

RITA DOVE: “LOOKING UNDERNEATH” HISTORY

Suggestions for the Classroom

by Renee H. Shea

Following are suggested thematic categories for teaching poems by Rita Dove, Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993-1995. These categories can be placed under the broader heading, “the poet’s view of history”: Re-Viewing History, Personal History, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of History. A unifying thread might be the quote that Dove uses in her latest collection, *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*: “All history is a negotiation between familiarity and strangeness” (Simon Schama). Or perhaps a more straightforward quote from Dove herself, from a 1985 interview with Stan S. Rubin and Judith Kitchen, might serve: “I found historical events fascinating for looking underneath – not for what we always see or what’s always said about an historical event, but for the things that can’t be related in a dry historical sense.”

These materials are intended to allow teachers to pick and choose what might be useful in their classrooms or use the entire set as a sequence to introduce students to increasingly complex poems of Rita Dove.

Some Useful Internet Resources

“The Rita Dove Home Page”

Perhaps the most useful of all sites, this one has links to Rita Dove’s biography, an extensive bibliography, her home page at the University of Virginia, a photo gallery, and many articles and interviews.

www.people.virginia.edu/~rfd4b/

“Parsley”

A whole series of links explore Rita Dove’s poem “Parsley,” including her comments about reading it at the White House, an article by Helen Vendler on this poem’s “Redefining of the Lyric,” and interviews with Dove.

www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dove/parsely.htm

“Irresistible Beauty: The Poetry and Person of Rita Dove”

A feature for the magazine of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, this article previews Dove’s most recent book *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* and provides background on the poet and her work.

http://www.nmwa.org/pubs/wia_back_issue.asp?magazineid=23

I. Re-Viewing History

In the following two poems, “Canary” and “Sonnet in Primary Colors,” Dove explores a personal connection with the singer Billie Holiday and the painter Frida Kahlo, respectively. Students might listen to a song by Billy Holiday or look at a painting by

Frida Kahlo, especially one of her self-portraits, and write in response. Either at that time, or after they have done some research into the biography of these women (especially for the Kahlo poem), they might write their own poetic responses prior to reading Dove's poems. After reading Dove's work, they might write their own reviewing of a popular or historical figure, in the process incorporating biographical information as images and allusions.

Both of these poems brim with vibrant images that bring the figures to life, yet each poses questions about the figures rather than simply describing them or their work. Students might try to formulate just what those questions are.

Canary

(for Michael S. Harper)

Billie Holiday's burned voice
had as many shadows as lights,
a mournful candelabra against a sleek piano,
the gardenia her signature under that ruined face.

(Now you're cooking, drummer to bass,
magic spoon, magic needle.
Take all day if you have to
with your mirror and your bracelet of song.)

Fact is, the invention of women under siege
has been to sharpen love in the service of myth.

If you can't be free, be a mystery.

From *Grace Notes*, by Rita Dove. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., and Rita Dove.

Focus Questions

1. What visual images does Dove use to convey the sound of Holiday's voice?
2. Why is the second stanza enclosed in parentheses? Is it an afterthought?
3. What does the speaker mean by "the invention of women under siege"?
4. How do you interpret the final line? Try placing it at the opening of the poem, or right before the next-to-last stanza: how does a different placement of this line affect the poem?
5. How do you interpret the title?
6. Does the speaker of this poem celebrate Holiday? Lament her? Criticize her?

Sonnet in Primary Colors

This is for the woman with one black wing
perched over her eyes: lovely Frida, erect
among parrots, in the stern petticoats of the peasant,
who painted herself a present –
wildflowers entwining the plaster corset

her spine resides in, that flaming pillar –
this priestess in the romance of mirrors.

Each night she lay down in pain and rose
to the celluloid butterflies of her Beloved Dead,
Lenin and Marx and Stalin arrayed at the footstead.
And rose to her easel, the hundred dogs panting
like children along the graveled walks of the garden, Diego's
love a skull in the circular window
of the thumbprint searing her immutable brow.

From *Mother Love*, by Rita Dove. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., and Rita Dove.

Focus Questions

1. What examples of paradox do you find in the first stanza?
2. Why might the speaker consider Kahlo a “priestess”?
3. How is the use of the word “present” a play on words?
4. What is the relationship between the first and second stanzas? Is the tone the same?
5. How would you characterize the speaker's attitude toward Kahlo? Try using one of those AP multiple-choice-like responses (e.g., begrudging admiration, gentle criticism).
6. In her introduction to *Mother Love*, the collection in which this poem appears, Dove writes: “The sonnet defends itself against the vicissitudes of fortune by its charmed structure, its beautiful bubble. All the while, though, chaos is lurking outside the gate.” How does this description of the sonnet apply to the poem about Frida Kahlo? If you have read about Kahlo's life, why might this form be appropriate for her according to Dove's definition?

Note: Dove's poetry abounds with examples of her re-viewing historical figures, many from ancient times, with a contemporary eye. Her collection *Museum* includes “Nestor's Bathtub,” “Tou Wan Speaks to Her Husband, Liu Sheng,” “Catherine of Alexandria,” and “Catherine of Siena.”

II. Personal History

Dove's Pulitzer-prize winning collection, *Thomas and Beulah*, opens with this explanation: “These poems tell two sides of a story...” Part biography, part autobiography, these poems are told from the viewpoint of a husband and wife modeled in part on Dove's grandparents. The following pair of poems presents the couple's “courtship” or dating period from each partner's perspective.

Students might begin by reading these two poems aloud to explore the different “characters” and their attitudes. The first poem is more narrative than the second, so students can first get a sense of “story” and then read the second to view the same events through a different perspective. One analytical element might be to identify the words and images that set the poems in an earlier time period.

Courtship

1.

*Fine evening may I have
the pleasure...*

up and down the block
waiting – for what? A
magnolia breeze, someone
to trot out the stars?

But she won't set a foot
in his turtledove Nash,
it wasn't proper.
Her pleated skirt fans
softly, a circlet of arrows.

King of the crawfish
in his yellow scarf,
mandolin belly pressed tight
to his hounds-tooth vest –
his wrist flicks for the pleats
all in a row, sighing...

2.

...so he wraps the yellow silk
still warm from his throat
around her shoulders. (He made
good money; he could buy another.)
A gnat flies
in his eye and she thinks
he's crying.

Then the parlor festooned
like a ship and Thomas
twirling his hat in his hand
wondering how did I get here.
China pugs guarding a fringed settee
where a father, half-Cherokee,
smokes and frowns.
I'll give her a good life –
what was he doing,
selling all for a song?
His heart fluttering shut
then slowly opening.

From *Selected Poems*, by Rita Dove. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., and Rita Dove.

Courtship, Diligence

A yellow scarf runs through his fingers
as if it were melting.
Thomas dabbing his brow.

And now his mandolin in a hurry
though the night, as they say,
is young,
though she is *getting on*.

Hush, the strings tinkle. *Pretty gal*.

Cigar-box music!
She'd much prefer a pianola
and scent in a sky-colored flask.

Not that scarf, bright as butter.
Not his hands, cool as dimes.

From *Selected Poems*, by Rita Dove. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., and Rita Dove.

Note: In her collection, *Mother Love*, Dove has a series of poems about mothers and daughters based on a re-imagining of the myth of Demeter and Persephone. "The Bistro Styx" is an appealing one for adolescents because it combines both the classical allusion and the metaphor of a meal in its depiction of the moment a mother realizes the inevitability of her daughter's growing independence.

Etext of "The Bistro Styx": <http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?45442B7C000C07030974>

III. Civil Rights Movement

The poems that follow can be approached individually or as a more unified commentary on civil rights, particularly the icons of freedom. Although "Lady Freedom Among Us" is not explicitly about the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, it fits into the spirit of civil rights and racial freedom. Dove first read this poem in 1993 at the ceremony commemorating the 200th anniversary of the U.S. Capitol and the restoration of the "Freedom" statue. The statue, nearly 20 feet tall and weighing over 14,000 pounds, was commissioned in 1855 and dedicated in 1863. Lady Freedom was witness to the racial divide that led to the Civil War: Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War, objected to the original design because it included a cap suggestive of the attire of slave women; later, President Abraham Lincoln hailed Lady Freedom as a symbol of the warring country's unity.

The Janus Press published a limited edition of this poem as the four-millionth acquisition of the University of Virginia Libraries. Information about the original statue and the

Janus Press book is available online at
<http://www.lib.virginia.edu/etext/fourmill/DovLady.html>.

An interesting exercise might be to have students compare the actual statue (photographs on the Web site) and the contemporary interpretation of the artist who created the book. This web site also includes a wonderful reproduction of the book itself: lines from the poem are paired with different images accompanied by audio of Rita Dove reading.

Of all the poems in these materials, “Lady Freedom” is the one perhaps most similar to the poems that appear on the AP English Literature Exam. A suggested AP question follows the Focus Questions.

Lady Freedom Among Us

Etext: <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/etext/fourmill/DovLady.html>

don't lower your eyes
or stare straight ahead to where
you think you ought to be going

don't mutter *oh no*
not another one
get a job fly a kite
go bury a bone

with her oldfashioned sandals
with her leaden skirts
with her stained cheeks and whiskers and heaped up trinkets
she has risen among us in blunt reproach

she has fitted her hair under a hand-me-down cap
and spruced it up with feathers and stars
slung over one shoulder she bears
the rainbowed layers of charity and murmurs
all of you even the least of you

don't cross to the other side of the square
don't think *another item to fit on a tourist's agenda*

consider her drenched gaze her shining brow
she who has brought mercy back into the streets
and will not retire politely to the potter's field

having assumed the thick skin of this town
its gritted exhaust its sunscorch and blear
she rests in her weathered plumage
bigboned resolute

don't even think you can ever forget her
don't even try
she's not going to budge

no choice but to grant her space
crown her with sky
for she is one of the many
and she is each of us

Originally published as a fine press book by Janus Press, Vermont, © 1994 by Rita Dove. Used by permission of the author.

Focus Questions

1. To whom is the poem addressed, i.e., the “you”?
2. What shift do the italicized lines signal?
3. What is the allusion to “potter’s field”?
4. How do you interpret the following phrases and lines:

“blunt reproach”
“rainbowed layers of charity”
“drenched gaze”

5. Identify the verbs used when Lady Freedom is the subject. What pattern or effect do you find?

Mock AP Question

Write an essay analyzing how the speaker in “Lady Freedom Among Us” reveals her attitude toward Lady Freedom.

In the section of her book *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* that bears the same title, Dove explores the icon that Rosa Parks has become with the following two poems. Each offers a glimpse into this woman on the spot of her refusal to move to the back of the bus and again many years later when she is frail, aging, and “living history.”

Rosa

Etext: <http://www.nortonpoets.com/ex/doveronthebus.htm>

How she sat there,
the time right inside a place
so wrong it was ready.

That trim name with
its dream of a bench
to rest on. Her sensible coat.

Doing nothing was the doing:
the clean flame of her gaze
carved by a camera flash.

How she stood up
when they bent down to retrieve
her purse. That courtesy.

From *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, by Rita Dove. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., and Rita Dove.

Focus Questions

1. Notice the physical movements alluded to in the poem. What is the impact of that sequence?
2. What is the one complete sentence in the poem? How does it serve as the center or anchor for the poem? (Try rewriting the poem in complete sentences to see the difference.)
3. What examples of irony do you find throughout the poem? Is the reference to “courtesy” one of them?
4. How does the rhythm of the poem affect your interpretation? In an interview, Dove comments that “the sense of a poem moves in and out of sync with the music of its language, which creates a marvelous kind of vibration...” Can you cite examples in this poem of such “vibration”?
5. Why do you think she called her poem “Rosa” instead of “Rosa Parks”?
6. How would you describe the speaker’s attitude toward her subject? Reverential? Playful? Cynical? Loving?

In the Lobby of the Warner Theatre, Washington, D.C.

They’d positioned her – two attendants flanking the wheelchair –
at the foot of the golden escalator, just right
of the movie director who had cajoled her to come.
Elegant in a high-strung way, a-twitch in his tux,
he shoved half spectacles up the nonexistent
bridge of his nose. Not that he was using her
to push his film, but it was only right (wasn’t it?)
that she be wherever history was being made – after all,

she was the true inspiration, she was *living* history.
The audience descended in a cavalcade of murmuring
sequins. She waited. She knew how to abide,
to sit in cool contemplation of the expected.
She had learned to travel a crowd
bearing a smile we weren’t sure we could bear
to receive, it was so calm a suturing,
scrolling earthward, buffed bronze

in the reflected glow, we couldn't wait but leaned out
to catch a glimpse, and saw
that the smile was not practiced at all –
real delight bloomed there. She was curious;
she suffered our approach (the gush and coo,
the babbling, the director bending down
to meet the camera flash) until someone
tried to touch her, and then the attendants

pushed us back, gently. She nodded,
lifted a hand as if to console us
before letting it drop, slowly, to her lap.
Resting there. The idea of consolation
soothing us: her gesture
already become her touch,
like the history she made for us sitting there,
waiting for the moment to take her.

From *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, by Rita Dove. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.,
and Rita Dove.

Essay Question

Compare and contrast the depiction of the historical figure Rosa Parks in the two poems “Rosa” and “In the Lobby of the Warner Theatre, Washington, D.C.”

IV. The Politics of History

“Parsley,” one of Dove’s most frequently anthologized poems, is also one of her most challenging. Understanding the historical context is essential. There are many web resources available (site noted in Section I) including one with Dove herself writing about reading the poem at the Clinton White House, an interview with her about the poem, and excerpts from a critical article by Helen Vendler. Here is Dove’s explanation of her subject:

“Parsley” is based on an historical event that occurred in the Dominican Republic in 1937. Rafael Trujillo, the dictator at the time, selected for execution twenty thousand Haitian blacks who worked side-by-side in the cane fields with Dominicans. He did this in a very bizarre and ultimately creative manner. The Haitians spoke French Creole, in which – unlike Spanish – you don’t roll the r, so the r sounds like an l. Trujillo had all the can workers pronounce *perejil*, Spanish for parsley. Those who could not pronounce it correctly – whoever said “pelejil” instead of “perejil” – were Haitian and were executed. That he had them pronounce their own death sentence, this ultimate little twist in cruelty, was what haunted me... (cited on www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/dove/reading.htm)

Given its difficulty, the following poem can certainly stand on its own to stimulate lively discussion of both form and content. An additional step, however, might be to pair it with a prose passage built on the same event. The excerpt included below is from *The Farming of Bones* (Soho Press, 1998), a novel by Edwidge Danticat.

Parsley

Etext: <http://www.starve.org/teaching/intro-poetry/parsley.html>

1. *The Cane Fields*

There is a parrot imitating spring
in the palace, its feathers parsley green.
Out of the swamp the cane appears

to haunt us, and we cut it down. El General
searches for a word; he is all the world
there is. Like a parrot imitating spring,

we lie down screaming as rain punches through
and we come up green. We cannot speak an R—
out of the swamp, the cane appears

and then the mountain we call in whispers *Katalina*.
The children gnaw their teeth to arrowheads.
There is a parrot imitating spring.

El General has found his word: *perejil*.
Who says it, lives. He laughs, teeth shining
out of the swamp. The cane appears

in our dreams, lashed by wind and streaming.
And we lie down. For every drop of blood
there is a parrot imitating spring.
Out of the swamp the cane appears.

2. *The Palace*

The word the general's chosen is parsley.
It is fall, when thoughts turn
to love and death; the general thinks
of his mother, how she died in the fall
and he planted her walking cane at the grave
and it flowered, each spring stolidly forming
Four-star blossoms. The general

pulls on his boots, he stomps to
her room in the palace, the one without
curtains, the one with a parrot
in a brass ring. As he paces he wonders
Who can I kill today. And for a moment
the little knot of screams
is still. The parrot, who has traveled

all the way from Australia in an ivory
cage, is coy as a widow, practising
spring. Ever since the morning
his mother collapsed in the kitchen
while baking skull-shaped candies
for the Day of the Dead, the general
has hated sweets. He orders pastries
brought up for the bird; they arrive

dusted with sugar on a bed of lace.
The knot in his throat starts to twitch;
he sees his boots the first day in battle
splashed with mud and urine
as a soldier falls at his feet amazed –
how stupid he looked! – at the sound
of artillery. *I never thought it would sing*
The soldier said, and died. Now

the general sees the fields of sugar
cane, lashed by rain and streaming.
He sees his mother's smile, the teeth
gnawed to arrowheads. He hears
the Haitians sing without R's
as they swing the great machetes:
Katalina, they sing, Katalina,

Mi madre, mi amor en muerte. God knows
His mother was no stupid woman; she
could roll an R like a queen. Even
a parrot can roll an R! In the bare room
the bright feathers arch in a parody
of greenery, as the last pale crumbs
disappear under the blackened tongue. Someone

calls out his name in a voice
so like his mother's, a startled tear
splashes the rip of his right boot.
My mother, my love in death.

The general remembers the tiny green sprigs
men of his village wore in their capes
to honor the birth of a son. He will
order many, this time, to be killed

for a single, beautiful word.

From *Selected Poems*, by Rita Dove. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., and Rita Dove.

Focus Questions

1. What are the shifts in voice and place that occur from the first to the second sections? Who is the “we” in the first section?
2. What is the effect of repeating “the cane appears” throughout the first section?
3. How many words in the first section include the consonant “r”? What effect does this sound create?
4. Why is the General “all the world there is”?
5. One critic has said that “[E]mbodiment of the frightening testimony in the exquisite form of a villanelle in the first part [of the poem] only intensifies the horror.” Why do you think the highly structured form of the villanelle “intensifies the horror” of the subject matter?
6. What are examples of contrasting imagery in the poem (such as the contrast between the swamp and the palace)? What is Dove suggesting by such juxtapositions?
7. What is the significance of the parrot “who has traveled/all the way from Australia in an ivory/cage”?
8. In the second section, what examples do you find of things the General can control? Of those he cannot?
9. How does Dove suggest a connection between the General’s obsession with his mother and his obsession with language?
10. What examples of irony do you find throughout the poem?

In this passage from The Farming of Bones by Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat, the narrator Amabelle and her countrymen Yves and Odette are trying to escape their Dominican pursuers.

Yves and I were lifted by a mattress of hands and carried along next to Tibon’s body. Two soldiers laughed, watching. The young toughs waved parsley sprigs in front of our faces.

“Tell us what this is,” one said. “Que diga Perejil.”

At that moment, I did believe that had I wanted to, I could have said the word properly, calmly, slowly, the way I often asked “Perejil?” of the old Dominican women and their faithful attending granddaughters at the roadside gardens and markets, even though the trill of the *r* and the precision of the *j* was sometimes too burdensome a joining for my tongue. It was the kind of thing that if you were startled in the night, you might forget, but with all my senses calm, I could have said it. But I didn’t get my chance. Yves and I were shoved down onto our knees. Our jaws were pried open and

parsley stuffed into our mouths. My eyes watering, I chewed and swallowed as quickly as I could, but not nearly as fast as they were forcing the handfuls into my mouth.

Yves chewed with all the strength in his bulging jaws.

At least they were not beating us, I thought.

I tried to stop listening to the voices ordering the young men to feed us more. I told myself that eating the parsley would keep me alive.

Yves fell headfirst, coughing and choking. His face was buried in a puddle of green spew. He was not moving. Someone threw a bucketful of water at the back of his head. A few more people were lined up next to us to have handfuls of parsley stuffed down their throats.

I coughed and sprayed the chewed parsley on the ground, feeling a foot pound on the middle of my back. Someone threw a fist-sized rock, which bruised my lip and left cheek. My face hit the ground. Another rock was thrown at Yves. He raised his hand and wiped his forehead to keep the parsley out of his eyes.

.....
[During their efforts to escape, Odette is fatally shot by Trujillo's soldiers.]

As we sat there with Odette under a canopy of trees in the middle of a grassy field, she spat up the chest full of water she had collected in the river. With her parting breath, she mouthed in Kreyol "pesi," not calmly and slowly as if she were asking for it at a roadside garden or open market, not questioning as if demanding of the face of Heaven the greater meaning of senseless acts, no effort to say "perejil" as if pleading for her life. Que diga amor? Love? Hate? Speak to me of things the world has yet to truly understand, of the instant meaning of each bird's call, of a child's secret thoughts in her mother's womb, of the measured rhythmical time of every man and woman's breath, of the true colors of the inside of the moon, of the larger miracles in small things, the deeper mysteries. But parsley? Was it because it was so used, so commonplace, so abundantly at hand that everyone who desired a sprit could find one? We used parsley for our food, our teas, our baths, to cleanse our insides as well as our outsides. Perhaps the Generalissimo in some larger order was trying to do the same for his country.

The Generalissimo's mind was surely as dark as death, but if he had heard Odette's "pesi," it might have startled him, not the tears and supplications he would have expected, no shriek from unbound fear, but a provocation, a challenge, a dare. To the devil with your world, your grass, your wind, your water, your air, your words. You ask for perejil, I give you more.

From *The Farming of Bones*, by Edwidge Danticat. Used by permission of Soho Press.

Suggested Essay Question

The poem "Parsley" and the excerpt from The Farming of Bones by contemporary Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat center on the use of a linguistic marker to identify national origin. In this case, the dictator Trujillo distinguishes Haitians from Dominicans by the pronunciation of "perejil," the word for "parsley" -- a distinction that results in the persecution, imprisonment, or death of the Haitians. Compare and contrast how the two authors convey their attitude toward this historical event.

V. Connections

Mock AP Question

In both “The Harlem Dancer” and “The Island Women of Paris,” the speaker describes a woman or women from the Caribbean currently living in a different place. Compare and contrast the elements of language that convey the speaker’s attitude toward the “Harlem dancer” in the poem of that title by Jamaican-born Claude McKay with that of the speaker toward the “island women” in the poem by African-American poet Rita Dove.

Harlem Dancer

By Claude McKay

Etext: <http://www.bartleby.com/269/76.html>

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;
Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
Blown by black players upon a picnic day.
She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
The light gauze hanging loose about her form;
To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.
Upon her swarthy neck black, shiny curls
Profusely fell; and, tossing coins in praise,
The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
Devoured her with their eager, passionate gaze;
But, looking at her falsely-smiling face
I knew her self was not in that strange place.

From *Harlem Shadows*. Claude McKay. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922.

The Island Women of Paris

Skim from curb to curb like regatta,
from Pont Neuf to the Quai de la Rappe
in cool negotiation with traffic,
each a country to herself
transposed to this city
by a fluke called “imperial courtesy.”

The island women glide past held aloft
by a wire running straight to heaven.
Who can ignore their ornamental bearing,
turbans haughty as parrots,
or deft braids carved into airy cages
transfixed on their manifest brows?

The island women move through Paris
as if they had just finished inventing
their destinations. It's better
not to get in their way. And better
not to look an island woman in the eye –
unless you like feeling unnecessary.

From *Grace Notes*, by Rita Dove. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., and Rita Dove.