Teaching The God of Small Things in Wisconsin: A Guide for Educators

2012-2013 Great World Texts Program of the Center for the Humanities

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How to Use this Guide

A note on context: Reading Across Time and Space

_The God of Small Things_ is a work of fiction. While its sociocultural and geopolitical contexts are integral to its impact, and to our critical reflections on the texts, it is important to remember that this is a work of literature and not a historical document. While literature can help us teach culture, history, psychology, current affairs, and so on, no one text can bear the burden of representing an entire nation, culture, or people. Please keep in mind as you teach this novel that this novel is written from a “minority” perspective even in its own cultural context and emphasize where you can the cultural specificities that make this book unique. Doing so in a clear and explicit way will also help you and your students appreciate the text’s ability to speak across time and space through its use of themes that many of us can relate to in complex and varied ways.

How to Use this Guide

The material in this guide is intended to provide all you will need to teach the novel and its context, from an “intro to India” to thematic units on close reading. We believe that the historical and cultural background is necessary to understanding the novel, its characters, and their decisions, but we encourage you to teach the novel thematically, and tie it into other disciplinary issues and regular features of your core curriculum wherever possible.

Readings, reviews and handouts: The reviews and readings in the guide are intended for teachers, but some of them may also work well as student handouts. These include readings that provide further background information for instructors as well as a variety of materials (especially from the internet) that might aid instructors in creating handouts, for example. You are encouraged, where possible, to use the materials in this guide as handouts for your students. These readings, handouts, and other materials are all available electronically at the Great World Text website: [http://humanities.wisc.edu/public-projects/gwt/2012-2013-project/](http://humanities.wisc.edu/public-projects/gwt/2012-2013-project/).

Lesson plans and suggestions for discussion: The lesson plans and activities provided in this guide are designed to allow you the opportunity to tailor the way you teach the text to your own course, time constraints, interests, and goals. The individual units could be taught over one or several days or weeks, and you can mix and match ideas from the various sections to create your own syllabus. Each thematic section includes a theme, followed by a set of questions, suggestions for discussion, and then specific quotes from the text that might be used to further discussion of the theme, with some critical assessment.

Focused Reading: although the guide assumes that one has read the entire novel, most units include specific passages for a focused reading—an area of the text from which the major ideas and themes of that unit are drawn and which can serve as an example of the major concepts discussed.

Close Reading Strategies

Most of the lesson plans include _focused readings_, which are passages from the novel that illustrate a certain theme or idea for that particular unit. During discussion and for assignments, students should be encouraged to support their interpretations with evidence from the text. Close reading lends itself well to group work and to small-group discussions, and is an excellent way for students to learn both critical thinking and analysis skills as they make connections, use evidence to support their views, and discuss the impact of various literary techniques. For close reading to work successfully, it’s important...
that the teacher always remind the students to point to the passage/line/occurrence that supports their position as they share their ideas. Close reading teaches students the difference between “opinion” or “personal reaction” and “analysis.” It also helps teach students to assess the texts of its own merits, and avoid essentializing the cultural components of the text or stereotyping based on generalizations.

Reading a portion of text out loud as a class or small group, followed by group analysis, can be an excellent way to develop close reading skills in the classroom.

The guide also includes a handout on close reading that we encourage you to use in your classes.

**Teaching Toward the Student Conference**

Your students will come to Madison on March, 20, 2013 to present their work to their peers, listen to lectures from experts on the text, and workshop with UW faculty. At the conference, they will have opportunity to meet and listen to the author, Arundhati Roy. Unit 9 in this guide is devoted explicitly to preparing for this visit, and the student conference. Prepare them for a successful conference by encouraging them to challenge themselves with projects that provide critical interpretations of the text in unique and complex ways. There is no limit to the type of project they might prepare. Past projects have included essays, painting, sculpture, weaving, culinary projects, photography, film and other multimedia, dramatic performances, song, dance, and more. The only requirement is that the students’ projects must present a critical analysis of the text. Students will be required to write a short summary of their projects which will be due to Heather ([greattexts@humanities.wisc.edu](mailto:greattexts@humanities.wisc.edu)) by March 6, 2013.

Each school will select one student (or group of students) whose work is exemplary to present at the plenary session on stage. It’s recommended that the students themselves select (by voting) the “best” project for this presentation, which will be about 5 minutes in length. It is our expectation that these presentations will be polished, rehearsed and timed, and that they will provide opportunity for your school to feel pride and investment in its participation in the program. All other students are expected to present their work in poster sessions during the conference, and will have opportunity to stand next to their projects and answer questions about them from other students and conference participants. Every student who attends the conference should present his/her work at the conference.

**A Note of Caution on Plagiarism**

As with other “great” and popular texts, there is a wealth of information readily available on *The God of Small Things*, which can be tempting material to plagiarize from the web or other study guides. Teachers may consider discussing their policies on academic honesty and the differences between paraphrasing, summarizing, citation, and undocumented use of other sources. It is also recommended that teachers make plagiarism less likely by customizing their assignments to their classes and avoiding generic and widely-used prompts for take-home essay assignments and other projects. The more specific a prompt can be—responding to a quote or to another theme or piece of material from the current curriculum—and the more specific evidence from the play required will help to reduce the opportunity for plagiarism.

**For Further Information**

If you have any questions about this guide, or would like additional information on any of the materials here, please contact Great World Texts coordinator, Heather DuBois Bourenane, at greattexts@humanities.wisc.edu.