The fragmented structure of *The God of Small Things* is one of its most striking and challenging features. In the novel, narrative time does not correspond with chronological time. In other words, the way in which the story unfolds does not follow a conventional route from beginning to middle to end. Instead, Roy employs alternating narrative threads, flashbacks, and flashforwards to tell her story out of sequence in a non-linear fashion. Although this is initially difficult for the reader, understanding why Roy writes in this way can enhance our understanding of key themes in the novel, in particular the lasting effects of trauma and the enduring legacies of historical events. Form and content are thus profoundly interconnected, as Roy herself explains:

[The structure] was the most challenging part of writing the book. It begins at the end and ends in the middle. . . . if it had been a straight, linear narrative, it would have meant something altogether different. Each ordinary moment becomes more heightened, more poignant because it is viewed through the complex lens of both past and present. (*TGST Reader’s Guide*, 328-29)

**Objective:**

To explain and analyze the complex narrative structure of *The God of Small Things*, and to reflect on the relationship between the novel’s form and content with particular reference to time as both a structuring principle and central theme.

**Preparatory Reading and Resources:**


**Handouts/Presentation Materials:**

- [Novel Chronology](#)

**Lecture Points:**

- Explain the difference between form (*how* the text is put together, its shape and structure) and content (*what* the text says, the story)
- Identify the different narrative threads that run throughout the novel, which are told out of sequence:
  1. The first storyline unfolds in Ayemenem during a **two-week period in 1969**, when the twins are 7 years old. A series of dramatic and upsetting events occur immediately before, during, and after their cousin Sophie Mol’s visit from England: Estha is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man at the cinema; Ammu has a secret and passionate affair with Velutha, the discovery of which results in his death at the hands of the police; Sophie Mol is tragically drowned when she runs away with the twins during the ensuing confusion; Ammu is expelled by her family to eventually die an anonymous death; Estha is sent to live with his father in Calcutta; Rahel remains in the family home.
2. The second storyline takes place over the course of one day in 1993 when Estha and Rahel meet in Ayemenem for the first time since the tragic events described above. Their reunion culminates in an incestuous sexual encounter.

3. Both storylines are supplemented by backstories which provide information about the central characters and their lives prior to the main events of the novel. These include details of Baby Kochamma’s unrequited love for Father Mulligan; the circumstances of Ammu’s failed marriage to the twins’ father; the story of Chacko’s Oxford education and his relationship with Margaret.

- Explain the concept of linear, chronological time (in which events unfold in an ordered sequence, a timeline)
- Define the formal techniques which Roy uses to disrupt linear time, including:
  - Alternating Narratives
    Roy switches between the narrative threads described above, relating events out of order.
  - Flashbacks
    e.g. “Twenty-three years later, Rahel, dark woman in a yellow T-shirt turns to Estha in the dark. “Esthapappychachen Kuttapen Peter Mon,” she says (Ch. 20, pp. 310: Rahel refers to her adult brother by a playful childhood nickname.)
  - Flashforwards/Foreshadowing
    e.g. “She remembers . . . what the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man did to Estha in Abhilash Talkies” (Ch. 1, pp. 5: The reader does not yet know what took place at the cinema; this isn’t revealed until pp. 98).

[NB. Unit 5 offers more detail about the novel’s distinctive style; the focus here is on formal and thematic “time”]
- Discuss the effects that the disruption of linear time has on the novel, which include:
  - Dramatic: The flashbacks and flashforwards prepare the reader for the tragic events that are to come, creating suspense, but also helping the reader to get accustomed to the horror that eventually occurs. These repetitions also convey the inevitability of both Velutha and Ammu’s affair and it’s outcomes.
  - Political: Critic Madhu Benoit suggests that the novel’s disorderly narration softens the blow of Roy’s intense social and political critique. By inviting the reader to put the pieces of the novel jigsaw back together as they read, Roy “blurs the dividing line between author and reader . . . as the reader ‘writes’ the text” (106). As a result, the reader is more receptive to the painful questions that Roy asks (e.g. about caste prejudice) because they feel more involved in the world of the novel.
  - Traumatic: Critic Elizabeth Outka suggests that the fragmented timeline of the novel mimics the psychological effects of Ammu and the twins’ trauma. People who experience disturbing, violent, and tragic events are often unable to fully remember them (amnesia) or they are unable to totally forget them (involuntary flashbacks). The kaleidoscopic form of the novel, in which the boundaries between past and present continually merge, imitates the ways in which trauma
sufferers are paradoxically haunted by their past, but also suppress its memory. In this way, the form of the novel reflects the content of the novel.

- Address the theme of “Frozen Time” in the novel, relating it to the form where possible:
  - **Rahel’s Wristwatch:** This is an important recurrent motif in the novel. A plastic toy watch with “the time painted on it,” the watch defies the passing of time by always reading “ten to two.” Rahel initially wants “own a watch on which she could change the time whenever she wanted to (which according to her was what Time was meant for in the first place)” (37). This seemingly childish desire also symbolizes one of the larger themes in the novel: the external forces—including time, but also longstanding social norms—which prevent the central characters from taking control of their own lives. When the watch is one of the few items left behind by the police who beat Velutha, the additional meaning of this “faulty record of the time” is underscored (295). The watch marks the trauma which “freezes” Estha and Rahel in time, unable to progress in actual or emotional terms (cf. 222: the adult twins are described as “frozen two-egg fossils”).
  - **Estha’s Silence:** Following the death of Velutha and his mother, Estha gradually stops talking. His silence is compared to “an uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past” (13). He deliberately shuts out the tragedies that affected his family in an attempt to freeze time and pretend they never took place. This is his way of coping with trauma.
  - **Ammu’s Words:** Like her son, Ammu deliberately tries to freeze time in order to deny the disintegration of her family. However, she becomes “garrulous” rather than silent in her attempt. When they meet for the last time before Ammu’s death, she continually interrupts Rahel, “terrified of what adult thing her daughter might say and thaw frozen time” (153).

- Discuss the significance of the History House in the novel, which comes to function as a symbol of the past’s enduring effects in the present:
  - **Metaphor:** Chacko originally uses the History House as a metaphor to convey the alienation of Indians from their own past—a result of British colonization, which imposed foreign ideals and distanced Indians from indigenous cultural practices and beliefs (51).
  - **Kari Saipu’s House:** The twins interpret their uncle’s metaphor literally, understanding the History House to be an actual abandoned building in Ayemenem where “the Englishman who had ‘gone native’” once lived, prior to the events of the novel (51). This one-time plantation owner abused a young boy on his property. In her description of this literal History House as a “private Heart of Darkness,” Roy references Joseph Conrad’s novel of the same name, which has been widely understood as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of colonialism. When Velutha is murdered in the History House, it takes on additional meaning as a site not only of colonial oppression, but also the repetition of such cruelty in postcolonial India. In contrast to linear time, the inescapable history encapsulated in the History House conveys the continual and paradoxical presence of the past.
Discussion Questions:

- What effect does the narrative structure have on your reading of the novel? Why do you think that Roy chose to write in this way? Do you find the disruptions of linear time off-putting, confusing, engaging, dramatic?

- The novel does not have a conventional conclusion. The events that are described last in the narrative actually occur earlier in chronological time. As a result they do not offer “closure” for the reader. In other words, things are not neatly tied up at the end. Why do you think Roy chose to end her novel as she does? What is the significance of the final word “tomorrow”? How might the conclusion be read as an attempt to “freeze time”?
  
  - Of the conclusion, Roy herself says: “[T]he novel ends more or less in the middle of the story and it ends with Ammu and Velutha making love and it ends on the word tomorrow. Though you know that what tomorrow brings is terrible it is saying that the fact that this happened at all is wonderful” (qtd. in Mullaney 56).

- How does the form of the novel relate to the theme(s) of the novel? How does the way Roy tells her story enhance, clarify or emphasize what she is saying?

- What is the role of memory in the novel? How does this affect the form? Why is memory an important theme for Roy? Why does Rahel think of memory as “that woman on the train. Insane in the way she sifted through dark things in a closet and emerged with the most unlikely ones—a fleeting look, a feeling. . . . Quite sane in the way she left huge tracts of darkness veiled. Unremembered” (69-70)? Does this description remind you of any characters in the novel?

- What is the significance Chacko’s “Earth Woman” fable, which he intends to “give Estha and Rahel a sense of Historical Perspective” (52)? Why are the twins unable to find comfort in “geological time” after the tragedies of 1969 (54)?

Assignment and Project Ideas:

- Before sharing the chronology handout, ask students to create their own timeline of the novel, arranging events in the order in which they occurred.

- Ask students to write their own non-linear story that does not have a conventional beginning, middle, and end.

- Invite students to reflect on some of their strongest memories. Why do you think these have lasted longer than others? What triggers your students’ memories? Are their memories accurate? What effect do they have?

Suggestions for expanding this unit:

Compile a timeline of Indian history with your students, providing both context for the novel and an explanation of linear time. Ask students to research different events on the timeline and present their findings to the class. Discuss the usefulness and limitations of historical timelines, e.g. how they help us keep records of the past, but also highlight certain occasions at the expense of others. Timelines do not describe the enduring effects of “past” events. Can your students think of alternative ways to visually represent history?