

JUDITH ORTIZ COFER (b. 1932)

Common Ground

Blood tells the story of your life
in heartbeats as you live it;
bones speak in the language
of death, and flesh thins
with age when up
through your pores rises
the stuff of your origin.

These days,
when I look into the mirror I see
my grandmother's stern lips
speaking in parentheses at the corners
of my mouth of pain and deprivation
I have never known. I recognize
my father's brows arching in disdain
over the objects of my vanity, my mother's
nervous hands smoothing lines
just appearing on my skin,
like arrows pointing downward
to our common ground.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How do you interpret the title? How did your idea of its meaning change as you read the poem?
2. What is the relationship between the first and second stanzas?
3. How does this poem make you feel? What is its tone? How do the diction and imagery create the tone?

COLETTE INEZ (b. 1931)

Back When All Was Continuous Chuckles

after a line by Anselm Hollo°

Doris and I were helpless on the Beeline Bus
laughing at what was it? "What did the moron
who killed his mother and father eat
at the orphan's picnic?" "Crow?" Har-har.

Anselm Hollo: Finnish poet (b. 1934) who teaches creative writing in the United States.

1987

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The bus was grinding towards Hempstead,
past the cemetery whose stones Doris
and I found hilarious. Freaky ghouls and skeletons.
"What did the dead man say to the ghost?"

"I like the movie better than the book."

Even "I don't get it" was funny.

The war was on, rationing, sirens.

Silly billies, we poked each other's arms

with balled fists, held hands and howled

at crabby ladies in funny hats, dusty feathers,

fake fruit. Doris' mom wore this headgear

before she got the big C which no one said out loud.

In a shadowy room her skin seemed gray

as moon dust on Smith Street, as Doris' house

where we tiptoed down the hall.

Sometimes we heard moans from the back room

and I helped wring out cloths while Doris

brought water in a glass held to her mother's lips.

But soon we were flipping through joke books

and writhing on the floor, war news shut off

back when we pretended all was continuous chuckles,

and we rode the bus past Greenfield's rise

where stones, trumpeting angels,

would bear names we later came to recognize.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Compare the difference between the title and its slightly revised version as it appears in line 25. How does that difference reveal the theme?
2. At what point does the tone of the poem shift from chuckles to something else?
3. What is the effect of the rhymes in lines 26 and 28? How do the rhymes serve to reinforce the poem's theme?

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Discuss the tone of this poem and that of Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" (p. 625).

The next work is a *dramatic monologue*, a type of poem in which a character — the speaker — addresses a silent audience in such a way as to reveal unintentionally some aspect of his or her temperament or personality. What tone is created by Machan's use of a persona?

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2004

KATHARYN HOWD MACHAN (b. 1932)

Hazel Tells LaVerne

last night
 im cleanin out my
 howard johnsons ladies room
 when all of a sudden
 up pops this frog
 musta come from the sewer
 swimmin aroun an tryin ta
 climb up the sida the bowl
 so i goes ta flushm down
 but sohelpmegod he starts talkin
 bout a golden ball
 an how i can be a princess
 me a princess
 well my mouth drops
 all the way to the floor
 an he says
 kiss me just kiss me
 once on the nose
 well i screams
 ya little green pervert
 an i hitsm with my mop
 an has ta flush
 the toilet down three times
 me
 a princess

1976

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** What do you imagine the situation and setting are for this poem? Do you like this revision of the fairy tale "The Frog Prince"?
2. What creates the poem's humor? How does Hazel's use of language reveal her personality? Is her treatment of the frog consistent with her character?
3. Although it has no punctuation, this poem is easy to follow. How does the arrangement of the lines organize Hazel's speech for clarity and emphasis?
4. What is the theme? Is it conveyed through denotative or connotative language?
5. **CREATIVE RESPONSE.** Write what you think might be LaVerne's reply to Hazel. First, write LaVerne's response as a series of ordinary sentences, and then try editing and organizing them into poetic lines.

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Although Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" (p. 702) is a more complex poem than Machan's, both use dramatic monologues to reveal character. How are the strategies in each poem similar?

A SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE

Georges 1

Alex Georges
 Professor Myerov
 English 200
 2 October 2010

Tone in Katharyn Howd Machan's "Hazel Tells LaVerne"

"Tone," Michael Meyer writes, "is the writer's attitude toward the subject, the mood created by all of the elements in the poem" (605) and is used to convey meaning and character. In her dramatic monologue, "Hazel Tells LaVerne," the poet Katharyn Howd Machan reveals through the persona of Hazel—a funny, tough-talking, no-nonsense cleaning lady—a satirical revision of "The Frog Prince" fairy tale. Hazel's attitude toward the possibility of a fairy-tale romance is evident in her response to the frog prince. She has no use for him or his offers "bout a golden ball / an how i can be a princess" (lines 11-12). If Hazel is viewed by the reader as a princess, it is clear from her words and tone that she is far from a traditional one.

Machan's word choice and humorous tone also reveal much about Hazel's personality and circumstances. Through the use of slang, alternate spellings, and the omission of punctuation, we learn a great deal about the character:

well i screams
 ya little green pervert
 an i hitsm with my mop
 an has ta flush
 the toilet down three times
 me
 a princess (19-25)

Listening to her speak, the reader understands that Hazel, a cleaner at Howard Johnson's, does not have an extensive education. She speaks in the colloquial, running words into one another and using phrases like "ya little green pervert" (20) and "i screams" (19). The lack of complete sentences,

Georges 2

capital letters, and punctuation adds to her informal tone. Hazel's speech defines her social status, brings out details of her personality, and gives the reader her view of herself. She is accustomed to the thankless daily grind of work and will not allow herself even a moment's fantasy of becoming a princess. It is a notion that she has to flush away—literally, has "ta flush . . . down three times." She tells LaVerne that the very idea of such fantasy is absurd to her, as she states in the final lines: "me / a princess" (24-25).

Georges 3

Works Cited

Machan, Katharyn Howd. "Hazel Tells LaVerne." *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*. Ed. Michael Meyer. 9th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012. 608. Print.
Meyer, Michael, ed. *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*. 9th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012. 605. Print.

MARTÍN ESPADA (b. 1957)

Latin Night at the Pawnshop

1987

Chelsea, Massachusetts
Christmas, 1987

The apparition of a salsa band gleaming in the Liberry Loan pawnshop window:

Golden trumpet,
silver trombone,
congas, maracas, tambourine,

all with price tags dangling like the city morgue ticket on a dead man's toe.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** What is "Latin" about this night at the pawnshop?
2. What kind of tone is created by the poet's word choice and by the poem's rhythm?
3. Does it matter that this apparition occurs on Christmas night? Why or why not?
4. What do you think is the central point of this poem?

How do the speaker's attitude and tone change during the course of this next poem?

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR (1872-1906)

To a Captious Critic

1903

Dear critic, who my lightness so deplores,
Would I might study to be prince of bores,
Right wisely would I rule that dull estate—
But, sir, I may not; till you abdicate.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How do Dunbar's vocabulary and syntax signal the level of diction used in the poem?
2. Describe the speaker's tone. How does it characterize the speaker as well as the critic?
3. **CREATIVE RESPONSE.** Using "To a Captious Critic" as a model, try writing a four-line witty reply to someone in your own life—perhaps a roommate, coach, teacher, waiter, dentist, or anyone else who provokes a strong response in you.

DICTION AND TONE IN FOUR LOVE POEMS

The first three of the following love poems share the same basic situation and theme: A male speaker addresses a female (in the first poem it is a type of female) urging that love should not be delayed because time is short. This theme is as familiar in poetry as it is in life. In Latin this tradition is known as *carpe diem*, "seize the day." Notice how the poets' diction helps create a distinctive tone in each poem, even though the subject matter and central ideas are similar (although not identical) in all three