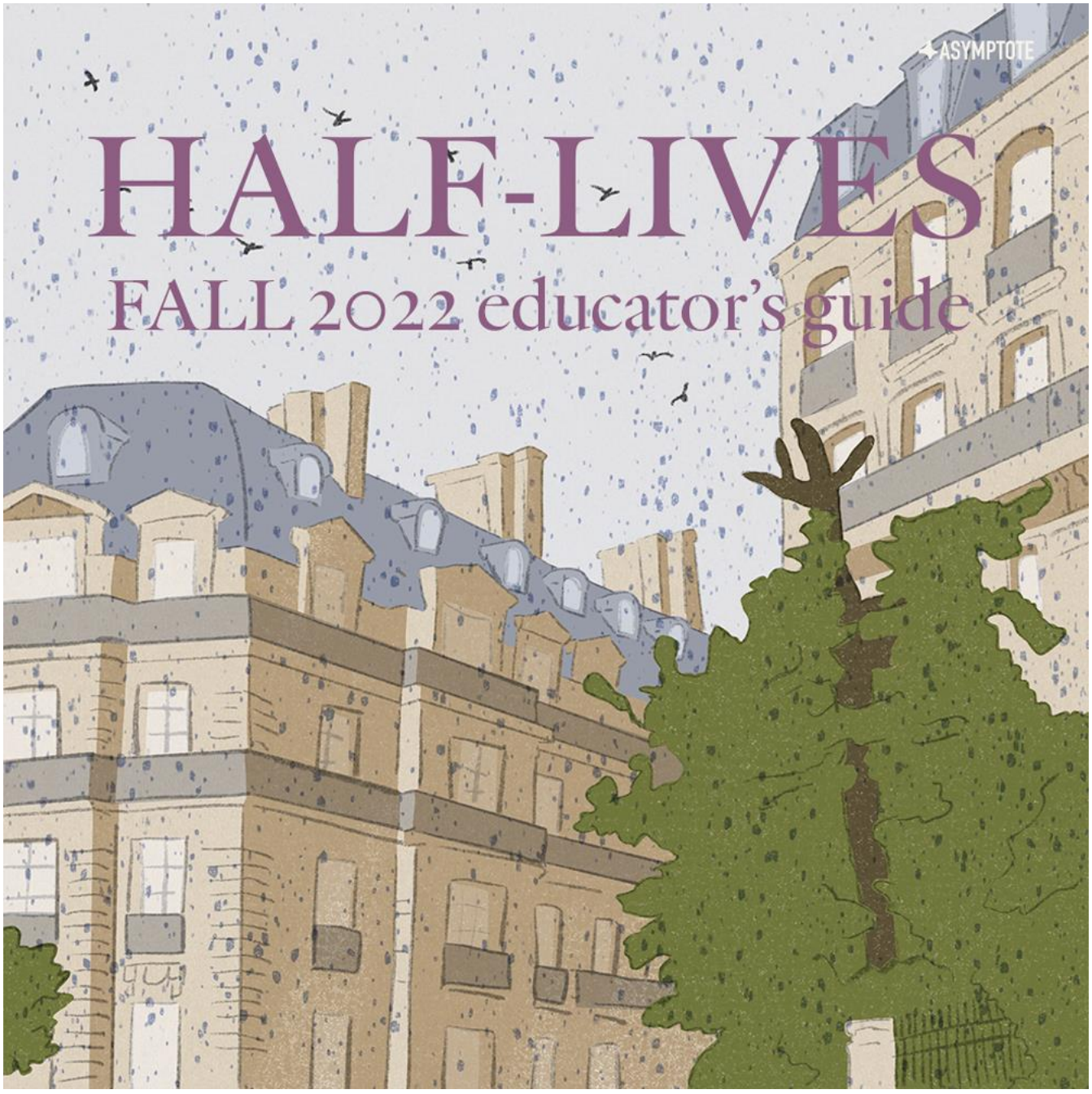
ASYMPTOTE
HALF-LIVES
FALL 2022 educator's guide

ASYMPTOTE
FOR EDUCATORS

# EDUCATOR'S GUIDE
## Fall 2022 | HALF-LIVES

## Table of Contents

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Fall 2022 issue of the *Asymptote* Educator's Guide!

Our latest guide contains five lesson plans to help you bring exciting and diverse world literature into all sorts of classrooms. Each lesson is paired with poems, essays, excerpts from plays, shorts stories, and book reviews from "Half-Lives," our Fall 2022 issue, which is available here: http://www.asymptotejournal.com/oct-2022

Our first lesson, "A Rendezvous with French Theatre," offers students a chance to learn about the lives and times of iconic French playwrights and actors. "The Ambiguity of Poetry: Muñoz meets Borges" is our second lesson and it provides space for students to reflect on thematic analyses in poetry. Our third lesson, "Two Meanings of 'Starve'," encourage students to think about what we owe one another via ethical questions about hunger and scarcity. "The Art of the Book Review" exposes students to different book reviews in both the current and past issues of *Asymptote* and gives them the chance to experiment with the form. Finally, "The Problems with Defining Non-western World Literature" asks students to consider the history of world literature and the limitations and marginalization in the term.

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.

# A Rendezvous with 20th Century French Theatre

***The Ghosts of Alloue* by Rémi De Vos, translated by Katherine Mendelsohn**
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/drama/the-ghosts-of-alloue/

Students read *The Ghosts of Alloue* by Rémi De Vos from the drama section. In this piece, actress Maria Casarès' house serves a meeting place for the ghosts of several 20th century French playwrights: Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Genet, and Bernard-Maria Koltès. After researching these influential figures and the related historical context, students synthesize information to create an original writing assignment.

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

- Reflect on *The Ghosts of Alloue*
- Research a person, event, or idea from the piece
- Give a short presentation on individual research
- Complete a writing assignment to synthesize information from reading, listening, and research

**Assessment**
Small group discussion
Presentation
Writing assignment

**Approximate Grade Level**
High school students
University students

**Materials Needed**
*The Ghosts of Alloue* by Rémi De Vos, (tr. Katherine Mendelsohn)
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/drama/the-ghosts-of-alloue/

Pictures of Alloue, such as those from
https://www.accr-europe.org/en/network/Members/maison-maria-Casarès

**Supplementary Materials (optional)**
Computer with projector to show images of Alloue

Highlighters (or pens) in different colors

*Illicit Love Letters: Albert Camus and Maria Casarès* (Book Review)
https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/04/11/illicit-love-letters-albert-camus-and-maria-Casarès/

*No Longer the Person I was: The Dazzling Correspondence of Albert Camus and Maria Casarès* (Book Review)
https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/no-longer-the-person-i-was-the-dazzling-correspondence-of-albert-camus-and-maria-Casarès/

**Approximate Length**
Lesson One (75 minutes)
Lesson Two (75 minutes)

## Lesson One

**Introduction** (10 minutes)
Pose the following warm up questions to students:

- Which museum, historical site, or other famous place have you visited?
- How was information about the exhibit or place conveyed to visitors? (e.g., brochure, tour, audio guide, app, signs)?
- How did this information shape your understanding of the place?

Introduce the piece *The Ghosts of Alloue*. It is a play written in the style of an audio tour of Alloue, the house of Maria Casarès, a famous 20th century French actress. Show pictures of the house and its location in France, such as those on the following website,
https://www.accr-europe.org/en/network/Members/maison-maria-casares

**Reading** (30 minutes)
Students read the play aloud with a partner or small group. While reading, mark answers to the following questions:

- Who are the *Ghosts of Alloue*?
- In which parts of the property are they reported to inhabit?

Students then scan the text individually, looking for details about the people mentioned in the play (e.g., Maria Casarès, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Jean Genet, and Bernard-Maria Koltès). Highlight information about each one with a different color pen. Students clarify information with a partner when they have finished.

Then have pairs write down additional questions that they have about these people. For example, students might write questions about Camus such as: What is *Le Malentendu* about? Who is Gallimard's son?

**Freewriting & Discussion** (30 minutes)
Students read the play again, then spend about 10 minutes freewriting about Maria Casarès. What impressions do you have about her life and work? Ask a few students to share their thoughts with the class before breaking into small groups to discuss the following questions:

- What impressions do you have about Maria Casarès life and work from reading the piece? How does it shape your understanding of Alloue as a place?
- "Maria Casarès' house is just that: a powerful antidote to grief, to the pain of loving, to irremediable loss." How do places evoke emotions? What do you think of the idea of a house being able to heal someone's grief?
- What is the significance of "tragedy" in Casarès' life and career?
- What do you think is meant by the last line, "She is theatre like a heart that beats?"

**Assign Homework** (5 minutes)
Research one of the people, events, or ideas related to the text. Refer to the questions written in class, if desired. Prepare a short presentation for your classmates.

- Maria Casarès

- Jean-Paul Sartre
- Albert Camus
- Jean Genet
- Bernard-Maria Koltès
- Jean-Louis Barrault / Leonie Bathiat (Arletty) / Sarah Bernhardt
- Molière
- Spanish Civil War
- French colonial Algeria
- General Franco
- The French Resistance
- Marxism
- Absurdism
- Existentialism

**Lesson Two**
**Warm up** (5 minutes)
Look at the artwork by Louise Bassou which appears above the text of *The Ghosts of Alloue*. Ask students: What do you think of the artwork? How does it represent the piece or its characters?

**Presentations** (45 minutes)
Students deliver their presentations to the class. While listening, students in the audience add information about the people to their notes.

**Discussion Questions** (20 minutes)
After students have listened to the presentations, lead a whole class discussion on the following questions:

1. What topic(s) were most interesting to you? What did you learn from the presentation about them? Does the additional information change your understanding of *The Ghosts of Alloue*? If so, how? How did these people, events, and ideas influence each other and French theatre?
2. What do you think about the author's *guided tour* approach to the play? What effect might it have on the audience? How do you think the play would be different if it involved dialogue between characters instead, for example? Does life imitate art or does art imitate life?

**Writing Assignment** (5 minutes)
Write one page to answer question one or two from the class discussion. Integrate information from the piece, the presentations, and your research. (Optional: See Additional Resources for more information on Marie Casarès and Albert Camus.)

Extension: Create your own audio guide for a local place. It can incorporate text, pictures, and audio. (Some examples https://voicemap.me/)

# The Ambiguity of Poetry: Muñoz meets Borges

**"In the Name of No One" by Rosabetty Muñoz, translated by Elena Barcia**
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/in-the-name-of-no-one-rosabetty-munoz/

In this lesson, students will first examine the extract from Muñoz's poetry collection *In the Name of No One* for its main themes, such as the environment and female experience. They will then compare their perceived themes with the themes recorded in Barcia's translator's note to develop both a deeper practical understanding of the texts and an awareness of the subjectivity of even thematic analysis. In the following section of poetic ambiguity, students will highlight, annotate, compare and contrast ambiguous passages across the poems and then use a Borges quote to analyze the possibility of extracting meaning from poetic texts. Finally, there are critical and creative options for the independent writing task.

**Learning Objectives**
By the end of these lessons, students should be able to:

- Analyze a poem thematically
- Discuss the subjectivity of meaning and thematic analysis
- Identify poetic ambiguity
- Evaluate the usefulness of deducting meaning from poetry
- Question poetic analysis as an academic field
- Incorporate ambiguity into their own poetry
- Investigate their own creative processes regarding ambiguity

**Assessment**
Independent study
Small group discussion
Whole-class discussion
Independent critical or creative writing task

**Approximate Grade Level**
University students

**Materials Needed**
"In the Name of No One" by Rosabetty Muñoz, translated from the Spanish by Elena Barcia:
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/in-the-name-of-no-one-rosabetty-munoz/

Elena Barcia's translator's note on "In the Name of No One," from the drop-down menu next to the text:
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/poetry/in-the-name-of-no-one-rosabetty-munoz/

**Approximate Length**
Lesson one (60 minutes)

**Pre-lesson activities**
Students read the four poems by Muñoz and make a list of what they think are the main themes of the poems.

**Lesson One**
**Introduction and Thematic Analysis** (25-30 mins)

Split the class into small groups. Hand out a copy of the translator's note to each group. The groups then read Barcia's note and pick out what she lists as the main themes of the poetry collection:

- Prostitution
- Exile
- Globalization
- Climate Change
- Poverty
- Abortion
- Rape
- Incest

Ask the groups to decide on which of these themes are applicable to these four poems, and how this list compares to the lists they prepared before class.

Class discussion phase. Write this question on the board:

1. What led you to choose the themes that you did?
2. How subjective is the thematic analysis of poetry?

Each group reports back to the class on their lists, how their lists compared with Barcia's translator's note, and whether there were any marked differences. Try to come to an agreement as a class on whether the thematic analysis of poetry is wholly subjective, or whether some themes are objectively observable and universal.

**Main Section: Poetic Ambiguity** (30 minutes)
Independently, students take five minutes to go through the poems and to highlight any sections which could have more than one meaning. Have them then annotate the different sections with their possible meanings.
Then, discuss in small groups where their perceptions differ, and why. Have them decide on which, if any, poem contains the most ambiguity.

Mix up the groups, so that every new group has at least one member from every previous group. Have the groups discuss their results:

1. How ambiguous are these poems?
2. Which possible meanings do they have?
3. Which poem is the most ambiguous, and why?

Write this quote on the board from Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel"*:*

*"I know of one semibarbarous zone whose librarians repudiate the "vain and superstitious habit" of trying to find sense in books, equating such a quest with attempting to find meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines on the palms of one's hand."*

The groups then discuss the quote in the context of Muñoz's poems.

1. How far do they agree with this quote?
2. How far is it applicable to Muñoz's poems?
3. Which layers of subjectivity exist in a text by the time it has been read?
4. How far is poetic analysis therefore a worthwhile endeavor? In what ways is this field of study still useful or fruitful?
5. What are the repercussions then, for literary translators and readers of literature in translation?

**Writing Task/Homework Option 1: Critical**
Write a response to the statement *"If the extraction of meaning from poems is impossible, then the fields of poetic analysis and translation are redundant."* Students argue their own opinions with reference to the Borges quote and Muñoz's four poems. (800-1000 words)

**Writing Task/Homework Option 2: Creative**
Students focus on one ambiguous line or passage from one of Muñoz's poems. They then create at least two poems of their own, each poem focusing on a different possible meaning of the same line. For example, the line *"Towards the end of that year, she began to fill out the dress and they confined her to the room with only one window facing the chicken coop,"* could be incorporated into a prose poem about pregnancy, or about adolescence.

Ask them to create a short diary entry which records the effect of the imagery in the chosen passage and their creative process of transforming the passage into part of their own poems. (200 words)

# Two Meanings of "Starve"

**"Hunger" by Narine Abgaryan, translated by Margarit Ordukhanyan and Zara Martirosova Torlone**
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/hunger-narine-abgaryan/

Narine Abgaryan's "Hunger" opens with a scene of abundance but then takes the reader to a past where war and pogrom made food scarce. Centralizing around the theme of hunger, the author explores what it means to care for others in even the direst conditions. In this lesson students will engage with a close reading of the text and then reflect on the ethical dimensions of hunger. They will elaborate on how not caring for others can be considered an active choice of "starving" someone.

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

- Recognize Armenia's traditional food items and culture
- Identify main themes of the short story
- Elaborate on the significance of hunger to the ethics
- Examine the role of charity in society
- Compare and contrast different characters in the story
- Develop their own ideas and stance on charity
- Research a local charity that is involved in food security
- Report on research findings

**Assessment**
Class discussion
Research report

**Approximate Grade Level**
Middle school

**Materials Needed**
"Hunger" by Narine Abgaryan, translated by Margarit Ordukhanyan and Zara Martirosova Torlone
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/hunger-narine-abgaryan/

Screen projector

Traditional food descriptions and images to be projected on screen:

Chervil: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chervil
Brynza: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bryndza
Chanakh and chechil: https://armeniadiscovery.com/en/articles/types-of-armenian-cheese
Ghaurma: https://heghineh.com/preserved-meat/

**Supplementary Material**
The teacher can choose to read Peter Singer's 1971 essay, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" before the second session. It is available at this link:
https://personal.lse.ac.uk/robert49/teaching/mm/articles/Singer_1972Famine.pdf
**Approximate Length**
Lesson One (60 minutes)

Lesson Two (60 minutes)

**Lesson One** (60 minutes)
**Preparation**
Students will read “Hunger” before class.

**Warm-up Discussion** (10 minutes)
Begin the lesson by asking students to list names of food items in the story as a class. Show the traditional food from Armenia from the story, using the following links:

Chervil: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chervil
Brynza: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bryndza
Chanakh and chechil: https://armeniadiscovery.com/en/articles/types-of-armenian-cheese
Ghaurma: https://heghineh.com/preserved-meat/

Conclude the warm-up part by asking students to reflect on why the author might have chosen to start the story with such detailed descriptions of food.

**Group/Pair Discussion** (20 minutes)
Depending on class size, put students in groups or pairs and have them discuss the following questions. You can choose to divide the questions among groups or have them discuss all.

- Who are the main characters of the story? Do characters complement each other in any way?
- How is food described? List examples.
- How is hunger described? List examples.
- What are the effects of war in the village?
- Why do locals mistreat refugees?
- Why does “Aleksan” think hunger is the most frightening condition?
- What does “life only has meaning if you have someone to live for” mean?

**Class Discussion** (15 minutes)
Reconvene as a class and have each group report on their discussions and answers. As part of the class discussion ask students the following and write answers on the board:

- What are the main themes of the story? (A few themes they might identify: war, care for others, hunger, dislocation, empathy.)
- What is the contrast between the beginning and middle parts of the story? (They should recognize how the author moves from abundance to scarcity, or from food to hunger.)

**Group Discussion** (15 minutes)
Divide the class into groups. Ask each group to discuss what hunger is and come up with a well-formulated definition. They can use descriptive and/or figurative language (such as metaphors) in their definition. They should write down their definition and bring it to the following session.

**Lesson Two** (60 minutes**)**
**Class Discussion** (20 minutes)
After a short review of the highlights of the previous session, let each group present their definitions of hunger. Discuss as a class whether the definitions they came up with are similar or different. Refer to how the author describes hunger:

- *But nothing can placate or cheat hunger; it hovers overhead in a cloud of infernal darkness, taunting you and killing every shred of your humanity.*
- *He had looked straight into hunger’s face. It had come to him in the guise of an emaciated old*

*man with sunken cheeks, a thread-thin line of bloodless lips, and papery skin stretched taut over his sharply protruding cheekbones.*

**Roundtable Inquiry on Hunger and Ethics** (35 minutes)
This inquiry is modeled around P4C (Philosophy for Children) practice.* In this section of the class, the teacher will be a facilitator in their thinking process and not impose any views or take an authoritative stance.

Prepare students to a roundtable discussion on the relationship of hunger and charity by laying out the rules:

- Seats will be arranged in a circle so they can see each other and listen attentively.
- You will read them a passage from the story and open the discussion.
- Students will then discuss freely, give examples and counter examples to ideas, challenge their assumptions, and build on each other's ideas.

The passage to prompt discussion (can be read out loud by the teacher or a volunteer student):

*"Why did you set a bear trap on your plot?" demanded Aleksan, still stuttering from labored breath, "What were you hoping to catch? A jackal?"*

*"What trap?"*

*"Don't play dumb," Aleksan spat out angrily*

*"Who got caught in the trap?"*

*"An old man. A refugee."*

*"So if he is a refugee, then it's ok for him to steal?" Tsolak sat up, swung around with unexpected adroitness and slapped Aleksan across the face. Aleksan neither dodged the blow nor tried to return it. He swallowed, feeling the unpleasant taste of his own blood.*

*"He's definitely going to lose his leg. That's if he pulls through. He has a great-granddaughter in town and nobody else. He lost everyone else in the pogroms."*

*Tsolak got up, picked up the log that Aleksan had used to clobber him and tossed it back into the mount of chopped firewood without looking. The log landed at the very top, got caught on another log by a chipped piece of bark and dangled in the air.*

*"So my kids aren't kids, then?" he hissed in a whisper. "Half of my relatives are not refugees, right? It's ok to steal from me, right? Because I'm a pansy and not a man, right? And I don't have a right to eat!"*

To get the students started, ask them: Is it okay to let someone starve?

Students might come up with many different answers and think through this ethical question in different contexts. For example: Should we let a neighbor starve? Should we intervene when there are people starving in a different part of the world? What if we don't have enough to feed our own family?

The teacher should keep in mind the related conceptual questions:

- Is there difference between killing & letting someone starve to death?
- Is letting someone die same as murder?
- What is charity?
- Should one be charitable even if it means they will act against their interests?
- How is charity different from government aid?
- Should charity be enforced in certain situations?
- Is it unjust to starve others?

In philosophy one of the most important works dealing with this issue is Peter Singer's 1971 essay "Famine, Affluence, and Morality." Here are a few highlights from the essay:

- "It makes no moral difference whether the person I can help is a neighbor's child ten yards from me or a Bengali whose name I shall never know, ten thousand miles away".
- "If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, then we ought, morally, to do it".

**Homework Assignment** (5 minutes)
Students will conduct research on a local charity or non-profit that is involved in food security (food pantries, food banks, etc.). They will review the mission and the operations of the organization and write a one-page research report.

*A typical P4C session is summarized in Montclair State University Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children's website: https://www.montclair.edu/iapc/what-is-philosophy-for-children/what-is-a-typical-p4c-session-like/

# The Art of the Book Review

**Caterina Domeneghini reviews *Translating Myself and Others* by Jhumpa Lahiri**
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/jhumpa-lahiri-translating-myself-and-others/

Caterina Domeneghini reviewed Jhumpa Lahiri's latest essay collection, *Translating Myself and Others*, exploring questions around translation, migration, self-discovery, and transformation. In this lesson, students will examine the fundamental features of a book review as they reflect on Domeneghini's review and write their own review of a work important to them.

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

- Define the basic components of a book review
- Discuss ways to structure and improve a book review
- Analyze the effectiveness of a book review
- Compose their own book reviews

**Assessment**
Comprehension questions
Class discussion
Book review

**Approximate Grade Level**
High school students
University students

**Materials Needed**
Caterina Domeneghini reviews *Translating Myself and Others* by Jhumpa Lahiri
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/jhumpa-lahiri-translating-myself-and-others/

Handout on book reviews from the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/book-reviews/

"On Reviewing Books: A Few Guiding Principles" by Julija Šukys
https://julijasukys.com/?p=4087

**Supplementary Materials**
*Asymptote* archive
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/archive/

*Asymptote* blog
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/reviews/

**Approximate Length**
Lesson One (50 minutes)
Lesson Two (50 minutes)

**Lesson One** (50 minutes)
**Opening Discussion** (20 minutes)

In small groups, have students give impromptu oral book reviews of their favorite book. What can they recall about the book? For example:

- Who wrote the book?
- What sort of book is it? What genre, for example?
- When or where was it published? When was it written? In what language?
- What is it about?
- Why did you enjoy it?

Next, ask students to report back on their peers' reviews.

- What did they learn about the book?
- Do they have a good sense of what the book is about?
- What more would they like to know about it?

**Reading** (15 minutes)
Have students read the handout on book reviews from the Writing Center at UNC at Chapel Hill. Provide the class with the following comprehension questions to focus their reading. Have them write short notes in response.

- Why should book review also be an argument? What does this mean?
- What is the difference between summary and commentary?
- What are some of the common features of a book review?
- What do you think is the key part of an engaging, well-written book review? Why?

**Class Discussion** (15 minutes)
After reading, as a class discuss some of the questions above.

After the discussion, assign the homework below.

**Homework**
Have students read Caterina Domeneghini's review of *Translating Myself and Others* by Jhumpa Lahiri in the Fall 2022 issue of *Asymptote*.

Ask them to answer some of the following questions as they read:

- According to Domeneghini, what are some of the central questions Lahiri explores in her essay collection?
- Why do you think Domeneghini begins her review with a quote from Ovid? What role does Ovid play in Lahiri's collection?
- How does Domeneghini use Lahiri's past to examine the themes in her work?
- How does Domeneghini connect Lahiri's work to current political questions and movements in Italy and the United States?
- Which specific essays from the collection does Domeneghini examine? Why?
- What is the underlying value in Lahiri's collection, according to Domeneghini?
- What metaphors do Lahiri and Domeneghini use to discuss translation? Which do you find most compelling? Why?
- After reading the review, are you interested in reading *Translating Myself and Others*? Why or why not?

**Lesson Two** (50 minutes)
**Discussion** (20 minutes)
Discuss the homework including Domeneghini's review and the questions above.

**Freewrite** (10 minutes)
Next, ask students to think back to their impromptu book reviews from the previous lesson. After reading Domeneghini's review and the handout from UNC, what do they think they should add to make their reviews more engaging and substantive?

Ask them to take 10 minutes to freewrite as a way to develop their reviews. Provide them with the following questions to start:

- Do they have a clear and succinct summary of the book?
- Do they have an argument? How will they go beyond summarizing the book and start analyzing it too?
- Are there aspects of the book that warrant criticism? Or praise?
- What do readers need to know about the author to connect with or understand the work?

**Reading** (15 minutes)
For another take on writing book reviews, ask students to read on their own "On Reviewing Books" by Julija Šukys. Afterwards, discuss the following:

- What other tips for reviewing books does Šukys suggest?
- Do any of her tips echo those provided by the Writing Center at UNC?
- What does Šukys mean by establishing one's credentials? As students, how might you do this? How does Domeneghini do this in her review?
- What does Šukys mean by "ungenerous" reviews?
- What is "owl" criticism?
- What does Šukys mean by fairness?
- Why is it useful to consider one's blind spots when writing a review?

**Assign Homework** (5 minutes)
Ask students to write their own reviews of a written work that is important to them. This can be a novel, a short story or poetry collection, or a work of nonfiction.

They should aim for 800 – 1000 words and consider the tips from UNC and Šukys as they write and revise.

Have students share and discuss their reviews in the following class.

**Optional Expansion Activity**
To explore more *Asymptote* reviews and expose students to other approaches to reviewing books, ask students to explore the *Asymptote* archive. Each issue features book reviews. Additionally, the *Asymptote* Blog features regular reviews of literature in translation.

Have students write their own review of a past review, analyzing how well the review aligns with the tips mentioned above. These short reviews should be around 250 words. They can consider some of the following questions as they read and write:

- Does the reviewer provide a clear and concise summary of the book?
- What is the reviewer's main claim, thesis, or argument?
- Do they quote from the book? Do you as a reader have a sense of the book's style from the review?
- Is the review ungenerous? Or fair? Could it be considered "owl criticism"? Why or why not?
- How does the reviewer establish their credentials?
- After reading the review, do you have a clear sense of the book's strengths and themes? Do you want to read the book?

# The Problems with Defining Non-western World Literature

**"The Tale of Mukaburung" by Lakshmi Pamuntjak, translated by Annie Tucker**
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/fiction/the-tale-of-mukaburung-laksmi-pamuntjak/

This lesson introduces students to the concept of world/global literature and the problems and difficulties in defining it. While introducing students to definitions and discussions from scholars on world literature, the lesson also considers an author from a less discussed national literature, Lakshmi Pamuntjak from Indonesia, and her insights into how she defines world literature and her own position in world literature as an author.

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

- Understand the concept of world literature
- Think critically on the problems of defining world literature
- Discuss ideas related to the reading including world literature, literatures prominent in the world literature publishing industry, the western canon, and readers of world literature
- Recognize the socio-political histories that have defined world literature
- Research an author and literature from a non-western, non-dominant literary practice

**Assessment**
Participation in group discussions
Discussions and research on world literature
Research essay

**Approximate Grade Level**
High school students
University students

**Materials Needed**
"The Tale of Mukaburung" by Lakshmi Pamuntjak, translated by Annie Tucker
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/fiction/the-tale-of-mukaburung-laksmi-pamuntjak/

Lakshmi Pamuntjak on World Literature
https://www.britishcouncil.id/en/12-writers-focus-laksmi-pamuntjak

World literature definition
https://www.definitions.net/definition/world+literature

World Literature Timeline 1
https://sybilisticism.tripod.com/worldliteraturetimeline.htm

World Literature Timeline 2
https://www.worldhistory.org/timeline/literature/

Eka Kurniawan on Indonesian Writing and Magic Realism

https://electricliterature.com/eka-kurniawan-on-indonesia-and-magical-realism/

**Definitions and Discussions regarding world literature:**

**Longxi Zhang on the origin of Weltliteratur (world literature)**
"Most discussions of world literature mention, at some point or other, the German term "Weltliteratur" and trace the origin of the concept to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Though Goethe was not the first to use that term in German, given his great reputation and influence on the European cultural scene in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, as John Pizer remarks, "it is Goethe to whom credit must be given for creating the paradigm that became a significant, widely debated element in critical and pedagogical literary discourse."
Zhang, Longxi. *The Changing Concept of World Literature,* World Literature in Theory, edited by David Damrosch, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2014

**Robert Young on world literature:**
"In Goethe's different formulations, Weltliteratur is something of a contradictory concept in so far as the idea is presented sometimes as global and sometimes as European (for whom the ancient Greeks serve as the ultimate or originary model).
….
Contemporary ideas of World Literature are inextricably bound up with: a) Questions of translation, and the rise of Translation Studies. b) The development of multiculturalism, postcolonial literatures, and the resurrection of the concept of World Literature in the context of globalization. c) The effect of globalization and World Literature on Comparative Literature departments which are attempting to globalise a previously largely European concept of World Literature, despite the continued dominance of Euro-American models and academic institutions."

Young, Robert J. C. *World Literature and Language Anxiety*, Approaches to World Literature, edited by Joachim Küpper, and Stefan Keppler-Tasaki, De Gruyter, Inc., 2013

**David Damrosch on world literature:**
"Goethe hoped that the age of world literature would be an era of international exchange and mutual refinement, a cosmopolitan process in which Germany would assume a central role as a translator and mediator among cultures, leading an international elite to champion lasting literary values against the vanities of narrow nationalism and the vagaries of popular taste. It is hard to imagine that he would have been pleased with the books recently on offer at the gift shop of Ho Chi Minh's Residence in Hanoi. There wasn't a copy of Faust or even Confucius's Analects in sight; in their place, a guide to the Residence in Chinese was sandwiched between two volumes in Vietnamese: a cartoon life of Abraham Lincoln, and a collection of children's stories, whose glossy cover boasted a leering Tigger and a roly-poly Pooh, taken from the Disney film. The Disneyfication of the globe was not exactly the future toward which Goethe wanted everyone to strive.

What are we to make of world literature today? The cultural and political realignments of the past two decades have opened the field of world literature to an unprecedented, even vertiginous variety of authors and countries. At once exhilarating and unsettling, the range and variety of literatures now in view raise serious questions of scale, of translation and comprehension, and of persisting imbalances of economic and cultural power. At the same time, the shifting landscape of world literature offers new opportunities for readers to encounter writers located well beyond the select few Western European countries whose works long dominated worldwide attention. Whereas in past eras works usually spread from imperial centers to peripheral regions (from China to Vietnam, from London to Australia and

Kenya, from Paris to almost everywhere), an increasingly multipolar literary landscape allows writers from smaller countries to achieve rapid worldwide fame.
…..
Scholars, teachers, and students of world literature must wrestle with problems of method, approach, and perspective. How can we gain an adequate grounding in more than one or two cultures? How do we make intelligent choices of what to read in those traditions? Once we have made our selection, how can we do more than skim the surface of complex works that we may need to read mostly in translation? How do we avoid projecting our home-culture values onto the wider world? How do we negotiate the uneven cultural, political, and economic landscape in which our texts circulate and in which we ourselves take part? Goethe's Weltliteratur has never managed to become a stable term (what literatures does it include? What views of the world?); how can we make sense of its multiplying avatars as vishwa sahitya in Bengali, mirovaia literatura in Russian, dünya edebiyatı in Turkish, and shijie de wenxue in Chinese."

Damrosch, David. *Introduction: World Literature in Theory and Practice*, World Literature in Theory, edited by David Damrosch, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2014.

**Supplementary Material**
Amplify Bookstore
https://amplifybookstore.com/

Kinokuniya Bookstore
https://www.kinokuniya.com/

*Asymptote* Map
https://www.asymptotejournal.com/map/

**Approximate Length**
**Lesson One** (In class – 90 - 105 minutes)
**Lesson Two** (In class - 150 minutes)
**Lesson Three** (Take-home assignment - 120 minutes)

**Lesson One – Discussions on world literature and how to define it** (90 - 105 minutes)
**Part One – In class discussion in groups** (45 minutes)

- Divide the class into groups of 5 or 6
  - Ask students to discuss which works of literature they have read recently, and make a list of those works
  - Then ask students to list out how many authors of color they have read
  - Next ask students to go to their local or regional bookshop websites and make a list of western vs non-western stories they see in the first 15 pages of fiction books
  - Next ask students to make the same list but with bookshops like Kinokuniya and Amplify
  - In the same groups, ask students to consider how many western authors vs non-western authors they can find in bookstores
  - What role do bookstores play in the distribution of literature from around the world?
  - What novels, stories or authors come to mind when students think of world literature?
  - In groups, ask students to come up with definitions of world literature

**Part Two – In class discussion with teacher** (45 - 60 minutes)

Ask students to read the excerpts and definitions listed under world literature including Zhong, Young, Damrosch and the world literature definition.

- Can students find any connections between the books they grew up reading that were considered important, the books they studied in literature classes, the kind of books sold in bookshops and Young and Damrosch's claims on the world literature canon being considered predominantly Western or European?
- Consider Young's ideas on world literature during a time of multiculturalism, postcolonialism, and translation. How important are these components for diverse literature? Building upon this question, in particular how important is translation, translation studies and translation journals to world literature?
- Ask students to read the two world literature timeline links and then re-read Young's statement. World literature has existed for centuries and have been rich and fascinating, so then why is there a "continued dominance of Euro-American models and academic institutions"?
- Ask students to list several action points on how to rectify the 'continued dominance' mentioned in the above question

Ask students to reconvene in the groups they were in before.

- Ask students to revisit their definition of world literature. Have their ideas on world literature changed after reading the excerpts on world literature? Ask them to first discuss in groups
- Gather all students in the class, and then write down their definitions on the board or the online learning platform. Discuss the similarities and differences between students' world literature definitions
- Discuss as a class how students defined world literature and if and how their understanding of world literature has changed during this lesson

**Lesson Two – Discussions on Lakshmi's views on world literature** (150 – 165 minutes)
**Part One** (90 - 115 minutes)
Ask students to read Lakshmi Pamuntjak's interview with British Council

- Do students agree or disagree with Lakshmi's ideas about defining world literature? Discuss why

Re-read this section of Pamuntjak's thoughts on literature being labelled:

"Yes, I often do, because the expectation presupposes a set of criteria imposed from outside of what literary success—or successful literature—is. And I find it so reductive. I also dislike labels, especially one that effaces diversity for the sake of reaching a wider audience. I'd like to think I am first and foremost a writer, not an 'Asian', 'Indonesian' or, worst, an 'Indonesian woman' writer. A writer's background is just one of many influences fueling his or her imaginations. It's not the defining quality. Besides, understanding literature in terms of a homogenised construct, whether it's 'Indonesian', 'Southeast Asian', or 'Asian' is almost always misleading. It doesn't allow for the many differences including race, class, ethnicity, gender and generation in both the writing and the writers, especially those who want to explore areas not stereotypically understood as 'Asian' or 'Indonesian'. Who would it include and who would it exclude? What things could or couldn't it be about? Would it be geographical?"

- Can students relate to being labelled themselves? Or being expected to act, behave or think in a certain way because of a social group they belong to? Can students relate their own life stories to what Lakshmi has mentioned in the last 5 lines of the above paragraph?

- As readers and literary enthusiasts, are we limiting our thinking and understanding of literature by labelling literature? Could we be influenced by stereotypes we grew up hearing or reading about in the way we perceive or digest stories?

Consider this part of the interview
Interviewer: *When people in the UK or US talk about Indonesian literature, the lazy comparison that is sometimes made is with Latin American magic realism - although it is much more plural and complex than that. Do you feel you are writing within any particular literary tradition or are you carving your own path?*

Lakshmi: "Yes, Indonesian literature is not a monolithic entity—it is made up of many cultures and places and styles. And of stories and storytellers. Do I carve my own path? Yes, I think so. Which doesn't mean that I found my 'voice' once I became a writer—it is a product of hard work, extensive reading and much reflection. It changes, it matures over time."

Next, have students read Eka Kurinawan's interview on Indonesian literature, oral stories, and the tendency to compare Indonesian literature to Latin American magical realism.

- Research into why Indonesian literature is compared to Latin American magic realism. Is there sufficient research to back this claim? Why does the interviewer call this comparison 'lazy'? What are the implications for literatures from writers of non-western, non-commonly referenced countries when these literatures are compared or considered a version of a well-known western trajectory instead of in their own right?
- How do labels harm world literature, its perception and reception?

Re-read the following excerpt from Damrosch:

"Scholars, teachers, and students of world literature must wrestle with problems of method, approach, and perspective. How can we gain an adequate grounding in more than one or two cultures? How do we make intelligent choices of what to read in those traditions? Once we have made our selection, how can we do more than skim the surface of complex works that we may need to read mostly in translation? How do we avoid projecting our home-culture values onto the wider world? How do we negotiate the uneven cultural, political, and economic landscape in which our texts circulate and in which we ourselves take part?"

- Discuss each question asked in the above paragraph
- Are there any reading traditions that students were able to identify from their own social-histories, cultures or academic backgrounds?
- How do we unlearn certain stereotypes of perspectives that we have learned regarding storytelling and what constitutes good storytelling?

Consider Lakshmi's statement on how poc/non-western authors are expected to write on certain themes to be considered international authors or to be recognized internationally.

- Is this the best way to approach world literature?
- Is this true and is this fair? (Perhaps as an example, all Sri Lankan authors who have been nominated for or have won the Booker prize for fiction have all written on war: Michael Ondaatje, Romesh Gunesekera, Anuk Arudpragasm, Shehan Karnutilaka. Is this a pattern or a coincidence?)
- Does this restrict the recognition and development of world literature?

Consider how Lakshmi became recognized as an author in the international sphere because of how her book was presented at the Frankfurt book fair.

- What are the implications for how poc/non-western authors can be recognized internationally when very few of them have access or contacts to publishing industry individuals who have a link to the western book scene?

**Part Two** (40 minutes)
**Reading**
Read Lakshmi Pamuntjak's story 'The Tale of Mukaburung' in the Fall 2022 issue of *Asymptote*, paying extra attention to the social dynamics between different social groups.

Consider this particular statement by Lakshmi again on world literature:
"It doesn't allow for the many differences including race, class, ethnicity, gender and generation in both the writing and the writers, especially those who want to explore areas not stereotypically understood as 'Asian' or 'Indonesian'."

How does your reading of this one story help you understand the above statement? In what aspects of the story can you find 'differences including race, class, ethnicity, gender and generation'? How do we define literatures like the story written by Lakshmi?

**Read the translator's note**
Consider the following paragraph in particular:
"I was fascinated by how this historical and political context exists as a low-grade hum throughout the story; minimally referenced, but in critical communication with the narrative development. The changes wrought to the land and people of Buru by the influx of those from Java and elsewhere in the story similarly gesture to the wider, devastating impact of military action and governmental policy on marginalized Indigenous ethnic groups and their lands throughout Indonesia. But here, as always in the collection, such impact is felt and told through one singular experience, the life of one woman who searches for meaning and retains her full agency even when at the mercy of larger forces."

Are there any similarities that you can find between Lakshmi's story, her interview and the translator's interpretation of Lakshmi's story?

Consider this statement:
"…such impact is felt and told through one singular experience, the life of one woman…"

- How much can we learn of a place and its people through a single story? And more specifically through an intimate portrayal of one individual?
- Does Mukaburung remind you of any other characters in stories you have read? If so, what does it mean for world literature if we can find parallels between characters from different cultural, historical and socio-political and economic backgrounds?

**Lesson Three – Take Home Research Essay** (120 minutes)
Research on an author and literature from a non-western, non-dominant literary practice and write a 600-word essay introducing this author and literary practice.

## FEEDBACK

Thanks for taking the time to read our Fall 2022 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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