

The Speaker & Other Voices

Target Academic Level: College & Beyond

Lesson Overview:

After reading the collection *Slick Like Dark* by Meg Wade, students will look at how Wade utilizes outside voices in her poetry. Examples of this will be found in the following poems: “Lady of the South”, “The Defense”, “Hallelujah Holler Asylum”, “Field Notes”, and “Arrested Empire”.

Before Lecture:

Have students briefly look over the poems “Lady of the South”, “The Defense”, “Hallelujah Holler Asylum”, “Field Notes”, and “Arrested Empire”, paying close attention to the addition of voices outside of the speaker’s in these poems.

Lecture:

Equivalent to the narrator in fiction, the speaker of a poem is very important, as they offer the reader all the necessary information and images. Unlike fiction and other prose forms, many poems will only have one voice: the voice of the speaker. However, in Wade’s collection *Slick Like Dark*, several poems include lines that come from voices outside of the speaker. This addition can serve many purposes in a poem, such as creating a more well-rounded and alive world that the reader can see the speaker as speaking from.

- In the poem, “Lady of the South”, Wade utilizes italics to add nuance to the speaker’s voice.
 - A line from the poem reads: “Please [*stop*] clawing its way out of a mouth.”
 - Because of the difference in formatting around “[*stop*],” Wade signifies that this word is meant to be read differently than the rest of the line, though it is still being said by the same speaker.
 - In this line, “[*stop*]” is meant to be read not in the voice of the speaker as they recall this story, but in the voice of the speaker as they were experiencing the situation described.
 - Therefore, the difference in formatting functions almost like a flashback or a voiceover.
 - Because the situation being described is highly emotional, the variation in voice serves to further heighten the drama and emotional effect on a reader by flashing back to the speaker’s voice in a very difficult moment.
- Similar technique can be observed in the poem “The Defense”.
 - Wade writes: “I cannot be afraid to tell it wrong.../ Here are the facts:/ *I know that I know how to kill* *that makes me an adult.*”

- In these lines, like in “Lady of the South”, Wade offers a variation of the same voice, marked by italics.
- In the un-italicized portion, “I cannot be afraid to tell it wrong,” the reader is being let inside the speaker’s more private thoughts, as they decide how they are going to articulate their story.
- The italicized portion, then, is a different side of the speaker’s voice where they are almost listing the ‘facts’: *I know that I know how to kill,*” and, *“that makes me an adult.”*
- The variation in voice here offers the reader a wider understanding of the speaker, as we are with them in the moments of deliberation where they are deciding how they are going to tell their side of the story. In this way, the speaker becomes more real and alive to the reader.
- In the poem “Hallelujah Holler Asylum” italics are used to signify the introduction of a voice outside of the reader.
 - For example, take the lines, “I need to know if God belongs within a body./ *What kind of question is that?-*”
 - The majority of the poem is in the voice of the speaker, so the reader knows that the un-italicized portions, including the line, “I need to know if God belongs within a body,” are the thoughts/words of the speaker.
 - Therefore, when italics are introduced, like in the line, “*What kind of a question is that?*” we know that the voice is now different from the speaker’s.
 - The voice talking back to the speaker helps to show how the speaker interacts with the world/people of the world that they exist in, thus serving to make the speaker more alive as a character.
 - In these lines in particular, the outside voice saying, “*What kind of a question is that?*” tells the reader a lot about how others react and interact with the speaker. This question, for example, signifies that the speaker is being shamed for things that they think and say. In this way, the addition of multiple voices allows for a deeper understanding of the speaker.
- In the poem “Arrested Empire”, Wade also uses italics to signify the introduction of a voice outside of the speaker.
 - This can be seen in the lines: “The night filled with the sound of living room songs sung by everyone/ I’ve ever loved and me/ smiling so much I’m told to put my teeth away--,” answered by, “*Girl* *you’re grinning like a butcher’s dog.*” “*Girl* *you got vinyl-shine eyes.*”
 - In the un-italicized lines, the speaker establishes themselves by speaking in the first person: “The night filled with the sound of living room songs sung by everyone/ I’ve ever loved and me/ smiling so much I’m told to put my teeth away.”

- Therefore, when the italicized voice enters and speaks in the second person, the reader knows that these voices are separate.
- Because the speaker establishes who they are with by saying, “songs sung by everyone/ I’ve ever loved and me/ smiling so much I’m told to put my teeth away,” the italicized voice, then, is contextualized as someone that the speaker knows and loves.
- The incorporation of the voice of someone known and loved by the speaker provides the reader with a more developed and lifelike speaker.
- In the poem “Field Notes”, Wade brings in a voice outside of the speaker’s, though it is not marked by italics.
 - In this poem, the outside voice is recalled by the speaker in the second person in the lines: “You told me, ‘you have to be tough with fruit/ trees, don’t let them out stay/ their welcome.’,” and, “You once told me I felt pain so deeply you needed/ to build a bridge over it, wide/ enough for us both to stand on.”
 - The speaker recalling the words of this other person demonstrates that they and their words are of great importance to the reader.
 - The fact that these words are recalled by the reader instead of spoken or quoted directly from the person who said them emphasizes the fact that they are not with the speaker, and that they are only there in the speaker’s memory.
 - This emphasis on their absence along with their implied importance to the speaker adds emotional gravity to the poem.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. Did you find that the inclusion of voices outside of the speaker helped you better know and understand the speaker? How so?
2. In *Slick Like Dark*, how did you see the addition of multiple voices working? Are the voices outside of the speaker necessary? Why/why not?
3. How does the use of outside voices compare to the use of dialog in prose like fiction? How is it similar in function? Different in function?
4. What are times where you feel that bringing outside voices into a poem might be especially helpful? Are there instances where you think it might not be helpful and might even hinder the poem?

Writing Prompts:

1. “Lady of the South” uses variations in formatting to include the speaker’s voice in the present and in retrospect. Think of a situation from the past-- either your own past or an imagined past-- that you might want to comment on now. Use the voice of your past or imagined past self and the voice of your present self as two separate voices that interact in the poem.

2. The poem “Arrested Empire” includes italicized lines in the voice of people that the speaker loves. Think of something that someone you love-- a grandparent, parent, friend, teacher, a favorite writer or musician, etc.-- has said that has really impacted you, or that you really hold dear. Write a poem that uses what they have said as either the poem’s opening or closing lines.
3. In “Hallelujah Holler Asylum”, Wade uses outside voices as a way to demonstrate shame they feel for thinking or feeling a certain way. Think of an outside voice that has made you experience shame-- this can be a more direct voice, like a family member or authority figure, or a broader voice like a societal norm/belief. Use this voice in a poem that communicates how this voice has made you feel.
4. The poem “Field Notes” recalls a relationship the speaker had in the past using the second person. Write a poem in second person in which you speak to someone that has made a great impact on you-- positive or negative. In some of the lines in your poem, recall things that they have said in the second person as Wade does.

The Body in Poetry

Target Academic Level: College & Beyond

Lesson Overview:

After reading *Slick Like Dark* by Meg Wade, students will discuss the effect of using the body in poetry, paying close attention to the poems “Lady of the South”, “The Defense”, “Hallelujah Holler Asylum”, and “Almost Refrain”.

Before Lecture:

Make sure students have read the poems “Lady of the South”, “The Defense”, “Hallelujah Holler Asylum”, and “Almost Refrain” by Wade before coming to class.

Lecture:

Entwined in histories of trauma and pain, the poems of *Slick Like Dark* demonstrate a deep interest in the body. Wade uses the body both literally and figuratively throughout the collection, describing the body’s movement through different circumstances, as well as the sensations created in the body by different emotional states. As demonstrated by Wade in *Slick Like Dark*, references to the body can serve many purposes in a poem, and can have a great effect on the poem’s reader.

- To begin, take Wade’s poem, “Lady of the South”.
 - Wade writes: “Body flung limp in the basement closet/ his hammer no/ his fists no/ his palms burnt ribs.”
 - The detached tone of the speaker referring to themselves as ‘body’ instead of ‘my body’ and ‘ribs’ instead of ‘my ribs’, for example, demonstrates the experience of dissociation in the speaker. This same detached, disconnected tone continues throughout the poem.
 - Although the speaker seems to be detached from their body, the comparison made in these lines of ‘his’ fists to hammers implies extreme pain that the image of the hammer allows the reader to picture and imagine.
 - In the line, “his palms burnt ribs,” the word ‘burnt’ placed with ‘ribs’ again allows the reader to locate this feeling in their own body.
 - Similarly, in the line, “skull bashed against a shelf,” Wade uses specificity to create an image that the reader can imagine, and imagine experiencing.
 - In the line, “Please [*stop*] clawing its way out of a mouth,” Wade involves the reader’s body through figurative language.
 - The word ‘clawing’ creates a certain mood/tone; a feeling of eeriness that is felt viscerally in the speaker’s body.

- Additionally, the use of the word ‘clawing’ placed in the mouth creates another bodily experience that the reader can feel and can imagine experiencing.
- Although the speaker in “Lady of the South” is seemingly disassociated from their body, the language of the poem still remains in the body. By marrying different images with different specific body parts, Wade creates bodily sensations in the reader that intensify the experience of reading “Lady of the South”.
- In “The Defense” Wade also uses the body both figuratively and literally.
 - In the line, “Get down on my knees and pray,” the image of getting down on one’s knees creates a sensation in the reader’s mind and body that anchors them in the poem.
 - In the lines, “There’s a thing in my chest/ a punch table I’d like to swallow,” Wade uses the body figuratively.
 - Here, Wade uses sensations in the body in order to communicate the feeling of a certain emotion in the body.
 - The use of the words ‘chest’ and ‘swallow’ draw attention to certain parts of the body, and to the feeling of particular functions in the body.
 - Wade anchors the reader by mentioning the chest, then by creating the image of swallowing a punch table, Wade offers an image and bodily experience that the reader can imagine.
 - By using the speaker’s body in figurative language, Wade creates the opportunity for the reader to feel into the emotion being communicated.
- The body is also used in the poem “Hallelujah Holler Asylum”, primarily through the use of sensory details.
 - For example, the lines: “Folded my hands in prayer too many times to forget/ the deep crushed velvet in the backseat of a stranger’s Chrysler, lips/ pressed against eyelids/ lips pressed against everywhere, a stranger’s thumb/ in the corner of my eye trying to pop it out/ a peeled grape.”
 - Here, in the description of the speaker’s hands folded to the detail of the crushed velvet, the reader is put into the speaker’s body.
 - This feeling of being in the body of the speaker continues as Wade describes, “lips/ pressed against eyelids,” and, “lips pressed against everywhere.”
 - Since the reader is already in the body of the speaker by the time we get to the lines, “a stranger’s thumb/ in the corner of my eye trying to pop it out,” the reader cannot evade the pain, just as the speaker couldn’t.
 - Wade also includes pain and the body in “Hallelujah Holler Asylum” in the line, “our necks and how easily they snap.”
 - By bringing the reader’s awareness to a particular part of the body (the neck) then having this body part be injured, Wade again creates a physical

experience for the reader that helps amplify the speaker's painful experience.

- In the poem "Almost Refrain", Wade uses the body and imagery of the body in instances of figurative language.
 - For example, the lines: "The whole messy thing/ unraveled like a horse/ belly, split open/ and spilled."
 - In this simile, the body of a horse is used to demonstrate the messiness, discomfort, and pain of a situation by presenting the reader with the image of a horse being sliced open.
 - Another example would be the lines: "my throat/ falls right out of my body."
 - In these lines, Wade uses figurative language in order to describe how a certain emotion experienced by the speaker feels in their body.
 - By using the body to help communicate the experience of an emotion, the reader can better experience this feeling alongside the speaker.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. What are some other instances in *Slick Like Dark* that you noticed an interest or emphasis on the body? What effect did these instances have on your experience of reading the poems that they're in?
2. Here, the emphasis on the body works well with the content, being about bodily trauma. What other types of content might lend themselves to an emphasis on the body in literal and figurative language in a poem? Is there any kind of content or context where you think that this wouldn't be as successful?
3. What other techniques can be used by a poet that is wanting to create a visceral, bodily experience for their readers? What have you observed in your reading in and out of class?

Writing Prompts:

1. In "Lady of the South", the poem's speaker is disconnected from their body. We know this in the way that they refer to their body as "Body," "skull", etc. Think about a situation in which you felt disconnected from yourself and your body. Use this same technique of not 'owning' your body or claiming it as yours in your poem to help communicate this disassociation to your readers.
2. In "The Defense", Wade grounds the reader in the speaker's body with lines like, "There's a thing in my chest,/ a punch table I'd like to swallow." Use the line, "There's a thing in my chest," as the opening line to a poem. Try to use this line figuratively as Wade does, in order to describe the way an emotional experience feels in the body.
3. In the poem "Hallelujah Holler Asylum", Wade places the reader in the speaker's body by using specific sensory details, like the car's crushed velvet. Think about a place you love to go-- the movies, your friend's house, etc., or a place you hate to go, like the

dentist or the hospital, and use sensory details that place the reader in the speaker's body in order to experience why you love or hate this place.

4. In "Almost Refrain", Wade describes how an emotion feels in the body using figurative language like, "my throat/ falls right out of my body." Write a poem where you describe how a particular emotion feels in the body using figurative language like Wade does.

Religious Themes in Poetry Collections

Target Academic Level: College & Beyond

Lesson Overview:

After reading *Slick Like Dark* by Meg Wade, students will think about and discuss the effect of using religion as a theme in poetry, using the poems “Hallelujah Holler Asylum”, “Young Cotton”, “Valley Psalm”, and “Bleached Acoustics” for reference.

Before Lecture:

Open up a brief discussion about the use of religion and Christianity as a theme in *Slick Like Dark*, steering students towards the following poems: “Hallelujah Holler Asylum”, “Young Cotton”, “Valley Psalm”, and “Bleached Acoustics”.

Lecture:

Being that poetry is a distilled form, poets often reach towards different techniques of language in order to offer the reader a complete understanding and experience of what is being written about. One way that poets reach the reader, even in a small amount of space, is by bringing in images and ideas that carry their own implications and connotations. Different ideas and themes carry different tones and undertones-- for example, if a poet were to use an extended metaphor using imagery of a carnival, the tone of the poem would be altered by the carnival imagery. In *Slick Like Dark*, one theme that shows up throughout the collection is religion and Christianity. This theme is used by Wade to expand the reader’s understanding of the poems’ and the speaker’s inner and outer world.

- Throughout the collection, Wade makes references to the speaker’s relationship to religion.
 - In “Hallelujah Holler Asylum” she writes: “I learned more about sanctuary from nakedness than I have in any cathedral.”
 - The speaker here implies a fraught relationship with religion, and a faith that was once stronger than it is in the moment they are now speaking from.
 - The fraught relationship and the ‘fall’ from a once closer relationship with faith helps illuminate the intensity of the situation and emotional circumstances that the speaker is currently in.
 - Another instance in the poem that speaks to the speaker’s relationship with religion is: “Folded my hands in prayer too many times to forget/ the deep crushed velvet in the backseat of a stranger’s Chrysler.”
 - In these lines, we see that even in their questioning and distance from religion, the speaker is still attempting to pray.

- In this context, the prayer becomes an act of desperation, again further illuminating the speaker's current emotional state.
- In "Hallelujah Holler Asylum", Wade also writes: "I need to know if God belongs within a body."
 - In these lines, they admit to having questions about their God and their religion.
 - This questioning demonstrates the speaker's mental state of confusion and uncertainty to the reader.
- In the lines, "so there's a vengeful and a saving God in fucking," and "Goddamnit, Christ has everything to do with this:/ authority of the stripped body salvation," the speaker attempts to come to an understanding of God, again illuminating their agonizing uncertainty.
 - In words like 'vengeful' and 'Goddamnit', the speaker implies an animosity towards their God.
 - This animosity, again, speaks towards their current mental and emotional state.
- In the poem "Young Cotton", Wade uses stories and references from the Bible as a way to make sense of their own life.
 - An example of this would be the lines: "A sinful woman washed Christ's feet,/ dried them with her hair, imagine/ all the ways a pair of country knees/ can worship their way home," and, "Deliverance begins with the body/ and sweeps outward. Please don't/ go to Heaven alone."
 - In the turn to religion to make sense of their own life and emotions, the speaker communicates a sense of being lost and unsettled.
- In the poems "Valley Psalm" and "Bleached Acoustics", Wade uses religious language and imagery in figurative language.
 - This can be seen in the lines, "Doubt silent as anonymous/ gods at a kitchen table," from "Valley Psalm".
 - In the speaker's continued mentioning of god, the reader sees that the speaker in this collection is in a place in their life where they are reckoning with religion, and their relationship with religion is shifting.
 - The same can be said of the lines, "My hands/ on the headboard no longer/ a steeple, but a bomb," from "Bleached Acoustics".
 - Here, Wade uses images to show the shift that the speaker is feeling within themselves, thus communicating their current emotional/mental state to the reader.

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. How does the continued use of religion/religious themes in *Slick Like Dark* change your understanding of the collection's narrative? Of the collection's speaker?
2. What about the content of *Slick Like Dark* lends itself well to the themes of religion and faith?
3. How does Wade use religion in order to communicate the speaker's relationship with themselves? Why/how does the theme of religion allow Wade to better communicate this to the reader?
4. Where else did you notice themes, language, and images of religion in this collection? What effect did this have on your experience of the given poem, or the collection as a whole?

Writing Prompts:

1. Wade uses different stories and images from the Bible in order to better communicate the world of the speaker. Write a poem where you use a story or image from the Bible figuratively to speak about a situation in your own life.
2. Think about a situation in your life that either brought you closer to or further from religion and faith. Write about this situation using language and images from your religion to help communicate how you felt during this instance.
3. In "Hallelujah Holler Asylum", Wade writes, "Desire is a miracle." Write a poem in which Wade's line appears as your last line.
4. In "Hallelujah Holler Asylum", Wade's speaker wonders: "I need to know if God belongs within a body." Write a poem that either begins or ends with, "I need to know if God belongs..." finishing the line however you see fit.