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Dolores laGuardia

Hans P. Guth



Map, by Jasper Johns. Oil on canvas, 78" x 123 1/2"

AMERICAN VISIONS

MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE FOR WRITERS



AMERICAN VISIONS

Multicultural Literature for Writers

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For Dorian, Justin, Ingrid, Michael, Susan, and Paul

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TO THE INSTRUCTOR

History . . . does not refer merely, or even principally to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, we are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.

James Baldwin

American Visions aims at giving teachers and students a fuller, richer multicultural definition of the American literary tradition. The book is designed to help students discover their cultural history through the study of imaginative literature. We invite students to discover and interact with writers who, in the words of one reviewer, try “to make sense of America.” Focusing on the diversity of the American heritage, the book explores the historical context and contemporary relevance of major themes that have shaped our consciousness as a nation. The fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction printed here explore the forces that have played a major role in the American experience.

American Visions is designed to help students become more alert and responsive readers, more fully aware of the social contexts and human meaning of imaginative literature. The apparatus promotes interaction between the literature and the reader in discussion, writing, and collaborative work.

The Goals of *American Visions*

A SENSE OF HISTORY This book is organized around major themes that help explain who and what Americans are as a nation. To help our students develop a sense of history, we need to remember that chronology is not history and that bit facts do not bring the past to life. This book uses a combined historical and thematic approach—presenting major themes in historical perspective. To help students understand the presence of the past, it traces major strands that make up the fabric of the American experience. It focuses on major concerns and shifts in consciousness, such as the idea of America as the land of promise, the search for a national identity, the reclaiming of the Native American past, the lure and limitations of American individualism, the challenges to American optimism, the trauma of slavery, the glory and decline of the American city, the search for personal

fulfillment, the emergence of a new multicultural consciousness, and the rediscovery of nature.

REDEFINING THE HERITAGE This book helps readers move toward a new multicultural definition of the American heritage. An authentic vision of a shared American culture moves beyond the boundaries of region, gender, and ethnicity. Over the years, a fuller, richer vision of the American experience has emerged: The flourishing of Southern and American Jewish literature put the New England tradition in a larger national context. African American writers from Frederick Douglass to James Baldwin and Alice Walker, and Native American writers from N. Scott Momaday to Louise Erdrich, have found a large audience for the unheard voices of America's minorities. Feminist readers and feminist critics have rediscovered eloquent women writers of the past and championed women writing in the present. In recent years, bilingual American writers—Latinos, American Chinese, American Japanese—have begun to make a significant contribution to our national literature.

THE RELEVANCE OF LITERATURE This book is designed to help students become more responsive and more sophisticated readers. We do not want them to see image and metaphor and symbol as ends in themselves; instead, we want them to see how the elements of literature serve its human meaning. In the words of Tillie Olsen, we should make available to our students literature that is close to the "human condition"; that recognizes great capacities "in everyday use"; that "makes us profoundly conscious of what harms, degrades, denies development, destroys"; and that reminds us how much human potential "is unrealized, unlived."

THE RESPONSIVE READER As teachers of literature today we do not expect the student reader to be like a blank page. We recognize and validate what students bring to their reading—their background, allegiances, questionings, ideals, and disillusionments. We expect not only to engage the students' intelligence but also to bring their emotions and imagination into play. Many of the poems and stories dramatize concerns that involve and engage young readers: probing tensions between the generations, searching for meaning in our lives, asserting independence from wrongful authority, searching for self-worth, challenging the barriers that prejudice erects in the path of self-realization, or trying to counteract the human capacity for violence.

LITERATURE FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING The after-selection apparatus in this book provides a rich range of stimuli for discussion and writing. The "Thinking About Connections" strand guides students to revealing juxtapositions. A final chapter devoted to writing about literature includes guidelines for journal writing, writing about a poem, writing about

character, writing about theme, and comparing and contrasting related selections.

SPECIAL FEATURES Our headnotes go beyond routine author biography to place a selection in the context of a historical dialectic and to dramatize an author's roots and commitments. In lieu of footnotes, these headnotes often include help with the author's language and range of allusion.

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TO THE STUDENT

This book asks you to understand America by looking in the mirror of its imaginative literature. Since before the beginning of history, human beings have used poem, song, and story to leave a record of who they were and how they saw their world. Since before the formal founding of this nation, Americans have used the spoken and written word to give voice to feelings of love, pride, belonging, or isolation; to their hopes, fears, grievances, and aspirations. Today as in the past, people with the gift of language put their thoughts and feelings into words that can bring the past to life and illuminate the present.

The readings in this book are organized around major themes in the cultural history of this country. These themes are deeply rooted concerns, pervasive trends, or nagging preoccupations that have helped shape how we as Americans envision our country and ourselves. They have helped form our national identity; they are part of what it means to be an American today. Writers engaged with these themes dramatize the legacies, the promises, the choices, the traumas, and the liabilities that come with being American.

Here is a preview of the themes explored in the documents, speeches, poems, stories, and plays in this book:

1 NEW WORLD: The Promise of America

To millions here and abroad, America meant the promise of a new beginning. Those who formulated the goals and aspirations of the new nation meant to leave behind an oppressive past: the rigid class distinctions of old-world societies, the use of religion in the service of the state. They envisioned a new world where all were “created equal,” with equal opportunities and equal rights. All were to be “free to profess and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion” (Thomas Jefferson). Later generations have judged this nation by how successfully it has translated its ideals into reality. Have they remained for too many an unkept promise?

2 NEW NATION: The One and the Many

From the beginning, America was a coming together of many nationalities to form a new nation. “Here is not a nation but a teeming nation of nations,” said Walt Whitman, the poet of democracy. English, Irish, and Germans, followed by Italians, Czechs, Jews, Poles and others, made for a new ethnic and cultural mix. Mexicans came into the Union in the conquered

territories of the Southwest, and Chinese were brought in as “coolie” labor in the West. Would the jostling mix of nationalities develop a shared identity? Would a new national character emerge from the diversity of backgrounds, traditions, and religions?

3 NATIVE AMERICANS: Reclaiming the Past

The white settlers spreading throughout North America did not move into “virgin territory.” They drove back a native population of a million or more who were decimated by massacre, starvation, and disease. A remnant survived on the reservations, with their religion and rituals banned, their way of life destroyed. In recent years, Native American writers have begun to rewrite their history and “to celebrate the miracle of survival of those remaining Native people, religions, cultures, language, legal systems, medicine, and values” (Suzan Harjo). What was the culture of the Native Americans? What is the sense of identity of their descendants? How do they see their role in the larger culture today?

4 AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM: A Different Drummer

American culture has glorified the self-reliant individual. Bred into Americans is the distrust of government and of institutions. (“That government is best which governs least,” said the New England maverick Henry David Thoreau.) The American folk hero has been the lone rider, the self-made man, the nonconformist. The great names in American literature—Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson—are writers whose individual voice expresses a unique vision of the world. Is individuality being lost in a homogenized mass culture? Is the individualism of the frontier and pioneer days an anachronism in our modern world?

5 BEYOND OPTIMISM: The End of Innocence

Americans have a reputation for being optimists. They want to believe that people of good will can live together in peace, fight off famine, and defeat epidemics. They teach that honest effort pays, and they like to believe that private greed in the end serves the common good. Mark Twain, America’s greatest humorist, was not the first to tell bitter truths at odds with the gospel of optimism. (“When you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you,” he said. “That is the principal difference between a dog and a man.”) Greed, lawlessness, and lynch justice; the loss of faith in the capitalist system during the Great Depression; genocidal totalitarian regimes—all these have sorely tested the optimistic American belief in the power of good. Is it still possible to believe in the “perfectibility” of humankind?

6 BLACK IDENTITY: Let My People Go

For many, slavery has been the fall from grace that brought sin into the American Eden. From the Civil War to the civil rights movement, the challenge to the nation has been to bring its professed ideals into harmony with its treatment of its oppressed and disenfranchised black minority. African American writers have generated a rich literature of protest against racism and of search for black pride. Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, has said that her heritage as a black writer from the South was “a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil” and “an abiding love of justice.” What does it mean to be black in white America? What does it mean to be a black woman in a male-dominated culture?

7 CITYSCAPES: Contexts for Living

Boosters of the burgeoning American cities celebrated them as bastions of prosperity and of American economic might. American city architecture, with its towers of glass and steel, testified to the capacity of a modern technological civilization for monumental creative achievement. At the same time, however, artists and writers chronicled the other side of city life, looking into city faces “Tired of wishes,/Empty of dreams” (Carl Sandburg). Today, the decaying, violence-ridden cities are often the place where the American Dream turns into a nightmare. How does the urban environment shape the lives and outlook of Americans? Does the city have a future?

8 DESPERATE GLORY: War and Its Aftermath

War is the great unsolved problem of human civilization. What role has it played in the history and self-awareness of the American nation? The Revolutionary War and the Civil War, or War between the States, tested the new nation’s visions of sovereignty and union. For many writers, the great later conflicts—from the war against Mexico through the two World Wars to the war in Vietnam—called into question their faith in humanity and their loyalty to the war machine. “There died a myriad/And of the best,” said the American poet Ezra Pound after World War I, “for a botched civilization.” What do the protests of writers and artists avail?

9 INNER QUEST: The Searching Self

“It’s intellectual devastation/of everybody/to avoid emotional commitment,” says the black poet Nikki Giovanni in her “Woman Poem.” A persistent subtext in American literature has been the lack of emotional fulfillment—the failure of people to lead fulfilled lives in accordance with their inner needs. The “Unlighted Lamps” in the title of a short story by Sherwood Anderson are symbolic of a capacity for love and joy that has remained

unused. In poem, story, and play, we see characters whose true selves have been repressed. What is at fault—a lingering Puritan suspicion of sin, the stifling effect of small-town respectability, loneliness in the faceless city, the emotional wasteland of suburbia? The disregard of a male-dominated patriarchal culture for the emotional needs of women? Does mainstream middle-class American culture render people unable to tap their feelings?

10 AMERICAN MOSAIC: Multicultural America

Recent decades have seen a mass influx of new Americans from culturally diverse backgrounds. Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans have brought a Latin feeling to cities and neighborhoods. Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants have revitalized decaying downtowns. Immigrants from countries like the Philippines, India, and Pakistan are living in new immigrant ghettos. Are old mechanisms of assimilation and acculturation breaking down? How do the new Americans see themselves in relation to mainstream society?

11 INVISIBLE WALLS: The Untapped Potential

Americans pride themselves on their sympathy for the unfortunate. Recent years have seen a crusade to integrate the disabled and enable them to lead rewarding lives. Growing awareness or consciousness raising is helping to end the outgrouping of outsiders. Often we are asked to rethink what were once considered liabilities. At the same time, we are sometimes accused of encouraging people to think of themselves as victims. Is the right of people to a full life regardless of barriers or handicaps still part of the American credo?

12 REGAINED ROOTS: Encountering Nature

In the eighteenth century, European intellectuals saw in the untamed wilderness of the American continent an answer to congested, corrupt city civilization. Nature remained for many later writers a counterpoint to the triumph of a technology-driven, technocratic culture. The ecological movement of the twentieth century has fostered a renewed respect for our natural roots and a new cult of the outdoors as the antidote to urban sprawl, pollution, and nuclear accidents. How close to nature or how alienated from it are Americans today?

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INTRODUCTION

Reading Multicultural Literature

*I hear the sound I love, the sound of the human voice,
I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused or following,
Sounds of the city and sounds out of the city, sounds of the day and
night.*

Walt Whitman

*One day, some identifiable life form will come to Earth and ask: Who
are these people . . . these Black Americans? And we will proudly pre-
sent our songs, stories, plays, speeches, and poetry. We will proudly say:
We are the people who believe in the possibilities.*

Nikki Giovanni

*May God keep us
From single vision.
William Blake*

Imaginative literature is like a mirror in which we recognize ourselves and our world. Poets, writers of fiction, and playwrights have a special gift for taking in what they see and hear. It is as if they had more wide open eyes and more alert ears than others. They are shrewd observers. At the same time, they have a special gift for putting into words thoughts and feelings that might be confused or inarticulate in our minds. They know the language of the emotions. They have words for our desires and hopes and fears. The mirror these writers hold up to life sees more than the hurried observer, and it probes beyond the polite or deliberately casual faces people present to others.

THE LITERATURE OF DIVERSITY

Writers of multicultural literature hold up the mirror to the diversity of the life around us. The people who make up this country were not all cast from the same mold. They include the descendants of Native Americans, white settlers, and African slaves. The ethnic and religious strands in our