

## Annotated Bibliography — English IV

Allen, Woody. "The Kugelmass Episode."

"The Kugelmass Episode" is a short story by Woody Allen about a man who ruins his life with a greedy passion for a more exciting life, a path that leads him further and further into lying until he meets his demise. The main idea is that one always has a better life in reality than one with unchecked pleasure. For example, while Kugelmass experiences a calm albeit uneventful life, his fairytale life with Emma Bovary results in "ruin and alimony; jail. For adultery with Madame Bovary, [his] wife will reduce [him] to beggary"; in the end, he even gets consumed by the calamity bound to happen by his messing with fate. The plot is somewhat analogous to that of *Hamlet*: Hamlet descends deeper and deeper into his revenge, hoping for a better opportunity to strike down King Claudius, but his closest friends around him die as he gets tangled further in his lies.

Atwood, Margaret. "Gertrude Talks Back."

Atwood's poem "Gertrude Talks Back" is a humorously literal response to a scene from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that emphasizes the importance of unsuspecting characters in any plot. Atwood's Gertrude character cleverly portrays the differences caused by a change in perspective: amidst her husband's death and her new marriage, Gertrude is more concerned with the state of the "student slum pigpen in Wittenburg," laundry, or the "bloat king" insult to King Claudius— every event is registered differently from each person and therefore it can be told as a different story from each perspective. Hamlet assumes that the others around him interpret his father's death with the same horror as he does; Atwood's interpretation is that "it was [Gertrude]" who murdered King Hamlet, and Hamlet's assumption is fatally incorrect. Stephen Crane explores Man's incorrect assumption that the universe cares about every living purpose in "A Man Said to the Universe" — Crane asserts that any indication that our interest in the universe is clearly a unfound and not mutual, similar to Hamlet's assumption about Gertrude.

Burt, Stephens. "Why People Need Poetry."

Stephen approaches the meaning of poetry in his TED talk "Why People Need Poetry" from a very existential, practical perspective. His main contention is that, because of the inevitable fact that "we are all going to die" and it is not possible to capture every historical perspective, poetry fills in those gaps: specifically, it allows people "to remember something or someone, to celebrate or to look beyond death or to say goodbye," to have communication with other humans reach past physical barriers of time and space. An analogous example we explored in class is Gardner's response to Susie West, which demonstrates the kind of dialogue that poetic writing can have between the reader and the author that Burts talks about.

Camus, Albert. "The Myth of Sisyphus."

Albert Camus explores what goes on in Sisyphus's mind in his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus." One interesting idea he declares is that "if this myth is tragic, then it is because the hero is conscious." No story is tragically meaningful if there is an unrealistic sense of hope around every corner, with no peep of reality found along the way; for Sisyphus, while there is the mindless act of pushing the rock up the hill, there is also the short, sweet moments when he watches the stone roll back down and he is free from his

toil, able to think freely. Camus argues that, as Sisyphus descends to his rock and has a moment to believe that he can control his fate, “he is superior to his fate.” This is very similar to what Christopher Nelson describes in his essay, “Barnacles: Liberal Education and the Art of Becoming Unstuck”: liberal education creates a spark of realization in people that their fate is still uncertain and that no person is doomed to the destiny of a mindless, barnacle.

Collins, Billy. “Everyday Moments Caught in Time.”

“Everyday Moments Caught in Time” is a humorous TED talk given by poet Billy Collins about the role of poetry versus video (visual media) as means of expression. A main idea of the talk is that poetry is not necessarily used to capture the boldest stories (like ardent love tales, Homer’s epics), but is rather an imaginative method of communication. He writes grammatically-correct poems, about everyday trivia such as “poetic amnesia,” the custom to “never ... leave a box of wooden strike-anywhere matches just lying around the house,” and to get through “To [His] Favorite 17-Year-Old High School Girl.” This clearly contrasts with the style and theme of Ferlinghetti’s poem “Constantly Risking Absurdity,” which indicates that poetry, like acrobatics, ought to be risky by nature.

Collins, Billy. “Thesaurus.”

“Thesaurus” is a poem by Billy Collins that discusses the idea that no words are truly synonyms because of the unique, subtle connotations that every word carries. A corollary to this idea is that the most interesting and captivating word usage is when “weddings ... between perfect strangers” take place—where exact and unexpected choice plays a role in creating original meaning—rather than the more ordinary “congregations with their relatives”—where synonyms make the text redundant. The slight connotations that come with different “synonyms” is an example of the use of *symbolic language* that Langer describes in “Language and Thought”—the “fine shades of meaning” between synonyms are unique ideas associated with each word that, when used effectively, greatly distinguish human language from that of other intelligent beings.

Crane, Stephen. “A Man Said to the Universe.”

“A Man Said to the Universe” is a pithy poem bringing to mind a sense of universal indifference that is the root of so many people’s despair and perhaps the rise of nihilistic philosophies. The fact that a person’s existence does not register “a sense of obligation” to the universe means that existence does not automatically merit importance, so that no human is born more important than another; one must pave his own meaningful path that should not depend on the help of the universe or other greater consciousness; all a person can do create meaning locally, for themselves or others. The poem “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--” implies that one meaningful way to live life is by the action of telling the truth, which contains an “infirm Delight” (Dickinson 3) that must “dazzle gradually \ Or every man be blind” (Dickinson 7-8); in other words, one way to live to create meaning for oneself and others is by teaching.

Crane, Stephen. “The Wayfarer.”

“The Wayfarer” is a poem by Stephen Crane that illustrates that the path to truth is always inconvenient and perhaps even dangerous, which explains why many people choose an easier, alternate path (that presumably leads someplace other than truth). By realizing that the path to truth “was thickly grown with weeds,” and then on further inspection, “that each weed \ was a singular knife,” means that finding

truth becomes increasingly difficult as you ponder achieving it; truth is something that should be confronted honestly and without fear of the minor cuts and scrapes that come along the way. An interesting example of a character who has found truth is Gertrude in “Gertrude Talks Back” — she berates Hamlet for his insolence but also unreluctantly reveals her own truth and can live without fear or shame; following Crane’s metaphor, it’s as if she ran down the path of weeds without even noticing that they were knives.

Dickinson, Emily. “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--.”

Dickinson’s succinct poem “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--” warns people to always reveal the truth gradually to the audience, as if a sudden reveal of the truth could be dangerous “As Lightning to the Children.” Her metaphor concerning lightning means that the Truth, without “explanation kind” or “Circuit” (circular language), can easily overwhelm or be misinterpreted by a person and therefore put the listener in a worse situation than if they had not heard any part of the truth at all. This is represented in Mary Oliver’s “The Journey,” in which the pathway to truth is not instantaneous and overwhelming, but a gradual, difficult journey. However, in “The Journey,” the path to truth is portrayed more as an effort by the learner of truth than a teacher, as is suggested in Dickinson’s poem.

Ferlinghetti, Lawrence. “Constantly Risking Absurdity.”

“Constantly Risking Absurdity” is a poem likening the actions of a poet to those of an acrobat: skillful, precise, imperiling. A less-obvious aspect of both skills that Ferlinghetti emphasizes is that both must “perforce perceive taut truth” before advancing— in other words, that what a poet writes must be their certain truth, no manner of falsity within— and that every step taken with said truth goes towards “that still higher perch where Beauty stands and waits.” The last step to obtaining beauty is to master the “death-defying leap” she takes, still observing Truth all the while. Influenced by the Shaper, Grendel follows a similar path: he always searches for his own truth (whether that be from learning from the dragon, or from Wealtheow’s beauty, or from Hrothulf or Beowulf) and takes risks to attack the heroes as a component of his search for self-purpose.

Joyce, James. “Eveline.”

“Eveline” is a short story in a collection called *Dubliners* by James Joyce about a tough decision to stay with her family and endure her sometimes-irrational father, or leave everything behind for her passionate love for her fiancé. A key theme is the confusion between the joys and horrors of freedom: toward the conclusion of the story she felt the wondrous “seas of the world” that she was going to travel with her sailor fiancé “would drown her”; that world of so many possibilities and uncertainty is less desirable than her current life, which was “a hard life — but ... she did not find it a wholly undesirable life.” In “Traveling Through the Dark,” Stafford also encounters an ethical problem to try and save the baby deer or not, but his decision did not have the influence of other witnesses to confuse him, and therefore his solution came much quicker and easier than Eveline’s.

Gardner, John. *Grendel*.

In Gardner’s novel *Grendel*, a monster undergoes a mental journey through various philosophies (from nihilism to Machiavellianism to the theories of various philosophers) based on his observations of the life of a civilization, causing phases of malice and restraint that allow the reader to redefine what it means to

be a monster. In this text, Gardner presents the idea that because “tedium is the worst pain” (138), challenge (whether it be friendly or fatal, like Unferth or Beowulf to Grendel) is *always* the better alternative to a boring, redundant life. This book relates to the TED talk “Why People Need Poetry” because it explains poetry’s role in bringing alive the perspective and emotions of people that are otherwise accessible; in *Grendel*, Grendel only begins to appreciate and feel more human emotions such as self-consciousness when he is influenced by the Shaper’s song.

Gardner, John. “Letter to Susie West.”

Gardner explains some of the misconceptions and acknowledges some of the correct assumptions that students in Susie West’s class wrote to him in letters about his novel *Grendel*, especially about the roles of certain characters in his novel. For example, he how he qualifies “David’s ... comment on man’s role as a theory maker,” in which he partially adds onto this idea, noting the evil of “justifying one’s behavior because it makes other people better” (i.e., a Devil’s Advocate) but also the benefit that “man can only learn control of nature and himself by making up theories” — a two-sided, more complex, truer claim than David’s original one. Showing Gardner’s knowledgeable perspective on his book is similar to Tom Matriq’s video, “What is Truth?”: much of what the students say is true, but Gardner (who is the character with a greater sense of truth) can always clarify or qualify the student’s claims, bringing them closer to the truth.

Heaney, Seamus. “Blackberry Picking.”

Seamus Heaney’s poem, “Blackberry Picking,” is the sad reality of a poor blackberry farmer, who is faced with a rotting harvest. Heaney creates a drastic juxtaposition in the phrase “lovely canfuls smelt of rot” that exemplifies the theme of the poem: that the blackberries, whose “flesh was sweet” was so easily destroyed by “a rat-grey fungus,” that the sweetest things can most quickly turn sour. Seamus’s concluding realization that “I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not” directly contrasts with O’Brien’s view of “truth” — in the farmer’s case, the rotting is a simple and direct truth, and he decides to express it so, unlike O’Brien. This makes O’Brien’s prose seem a romanticization of the truth, and that a cold, bare tragedy has a similarly numbing, but perhaps more hopeless, effect.

“Interview with Tim O’Brien.”

In his interview, Tim O’Brien offers some answers about the real history of the stories in his book and how he came at some of the fictional experiences that appeared. The large majority of his story did not really happen, to the surprise of the interviewers. This interview is important because it shows much of O’Brien’s motivation to write the book: he says that “wars are no longer coming into our living rooms in the way Vietnam once did ... Our current wars seem almost sanitized” -- in other words, he felt compelled to write about a sensitive topic simply by the merit that it was important to him and that his view wasn’t widely known. While this might seem a bit obvious, it is the kind of narrow focus that Mary Oliver emphasizes in her poem “The Summer Day,” in which she writes about human’s purpose in nature because that is her deep, under-published concern.

Kipling, Rudyard. “If.”

“If” is a practical piece of advice, presumably given from a parent figure to his or her child at an adolescent stage, written by Rudyard Kipling. It warns the child mostly to be able to tolerate the many

difficulties that may come their way with moderation. For example, the child should know both to “trust yourself” (3) and “make allowance for ... doubting too” (4), and “dream-- and not make dreams your master” (9); balance is key, and a person should never learn to go completely one way or the other on the spectrum of trust, dreams, or any of the other emotions Kipling advises. This poem brings into mind Gregory Orr’s poem, “Like Any Other Man,” because Orr presents two extreme situations (vulnerability and aggression) that humankind always has to balance between.

Langer, Susanne K. “Language and Thought.”

“Language and Thought” is an essay by Susanne Langer exploring the role of language in distinguishing human intelligence from other forms of intelligence by the human ability to interpret “symbols” as opposed to simple “signs.” An interesting point that Langer makes is that humans have not only the gift for this elevated sense of intelligence, but we have “a biological need ... the constant need of *conceiving*” (2) what happens, and that this process of constant expression begins as soon as a person begins to dream. This explains the motive behind writing poetry based on commonplace events such as those by Billy Collins in “Everyday Moments Caught in Time” — he finds obligation to write about these subjects because of this fundamental need Langer describes.

Matriq, Tom. “What is Truth?”

Tom Matriq explores the definition of truth through a hypothetical situation that exposes that no truth is absolute. He studies a situation in which “no one is lying,” and yet most of the people are incorrect — an apparent paradox that he explains with the concept that no truth is truly absolute but always relative to the information given, because there is always some aspect that can be more true (e.g., a two-colored ball, lighting, etc.). This relates to Nelson’s “barnacles” — a person without the open-mindedness to pursue a liberal education by studying more knowledgeable people and discovering that there is always a higher degree of truth. It also relates to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, in which the reality of the chained people are the shadows, and they have no way to tell that their reality is only a limited sense of the reality of the people casting the shadows.

Mueller, Lisel. “Things.”

“Things” is a poem describing human nature’s tendency to attribute human qualities to nonhuman items to make them more appealing to everyday life. A main idea Mueller presents us that humans subconsciously attribute different human characteristics to (i.e., personify) objects based on context: people may personify furniture to be more amiable when “[they] grew lonely” (1); may personify dull objects because “[they] loved graceful profiles” (12); and give scarier notions such as caves and storms human characteristics “so [they] could pass into safety” (20). This sort of context-aware reasoning is not present in Collins’s poem “Thesaurus,” in which words are mechanically assigned synonyms, often ignoring subtle connotations (i.e., context).

Nelson, Christopher B. “Barnacles: Liberal Education and the Art of Coming Unstuck.”

“Barnacles: Liberal Education and the Art of Coming Unstuck” is an essay describing the effects of a lack of a so-called “liberal education” — i.e., an education by exemplars. It argues that barnacles refused to get “scraped” because they forget “how much more is possible, how spacious and open life can be” because being a barnacle simply and “effectively solves many of life’s problems, like where it’s going to

sleep, how it's going to get food, what it should do during the day, or whether it should visit its relatives." In other words, barnacles become self-content with automatically making easy decisions in life that they forget what it means to challenge themselves. This idea of tedium relates to "Things" by Lisel Mueller, because people tend to generalize objects and forget to carefully observe every object as they come, much like how barnacles forget the joy of overcoming every obstacle as a challenge.

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carry*.

*The Things They Carry* is a very compelling series of "true war stories" written about fabricated experiences of the Vietnam War. A major conviction of O'Brien's is that there is a difference between "happening-truth" and what is actually true: in fact, the entire premise of the novel is that it is not written about real events but instead about events that O'Brien created to recreate the true experience, because "in war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (78). This connects to Ferlinghetti's "Constantly Risking Absurdity," because in his poem "truth" is some beautiful, unreachable entity that must be obtained by making risky, non-practical, acrobatic tricks, far outside what usually happens ("happening-truth").

Oliver, Mary. "The Journey."

Mary Oliver's poem "The Journey" is the mental battle of a person who is enlightened by the truth, which is the ability to listen to one's inner voice and not depend on the opinions of others. A main point that Oliver makes is that finding truth is a purely individual feat, and that a person can only save "the only life that you could save," i.e., themselves. One cannot help the "voices around you \ [that] kept shouting \ their bad advice," but rather distance themselves from those negative pressures to save themselves. Eveline is a character who could not find the truth (i.e., isolate and listen to only her own voice rather than those of others); she tries to fulfill her mother's will to manage the home, her brothers' will to stay home, and her fiancé's will to find love, and is torn apart without knowing what *she* really wanted.

Oliver, Mary. "The Summer Day."

Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day" is a philosophical discussion on what it means to exist: what to observe, what to learn, what is worth the time. Because Oliver chooses to focus on a single grasshopper for the majority of the poem means that she wants to demonstrate that, to make the most of "[their] one wild and precious life," people should pay deep attention to the things that interest them, rather than spreading themselves on topics that don't interest them. Mary Oliver, who writes many thoughtful poems on nature, decides not to deviate from her focus of the grasshopper, "stroll[ing] through the fields," and "kneel[ing] down in the grass." The problem with this philosophy is that it always feels as though there is not enough time; stressful situations such as O'Brien's during the Vietnam War don't always allow for focus on important or interesting matter, so Oliver's poem is mostly relevant during free time.

Oliver, Mary. "Wild Geese."

"Wild Geese" is a poem by Mary Oliver that explores the idea of a person's purpose in a seemingly uncaring universe. Her thesis is that a person doesn't have to do any sort of universal good in their existence, but that they should simply be true to themselves and others, as she calls to the reader

soothingly, "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. Tell me about your despair, and I will tell you mine." While this does not contradict the Universe's uncaring statement in "A Man Said to the Universe" by Stephen Crane, it adds a human level of understanding, that nature (the "sun and clear pebbles of the rain" and the "wild geese") may never understand the philosophical, existential predicaments of Man and that it is not our purpose to have other beings understand.

Orr, Gregory. "Like Any Other Man."

Gregory Orr's poem, "Like Any Other Man," is a short poem about the apparent paradox of human nature's vulnerability. He states that every man inherently has "a knife in one hand" and a (likely self-inflicted) "wound in the other," signifying that Man realizes the danger of using violence as a means of solving problems but refuses to stop using it. This idea contributes to the sort of careless, nihilistic air in Mary Oliver's poem, "Wild Geese," in which she begins with "You don't have to be good": the knife is a problem for Man but not something that will affect the universe's general intentions.

Sandburg, Carl. "They All Want to Play Hamlet."

"They All Want to Play Hamlet" is a poem by Carl Sandburg about the allure of playing the role of Hamlet in the play. It has a theme of irony, because the people who want to play Hamlet do not truly understand what it means to "see their fathers killed" or "their mothers in a frame-up to kill," but they want the role because they want to recite the "slow wise, keen, beautiful words" that gives Hamlet's role such a sagacious feeling. This directly contrasts with how Mary Oliver proposes that people should live their lives in her poem "Wild Geese," "let[ting] the soft animal of your body love what it loves" and "tell[ing] about your despair." Because it is likely that no person has gone through the same combination of love and despair as Hamlet, no person can ever accurately portray the role of Hamlet.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is a play about the tragedy that ensues when revenge based only on passion and honor is sought. One theme is the distribution of a person's trust and loyalty: Hamlet's is clearly allocated to a greater degree to his close friends than his family, and this causes both his family's destruction and his own. Especially strong is his dislike and disconnect with his mother, for who he believes "a beast, that wants discourse of reason, \ Would have mourn'd longer [after her husband's death]" (1.2.153-154). Kugelmass is alike to Hamlet in this manner, and from this comes his downfall: his trust of Persky and magic become greater than his love to his wife, to the point that his quality of living in reality diminishes to untrust and depression.

Stafford, William. "Traveling Through the Dark."

This poem by William Stafford recounts a quick decision made by the narrator to end the unborn foal's life to save it further complication and misery: an ethical choice. It brings to mind the level of interaction between Man and Nature in a modern context: purely pragmatical. His decision to throw the doe and its unborn child is based on the fact that "to swerve might make more dead" and that it was late at night with no help nearby; he might have been able to save the infant deer by contacting professional help, but he takes the convenient route of removing the deer from the road. There is a contrast between this logical approach and that of Man against other Men, such as in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" —

people sometimes charge almost towards certain death for sometimes very simple or illogical contentions, honor and loyalty; interactions with Nature are often more thoughtful.

Stromme, Craig J. "The Twelve Chapters of Grendel."

"The Twelve Chapters of Grendel" is an analysis of the different philosophies that Grendel discovers in different parts of John Gardner's novel *Grendel*. The important takeaway is that Stromme explains that the philosophies are not "presented in a uniform format," as they are not concrete, systematic ways of thinking; instead, each philosophy is part of a "search ... for the best way to live in the world," and Grendel's ability to completely switch philosophies makes his life a very dynamic one. Also interesting is how he can house multiple philosophies at once, sometimes even conflicting ones (e.g., that human beauty is something both sacred and laughingly trivial), makes him realize that no philosophy is the entire truth, as Tom Matriq suggests in his video "What is Truth?"

Tennyson, Alfred Lord. "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" is a dramatic depiction of the bravery of soldiers who were misled in the Battle of Balaclava, resulting in high casualties due to the soldiers' fidelity even in the face of a low chance of survival. This in turn leads to the main idea that the level of heroism the soldiers exhibit is directly correlated with the ability to follow orders against their instincts: because their military commands were absolute and it was "Theirs not to make reply, \ Theirs not to reason why, \ Theirs but to do and die," the soldiers are branded with a mark of heroism. This relates to the prickly path to truth that is expressed in Stephen Crane's "The Wayfarer": because attaining truth through a path of weeds or knives is dangerous, it usually happens by the unwilling, torturous walk prompted by the encouragement and support of friends and family.