

DECONSTRUCTING HESTER:
TEACHING HISTORY OF
AMERICAN LITERATURE
AT A JAPANESE WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY

—DORSEY KLEITZ

“But how easy and how hopeless to teach these fine things!”

—*Moby-Dick* (Chapter 68, The Blanket)

Follow the narrow winding bus route from the station for half a mile past noisy pachinko parlors, tiny *yakitori* restaurants, used bookshops selling dog-eared copies of *National Geographic*, and antique shops displaying brown-rimmed *igezara* to the stone wall and iron gate of one of Tokyo's best-known women's universities. Here, for the past twenty-five years, I've made my academic home. The original campus, designed by Antonin Raymond, who arrived with Frank Lloyd Wright in 1919 to build the second incarnation of the Imperial Hotel, is a wonderful collection of Wright-influenced early reinforced concrete buildings. Marrying Western architectural modernism to traditional Japanese aesthetics and building techniques, Raymond is today considered one of the fathers of modern architecture in Japan. His light-filled university classrooms with walls of windows are much preferred to the florescent-lit, poorly ventilated spaces in the newer buildings on campus.

Pass through the gate, under the towering ginko trees, straight ahead across the sunny quadrangle to the *Honkan*, the old library at the heart of the campus decorated with colored tiles and bearing the Latin inscription in large letters incised below the eaves, *Quaequunque Sunt Vera*, taken from the closing of Paul's Letter to the Philippians: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure,

whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Phil. 4.8). Memorable words that Rainer Maria Rilke, not content to simply “think about such things,” condensed and rendered exclamatory in his *Sonnets to Orpheus*: “To praise, that’s it!” The school’s other motto, the less orphic, much bemoaned “Service and Sacrifice,” is cleverly disguised in the attractive triskel-like university symbol of two interlocking “S”s.

Behind and to the left of the *Honkan* looms one of the most recent additions to the campus, Building 23. Here, on the fifth floor, with a view across the pylon-studded Kanto plain toward Mt Fuji and the setting sun, are the offices of the venerable Department of English. While these days many university English departments in Japan serve primarily as in-house English language schools, or indeed have been reinvented as English Language Centers whose responsibilities have been outsourced to private companies, my department, the largest at the university, remains true to its old-fashioned humanistic calling, focusing on teaching American literature, British literature, linguistics, and in a recent bid for relevancy, Cultural Studies. Though we are a diverse group of academics, we generally do not believe that university education is simply preparation for the capitalist labor market. We hold fast, in prelapsarian innocence, to the idea that language and literature should be taught side-by-side as part of a liberal arts education, and that in the consumer-driven 21st century where old can become new overnight, our star will rise again.

In the last office, at the far end of the corridor, early Friday mornings from April to mid-July and again from late September to mid-January, if the distant view of Fuji-san isn’t too distracting, you’ll find me preparing my weekly 9:00–10:30 History of American Literature lecture. With *The Norton Anthology* open on the table, I’m usually scrambling to assemble handouts or queuing up videos for full visual effect. History of American Literature has an average enrollment of about fifty third and fourth year students and is an important class for English majors planning Graduation Essays in American literature. It is, as I teach it, a fairly rigorous chronological survey course carefully tailored to the specific needs of a good Japanese women’s university where students are serious, attentive, polite, energetic,

and often more sophisticated than they might appear. That said, the students' ability in English—and particularly relating to this course, their reading ability—is generally weak, making the careful selection of texts and clear, succinct lectures essential to success.

The walk across campus to the small auditorium where the class meets is a chance to focus my thoughts. The area behind the *Honkan* is a relatively wild tangle of plants under tall evergreens and tulip trees noisy with crows and bul-buls. Snakes occasionally grace the path here and in the evening our resident *tanuki* can sometimes be glimpsed prowling in the undergrowth.

At the first class I pass out and go over the syllabus and give an overview of American geography. The syllabus for each semester is a simple one-page document containing a brief course description, the requirements for the course, and a list of the weekly readings students are responsible for. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* is a necessary evil; unfortunately, there's nothing better. It includes far too much material even in the so-called "Shorter Edition" we use, is too heavy to easily carry on the long daily commute many students endure, costs far more than most students can easily afford, and is physically unpleasant to read. To convince students to buy it, I humor them and lie. Dragging it to and from class, I explain, will help keep them in shape; it contains such an impressive array of texts—all of *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Waste Land*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*—that they'll never have to buy another American literature textbook; and they can enjoy it in their personal libraries for years to come, even pass it on to their children when they go off to university. I also have handouts for almost every class that add supplementary visual and written information.

There are three basic course requirements for History of American Literature: attendance/attentiveness, a final examination, and a five-page academic essay due at the last class. The value of attending and paying attention is obvious. Since the examination is based on material we cover in class, students won't be able to pass unless they come every week and take good notes. The ninety-minute, long-answer examination takes place during the examination period at the end of the semester. I give the students

ten passages we've studied during the semester and ask them to identify the title and author of eight of them. Then, as time allows, they must briefly comment on whatever seems most significant or representative about the passage, the author, or the text the passage comes from. In their answers they should try to include information about the literary period and the historical context. Even if they can't identify the passage, they should be able to say something intelligent about it based on the content. There are no surprises or trick questions on the examination; it's drawn completely from material I've presented in class. I stress that this course isn't a writing course so there's no need to worry too much about spelling and grammar; however, if their writing ability is so poor that I can't understand what they're trying to say, obviously their grade will suffer. The five-page essay can be on any text we read during the semester or any other text written during the time period covered during the term, as long as I approve it. Cross-cultural topics linking American literature and Japan are always welcome. Because all senior English majors are required to write a 20–25-page Graduation Essay in English, a central element in our English program is academic writing that takes students from the sentence level to the fine points of MLA style. I tell the students to use all the academic writing skills they're learning in Junior Composition, but I remind them, again, that this isn't a composition course so they shouldn't expect me to work through various drafts of the essay with them or to heavily mark the final version they submit. Ideally, the essay should be an exploration of something in American literature that genuinely interests the student and possibly something she could develop further in her Graduation Essay.

In introducing the list of weekly assignments I tell students we'll be "slow reading" some of the most important texts in American literature. Indeed, slow reading is the main work—the heavy lifting—of the course. Although all the students who take the course have previously completed two required general reading courses, their ability to read literature is limited. Slow reading is wonderful for language learners because they're generally reading slowly anyway. But slow reading isn't necessarily slow; rather, it is deep reading or close reading that emphasizes the comprehension and appreciation of the ideas the words and sentences present. In *The Gutenberg*

Elegies (1995) Sven Birkerts traces the roots of slow reading to a pre-Gutenberg era, before books were disposable commodities, when people who could read read the same book—the Bible, for example—over and over, carefully paying attention to nuance and meaning. More recently, David Mikics’s *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age* (2013) and Thomas Newkirk’s *The Art of Slow Reading* (2011) put slow reading in a popular pedagogical context, identifying such slow reading practices as reading aloud. I’m a great believer in reading aloud and listening to texts being read. Thus, I tell students that during the semester, as part of our slow reading, I’ll read aloud or play recordings of all the poetry assigned as well as significant passages from the prose. In addition, I encourage students to read the texts aloud when they’re preparing for class. The physical act of forming the words in their mouths and making the appropriate English sounds will give them a more intimate experience of the text and ultimately improve their language fluency. Poetry, especially, is directly connected to music, so reading poems aloud can help students acquire the characteristic rhythms of spoken English. Here I take the opportunity to briefly mention the importance of the oral tradition of poetry and discuss poetry as a distilled repository of ideas and meanings that are shared across time and cultures. I emphasize to the students that if they haven’t heard a text in class, it won’t be on the examination, which gives them added incentive to come each week. Not all texts are better understood and appreciated by slow reading, but most of the texts covered in this course are. As part of the course introduction I review the traditional elements of literary texts—setting, character, plot, theme, and symbol—that they’ll need to keep in mind as they read, and tell them that reading for the ideas is hard, even for native English speakers, but ultimately it’s why we read and what makes reading worthwhile. In addition, because the students are not native English speakers, and because some of them may be more interested in linguistics than literature, in this course I try to pay special attention to the different language and stylistic characteristics of the texts we read.

The weekly assignments necessarily reflect my own interests but are selected and presented with an eye to engaging the curiosity of the students and thus increasing their motivation to learn. If students are motivated, the

more mechanical, rote language-learning aspects of the course become secondary while the desire to understand the literary and historical content increases. One way to do this is to connect the readings to Japan. For example, during the first weeks when we study the captivity narratives of John Smith and Mary Rowlandson, I remind the students about the Japanese who were abducted by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 1980s. The total number is still not known, but all of those abducted have stories about their lives as captives—captivity narratives—whether told or not. Thus captivity narratives are not simply part of what we study in American literature, there are Japanese captivity narratives as well. Indeed, they occur throughout the world wherever people are held against their will.

One thing I do not formally teach in this course is literary theory. Though I want the students to think critically, I do not teach them to become literary critics. I am primarily interested in giving them a firm foundation in American literature—and to a lesser degree, history—that they can build on later in more advanced courses where theory is taught. On the other hand, I announce on the first day that my approach is generally feminist and environmentalist. The course highlights women as writers and characters, and explores themes dealing with women, and it does so in the context of Mother Nature and the Green World. Although the situation is changing, many Japanese young women have only vague, often negative, ideas about feminism that go back to the more radical feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. One of my responsibilities as an American teaching at a relatively conservative Japanese women's university is to raise the students' consciousness about feminist issues in Japan by examining related issues in the United States and elsewhere. And while environmental awareness is in some everyday ways more developed in Japan than in the United States, the tremendous scale of the American physical environment and the important role size, in all its ramifications, has played in the development of the American character needs repeated emphasis. Charles Olson's famous opening to *Call Me Ishmael* is an effective way to focus students' attention on the vastness of the American landscape: "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America from Folsom Cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy." Using this as a start-

ing point, with maps in hands, I wrap up the first class by identifying the main geographical features of the United States, moving from east to west. I point out that our year begins with the arrival of John Smith on the east coast of a completely unknown continent, inhabited by untold numbers of mysterious indigenous people and exotic animals, and ends, after having followed Huck and Jim's adventures traveling down the Mississippi River through the heart of nineteenth-century America, roughly four hundred years later with Raymond Carver on the west coast of the same continent, but a continent that's now been thoroughly explored and Google-mapped and, for better or worse, utterly transformed by the carefully documented ethnic mix of the roughly 320 million Americans who call it home.

What follows is a sample list of readings we cover during the two semesters along with brief explanations of how I treat some of the texts in my weekly lectures. My comments are not fossilized truths on how to teach the texts, but merely outline strategies I have found useful over the years.

Spring Semester

Week 1: Semester introduction; geography of the United States

Week 2: Native Americans; Colonial America; John Smith, from *The General History of Virginia* and film excerpts from Walt Disney, *Pocahontas*; Puritanism; William Bradford, "The Mayflower Compact," "The First Thanksgiving"

Week 3: Anne Bradstreet, "To My Dear and Loving Husband," "Here Follow Some Verses upon the Burning of our House"; Mary Rowlandson, from *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration* and film excerpts from *Dances with Wolves*

Week 4: Benjamin Franklin, from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*; Thomas Jefferson "Declaration of Independence"; slavery

Week 5: Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America"; Washington Irving, "Rip Van Winkle"; William Cullen Bryant, "To a Waterfowl"

Week 6: Romanticism; Ralph Waldo Emerson, from "Nature"; Henry David Thoreau, from *Walden* ("Economy," "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," "Conclusion")

Week 7: Edgar Allan Poe, "The Raven" (CD)

Week 8: Edgar Allan Poe, “Ligeia” (CD)

Week 9: Margaret Fuller, from “The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men, Woman versus Women”

Week 10: Herman Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivener” and film excerpts

Week 11: Herman Melville continued, “Bartleby the Scrivener” and film excerpts

Week 12: The American Civil War; Harriet Beecher Stowe, from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, (chapter 7, “The Mother’s Struggle”) and film excerpts

Week 13: Walt Whitman, “I Hear America Singing,” “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” selections from “Song of Myself”

Week 14: Emily Dickinson, #269 (Wild nights), #591 (I heard a fly buzz), #1108 (The bustle in a house), #124 (Safe in their alabaster chambers)

Week 15: Course conclusion and review for examination

Fall Semester

Week 1: Semester introduction, spring semester review

Week 2: Mark Twain, from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (chapters I and XV) and film excerpts

Week 3: Mark Twain, from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (chapters XXXI and Chapter the Last) and film excerpts

Week 4: Henry James, from *Daisy Miller* (first half) and film excerpts

Week 5: Henry James, from *Daisy Miller* (second half) and film excerpts

Week 6: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Week 7: Kate Chopin, “The Story of an Hour”

Week 8: Modernism; Edwin Arlington Robinson, “Richard Cory”

Week 9: T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, and film excerpts; Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken,” “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening”

Week 10: Ernest Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants”; E. E. Cummings, “a(l),”

Week 11: The Harlem Renaissance; Langston Hughes, “Mother to Son” and film excerpts; Elizabeth Bishop, “The Moose” and film excerpts

Week 12: Beat Writers; Allen Ginsberg, “Howl” (CD)

Week 13: Joyce Carol Oates, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

Week 14: William Stafford, “Traveling through the Dark”; Raymond Carv-

er, “Cathedral”

Week 15: Course conclusion and review for examination

History of American Literature presents a great opportunity to examine the intertextual richness of a large body of work. Thus, whenever possible, I point out the myriad connections between materials we cover that can create meaningful patterns and motivate students. In addition, to enhance the readings from the Norton and break-up my lectures, I include relevant audio-visual material whenever possible. An example of this comes during the second week with our first pairing of text and film: the story of John Smith and Pocahontas found in Smith’s *General History of Virginia*, and Walt Disney’s animated, *Pocahontas*. Many students are familiar with of the Disney film, but few realize that it’s based on one of the earliest stories in American literature. Smith calls his account a “history,” which students assume means that it’s factual. When I point out, however, that there’s little evidence to corroborate the details of his captivity and romance with Pocahontas, they begin to see that “history” is a slippery term. It’s a good lesson to learn at the start of a course calling itself a “history” of American literature. In dealing with this early captivity narrative, I read aloud and explain the main points in the text, then compare them to relevant scenes in the film. Smith is quick to promote himself in his third-person account while Disney promotes a collection of national myths. This is also our first opportunity to talk about Native Americans and Mother Nature, who’s personified as wise Grandmother Willow in the film. I explain how the ancestors of the Native Americans traveled from Siberia, across the Bering land bridge, and down through North America about 20,000 years ago, and how DNA testing has revealed a genetic link between Native Americans and the Japanese. Disney also includes an entertaining lesson for language learners: when Smith first confronts Pocahontas in the forest and they find they can’t communicate, suddenly Pocahontas remembers Grandmother Willow’s advice—“Listen with your heart, you will understand”—and breaks into fluent English. It’s a wonderful moment on film; if only real-life language learning were so easy.

The third week gives us a chance to look at women in colonial America. Anne Bradstreet’s poems, “To My Dear and Loving Husband” and

“Here Follow Some Verses upon the Burning of our House” reveal a passionate wife and sentimental homemaker in subtle conflict with her Puritan religion. Without going into elaborate detail about Puritanism, during my lecture on colonial literature, I encourage the students to read the Bible. I explain that a familiarity with its key stories will increase their appreciation of not only American literature but also Western culture in general. Mary Rowlandson’s harrowing captivity narrative links back to John Smith’s experience, but this time told from a female Puritan point of view. Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves*, filmed in the stunning landscape of the American West, gives a visual representation of a fictional captivity story. *Stands with a Fist* is a white woman who was captured as a child and raised by Sioux Indians. Like Disney’s Pocahontas, *Stands with a Fist* confronts the language barrier between the white newcomers and the Native Americans. When John Dunbar is invited to the Sioux village, *Stands with a Fist* is forced to summon up the little English she can remember to bridge the communication gap between Dunbar and Kicking Bird, his Sioux host.

Weeks 4 and 5 focus on the founding of the United States, the institution of slavery and, in the poetry of William Cullen Bryant, bring the semester to the brink of Romanticism. Phillis Wheatley, purchased by John Wheatley in Boston as a slave for his wife, was the first African American poet. “On Being Brought from Africa to America” is a curious short poem expressing gratitude for the opportunity slavery gave her to become an educated Christian. Many students can easily identify with William Cullen Bryant’s “To a Waterfowl” since the poem was inspired by Bryant’s youthful job hunting anxieties. In the poem, Bryant takes heart from a migrating waterfowl he observes one evening that seems to be guided by the mysterious power of Nature.

Week 6 is devoted to Emerson and Thoreau. For Emerson we read the famous “transparent eyeball” passage from *Nature* and discuss the general turn from Christianity to the Green World and the new concern with human nature. I approach Thoreau through the twelfth-century Japanese writer and hermit, Kamo no Chomei whose *Hojoki* is sometimes compared to *Walden* in its emphasis on simplicity, and whose name in Chinese characters means roughly, “Duck’s Song,” reminding us of Bryant’s “To a Wa-

terfowl” and the laughing loon Thoreau pursues one October day on Walden Pond. Both Emerson and Thoreau are somewhat difficult for the students since their writing generally lacks narrative action. Understanding the ideas they discuss, however, is essential to understanding American culture.

The Gothic world of Edgar Allan Poe is the topic for weeks 7 and 8. Poe is well known in Japan through the work of Taro Hirai who wrote Poe-inflected mystery stories under the penname Edogawa Rampo. “The Raven” and “Ligeia” both deal with the narrator’s response to the death of a beautiful woman, a theme the students are attracted to despite the density of Poe’s style. The poem works especially well when I remind students about the many crows haunting our campus. “Ligeia” also opens the way for a discussion of doubles and connects nicely to Shusaku Endo’s *Scandal*, a modern Japanese Gothic novel about a well-respected writer and the sinister double that torments him by his scandalous activities in the seamy neighborhoods of Tokyo.

In the ninth week we read excerpts from Margaret Fuller’s “The Great Lawsuit,” one of the major documents of nineteenth-century American feminism. Because we are at a women’s university, I point out Fuller’s concern with education for women. I tell them Fuller inspired Nathaniel Hawthorne’s powerful female character, Hester Prynne of *Scarlet Letter* fame. To find out more about this seminal creation in American literature I encourage the students to take one of the advanced courses offered by the department. Poe refers to Fuller’s “unmitigated radicalism” which raises the questions, how is she radical and how are current women’s issues different from those in Fuller’s day?

Weeks 10 and 11 are devoted to Herman Melville’s story, “Bartleby the Scrivener.” Though all the characters are men, this tale of daily life in the urban workplace strikes a chord with the female students, most of whom have part-time jobs and are anticipating working full-time after graduation. In the Tokyo world of *hikikomori* and *freeters*, Bartleby is an immediately recognizable figure. The story has elicited a number of thoughtful student essays examining the conflict from the point of view of the boss/narrator as well as from that of Bartleby’s co-workers. Recently students

have connected the story to the growing gap between economic classes around the world. Excerpts from the 1972 film version of “Bartleby,” with Paul Scofield as the lawyer, update the story to a London setting.

In week 12 I present an overview of the American Civil War and the role Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, played in galvanizing public sentiment against slavery. The chapter, “The Mother’s Struggle,” in which the narrator directly asks female readers to imagine themselves in Elizabeth’s situation, elicits a strong student response: “If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader . . . how fast could *you* walk?” The 1965 German film of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has a particularly dramatic rendering of Elizabeth crossing the ice-filled Ohio River to freedom.

Week 13 introduces Walt Whitman and free verse. After explaining the catalog structure of “I Hear America Singing,” we write a class poem, “I Hear Japan Singing,” replacing Whitman’s New York “carols” with those of Japanese salary men, tofu deliverymen and office ladies. “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” connects to Emerson’s *Nature* in privileging a direct epiphanic experience of Nature over academic book learning.

The semester’s final lecture focuses on a selection of Emily Dickinson’s poems dealing with love and death. Her compression has similarities to Japanese haiku, as does her miniaturist interest in the natural world. “Wild nights” has the emotional passion of Bradstreet’s “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” but without the framework of Puritan morality. And unlike in Bradstreet’s poem, the imagined partner joining Dickinson in wild abandon—male or female—is unknown. Dickinson’s, “I heard a fly buzz,” enacting her own death, has a Bradstreet-like domesticity, but the final lines, “And then the Windows failed—and then / I could not see to see,” develop ideas of sight, insight, and “I-dentity” from Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” passage.

The fall semester of History of American Literature builds on the texts previously studied in the spring semester. Most of the students continue from the spring semester though every year some drop out and others add. At the first class I explain the course requirements and review our “slow reading” technique and United States geography. I warn students that the

semester begins with lengthy reading assignments—significant excerpts from Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Henry James’s *Daisy Miller*—so they need to get started right away. At the same time I reassure them that our reading will foreground a selection of the most important scenes. I also recommend that they get Japanese translations of these novels to help them with the nuance of the language.

Huckleberry Finn easily fills weeks 2 and 3 of the fall semester. I introduce the text by explaining that although the story of Huck and Jim—a runaway boy and a black escaped slave traveling together down the Mississippi River—is one of the essential novels in American literature, it is banned from some public schools and libraries because of Huck’s frequent use of the word “nigger,” a common term in the American south in the nineteenth-century, but an incendiary racist insult today. Since “nigger” appears in *Huckleberry Finn* almost 200 times, teaching the book to non-native English speakers requires teaching the word. I explain that though Blacks might use it, notably in popular music, it’s not acceptable language for non-Blacks. “Nigger” is an important addition to the students’ passive vocabulary, but they should never use it. *Dame!* The class is typically all ears after this brief vocabulary lesson. *Huckleberry Finn* is written in several dialects of American English, so my follow-up is to dissect the language of the book’s first pages where Huck introduces himself and the action begins. We spend all of the third week looking at scenes in the book that reveal Huck’s growing understanding of Jim’s humanity and his final ability to think for himself about the value of individuals and personal relationships. I explain the importance of the overarching journey metaphor that informs the structure of Twain’s book and relate it to Basho’s haiku travel journal, *Oku no Hosomichi (Back Roads to Far Towns)*. Is Huck really a bad boy? Should *Huckleberry Finn* be banned? I clarify the difference between a “bad boy” and a “good bad boy” and let the students decide.

Weeks 4 and 5 are devoted to Henry James’s *Daisy Miller*, a short novel about another rebellious young American—this one, female. I approach *Daisy Miller* as an example of James’s international theme, a theme the students easily identify with. Indeed, Daisy’s missteps in the cultural minefield of foreign travel are similar to those of anyone traveling abroad. Her death

in Rome from malaria caught while visiting the Colosseum by moonlight, is figuratively both a murder and a suicide and shows the necessity of being culturally sensitive as tourists and to tourists.

In weeks 6 and 7 we study stories by two key nineteenth-century feminists, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a familiar Poe-like Gothic tale, but one with a powerful social message about appropriate medical treatment for women. Chopin's "Story of an Hour" is an almost perfect story that uses irony to cleverly portray a housebound woman's fatal desire to escape an unsuccessful marriage.

The next three weeks are given over to various aspects of Modernism. Highlights here are Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" focusing on a couple's conflict over abortion—always a show-stopping topic for the students—and Cummings's visually playful but impossible to read aloud four-word image of loneliness:

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Is it a poem? And if so, what exactly is a poem? Written horizontally with spacing readjusted the answer begin to emerge.

In week 11 I introduce the Harlem Renaissance, blues music, and Langston Hughes before turning to Elizabeth Bishop and "The Moose." Both writers use variations of the journey metaphor in the poems we read. In "Mother to Son," a Black mother encourages her son to keep climbing

the stairway of life by describing her own perseverance in the face of difficulties. In “The Moose” the speaker’s nighttime bus journey from her rural home in Nova Scotia to Boston is interrupted when a female moose steps onto the dark roadway bringing the bus to a halt.

During the last three weeks we read a selection of poems and stories that give a taste of contemporary literary concerns. Allan Ginsberg’s “Howl” is a long free verse poem that links back in both form and content to T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Joyce Carol Oates’s neo-Gothic “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is a twenty-first century update on Poe and Gilman with a music soundtrack from Bob Dylan, the 2016 Nobel Prize winner for literature. William Stafford’s “Traveling through the Dark” is another road poem that connects directly to Bishop’s encounter with the moose. This time, however, in the roadside standoff between the internal combustion engine and Mother Nature, technology wins. We end the year by reading Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral,” a powerful story about mental and physical blindness and about seeing and understanding that takes us back, again, to Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” and to Dickinson’s “I heard a fly buzz.”

It’s appropriate that History of American Literature ends with a text about sight since seeing/understanding is at the heart of everything we do during the year. One of the aims of the course, besides giving the students a solid background in the rich literary history of the United States, is to at least strengthen the confidence of the students as readers by showing them ways to understand literary texts. I do not say every student will necessarily read fluently at the end of the year. Teaching students to read deeply, think critically, and stretch their imaginations is anything but easy. But if the material taught is appropriate for the aims of the program, and if it is coherently presented in a way that motivates the students, there is a much stronger likelihood of success, that the students who complete the course will ultimately be better equipped to assess, interpret, and confront the challenges they will face in their personal and professional lives.

Although the value of the course described here and the kind of liberal arts education provided by my university are frequently acknowledged, my department is, in fact, under tremendous pressure from within the uni-

versity and from the Japanese Ministry of Education to document and justify our program in ways that subtly undermine its viability. This rush to bureaucratize and commodify higher education is occurring worldwide and ironically has the potential to seriously damage the universities responsible for that education. Philosophically considered, however, it must be remembered that education, like love and hate, is finally an abstract concept and will always resist such attempts to quantify it.

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