Sharing Culture, History, and Knowledge," uses a combination of Bedouin oral poetry and the reflections of art historian and poet Caitlin Woolsey to encourage thoughtful inquiry and expose students to oral storytelling traditions. Our second lesson, "Experimental Poetry and Translation" asks students to consider the boundaries of experimental poetry by examining the work of poet Lee Jenny and ultimately composing their own experimental poems. "Essay as Exploration," our third lesson, has students reflect on the idea of forgiveness across literature via Sara Stridsberg's essay "Forgiveness." The fourth lesson, "If You Could Have a Dinner Party with a Famous Text," gives students the opportunity to flex their comparative literature muscles by examining "After Dinner" by Ham Chöngim and "The Dead" by James Joyce. "The 'New' Albania," our final lesson, introduces students to Albanian history via "Until the Bird Returns," creative nonfiction by Małgorzata Rejmer. The lesson asks students to make important and timely connections to current debates about democracy and security in Europe and across the globe.

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 experiences are valuable to us, and hearing about them helps us improve our formation for the next guide. Please leave feedback and suggestions here: <http://tinyurl.com/asymptoteforedu>.

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.

Oral Storytelling: Sharing Culture, History, and Knowledge

“If my heart were a stone, it would drop down to meet you”: Bedouin Oral Poetry and Translation as Reciprocity” by Caitlin Woolsey

<https://tinyurl.com/woolsey-asymptote-2021>

Caitlin Woolsey’s piece combines excerpts from Bedouin oral literature with her experiences learning about oral storytelling traditions in the Wadi Rum region of Jordan. She writes, “... *I had set myself the daunting task of seeing what I could gather of Jordanian Bedouin oral traditions, principally through simply being present and asking questions.*” Inspired by this idea, the activities in this inquiry-based lesson plan are designed to incite learners’ curiosity through the process of asking questions and making observations about oral literature.

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify the characteristics of Bedouin oral literature
- Formulate effective questions about oral literature
- Discuss ideas related to the reading
- Practice storytelling techniques and share an original story with classmates

Assessment

Written reflection

Participation in small group discussions

Approximate Grade Level

High school students

University students

Materials Needed

“If my heart were a stone, it would drop down to meet you”:

Bedouin Oral Poetry and Translation as Reciprocity” by Caitlin Woolsey
<https://tinyurl.com/woolsey-asymptote-2021>

Approximate Length

Lesson One (60 minutes)

Lesson Two (60 minutes)

Lesson One

Warm-up (15 minutes)

What do you know about oral literature? What kind of information is transmitted through oral literature? Can you give any examples? How is it similar or different to written literature?

(For a concise overview, see the oral literature entry in Encyclopedia Britannica

<https://www.britannica.com/art/oral-literature>)

Read the first two paragraphs of the piece for background information.

Reading (20-30 minutes)

Students read only the examples of oral literature from the piece (without reading the whole essay or the explanations provided in italics). They should read through the lens of a researcher whose aim is to discover the relationship between this example from oral literature and Bedouin culture; and the characteristics of Bedouin oral literature (e.g., themes, ideas, imagery, poetic language).

1. If you were the researcher, what questions would you ask to discover more about the relationship between the literature and Bedouin culture?
2. If you were the researcher, what tentative observations or guesses would you make about the characteristics of Bedouin oral literature?

If preferred, students can be divided into groups and assigned a specific example of oral literature from the piece to focus on. Setting a time limit for writing questions may be useful. The teacher may lead the class through the first text to model the activity.

Example

Oh my family, I miss you

If my heart were a stone it would drop down to meet you

Oh you tree on top of the mountain

The gazelle is sleeping in the hot hours of the day, the sound of the rain knocks against the tree

Oh woods on the top of the mountain

She is very beautiful, all the men track her steps like wolves following the goats

3. If you were the researcher, what questions would you ask to discover more about the relationship between the literature and Bedouin culture? (*Note: Several sample questions are included below. Answering the questions is not necessary; students should focus on writing interesting questions.*)

Sample questions:

- *What type of oral literature is this (e.g., a song, poem, or story)? When would this story be told?*
- *What is the role of these animals (gazelle, wolves, and goats) in Bedouin culture? How would the poem be different if the animals were changed?*
- *What is the traditional Bedouin family structure? Is it common to be separated from the family, like the speaker in this poem?*

4. If you were the researcher, what tentative observations or guesses would you make about the characteristics of Bedouin oral literature?

Sample answers:

- *Images from nature are often used: animals (gazelle, wolves, goats), landscape (mountain, tree, woods), and weather (hot hours of the day, rain).*

- *Importance of family and togetherness: “Oh my family, I miss you”*
- *Poetic language (metaphor and simile): “If my heart were a stone” and “all the men track her steps like wolves following the goats”.*

Discussion (10-20 minutes)

Debrief the activity by pairing or re-grouping students and having them share their questions and observations about the oral literature that they read. Share a collection of the most interesting or meaningful questions on the board.

Assign homework (5 minutes)

Distribute the text and have students read the piece in its entirety. While students are reading, they should highlight or annotate information they find about the relationship between this example from oral literature and Bedouin culture; and the characteristics of Bedouin oral literature (e.g., themes, ideas, imagery, poetic language).

After reading and making notes on the text, students should write a written response (approximately 250 words) on the following prompts:

- How were the initial questions or observations that you wrote in class similar or different to those covered in the article? What would you still like to know?
- Through the class activity and the reading, what did you learn about the relationship between oral literature and Bedouin culture? What did you discover about the characteristics of Bedouin literature?

Lesson Two

Review the text

Referencing the piece and their written reflections, ask students to list some of the characteristics of Bedouin oral literature. Then ask for specific examples from the examples of oral literature in the piece. Keep a record of student answers on the board or in a shared document.

Examples of characteristics:

- emphasis on the ideas of community, family, love, and honor
- images from nature and daily life
- use of vague description or characters
- poetic language (e.g., symbols, metaphors, similes, contrasts)
- portrayal of relationships or roles within the family or community
- versatility of the stories

After focusing on the characteristics and corresponding examples, students discuss the following questions:

1. According to the piece, how has Bedouin culture changed? Do you think oral literature will thrive or fade as Bedouin communities continue to change? Which characteristics of oral literature make it long-lasting? Which make it vulnerable?
2. Are there any similarities or differences between Bedouin oral traditions and other oral traditions that you might be familiar with? Are these characteristics also found in oral traditions in other cultures?

Review homework

Students meet with a partner or small group to discuss the written reflections they completed for homework. Ask a few students to share their ideas with the full class.

Then after sharing their written reflections, students discuss the following questions:

1. How could a researcher's questions, observations, background, or even relationships with the participants influence the information collected? How could the beliefs of the participants, in this case Bedouin storytellers, also influence the information collected?
2. Do you think oral literature should be written down and translated? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think the author titled the piece "Bedouin Poetry and Translation as Reciprocity?" What do you think "reciprocity" refers to in this context?

Extension: Oral Storytelling Project

Think of an important experience or a lesson you have learned in your life. How could you teach or share it with others through storytelling? How does this story relate to your culture and values? Make an outline of your story and incorporate several of the characteristics of oral literature you about learned in class. If possible, students could watch videos of oral storytellers online to get additional ideas of storytelling techniques.

Practice telling your story to a classmate or small group. How do the listeners feel when they are listening to your story? Do they have any questions about your story or how it relates to your culture? How do your voice, gestures, eye contact, and word choice affect the listeners? How might you change the story when you tell it again? Revise your story outline, and then repeat this process with another partner or small group.

After you have revised your story outline and practiced telling your story, make an audio or video recording of your story to share, or present your story in front of your classmates during the next class.

Additional Teacher Resources

Inquiry-based learning

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/are-questions-answer>

An additional lesson plan on oral literature from Asymptote:

This lesson plan is based on Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's short story, *A Dhow Crosses the Sea*, translated from Italian by Hope Campbell Gustafson. The author uses elements of Somali oral tradition in her writing, and in this lesson, students learn about oral storytelling in Somalia and explore the relationship between identity and stories.

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2017/05/13/teach-this-banned-countries-special-feature-2/>

Experimental Poetry and Translation

“As We Are Others to Ourselves” by Lee Jenny, translated Jaewon Che

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/lee-jenny-as-we-are-others-to-ourselves/>

Lee Jenny’s experimental poetry pushes the boundaries of form, giving new meaning to imagery, sound and objects. In this lesson, students explore experimental poetry, poetic devices, and compose their own experimental poems.

Learning Objectives

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

- Practice close reading
- Analyze the text
- Discuss ideas related to the reading: experimental poetry, translation, imagery, repetition, rhythm
- Write their own experimental poetry

Assessment

Participation in group discussions

Research on experimental poetry

Creative Writing assignment

Approximate Grade Level

High School Students

Materials Needed

From “As we are others to ourselves” by Jenny Lee, translated by Jaewon Che

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/lee-jenny-as-we-are-others-to-ourselves/>

Supplementary Materials

Definition of poetic terms from poets.org

<https://poets.org/glossary>

Definition of Syntax

<https://poetryarchive.org/glossary/syntax/>

Examples of writers & poems that can be used for Lesson Two, Part Two

<https://lithub.com/voyage-of-the-sable-venus/> (scroll down a little to find the poem. This link also includes a note by the poet on the decisions she made when she wrote the poem and can be something interesting for students to look at for Lesson Three)

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/sebastian-jimenez-galindo-experimental-gardening-manual/>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45502/the-red-wheelbarrow>

https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/BeyondWords_2019.pdf

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/bhanu-kapil>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/theresa-hak-kyung-cha>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gertrude-stein>

<https://poets.org/poet/claudia-rankine>
<https://thevolta.org/ewc28-ssharif-p1.html>
<https://aprweb.org/poems/somewhere-in-los-angeles-this-poem-is-needed>

Approximate Length

Lesson One (80 minutes)

Lesson Two (70 minutes)

Lesson Three (take-home assignment, 40 – 120 minutes)

Lesson One (80 minutes)

- Ask the students to read the first three poems two or three times, and then discuss the poems in general in small groups (20 minutes)
 - What were their first impressions of the poem?
 - How is meaning constructed in the poem?
 - What audience do students think the poet had in mind when she wrote this?
 - Have students come across this kind of poem before?
- Ask the students to present their ideas to the class: what elements did they notice? What stood out to them? (15 minutes)
 - Some examples could include repetition, syntax choice, punctuation, onomatopoeia, imagery (if students don't know these words, the poets.org glossary has definitions)
- Discuss what constitutes experimental poetry and explain that experimental poems can differ a lot from each other (10 minutes)

Whole-Class Discussion (25 – 35 minutes)

- What is the effect of repetition?
<https://poets.org/glossary/repetition>
e.g.: - *In the memory, curls of breath. In the curls, tears. In the tears, your words. In your words, my words. In my words, stains.*
Is grass. Is water. Is fire. Is a laugh. Is a cry. Is music. Is silence. Is a shadow. Is a cat. Is a dog. Is a bird. Is I. Is you.
- Did the students notice a rhythm and/or rhyme in the poem?
“Rhyme: the correspondence of sounds in words or lines of verse.
Rhyme Scheme: the pattern of rhymes falling at the ends of a poem’s lines.”
(Definitions taken from poets.org)
Rhythm is a pattern created through stresses, pauses etc.
Ask students to read the first two poems out loud once to get a sense of the rhythm.
- Is the rhythm of the poem connected to its imagery?
- What is the purpose of the “I” in the poems?
- How is the repetition and sequence of sentences different from poem 1 to poem 2 to poem 3?
- What effect does the use of punctuation (e.g.: full stops) have in the poems?

Lesson Two (70 minutes)

Part One (25 – 35 minutes)

- Ask students to read the translator's note (and listen to the audio of the poem in Korean if it is available)
- Did the translator's note add meaning to the poems they read?

e.g.: - poetry collection offers a glimpse into how Lee translates the barely visible, audible, tangible, or noticeable into monosyllabic words—concrete nouns and simple verbs—strung together with jarring lucidity only to push us right back out of this clarity and leave us sorely aware of the ever-changing, forever-swinging push and pull of sound and meaning

- Did students gain a new or deeper insight of the poems after reading the translator's note?
- How might the rhythm of the poem have changed/been affected in the process of translation?
- How might the translation process affect the experimental nature of the poems?

Part Two (30 - 40 minutes) If the class is online, students can use their laptops while in class. If not, they can do research at home.

- Ask students to read the poet's bio.
- How is this poem different to other poems the students have read in the past? What did they notice about the form?
- Ask the students if they know of any other experimental poets? Ask students to do some research on experimental poets and pick one poet whose style they like. Let students choose their favorite poems and ask them to discuss why they chose the poems they did. If they don't know of any poets, teachers can use the list of poet names/poems mentioned in the supplementary material.

Lesson Three (40-120 minutes)

- Ask students to write an experimental poem and bring the poem to class.
- Ask students to share their poems in small groups

Prompts for writing an experimental poem

- Ask students to pick an experimental poem of their choice and write a poem mimicking the style of the poem they chose
- Ask students to pick any poem of their choice and practice erasure – take a copy of an existing poem and cross out words and phrases to make a new poem
- Write a poem in the shape of an object
- Select some pictures and use it as a part of the poem
- Cut a poem into strips and rearrange/add to it

Essay as Exploration

“Forgiveness” by Sara Stridsberg, translated by Deborah Bragan-Turner

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/forgiveness-sara-stridsberg/>

In “Forgiveness” Sara Stridsberg explores the concept of forgiveness by looking at different approaches to forgiveness across philosophy, art, politics, history, and literature. After reading and reflecting on “Forgiveness,” students will take Stridsberg as a model and compose their own essays exploring a core emotion or idea relevant to their own lives.

Learning Objectives

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

- Describe the role of literature in exploring forgiveness
- Examine the role of forgiveness across media and subjects
- Research and compose their own essays around a core concept central to their lives
- Integrate quotes from complex texts into their own essays
- Analyze and critique their peers’ essays

Assessment

Comprehension questions

Class discussion

Essays

Approximate Grade Level

High school students

University students

Materials Needed

“Forgiveness” by Sara Stridsberg, translated by Deborah Bragan-Turner

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/forgiveness-sara-stridsberg/>

Approximate Length

Lesson One (50 minutes)

Lesson Two (50 minutes)

Lesson One (50 minutes):

Reading Comprehension

Before class, have students read “Forgiveness” on their own and prepare short answers/notes to the following questions about the piece more broadly.

- Why do you think Stridsberg begins her essay with an anecdote about her father?
- How is forgiveness paradoxical? What, according to Derrida, is the nature of forgiveness?
- How, according to Stridsberg, is the law “scientific and not moral”?
- Why does Stridsberg say true forgiveness is unconditional? Do you agree?
- What is Derrida’s definition of the unforgivable?

- How are Jean Améry and Nietzsche contrasted? Améry and Desmond Tutu? Why?
- According to Stridsberg, what is literature about? When is it at its greatest?
- Why does Stridsberg connect with the art of Anna Schuleit?
- What does Stridsberg mean by “the vulnerable get the blame for their vulnerability”?
- What will be our last unforgivable act?
- What is true forgiveness and where is it possible?
- Which example do you find most compelling? Améry? Florin? Rankine? Why?
- Can you think of other examples from literature or art more broadly that explore forgiveness?
- Do you agree with Stridsberg’s take on forgiveness? How do you define it? Has your definition changed since reading “Forgiveness”?

Small Group Work (20 minutes)

Have students discuss their answers and more general reactions to “Forgiveness” in small groups.

Class Discussion (20 minutes)

Reconvene as a class and have each group report on their discussions.

Assign Homework (10 minutes)

Taking Stridsberg as an example, students will compose an essay exploring an emotion or concept central to their lives. They should incorporate examples from art, philosophy, religion, politics, science, literature, and/or pop culture to explore their chosen theme.

Brainstorm in class to collect possible subjects recurring in literature such as: empathy, charity, rage, fear, consumerism, angst, death, love, dignity, racism, sexism etc. Ask students to share some preliminary thoughts on their possible subjects.

Students should then compose an essay around this theme advancing an argument about the topic’s importance in their lives and significance for the wider world with supporting examples from literature, art, film etc. They should summarize the examples and connect them to their own lives and to the larger concept being explored.

Essays should be approximately 1,000 – 2,000 words. Students should post the finished essays to the discussion board or share via email.

Ask for one or two volunteers for group workshop/discussion in the following class. Have students read those two essays and prepare notes for group discussion for the next class.

Lesson Two (50 minutes):

Pair Work (25 minutes)

In class, have students share their work with a partner. They should take approximately 10 – 15 minutes to read their partner’s work and another ten minutes to discuss it, paying attention to how well the concept/idea is explored, how clearly it is defined, and which sources are most relevant and compelling and why.

Group Work (25 minutes)

As a group, discuss the one or two student essays that the class was asked to read before class. Some questions to consider for group discussion:

- Is the concept clear? What is the author's final position on the core concept?
- What sources do you find most relevant and compelling to the topic being discussed?
- Did the writer integrate their sources well?

If You Could Have a Dinner Party with One Famous Text...

‘After Dinner,’ Ham Chǒngim, tr. Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/fiction/ham-chongim-after-dinner/>

Students explore the relationships between two texts, and how a story’s meaning changes if read in the context of the work that influences it.

Learning Objectives

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

- Identify how stories create meaning
- Explain how different components of a story contribute to its overall meaning
- Discuss how one story can draw on elements of another
- Reflect on the nature of literary influence
- Reflect on cultural specificity

Assessment

Group discussion

Writing assignment

Approximate Grade Level

High school students

Materials Needed

Ham Chǒngim, translated by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton, ‘After Dinner’

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/fiction/ham-chongim-after-dinner/>

James Joyce, ‘The Dead’

http://www.online-literature.com/james_joyce/958/

Chalkboard or white board to take notes

Approximate Length

Lesson One (50 minutes)

Lesson Two (50 minutes)

Lesson One (50 minutes):

Assign ‘After Dinner’ as homework the night before, and ask the students to write a brief (1-2 sentence) summary of the story, including a sentence that describes what the story is about.

Activity:

(5-10 minutes) Begin discussion by collecting reactions and responses to the story. Did they like it, what did they notice about it, etc. Ask them, too, if this story seemed particularly “Korean” (in doing so, they will have to explain what they think of as “Korean” qualities, and perhaps where they got this idea), and if so, how?

(5-10 minutes) Then, ask them to share their summaries. Take notes on the board, collecting a list of the different things people suggest (a story about a dinner party, a story about marital tension, a story about grief). Ask if anyone strongly disagrees about any of the suggestions — i.e., if they think this is NOT what the story is about, if so, discuss why not.

(15-20 minutes) Now, suggest that you all go back and try to think together about what this story is doing. Note that it is told in a kind of fragmentary style, in little chunks of narrative. On another board, or on another section of the board, create an outline, trying to summarize each section in only a few words (for example, for the second chunk: P's death, night, prayer; for the third, candles, Jambi, Kyrgyzstan, Kangjae, music).

(10 minutes) Now, try to connect some of the summaries suggested in the first part of class with specific components of the story. Are there keywords or terms that reappear in the outline? Are they reflected in the summary sentences? Are there parts of the outline that seem to have no purpose to the overall story?

(Note: if it is possible to leave your outline up on the board, this will be helpful for the discussion the next day)

Homework: Read 'The Dead', by James Joyce, as homework. Ask students to underline or highlight the parts where they see a connection or resemblance to "After Dinner".

Lesson Two (50 minutes):

(5-10 minutes) Begin discussion by collecting reactions and responses to the story. Did they like it, what did they notice about it, etc.

(10-15 minutes) Ask students to share which parts of 'The Dead' they underlined or highlighted, that seemed connected to 'After Dinner'. Make a list on the board.

(this could include: snow, studying languages, piano, toast, music, conflict between husband and wife, death of Michael, France)

(10-15 minutes) Discuss how these elements feature in 'After Dinner' and whether it is similar to, or different from, 'The Dead'. For instance, does the tension between the husband and wife seem similar in both stories? Does it serve the same purpose in the plot (to answer this question, the students will need to explain what they think the purpose of these aspects is in the overall plot!).

Explain to the students that the conversation between Molly and Gabriel is an argument about feeling a connection to your own culture, as opposed to that of a colonial power — Molly is upset that Gabriel visits France instead of Ireland, that he cares about studying French, but not Irish. She calls him a "West Briton", semi-jokingly, as a way of saying that he is more British than Irish. Ask the students if similar tensions appear in 'After Dinner' (note, for instance, how frequently the names of European writers—such as Joyce!—appear in the story; but also consider the portion about Kyrgyz)

(10-15 minutes) Ask the students how reading 'The Dead' has changed their perspective on 'After Dinner'. Did they notice anything new about it? Does the meaning of the story change if we read it alongside the story that influenced it? You may wish to ask them about the differences between the stories as well (the switch from a male to a female narrator, that the dead person was a mentor rather

than a romantic interest). Ultimately: how similar are these stories? Are they getting at a similar idea in different ways, or are they using similar components to convey very different ideas? How are these stories reflections of the cultural background of their authors — is there something specifically Irish, or Korean, about either text?

Homework, Essay:

Compare and contrast the two stories.

OR

Choose one element that is in both 'The Dead' and 'After Dinner' and compare the way it functions in both stories.

OR

Explain how your reading of 'After Dinner' changed after reading 'The Dead.'

The ‘New’ Albania

“Until the Bird Returns” by Małgorzata Rejmer, translated by Zosia Krasodomska-Jones and Antonia Lloyd-Jones

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/until-the-bird-returns-malgorzata-rejmer/>

In these lessons, students will read a piece of creative nonfiction by Małgorzata Rejmer, from her forthcoming release *Mud Sweeter than Honey*. This chapter concerns the story of Neim Pasha, who became a political prisoner in Communist Albania at the age of nineteen and spent twenty years incarcerated. Students will then analyse the piece against its historical and political backdrop with a homework task and class discussion, before moving onto a broader debate about the security of democracy in Europe and beyond.

Learning Objectives

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

- Analyze creative nonfiction in its historical and political context
- Comment on the use of poetic devices and their effects in creative nonfiction
- Assess narrative point of view in survivor testimony
- Debate and evaluate the political concept of ‘backsliding democracies’
- Research a ‘backsliding democracy’
- Assess the importance of creative nonfiction when relating the personal to the political

Assessment

Writing task (100-300 words)

Pair discussion

Whole-class discussion/debate

Individual research task

Individual presentation task

Approximate Grade Level

University Students

Materials Needed

“Until the Bird Returns,” by Małgorzata Rejmer, translated by Zosia Krasodomska-Jones and Antonia Lloyd-Jones

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/until-the-bird-returns-malgorzata-rejmer/>

Blank map of Europe:

<https://worldmapblank.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Europe-Blank-map-Outline.pdf>

Labelled map of Eastern Europe:

<https://www.mapsland.com/europe/eastern-europe/detailed-political-map-of-eastern-europe-1993>

Encyclopedia Britannica entry on Albania:

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Albania>

David Waldner and Ellen Lust. 2018. "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding"

<https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>

Harun Karčić. 2021. "Democratic Backsliding in Europe. Who is to blame?"

<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/democratic-backsliding-europe-who-blame>

Supplementary Materials

Smartboard (recommended but materials could also be printed)

Approximate Length

Lesson one (45 minutes)

Lesson two (45 minutes)

Lesson three (45 minutes)

Lesson One (45 minutes)

Homework before class: read 'Until the Bird Returns'

Introducing Albania (25 minutes)

Write 'Albania' on the board. Students should not have read the text beforehand. Ask the students to share anything they already know or think they know about the country (this may be very little indeed). Maybe we are only aware of the stereotypes, why is that?

Is Albania in Europe? Show the students this map (unlabeled) and ask one of them to try to pinpoint the country.

<https://worldmapblank.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Europe-Blank-map-Outline.pdf>

Then show them this map.

<https://www.mapsland.com/europe/eastern-europe/detailed-political-map-of-eastern-europe-1993>

Did somebody manage to label Albania? How close did they get?

Briefly show the students (on a smartboard or as a print-out) some information about Albania. The Encyclopedia Britannica is a good source of information:

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Albania>

Things you may want to pick out include:

- History (Communism between 1944 and 1990) See tab 'Socialist Albania'
- Language (shqiptarë, Shqipëria)
- Religion (majority Muslim, but more secular due to legacy of Communism)

If you decide to print out the website and ask the students to read the first few pages themselves (time-permitting), you could ask them to each report back to the class one thing they found interesting or surprising.

Reflecting on their reading (20 Minutes)

Collect first impressions of 'Until the Bird Returns'. What is the story about, and why are Rejma and Pasha telling it? Which images from the story have moved or affected the students? Was there

anything about the narrative or setting that they found confusing on their first reading? Has anything discussed in the first section of the lesson helped them to understand the story better?

Ask the students to spend a few minutes skimming through the story again and pick out the following details. Collect some examples on the board as part of a class discussion. If you have a smartboard or a laptop or even a smartphone to hand during the lesson, you could research some of the unknown words (time-permitting):

- Poetic devices (pathetic fallacy, metaphor, simile, personification etc.) What are these doing?
- Narrative point of view (who is speaking? Who is writing?)
- Unknown words (Communist jargon, Historical/Albanian context)

Homework for the next lesson:

Assign each student one or two of the class discussion questions from the next lesson and ask them to write a detailed answer (100-300 words).

Students could also look up the definitions of any other unknown words encountered in the text.

The questions cover the text roughly in chronological order.

Lesson Two (45 minutes)

Class Discussion (35 minutes)

Divide the class into pairs. Ask them to discuss their homework for around five minutes, sharing with each other the question they explored in more detail. Ask each pair to report back to the class on their partner's question.

Discussion Questions

1. When do you first get an idea from the text that the narrator (Neim Pasha) is speaking of an authoritarian regime? Which 'Party' is he referring to?
2. *"Cursed be the first man to have stuck a stick in the ground, drawn a circle around it, and said: 'This is mine.' Cursed be the man who says 'I'll kill anyone who enters my circle.'"* Explain this quote with reference to a historical event of your choice.
3. *"We survived thanks to each other."* Do extreme situations tend to bring people together, or to push them further apart? Which examples of both can you pick out from the text?
4. *"Writers are guides— by showing us the paths that others have taken, they help us to understand ourselves."* Has non-fiction writing ever affected you in this way? Have you ever read a piece of journalism or an (auto)biography, or watched a documentary, that has changed your perspective on life or helped you to grow? How?
5. *"Soon you'll be eating with golden spoons."* What kind of empty promises have political parties made in your country, or others? (USA and Trump, UK and Brexit, etc.). And why might someone believe them?
6. *"The System got in between us. Who was the informer?"* How do totalitarian systems breed paranoia?
7. What was the initial reason for Pasha being arrested? And how did the effects of being arrested spread beyond the individual?

8. *"She played her role like a puppet on strings."* How does the author use this image?
9. Pasha speaks of the contradictions between loving the Party and hating Enver Hoxha, the Leader of the Party of the Labour of Albania between 1941 and 1985. Which other contradictions can you find in the text?
10. *"Each of us needed a thought to keep us alive."* How important is psychology to survival? Research a recent survival story from the news and compare their experiences and attitude to Pasha's.
11. How does the author use pathetic fallacy in the text?
12. Why does the guard find it so hard to believe that Pasha tends to Naum's body simply because he felt sorry for him?
13. Why was the idea of the Spaç Revolt so unthinkable before it actually happened?
14. *"Communism was a beautiful edifice of dark, decaying rooms."* How does the author use this metaphor?
15. What was the nomenklatura? Research this term and its implications in the Soviet bloc.
16. Why did Hoxha start convicting war heroes? Is this behaviour common among autocratic leaders? Research one or two other examples.
17. Which metaphor is used to describe the Communist system of Albania? And how does this relate to Pasha's experience?
18. What was Pasha involved in during the Spaç Revolt that made the guard's fury explode, and why? What does this object and this action represent?
19. What do Pasha and his cousin, Skënder Qerimi, represent in their encounter?
20. Do you think Pasha began spying on his fellow inmates for the Party? Why do you think this has not been directly addressed in the text?
21. Why was Pasha afraid to leave prison? How would you describe the world now to someone who has just been released from prison after twenty years?
22. What does Pasha find most surprising immediately on his release from prison, and why?
23. What do you think the 'cool chill' on Pasha's fingers from the stream could represent? Could it have both positive and negative connotations?
24. Research the Greek myth of Prometheus's liver and compare it to the story of Taras Agolli.
25. Describe the importance of family to Pasha in the story. What is his greatest fear, and how does his family help to heal him?
26. What does Pasha mean by parasite? And why does he start to feel like one?
27. *"The authorities would always have me in handcuffs."* Why does Pasha think this, even though he's been released from prison?
28. How does Pasha feel about becoming a prison guard? How does it compare to his feelings about the 'new' Albania in the 1990s? What are the similarities?
29. According to Pasha, what did the new Albania fail to do? Is this a common story? Think about other regime changes, e.g., from the Nazi era to West Germany in the 1940s.
30. Why do people find it so hard to believe Pasha when he tells his story?
31. How does Pasha/the author use rhetorical questions in the last few paragraphs of the piece?
32. Which image does Pasha/the author use in the last two sentences? And what are the connotations and effects of this image?
33. Examine the narrative POV in the story. Who is telling the story, and through whom? Which language was it originally written in? Does this surprise you? Is it possible to separate the author's POV from Pasha's?

Whole-class questions (10 minutes): what do you think the motivations are behind this kind of non-fiction writing?

- Documentary: witness to oppression
- Biographical: survivor stories
- Any other ideas? (a warning, perhaps?)

Lesson Three (45 minutes)

Class debate: Are our democracies safe?

Introducing ‘backsliding democracies’ (10 minutes)

Write ‘backsliding democracy’ on the board. Can any student offer a definition? Does anyone have any examples of backsliding democracies across the world?

Read out the definition of a ‘backsliding democracy’ from David Walnder and Ellen Lust’s 2018 article “Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding”¹

“Backsliding entails a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime.”

What could this include? Ask for ideas and write them on the board. These could include:

- Restricting press freedom
- Restricting freedom of speech
- Populist, xenophobic rhetoric against perceived ‘outsiders’
- Attempting to control the outcomes of elections
- Physical oppression (of mass protests etc.)
- And any other ideas

Which events could recently have catalysed backsliding democracies? (The COVID pandemic, emboldened by the USA and Russia etc.)

Reading and Discussion (35 minutes)

Ask the students to read this article by Harun Karčić on backsliding democracies in Europe:

<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/democratic-backsliding-europe-who-blame>

Ask the students to discuss the following questions on the text in small groups and then report back to the class:

- How far do you agree with Karčić’s negative view of the stability of democracy in Europe?
- Can you apply Karčić’s arguments to the rest of the world?
- Is it incorrect to assume that, once a country becomes a Western-style liberal democracy, it will stay that way?
- Are there any positive signs for democracy, either in Europe or the rest of the world? (e.g., the failure of Trump’s attempt to cling to power after losing the 2020 election, the prosecution of those involved in storming the Capitol in January 2021)

¹ <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050517-114628>

Whole-class questions:

"The personal is political" is a slogan that sprang up in the 1970s Women's Liberation movement. But how important is it to read non-fiction literature such as "Until the Bird Returns" in this context? What can such literature teach us? How can it be more impactful than reading scholarship, for example?

FEEDBACK

Thanks for taking the time to read our Fall 2021 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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