

Cozy Apologia

- by Rita Dove -

A YouTube clip of Rita Dove talking about her work is available, called the 'Big Think Interview.' Students may find this helpful to introduce the poet and her ideas.

Activities

A

Students should be encouraged to discover for themselves how the term 'apologia' is used in literary convention. The Wikipedia definition is quite useful as it contains reference to some elements used by Dove in the poem:

- the idea of a rationale or justification of the poet's relationship with her partner
- the idea of refuting an imagined accusation of 'cosiness' in the relationship

In response to the prompt question, students may speculate about the status and identity of 'Fred', named in the title, and should be able to recognise some essential qualities in their relationship, such as:

- their happiness and 'cosiness'
- his reliability and steadfastness
- her devotion to him

Encourage students to justify their impressions by reference to the detail in the poem, such as the image of the knight in the first stanza to suggest her view of him as a protector.

B

The juxtaposition of concrete images from ordinary life in the first three lines with the stylised romantic image of the knight in shining armour in the rest of the stanza could be the focus of some productive discussion.

The concrete images - the lamp, the rain and the drying ink - conjure up particular aspects of her ordinary life, although able students may see more symbolic value in these features. For example, the closely observed detail of the drying ink is linked with Dove's profession as a writer or the rain may begin to depict an image of indoor domesticity.

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C

The image of the knight in shining armour in the rest of the stanza is built up using the highlighted details. Students will readily identify the romantic stereotype evoked here, although some may need the words and phrases highlighted in red to guide their responses. The overall image is almost a cliché of romantic convention, perhaps surprisingly so, coming after the more pedestrian images in the first three lines. The last two lines make use of military terminology and students could be encouraged to speculate on Dove's meaning here: what is she freed from, why is he smiling and who is the enemy?

D

Students may not recognise compact disks and faxes as very modern but need to see that they were for the poet! Some able students may be able to investigate the ideas of post-modernism – a scepticism about literature itself and what it might mean. They may be able to offer a view on the repetition in 'post-post-modern'.

The red highlighted words are perhaps best considered in conjunction with the image of the knight. Students may notice the cynical tone of these descriptions and discuss whether the poet is more approving of the romantic knight image than of modern times.

The contrast between the image of the knight and the less attractive depiction of males here should be noted. The green highlighted words and phrases may help to elicit some thoughtful discussion about a particular kind of teenage experience from a girl's perspective. The images highlighted in blue may be explored: the reference to confectionary might suggest the transitoriness of teenage romances, for example, and the use of 'dark and hollow' may help to convey their insubstantial nature. 'Big Bad Floyd' may need to be explained as the name given to a hurricane, according to the naming conventions of meteorologists. The colloquial addition of 'Big, Bad' may, however, elicit some discussion about the poet's attitude to men.

E

In this stanza, Dove defines the nature of her relationship with her partner. The 'apologia' idea is invoked by her defence of a relationship which is 'content' and 'ordinary' rather than passionate. The cosiness of the relationship is what protects her from the storm (and her own 'melancholy'). Other ideas to consider are the significance of the eagles and their possible association with the 'Divine' in the poem, why their happiness is 'embarrassing' and why the time is 'stolen.'

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F

Students could consider the use of different images of love relationships in each stanza – the clichéd romantic image in the first, immature and transient affections in the second, progressing to a cosy acceptance of a quiet, mature but ordinary love in the last. These may elicit some thoughtful personal responses from students. The poet uses rhyme in an unobtrusive but quite light-hearted way to underline her contentment in her relationship. The rhyming patterns vary from stanza to stanza as the poem offers an argument/rationale rather than an image of perfection or passion.

The mood of the poem is quite self-mocking in places, gently humorous and sometimes quietly reflective, especially in the last stanza. Students may track these subtle changes in different ways and find different interpretations of the language and imagery.