

## *Transhistorical Empathy*

A lesson in historical-personal writing using *Ordinary Misfortunes*

Designed by John Darr

Many political writers aim to ground, or at least contextualize, their singular viewpoint as authors within a collectively-constructed history. The burden of the artist is often to accomplish this on both informational and emotional levels. When tragedy occurs across a population, one manner in which we can understand it is through the recreation and magnification of our own personal tragedies. A piece of literature that catalyzes this action can act as a bridge between points with seemingly incompressible differences in scope.

Such is the accomplishment of *Ordinary Misfortunes* by Emily Jungmin Yoon. Yoon's debut chapbook acts as a nexus between the experiences of Korean sex slaves during World War Two and her own struggles as a first-generation Korean-American. Yoon's work struggles to make sense of her simultaneous resonance with and separation from this history. While it offers no clear answer to how a person in her position should act, *Ordinary Misfortunes* provides testimony to the power of actively reckoning with the past while navigating the present. By studying *Ordinary Misfortunes*, students can appreciate the lasting impact of distant histories while being inspired to investigate their own.

This lesson fulfills the following objectives:

1. Students will be able to identify and distinguish multiple narratives within a text.
2. Students will be able to analyze the relationship between multiple narratives within a text.
3. Students will be able to compare and contrast the function of personal and historical narratives within a poem.
4. Students will be able to interpret the sum product created by multiple narratives within a poem.

Homework assigned in preparation of this class: N/A

## Lesson Structure:

1. **Opening Journal:** Think of an event in history that scared or sickened you when you learned about it. Why were you scared or sickened? How did you change as a person when you learned about that event? (~10 minutes)
2. **Reading & Discussion Warm-Up:** Individually read “News,” the opening poem in “Ordinary Misfortunes.” (~3 minutes) *In groups, students discuss the poem overall – how it made them feel, what they took away from the poem, how ‘good’ of a poem they think it is.* (~5 minutes)
3. **Follow-Up Discussion and Analysis:** In the same groups, outline the two narratives that occur in each poem. Still in groups, compare and contrast the narratives. Who is telling each narrative? What is the impact of each narrative? Why are they in the same poem? (~10 minutes) Then, open up the discussion to the class; if students are reluctant to share, call upon individual groups to discuss their findings. (~7 minutes)

## **RUNNING TIME UP TO THIS POINT: 35 Minutes**

4. **Individual Readings & Analysis:** Have students read the next two poems in the collection, “An Ordinary Misfortune” and “Comfort.” (~5 minutes) Have students individually outline the narratives that occur in each piece. Questions for students’ consideration while they are doing this: What information are we given that does not seem to be part of a narrative? Can it be grouped or organized into something resembling a narrative, and if not, what is the function of that information? Why do you think the information is presented in the order that the poet chose? (~10 minutes)
5. **Class Discussion (~15 minutes):**
  - a. What is the historical narrative running through both poems?
  - b. Which poem did you like more and why?
  - c. Do you think you liked the poem more because it was friendlier – less difficult to read – or because it functioned more effectively as a historical/political poem?
  - d. How does each poem handle the narrative?
  - e. How does the personal narrative in each poem affect or complement the historical information given in each poem?

## **RUNNING TIME UP TO THIS POINT: 65 minutes**

6. **Preparation for Projects / Personal Reflection Journal:** Go back to your opening journal. What kind of personal narrative could you pair with the event in order to craft a historical poem, and why do you think such a pairing could work? (5 minutes) Which other historical events are you interested in researching and writing about? How might you approach writing a personal / historical poem on each event? (5 minutes)

## **LESSON TOTAL: 75 minutes**

## Critical Essay: *Ordinary Misfortunes*

Emily Jungmin Yoon's *Ordinary Misfortunes* centers around multiple treatments of several historical events, synthesizing Yoon's perspective with those of primary sources. As a short collection / chapbook, it offers a unique opportunity for large-scale analysis. For this assignment, you will choose one focus for analysis to investigate over the course of the entire collection. If you're uncertain about what to investigate, the following topics may be good options:

1. Yoon's use of titles
2. Yoon's treatment of history
3. Yoon's use of form
4. Yoon's ordering of the poems

To guide yourself through the planning and writing processes, follow the steps below:

1. **Read through the series, keeping in mind the topic you've chosen.** How much do you think you'll be able to write about your topic? Are there subtopics that could be investigated alongside your topic? Jot notes about your ideas. Once you're done reading, look at your notes. Are they substantial enough to form the backbone for a paper? If not, what other topics could work as centers for investigation?
2. **Perform a close reading of the first and last poems / stanzas in the chapbook.** Thinking about the focus of your paper, how do the first and last poems compare? Is there an arc that the chapbook takes between those poems? Are the differences and similarities worth commenting on, and if not, where in the chapbook would you turn to for investigation instead?
3. **Read back through the series and look for places where your topic seems the most relevant.** How does the treatment of your focus element differ from poem to poem? Are there any clear patterns? Which poems and passages provide specific textual examples relevant to your focus area?
4. **Settle on a thesis for your paper.** Now that you've investigated the text in regards to one area of focus, you should have an idea about the sort of claim you can make regarding that focus. Your thesis should answer the following question: **How does Yoon treat (insert area of focus here), and how does that affect the meaning and function of the chapbook as a whole?** Make sure to craft a thesis that can be clearly defended using the textual evidence you've begun to collect.
1. **Structure and outline your essay by collecting then organizing textual evidence.** Once you have your thesis, comb the chapbook for evidence that supports it. Organize that evidence into subpoints that back up your main point. Make sure to adjust your points to be as convincing and unified as they can be. If a piece of evidence doesn't relate that well to your overall point, discard it. If this happens continuously with your evidence, it may be time to slightly alter your thesis. Remember: you're aiming to collect enough evidence to provide backup for your thesis; you don't need to prove why all other

interpretations are wrong (or even inferior) in order to defend your own. Just aim to provide at least one piece of evidence for every point you make over the course of your essay.

5. **Write the essay.** Using your outline as a roadmap, draft the essay. Give yourself the flexibility to go back and look for more evidence when you come up with new ideas, but try to stick with your outline to make your draft as clear and focused as possible. Try not to worry too much about phrasing and editing while writing; that's what the next step is for.
6. **Revise the essay.** In addition to using a spell check and reading back through the essay for errors, use read-aloud and peer editing to get a more thorough, distanced perspective on your work.
7. **Turn in the essay** and pat yourself on the back. Good luck!

#### **Assignment Rubric:**

<b>Presence of a strong, clear thesis:</b>	_____ / 15
<b>Provision of relevant evidence:</b>	_____ / 25
<b>Analysis &amp; defense of evidence:</b>	_____ / 35
<b>Structure:</b>	_____ / 15
<b>Grammar &amp; Mechanics:</b>	_____ / 10
<b>Total:</b>	_____ / 100

## Creative Project: *Ordinary Misfortunes*

*Ordinary Misfortunes* cohesively melds primary source information and personal narrative. For this project, you'll attempt to do the same by selecting, then researching a topic before attempting to write poems informed by said research. Your ultimate product will be a mini-chapbook or long poem of at least eight pages in length. When you turn in this project, it must include the following materials:

1. An annotated bibliography complete with at least five correctly-cited sources in MLA format. Each source should be accompanied by a paragraph's worth of information.
2. A statement of purpose that reviews your overall goals in writing the collection and cites two specific examples of where and how that purpose is achieved.
3. Your eight to twelve page collection, complete with a title page (not included in page count).

Each poem can deal with either the historical event in isolation, your reflection on history/a demonstration of history seeping into a present event, or both. However, **at least one poem must address both** in the manner of "News" by Emily Jungmin Yoon. This assignment is designed to give you maximum creative freedom while still pushing you to stretch your skills as a researcher and writer.

Before you turn in your collection, make sure to proofread and, if at all possible, have a peer read over your work for their input. You want as few mistakes cluttering up the reading experience as possible. Attention to visual presentation is highly encouraged to make for a cohesive, powerful collection. Best of luck!

**Collection Content:** \_\_\_\_\_ / 55

Meets Length and Form Requirements: \_\_\_\_\_ / 10

Integration of Research: \_\_\_\_\_ / 20

Poetry Effort & Polish: \_\_\_\_\_ / 25

**Other Material Content:** \_\_\_\_\_ / 40

Annotated Bibliography \_\_\_\_\_ / 25

Explanation of Process \_\_\_\_\_ / 15

**Overall Grammar & Mechanics:** \_\_\_\_\_ / 5

**Total:** \_\_\_\_\_ / 100