

The Anti-Racist Classroom

Teaching close reading with Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*

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About the Text

Natasha Trethewey is an American poet, originally from Mississippi, who served as Poet Laureate of the United States twice. She was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for *Native Guard* in 2007. The book's themes include the author's childhood in the segregated south, the status of cultural and personal memory, and the persistent legacy of slavery.

Native Guard works really well in introductory writing and literature classes! Its formal diversity and engagement with difficult subject matter make it a perennial favorite with students. This suggested lesson plan can be mobilized not only to generate conversations about racism, but also target critical literary studies skills.

This lesson plan focuses on one poem in particular: a pantoum called "Incident." This lesson is designed to last ~45 minutes, and it targets close reading and thesis statements.

Reading the Poem

Incident

We tell the story every year—
how we peered from the windows, shades drawn—
though nothing really happened,
the charred grass now green again.

We peered from the windows, shades drawn,
at the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,
the charred grass still green. Then
we darkened our rooms, lit the hurricane lamps.

At the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,
a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns.
We darkened our rooms and lit hurricane lamps,
the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil.

It seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns.
When they were done, they left quietly. No one came.
The wicks trembled all night in their fonts of oil;
by morning the flames had all dimmed.

When they were done, the men left quietly. No one came.
Nothing really happened.
By morning all the flames had dimmed.
We tell the story every year.

Mariner Books, 2007

1. Read the poem aloud as a group.
2. Before attempting to interpret the content of the poem, ask students to spend five minutes reading silently, jotting down what they notice.
3. Students spend five minutes in small groups comparing notes.
4. Project the poem directly onto the whiteboard. Invite each group to share an observation while you underline or circle the relevant parts of the poem.
5. Ask students: What is repeated? What do you think is the event of the poem?

Interpreting and Analyzing the Poem

Once everyone in the class has reached an understanding about the content of the poem, the following activities help students practice moving from close reading to forming arguments about the text.

Class discussion:

1. Why has the author chosen this repetitive form to explore this particular topic? What is the effect of that choice?
2. Are the repeated lines the same every time they appear?

Individual work:

Ask students to pick a line that is repeated in the poem. E.g. "We tell the story every year" For five minutes, each student describes how the line changes between its two appearances, and speculates as to the effect of that specific change.

Group work:

Then, students rejoin their small groups and share their ideas. As a group, students write a mock thesis statement about the poem that answers the following questions: What do they observe about "Incident"? How do they interpret their observations? and What is the significance of their interpretations? When they are ready, each group writes their "thesis" on the board.