

Poem Series

Academic Level: High School, College, and Beyond.

Lesson Overview:

After reading *April at the Ruins* by Lawrence Raab, students will read “In the Earliest Days,” “False Dawn,” “A Children’s Story,” “My Expedition,” “Pastoral,” “The Weird Museum,” “You Never Actually Die When You Die in A Dream,” “A Long Train Ride to the Sea,” “Moon and Sun.”

Lecture 1:

Society has approached knowing about the relationship between the identity and the self in many ways. Some use “social identity theory” and “self-categorization theory.” Social identity theory shows that individuals usually prefer people in their own group in relation to other groups. This is because individuals gain support and self-esteem from their group, so they are motivated to stay within their group. Unlike social identity theory, self-categorization theory imagines the self in different ways (personal, intergroup, and interspecies) and it shows an identity that forms as people constantly move between an individual and a social identity.

Both social identity theory and self-categorization theory have been useful when trying to understand why people think of their own group more favorably than other groups. The theories also help to explain how the self is redefined within groups and the stereotypes associated with social categories. Both theories aim to identify and understand how groups distinguish

themselves from others. It also seeks to understand why feelings of fear influence feelings towards other groups and how these emotions bring individuals together in times of uncertainty.

Classroom Activity:

Students will work in groups to identify words or phrases in two of the above poems that relate to social identity theory.

Lecture 2:

“Home” as a concept gives people a sense of security that functions effectively through its ability to combine a “material environment with a deeply emotional set of meanings relating to permanence and continuity.” People maintain their security when their imagined home can give them consistency in their social and material environments. Within the imagined home, people can enact human experiences under their own control. This is the spatial context of homes. People feel as though they have total control over everything in their lives because they don’t feel the pressure of societal standards that exist outside their home. That is, unless these rules of society are ones that people value. Even so, it is up to people to decide what they express in their own home. The foundations of identity are unique to individual experiences and circumstances.

Édouard Glissant, in *Errantry, Exile*, gives an explanation as to this

In the course of this journey, identity, at least as far as the Western peoples who made up the great majority of voyagers, discoverers and conquerors were concerned, consolidates itself implicitly at first (‘my root is the strongest’) and then is explicitly exported as a value (‘a person’s worth is determined by his

root'). The conquered or visited peoples are thus forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror. A tragic variation of a search for identity. For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders. whereas the Western nation is first of all an 'opposite,' for colonized peoples identity will be primarily 'opposed to'--that is, a limitation from the beginning (16).

Glissant's perspective tries to avoid using generalizations to describe nations or groups of people. "Generalization is totalitarian: from the world it chooses one side of the reports, one set of ideas, which it sets apart from others and tries to impose by exporting as a model. The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it" (10). Glissant begins with a definition. Identity is closely tied to one's "root", origin, and land. As a result, culture and civilizations only existed when people were connected to one another by opposites that were created in the opposition to the other because culture "pitted citizen against barbarian" (10).

Classroom Activity:

Students will individually assess one of the poems above and draw images that convey core concepts or imagery of the poem.

Students will then present their images in small groups of three and combine their images to form a coherent narrative.

Lecture 3:

The nature of modern society is influenced by anonymity and alienation. People's lives, as a result, have become malleable. People, to evade feelings of alienation and the sense of living a meaningless life, channel an imagined past by utilizing cultural reference points and recreating significant symbols that represent a better time to regain security within the Self. This idea implies security and its relation to the Self comes into being through an internal process, both individual and communal. Those who use familiar symbols to reinforce security can actualize their beliefs, to make them factual. Thus, they can apply their interpretation of the truth to outside groups and communities in order to define them. In an effort to establish itself, the Self utilizes language to emphasize difference to reinforce its identity.

Classroom Activity:

Students will write an original poem from the point of view of the man in "You Never Actually Die When You Die in A Dream" using only words from the original poem.

Poem Excerpts to Consider:

From "In the Earliest Days":

"death and chance

were brothers, and suffering didn't turn anyone

into a better person.

What happened happened. The sun vanished

and returned.

For a while everybody
was more afraid than usual.
Perhaps this was a sign.
But of what?"

From "False Dawn":

"And some were troubled
in the false dawn—
had loving God
become too difficult?
Silence enfolded them.
In this way they were like us
as we lie in bed, sleepless,
watching the headlights of cars
slide across the ceiling, remembering when we took our lives for granted."

From "Pastoral":

"Soon it was autumn,
season of endings. Bells were tolling,
which had once meant more
than the slipping of one hour
into the next. I took out my journal

and wrote a few sentences
on the subject of how easily
we are beguiled
by the appearance of things.”

From “You Never Actually Die When You Die in A Dream”:

“Deep in the woods something is always
ready to pounce. Which is why I prefer
a short walk around my cottage,
even if at any moment a crazy man

might stumble out of the bushes
and fix me with his fiery stare, demanding
that I face the truth about sin
and retribution, and how punishment

precedes the crime that deserves it, but not always...”

“I’m not saying this happens every day,
but even the most questionable
revelation confirms my suspicion
that I’ll never be released

from waiting deep in the woods
for something that knows me
to find me—something savage
and sane, like a wolf,

but as cruel as a man,
staring into my eyes, judging
my character,
convinced of my guilt.”

Essay Questions

1. Several poems listed above utilize times of day, like dusk and dawn. In what ways do these signify differences in perspective or trajectory of life.
2. Many poems listed above also feature myths and fables. How do myths within these poems reinforce the idea of the Self in the speaker or emphasize points of difference?
3. In “You Never Actually Die When You Die in A Dream,” the speaker expresses their fear of encountering a figure that is “something savage and sane, like a wolf, but as cruel as a man.” Is this a mirror image of the speaker? How does the speaker’s fear and the “crazy man’s” knowledge inform one another? Does this fear and knowledge compromise the security of the Self?