

# Workshop 6

## Objectifying the Text

### Introduction

When readers step out and objectify their reading experience, they reflect on the text and their experience with it, by analyzing its words and its structure, comparing it to other texts, examining the author's craft, and objectifying their personal responses to it. From this critical approach, readers have the opportunity to extend and examine their understanding of the piece. In this stance, they can try on different ways of seeing the text, explore other interpretations, and think about the ways language, syntax, genre, voice, and time period work within the piece. This is also where readers bring various approaches to literary criticism to bear, using the tools of New criticism, feminist criticism, or historical criticism, for example, to analyze and critique the text.

At this point in the envisionment-building process, readers take time to explore the author's use of language and the impact of significant phrases and word choices on the message relayed to the reader. Here, effective readers utilize literary elements and allusions to critically analyze the text. Like all others, this stance can occur at any stage in the recursive envisionment-building process.

Some of the questions that readers ask themselves when stepping back from the text include:

- Are there any other texts that I have read that can inform my understanding of this piece?
- Why did the author choose that particular phrase, style, or organizational feature?
- How does the title relate to the construct of the story?
- How does the language and voice affect my understanding of the text?
- How does the author's voice contrast with my own perspective?
- Why did some of the word choices affect me so deeply?
- How can my understanding of literary elements (plot, setting, theme, characterization, and so forth) inform my envisionment?
- How would the piece differ if written, taken place, or read in another era or culture? How would I see things differently if I were from another culture, another era, or another's perspective?
- How do other interpretations of the text contrast with my own?
- What are some other ways I can react to the text? Consider other perspectives, such as critical, feminist, or political.

## Key Points

- Making sense of what you read requires readers to call upon their personal, social, and cultural history; their life experiences; their literary experiences; and the text itself.
- By trying on different perspectives, readers' understandings are moved beyond their current depths, adding layers of complexity and richness.
- When readers step out and objectify a text, they focus on the author's craft, literary elements and allusions, and their particular reading of the text. They try on other perspectives through which they might add other dimensions to their growing envisionments. They become critics of the text and their experience with it.
- Readers utilize literary elements as tools to extend and examine meaning in a text, adding layers of sophistication to the understanding of the piece.
- Readers can step out and objectify their reading experience at any point in the envisionment-building process and recursively return to this stance as the envisionment is developed and extended.

## Learning Objectives

After viewing this program, participants will be able to:

- Name at least three key activities that readers complete as they step out and objectify their literary experience.
- Demonstrate through example multiple ways of examining a text through different perspectives.
- Explain how adopting a critical stance helps readers grow their envisionments.

## Background Reading

In preparation for this workshop, you may want to read the poems "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes and "Revolutionary Petunias" by Alice Walker. Both selections are available from *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*, 5th edition, Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs, Prentice Hall. Copyright 1998. ISBN 0-13-010076-5. "Revolutionary Petunias" is also available from *Fiction 100: An Anthology of Short Fiction*, 9th edition, James H. Pickering, University of Houston, Prentice Hall. Copyright 2001. ISBN 0-13-014328-6.

Within the workshop session, you will be reading one of the following poems: "Richard Cory" by Edward Arlington Robinson, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas, or "She Walks in Beauty" by George Gordon, Lord Byron.\*

\* or an alternative selection. Check with your Site Leader.

Online versions of some of the poems listed above can be accessed at the workshop Web site. Go to the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/) and click on "Workshop 6. Objectifying the Text" and "Background Reading."

If you have not already done so, you may consider reading *Envisioning Literature*, Chapter 2, "Building Envisionments." Additional information on this stance can be accessed at the workshop Web site. Go to the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/) and click on "Workshop 6. Objectifying the Text" and "Background Reading."

For other resources, look under "Additional Reading" for "Workshop 6. Objectifying the Text" on the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at

**NOTE:** Public and college libraries have access to a search engine called POEM FINDER, a library Internet service which provides indexing and detailed subject access to over 600,000 poems and the full text of over 50,000 poems. Check with your local public or college library to use this research tool to find these and other poems.

# Workshop Session (On-Site)

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## Getting Ready ..... 30 minutes

### Reading and Discussion: Selected Poem

Read the selected poem to yourself several times, and jot down some ideas that come to you as you read. Then, listen to the poem read aloud.

Share personal reactions to the poem. Talk about some of the following questions:

- What did the poem mean to you?
- What do you think is going on in the poem?
- What do you think these lines \_\_\_\_\_  
[Site Leader: select a few lines] mean? Explain.
- Who was the speaker in the poem and how did this affect your reading?
- What was the poem's general mood? How did it make you feel?
- Was the poem successful to you as a reader? In what ways?
- Think about some of the literary tools (such as metaphor, rhyme, meter, etc.) the author used. How did the use of these tools add to your appreciation of the poem? How did they contribute to your envisionment of the text?
- Which lines of the poem particularly struck you? Explain your choices and why they "worked" for you.
- Have you read any other works by the author? Did they help you in reading this work? Explain.
- What events in your own life did you recall as you read the poem? In general, how does your background as a reader and as a member of a particular culture play a part in your envisionment of this poem?
- How could you read the poem from another perspective—assuming a different voice than that the author uses or through the eyes of another reader?

**Site Leader:** See **Materials Needed** on pp. 7-9 of this guide for instructions on selecting a poem for this discussion.

Have the participants read and reflect on the poem themselves first, then ask someone to volunteer to read the poem aloud.

## Watch the Workshop Video ..... 60 minutes

### Viewing and Discussion

Now you will view the video program "Objectifying the Text," which focuses on the process readers go through when they step back from the text and look at it with a critical eye, just as you did with the opening activity.

While viewing the program, note in your journal any literary terms or references to other texts used by the panelists as they discuss the poetry.

As you view the video program, consider the questions on the following page.

**Site Leader:** If you are watching on videocassette, you may pause at the segments indicated below to give participants opportunities to discuss, reflect, and interact with the program. If you are watching a real-time broadcast, have participants consider the questions as they view the program, and discuss them later.

You may select any or all of the questions below to discuss, as time permits and according to the interests of your participants.

# Workshop Session, cont'd.

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## Segment One

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Pat Bradford's comment about Langston Hughes's writing, "So I think the more you bring to literature, the better you understand it."]

- Describe the stance *Stepping Out* and *Objectifying the Experience*. What are readers doing when they stand in this relationship to the text?
- How is this stance different from the others?

## Segment Two

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Dale Allender says, "It's a brilliant piece," following the discussion of Langston Hughes's poem "Theme for English B" and Patricia Elam's comment that Hughes is providing insight into who he is.]

- When you finished reading the poem, what were your general impressions of it?

## Segment Three

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Patricia Elam makes a connection between the poem "Lost Sister" and "Theme for English B," when she says, "And so, you know, that whole idea of not quite fitting in, wanting to fit, but also wanting to figure out who they are in the midst of all this."]

- How does your own knowledge of the author Langston Hughes impact your understanding of the poem "Theme for English B"?
- What other texts have you read that inform your understanding of the poem "Theme for English B"?
- What sorts of questions do readers ask themselves when they step out of a text and objectify their experience with it?

## Segment Four

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Jeffrey Wilhelm explains why the passage "Bessie, bop, or Bach" impacted him so greatly.]

- How are the following lines significant in a reader's analysis of the poem "Theme for English B"? Consider language choices made by the author.

"The steps from the hill lead down to Harlem,/ through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas/  
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,/ the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator/  
up to my room, sit down, and *write* this page."

- Revisit the line from "Theme for English B," "So will my page be colored that I write?" How do you think the speaker of the poem would answer this question? How would his professor answer this question?
- Revisit the lines from "Theme for English B," "But it will be/ a part of you, instructor./ You are white—/ Yet a part of me, as I am a part of you./ That's American." What did this say to people in 1959, at the time Hughes wrote this poem, and what does it say to us today?
- What is your favorite phrase or line in the poem and why? Why do you think it strikes you in such a significant way?

## Segment Five

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Dale Allender comments, "This person doesn't have the sense of movement, the sense of odyssey that he has," just before Dr. Langer comments about eras, cultures, and values impacting a reading.]

- How would a professor react to the speaker's English composition in "Theme for English B"? How would a political activist respond to the speaker's English composition?

# Workshop Session, cont'd.

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- How does the poem “Theme for English B” help you analyze the poem “Revolutionary Petunias”? How does the consideration of the two texts enhance your understanding of both?

## Segment Six

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Patricia Elam’s comment, “There’s a real acceptance of whatever the fate is going to be. Yes.” This is the conclusion of the discussion of Sammy Lou’s use of violence in “Revolutionary Petunias.”]

- How does your knowledge of history and the rural South impact your understanding of the poem “Revolutionary Petunias”?
- How is Sammy Lou in “Revolutionary Petunias” a true revolutionary? In what ways? What other dimensions of Sammy Lou’s character does the poem present?
- Was the murder justifiable in Sammy Lou’s case? Why or why not?
- Do you think Sammy Lou is a violent person? Why or why not?
- Why do you think Sammy Lou insists that her purple petunias continue to be watered?

## Segment Seven

[**Site Leader:** Pause after Dr. Langer’s comment about establishing respect in the classroom and for the text in order to allow rich discussions about literature.]

- What about the poem “Revolutionary Petunias” did you find puzzling? Discuss this puzzling point and work through an analysis of it with workshop participants.
- How does working through this question add to your understanding of the poem?
- What was your interpretation of the sonneteers? What was their significance in the overall meaning of the poem?

## Segment Eight

[**Site Leader:** View the remainder of the workshop program.]

- What are some of your overall reflections about the poem “Revolutionary Petunias”? How has your understanding of it evolved by analyzing parts of it? How has multiple perspectives offered by participants in the workshop group added to your interpretation of the text?

## Going Further ..... 30 minutes

### Discussion

Discuss what you observed in the video. Some questions you might consider include:

- How did your envisionments of the poems compare with those the panelists offered? How did the envisionments they offered add to the one you had created as you read?
- What literary tools did the panelists refer to as they discussed the texts at a critical level? Did these references affect you in the same way? How does looking at literary tools help readers as they step out and objectify their reading experiences?
- What are some ways you can help students acquire a lexicon of literary terms in a meaningful way, as opposed to directly teaching terminology?
- What references to other texts did the panelists make? How did these references enhance their envisionments of the poems?

# Workshop Session, cont'd.

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- How does the discussion of the author's craft add complexity and depth to a reader's envisionment?
- How can thinking about the cultural and historical background of a poem influence a reading of a piece? Talk about the kind of depth it adds to readers' envisionments.
- How did a discussion during which readers stepped out of a text and objectified their reading experience differ from other discussions you have observed in this workshop when readers spoke from the vantage point of other stances? How were they the same?

## Between Sessions (On Your Own)

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### Homework Assignment

#### Journal

In your workshop journal, respond to the following:

How can you incorporate a received interpretation of a text (one that has been traditionally accepted as the one "correct" meaning of the work) as students step out and objectify the text?

#### Reading

In preparation for Workshop 7, you may want to read the poems "Icarus" by Stephen Spender, "Icarus" by Edward Field, "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" by Anne Sexton, "Landscape With the Fall of Icarus" by William Carlos Williams, and the first chapter of the novel *The House on Mango Street*\* by Sandra Cisneros. All texts can be found in *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*, 5th edition, Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs, Prentice Hall. Copyright 1998. ISBN 0-13-010076-5.

\* or an alternative selection. Check with your Site Leader.

Online resources related to the authors and their works can be accessed at the workshop Web site. Go to the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/) and click on "Workshop 7. The Stances in Action" and "Background Reading."

If you have not already done so, you may also consider reading Chapter 4, "The Classroom as a Social Setting for Envisionment Building," and Chapter 5, "A Practical Pedagogy," from *Envisioning Literature*.

For other resources, look under "Additional Reading" for "Workshop 7. The Stances in Action" on the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/).

### Ongoing Activities

#### Channel-Talk

Remember to post comments and questions on Channel-TalkLitConversations. Go to [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/) and click on "Channel-Talk."

# Between Sessions, cont'd.

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## Extension: Classroom Connection

### Activity: Cinderella: A Cross-Textual Study

There are several versions of the traditional tale many of us know as “Cinderella.” These versions can be accessed at the workshop Web site. Go to the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/) and click on “Workshop 6. Objectifying the Text” and “Extension: Classroom Connection.”

Consider gathering copies of a variety of “Cinderella” stories before meeting with your class, and either print the information you find online, bookmark the sites for students’ use, or provide copies of books from your local library.

Divide the groups into small research teams and ask each group to select three versions of the Cinderella tale to look at in depth. Provide each group with a copy of the Venn Diagram activity sheet in this guide and ask them to look at the similarities and differences between the three versions of the story. Groups should share their work with the whole class. Together, think about and discuss the following questions:

- How are the plots similar and different?
- How are the characters similar or different?
- How are other parts of the literary toolbox (metaphor, theme, mood, setting, etc.) the same or different?

Then respond to the following questions in your *Conversations in Literature* journal:

- What literary tools did your students use to step out and objectify their experience?
- What other tools could be used to provide other perspectives and enrich their reading?
- What kinds of help could you give them, so that they would begin to use these other tools in a later discussion?

## Additional Reading

For other resources, look under “Additional Reading” for “Workshop 6. Objectifying the Text” on the *Conversations in Literature* Web site at [www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/](http://www.learner.org/envisioningliterature/).

# Venn Diagram: Cinderella, A Cross-Textual Study

**Directions:** Use this diagram to compare and contrast *two* of the three Cinderella tales you read. List each story's unique qualities on either side, and use the overlapping section to track their similarities.

Story 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Story 2: \_\_\_\_\_

