

Critical Response Paper Samples
Ann Pancake's Critical Response Paper Class

(Please print these out, read them, and bring them with you to class.)

Jennifer Culkin (Fiction and Nonfiction)

Notes on *The Things They Carried*, by Tim O'Brien

It's clear from *The Things They Carried*, his collection of stories on the Vietnam War, that Tim O'Brien has been to the raw, bleeding edge. This is the psychic outpost where everything is at stake, where every vestige of civilization breaks down. Where democratic, prosperous, peacetime conceptions of what it means to be human become obliterated. O'Brien reports back from this nightmarish territory with clear, harrowing authority.

These are stories that shine in the elusive promised land between fiction and memoir. We can't isolate which physical events actually happened, and which are invented, borrowed, relocated or embellished. And it seems to be O'Brien's intention to confound us there, yet another way to communicate the surreal, shape-shifting, hallucinatory power of what he experienced in the war. This blurring also enlarges the work. These stories become more than just O'Brien's; they reflect a collective experience. But because of O'Brien's authority (he *has* been there), because of his skill at rendering the contrast between the terse, raw facts of setting, character development and action, and the more lyrical hints or explorations of character and purpose that are part of the fabric of each narrative, we feel secure in the emotional, and somehow the spiritual truth of each story.

In the piece (is it a story? Is it a short essay? The question isn't answerable), "Good Form", O'Brien explores the function of this interstice between reality and fiction:

Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. (180)

He's right, and it makes me wonder whether I shouldn't experiment more with the memoir/fiction interstice in my own work. In most cases, I think the magic of a story that is based in fact is enhanced by sticking to the details of what actually happened, if you can. Are there words any more powerful or talismanic than *this is a true story*? When a story is true, resonant and well-rendered, it acts on readers in a different way than fiction—they will take it in at a deeper level. They will incorporate it in a way that they are less likely to do with fiction: *Some living person has done this, has thought this, has felt this before me.*

But that's if the writer can remember the details of what happened, and if he was able to pay attention to exactly what happened. In war, and in emergency medicine, so much happens in such a compressed time-frame that memory might provide nothing more coherent than a jumble of impressions, none of them solid. Whatever the writer chooses to tell, it'll be a version of the truth, no more than that. And what you take away from an experience *is* something separate from the experience itself. By itself, it's a worthy area to explore, even if you have to invent the context to explore it.

O'Brien also understands a home truth about what happens at the extremes of human experience. In "How To Tell A True War Story" he writes:

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done...If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. (68-69)

I've used war metaphors to describe my work in medicine—"in the trenches", "on the front lines" to name a couple of the well-worn clichés I've stooped to—but it wasn't fair use. I have no war experience whatsoever—how could I compare them? Yet, in reading these stories, which contain O'Brien's conception of the meaning of what happened, his attempt to ground it, place it in the spectrum of human experience, communicate it, I realize the metaphor is apt, after all. Both emergency medicine and war bring on sleep deprivation, terror, floods of adrenaline, an unusual degree of camaraderie, the exigency to function despite overwhelming emotions, and a heightened sense of a different reality. A reality that just "is", that doesn't—can't—aspire to anything we identify as "greater". There's a disconnect between what civilization has taught us to think of as humane and proper behavior, and a recognition that no happy ending, not even a "small bit of rectitude" is ever guaranteed. Perhaps the constant threat or specter of death, the constant exposure to the human body as meat—as blood, bone, hunks of tissue— places both soldiers and emergency medical personnel at a remove from the mainstream of human experience. Soldiers must kill intentionally, and are afraid for their own lives. Emergency medical providers don't face that. But we can, and do, cut into others' bodies, put needles and tubes in them, inject them with toxic substances. We can kill with inattention, fatigue, or a failure of knowledge or courage. There is always some vital core of self that is at risk.

Perhaps it's all of these stressors in the aggregate that render changes in the structure of a person's psyche, like organic matter distilled to schist by geologic pressure and time. Whatever is soft is lost.

The “very old and terrible lie” is at work in medicine, too, and in the telling of what happens in medicine. Good things do happen in medicine, more often than in war: people get better, lives are improved, sometimes there’s a save. But readers expect a medical story to be uniformly uplifting; they’re frightened if it’s not. And the truth, in the details, is always darker, more ambiguous, than supposed. There might not be a moment of saving grace. Often, as Tim O’Brien knows and tells so well, there is only a merciless clarity.

Work Cited

O’Brien, Tim. The Things They Carried. New York: Broadway Books, 1990.

Jennifer Culkin’s Response to Nuala O’Faolain’s *Are You Somebody* (Nonfiction)

I think, Judith, that I’ll make this an informal response. I’ve been making false starts for an hour, trying to organize my thoughts for an intelligent, structured piece. Since that isn’t happening, I’d better try to jar *something* loose...

You wrote, when you recommended this book, that Nuala O’Faolain is “Irish and feminist and single and self-conscious and intelligent and wryly, darkly funny as well as questioning. I think you’d like her at times, find her insufferable at others, and maybe thinking about why would help you. And you’d get in touch with that country your mother and her sisters fled.”

And yes, I think she’s all of that. I was most struck by her voice. O’Faolain’s intimate, questing, confiding and distinctively Irish voice envelops us from the start. We become insiders from the first sentence, but she avoids the confessional trap. We’re partners instead in a frank, intelligent exploration. When I opened it in the library parking lot, and read the intro and the first page of chapter one, I thought, “Hmm. This is engaging; I want to read more. She’s skillful—I’ll

have some idea what it's like to be this woman who lives where half my family (actually it's my father's side) originated so long ago, who is probably twenty years older than I am, and who came of age just before feminism (and contraception and the decline of influence from the Catholic Church) began to have an impact on Irish society. I'll know what it's like, for a time, to live in her skin."

For example, she accomplished a lot, personally and politically, with this paragraph:

The psychiatrist was in an office in a hospital. "Well, now, let's get your name right to begin with," he said cheerfully. "What is your name?" "My name is...my name is..." I could not say my name. I cried, as from an ocean of tears, for the rest of the hour. My self was too sorrowful to speak. And I was in the wrong place, in England. My name was a burden to me. (7)

For fun, I'm also dipping into Bill Clinton's memoir (I placed it on top of my toilet tank—you can only take so much of Bill at one sitting!) I'm only on page 25 of 957, but I think I have a sense of it already. Let me say that I'm a Democrat, and that with some reservations about his posture toward women (this is an understatement), I enjoyed Bill Clinton as president—he was certainly a hell of a lot more fun than most politicians. I thought that when he wasn't spending all his energy dealing with the fallout of his indiscretions, he did a good job. I am predisposed to like him despite the fact that I had to hash over Bill's escapades ("Uh, Mom, what exactly *is* the thing with the cigar?") with Kieran and Gabe when they were something like 12 and 9. (Bill did more to promote family discussions of sexuality than any other public official I can think of.) I know I digress. But what I'm getting at is his voice—it *acts* like it's letting us inside, but it doesn't, really. Even in the first twenty-five pages, even as he describes the earliest days of his childhood, and even though he is already a lame duck for the highest office in the land, he can't seem to help himself: there are political motivations in play. He's singing Mom and apple pie, and at the same time, he's

working the rehabilitation machinery, setting us up with those early experiences, those genetic and environmental influences that will explain why he behaved as he did. Already, I can't quite buy it.

In contrast, I felt that Nuala O'Faolain is honest about her sexuality and her motivations. In part, she wrote the book to search for them, to make sense of her life and especially of the nature of the relationship between men and women, and more basically, the relationship of self to other, and of self to society. She comes at those relationships from a broader cultural perspective as well as from her unique, individual experience. Her voice is her medium for discovery, and I think that's where her work and mine intersect most. In my current collection, and even in some of my fiction, I write partly to discover what it is I have to say, and the success of my work depends heavily on voice. It depends, as this book did, on the development of a narrator that the reader can like, trust and empathize with. It also depends on finding, in the discovery process, something worthwhile and universal to say, a growth trajectory that a reader can follow and that will mean something to his or her own life.

O'Faolain uses a conversational tone and conversational conventions, in part, to create the effect of her voice.

...when I'm in the grocery store someone who has just passed me by turns back and comes right up to me and scrutinizes my face. "Are you somebody?" they ask. Well—am I somebody? I'm not anybody in terms of the world, but then, who decides what a somebody is? (5)

Words like "well" and "then" give the passage a mulling-it-over flavor, and phrases like "comes right up to me" conjure oral storytelling. Her questions lay out the territory of the book. And the sentence "Well—am I somebody?" is a taste of her wry humor. It's also a perfect title for a memoir.

Her sentences are often complex, and she uses punctuation to suggest the rhythms of speech and thought—dashes, semicolons, colons, ellipses. She intersperses questions with longer, ruminative sentences, and with short ones or fragments that deliver a punch. Her prose has a music to it. I recognize something of my own sentence structure and rhythms in it. Maybe it's Irish—genetic.

In terms of content, I really liked the beginning, through about chapter 5. There she laid out her family territory, considered her mother's life in relation to her own, showed us the difference between her father's life and experience and her mother's, and she shared her love for literature and what it means to her. I also felt the end of the book was strong, from chapter 14 on, because she returned to Ireland and to the themes of the family, and we were able to see how she had changed and what sense she had made of her life and her situation. "Afterwords" was also strong, a credible and necessary extension to the original book, because it was so interesting to learn what happened in the wake of the book's success. Again it sounded both universal and personal chords: the letters she received from her reading public, the letter her brother wrote to her sister, her brother's death.

Was she insufferable? Occasionally. The book lagged in the middle for me; I felt that section contained a lot of name dropping about her connections in the literary and art worlds of the era (though having just read *Reading in the Dark*, I found her bit on Seamus Deane interesting). Overall, that part of the book felt a little adolescent; it didn't seem to dig as deep. I kept thinking that yes, I understand the unthinking opacity and depth of the discrimination women faced in the workplace at that time—we still face remnants of it. And I understand how confusing it was, growing up in an Ireland that was essentially medieval in its attitudes toward women, fast-forwarding into a modern career. But I also thought that if you want to be taken seriously professionally then you really, really have to stop sleeping with everyone. You have to stop personalizing and sexualizing everything so much. But of course that was part of the knot she was trying to unravel in her life, and a part of what history handed her. She was honest about her role in it.

I thought her craft with language was strongest when she dug deepest. Content and craft synergized then.

What can I learn from her? That a piece will lag when it doesn't probe or discover something new, and that my personal blind spots are likely to make for the weakest reading. But also: if a life is put forth with honesty and with some love for storytelling and for language, with some attention to craft, and if an eye and ear are open to universal threads, a reader will follow—gladly—the tailings of a mind and a heart.

Work Cited

O'Faolain, Nuala. *Are You Somebody?: The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman*.

New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.

Anita Sullivan

Kevin Goodan, *In the Ghost House Acquainted* (poems). Alice James Books, Farmington, Maine, 2004.

I read Judith Kitchen's review of poetry contest winners in a summer 2006 issue of *The Georgia Review*, and jotted down the name of this book as one of the few she recommended. It turned out to be a collection that makes me think the great poetic "Squaring of the Circle" project might indeed be completed one day after all, because someone has filled in quite a few gaps. And sends me inside and outside again, sweeping, sweeping.

I can only try to say a little of what it is about these poems I consider so fine. Oddly enough, the first work in the book is an untitled, italicized piece that seems totally out of line with all the poems that follow. Though I have read it many times, I fail to see how it connects with the rest of the work either thematically or stylistically. In some ways it comes across as an act of atonement, an afterthought tacked on prior to publication to make up for the baggage of Christian imagery in the rest of the book, since this initial poem reads like a wolf-cry from a primal if not strictly ancient world. I don't even think it's up to the rest of his work as a stand-alone piece.

Then I plunge into the poems proper, and right away (in the first poem "Almanac of Caliber and Distance") there is "a mime of geldings" , and

"ash through which a mare meanders

blackens in the light”

I think, Oh, he has a painter’s eye and is in love with horses. But a few lines later he says lightly,

“I want to build my house
in you, phantom in the song-light.”

And I feel that this man has a huge notion of ‘house’ to make it inside a mare he has first refused to pin down to a single time and place and solid state, granting the animal huge pride of place.

Goodan would likely be called a “religious poet” (or whatever the current term is for those who use terms like “the Lord” in their poems, or echo biblical passages such as “for I have so loved this world”). To my ear this functions as a flaw in his work, but the kind of flaw that in a species of tulip or a gem would enhance its value rather than detract from it. He has not only internalized the Biblical rhetoric (like Cormac McCarthy), and to a lesser degree the scaffolding of the Christian story, but much more than that, his work seems to exude an attitude of cherishing that blends deeply with his language so that it comes across as “religious” in the highest and best sense of that term. This is different from “spiritual,” which I take to mean a more private “power system.” Reading his poetry is a little like reading Hopkins, where the *prayer* is the dominant emotional and imaginal energy behind most of the poems, but (in the case of Goodan, at least) the reader doesn’t feel immutably directed to a Receiver, only back to the wellspring of love and wonder and gratitude that keeps driving the work. And honing it as well, I must add.

I rarely find a collection in which the percentage of poems I truly loved was so high as it was in this one. If I had advice for him (If I were the one to give advice) I would caution him against letting his bones settle into lovely rhetorical patterns he thinks come from somewhere he has been himself. I couldn’t pick a single poem I loved most, but a poet who can say:

“This is a sky that harbors
and does not damage.
Puts birds there
again and again. Small
and singing. Hawk and resting”

is doing something with the “simple language of everyday speech” that turns it into a nuclear force. To me, this kind of writing is “Poetry” with a capital P, a fusion of sound, rhythm and meaning in a way that emerges like an element, or a constellation --- something that *adds to* the stuff of which the universe is made.

Kathleen Flenniken

The Poems of Marianne Moore, Edited by Grace Schulman, Viking, 2003.

This new edition of Marianne Moore's complete poems is indeed complete, includes many previously unpublished poems, some written as early as college, and covers her entire career. This volume, then, is more comprehensive than Moore's *Complete Poems*, which included only about half of her work.

Perhaps Moore had it close to right. While Schulman's edition is thorough, so much of it documents Moore winding up and winding down. Schulman includes 75 pages of unpublished early work that is mostly slight. It's moderately interesting to observe how organic Moore's characteristic rhythms and rhymes seem to be (they are present even in her Christmas poem, written at age 7: "Dear St. Nicklus;/This Christmas morn/You do adorn/Bring Warner a horn/And me a doll/That is all."), and that she comes by her peculiar titles and subject matter honestly; but there are no gems here. And with a few exceptions—"Baseball and Writing" and "Blue Bug," perhaps—Moore's work after she entered her 70s is less engaging aurally, and that turns out to diminish the poems significantly. A subtle sway gets lost. Another problem is the way Schulman has bundled Moore's uncollected, thinner work right along with her best, in order to preserve the historical order: it has the effect of bringing the whole down, especially in these later years when Moore was off her best game.

What is overwhelming in this collection is Moore's undying devotion to the world of *things*, natural and otherwise, and the responsibility she takes for it. She is as meticulous with her research (evident in her characteristic quotation marks and copious endnotes) and her metaphors, as any scientist. She seems to have no need to reveal herself in her poems, but acts instead as an eye (a keenly focused eye attached to a big brain). Just as remarkable is her allegiance to her own music, which is unlike anyone else's, and must have had an extraordinarily effect in her first appearances in print. It is the music which controls the poems, which stirs "the facts" into surrealistic clouds. Elizabeth Bishop wrote of Moore, "I think her own sense of rhythm is so peculiar to her, so much a part of her respiration, heartbeats, etc., that even when she thinks she's

writing something in a regular tum-tum-tum style she isn't at all." Both strengths stem from an abiding self-confidence; both (warp and waft) create a voice that is inimitable.

Moore wrote her strongest work between her thirties and sixties. One of her early successes, published first in 1918 at age 31, is "The Fish." The syllabic form Moore so often employed draws attention to itself here in a series of stanzas with lines ranging from one to nine syllables. The short lines and the rhyme scheme create a charming bobbing effect, like waves.

"Wade/through black jade" and "an/injured fan" and especially "ac-/cident—lack" amuse, and let the reader in on the secret of her construction. The poem's bones are as appealing as its heart, its eye as intriguing as what it sees. Another early poem is one of her most famous—"Poetry." Though she later trimmed it down to its first three lines (much to the devastation of her readers), it is the five-stanza version that still gets quoted in endless essays. "Poetry" is a testament to Marianne Moore's singular ability to take fine-tooth detail and intellectual curiosity and spin it into a lively, engaging poem. The words are still fresh: "I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle./Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in/it, after all, a place for the genuine." It is easy to overlook how innovative, even radical, the poem must have been in 1919—half nature newsreel, half lecture. It is interesting to remember that Moore resisted calling her early work poetry, but decided to call it that for lack of anything better. Moore's later work in *Selected Poems*, *What Are Years* and *Nevertheless* achieves a mysterious luster. This voice addresses its subjects in a manner that is nearly religious in its attention, without sentiment. She is able, as she does in "The Mind is an Enchanting Thing," to combine elements of nature (katydid-wing) and music (Gieseking playing Scarlatti), memory ("like the dove-/neck animated by/sun; it is memory's eye;") and mystery ("Unconfusion submits/its confusion to proof: it's/not a Herod's oath that cannot change.") to make a poem that wants to be read again and again, which never quite comes easy but rewards the reader further with each reading. "The Frigate Pelican" paints a clear picture of the pelican flying against the wind, but does it as a collage artist might, in discrete dabs, with references Hansel and Gretel's swan, to the swamps where the pelican sleeps, and in the powerful last stanza, to a python: "the tired/moment of danger that lays on heart and lungs the/weight of the python that crushes to powder."

The endnotes, both Moore's and Schulman's, take up nearly 75 pages. They are valuable and entertaining—some include alternate versions of poems, some explicate and deepen the poems, and reveal a little more of Moore's wonderful, odd mind.

Cameron Walker (Fiction)

I've always loved page-turners. An airport novel, a mystery, or a Tom Clancy paperback will keep me happily occupied and oblivious to whining dogs, laundry piles, or even the oven timer going off. But it seems like many of these books rely on cheap tricks to build tension and suspense. In The Da Vinci Code, for instance – which I did stay up all night to finish – Dan Brown closes each of his chapters with an action-packed cliffhanger to get the reader flipping ahead to the next. Chapter 17, for example, wraps up dramatically, each sentence getting its own billboard-like line on the page:

[H]e could now see the exact location of the signal.
It was no longer moving.
It lay at a dead stop in the middle of Place du Carrousel.
Langdon had jumped. (83)

But how do writers in pursuit of more literary thrills get readers hooked? This month, I looked at these three books to find out how they create tension that keeps the pages turning.

Not only did I like the pale green images of seahorses on the cover, but I found A Seahorse Year gripping, just as you had said. (I sat on the couch one night after dinner and stayed there until the wee hours to finish it.)

The greatest suspense comes toward the end of the book, when Christopher and his girlfriend, Tamara, head out into the woods in Humboldt County. The reader knows something tragic is ahead by the slow buildup of negative circumstances – Christopher is schizophrenic, and his condition worsens as the novel progresses. As the pair move

deeper into the wilderness, their options start to fall away: it's raining (229), the cell phone slips out of the pack in the woods (231), and they get lost (236). Tension builds, too, through Tamara's reaction to Christopher. Even while she tries to calm him, she thinks about the Valium she has packed away, hidden, in case she needs to slip it to Christopher, and she drops the hat, in case she needs to come back for the cell phone (231). As the climax approaches, the constant layering of challenges is needed to reach the novel's highest point.

The structure of the novel itself helps to set up the suspense. Throughout the novel, Stacey D'Erasmus moves from one character to the next in a roving third-person narrative. This technique is terrific in characterization, often providing the most pointed glimpses of a character when she is seen through the current narrator's eye. On the first page, Howard describes Nan, "the way she occupies any chair as if she has just built it herself out of a tree she felled with her little saw" (1) – so that by the time the book shifts into Nan's point-of-view, the reader already knows her. Along with defining each character, the switching points of view help to build suspense, as each character's experience is cut short – a sophisticated cliffhanger technique, I suppose – to make way for the next, leaving the reader still wondering where the first narrator is heading while becoming engrossed in the story of the next.

Early in the book, the main characters are given more extended time on the stage, following each character's journey for several pages or more. As the novel progresses, suspense builds as the shifts become more frequent, and each passage shorter. Near the climax, D'Erasmus cuts briskly between scenes of the family members and Christopher and Tamara in the cabin as Tamara's broken leg becomes more and more dangerous.

Once Nan, Christopher's mother, finds the cabin, scenes move shift from several pages to mere paragraphs: Howard arrives at Nan's motel, Tamara feels Christopher holding her, Marina and Shiloh have sex. And then everything narrows to a single sentence: "Christopher, his arms around Tamara, is asleep" (284). The writer seems to be using the points of view as a funnel, slowly narrowing down the characters' motives and actions to this single moment.

I'm not sure if this is something that's available to me right now – in first person, it's hard to cut to another character. But maybe there are other ways to break up the story, especially the last chapters, because it's told retrospectively. Maia could tell part of a story, interject something else, and continue on with the story, in the same way that the shifting point of view is used here.

What seems even more challenging is maintaining tension through the middle of a novel. At the end of most novels, there's a major crisis, a turning point, and it seems easier to build suspense as one gets closer to that point. (Surely it's still not easy writing it, but there's a clear moment that writer and reader are working toward). In the middle, it seems you want to create a mid-level kind of tension that will keep the reader's interest, but not wear out the adrenaline in each chapter, or make it overly manufactured.

In *A Seahorse Year*, D'Erasmus seems to use the middle of the novel to tease out the complexities of relationships. At the novel's midpoint, Hal is at a dinner party where some of his past comes back to him while he contemplates a new relationship.

Other guests – a local playwright; a local novelist; Mimi's sound engineer, Sam, who may or may not be her lover, Hal has never been able to figure it out; Mimi's mother, Zuleika, with those long nails; Ti-Hua, a financial reporter from the *Chronicle* with whom Hal had a brief affair. They are all Hal's clients. . .

"We were all just saying how we never see you anymore. Have you become a crack addict?" This is Zuleika's way of joking.

“No.” Hal hesitates. “I—“
 Ti-Hua looks at Hal compassionately.
 Oh no, thinks Hal. (179)

Here, the tension isn't coming directly from the plot's main story – the rescue of Christopher – but it's a nice addition, a subplot, in which lesser, older tensions arise. It does contribute to the plot, because the focus of this novel is the interwoven relationships of the character. This break from the main plot heightens the overall forward movement because it cuts away from the main through-line – perhaps this is the “absence makes the heart grow fonder” theory -- and by adding a different kind of tension, that will last only for this scene (will Hal get out of the room without revealing his secrets?). It also seems that the middle section of a novel can be the place for lesser characters that let old issues resurface by their presence. So what if Ti-Hua never reappears? Small doses of suspense, even within a single scene, prepare the reader for later tension and lighten (?) up what could be a slower section of the novel.

In a review of this book for The Believer, Sarah Stone writes. “[T]he endangered character is a living child, not an already-lost parent. This gives urgency to the forward movement of the book, and weight to the stories of the characters' pasts and the questions of how they all reached this point” (50). This makes me wonder – where is the urgency in my novel coming from? Right now, it seems Maia is concerned about the past, not the future. How is the forward motion happening?

I think the retrospective voice can be used to create forward motion and suspense. In Alice Greenway's White Ghost Girls, the voice – and the suspense it creates – begins early. “The summer, the one I'm going to tell you about, is the only time that matters. It's the time I'll think of when I'm dying, just as another might recall a lost lover or

regret a love they never had. For me, there is one story. It's my sister's – Frankie's" (2). In these few, simple lines, the book's premise comes out. We know this is the most important time for the narrator, so we're ready for something interesting to happen (I tend to believe a narrator when they tell me something is important). Also, there's an air of sadness in this voice from the beginning – instead of comparing what one would think about when someone was dying to fond memories of a lover or friend. Instead, we hear of a lost lover, a regret.

In some ways, this straightforward approach – one summer, one character – makes me wonder if I'm losing this urgency by trying to do too much. There are three times – the present of the story, the recollection of the past when Cleo comes home, and within that, the recollection of an even earlier past, in which Gabe dies. With so many characters, so many layers, does it lose the forward motion to dilution?

The narrator doesn't re-enter often in retrospective voice. When she does, it always comes at a crucial moment.

The body floats up in these pages the same way it did in the sea that day, unexpected, shocking. I see now, it's something we were waiting for.

The body changes us. That's why my mother doesn't want us to see it, is sick in a red bucket. It marks the end of our innocence, exposes the impossibility of her efforts to protect us.

We've seen what my father sees in Vietnam. Mined, napalmed, fire-bombed, shot, burned. We have a body now too. Drowned. (10)

The benefit, here, of having the retrospective narrator is that she's aware of things that perhaps she wouldn't have voiced as a twelve-year old – the importance of this end-of-innocence, how it's both repulsive and desired. (It's an interesting mix – it's told in present tense, so sometimes one could lose this thread that this is a much older narrator. For me, the novel's opening was strong enough so that I didn't get confused).

While imagery might be considered a static backdrop, in this novel, it contributes to the sense of loss in the retrospective voice. The things Greenway chooses to describe are both beautiful and sickening, an assault on the senses, from the white fish that swim out of a corpse's eyes (8) to Frankie's breasts, described as overripe papayas (110). The language (and the writer) isn't afraid to push on these images, and in doing so, I think, it drives the story forward, because what I expect from such strong imagery is strong action.

Straying a little away from suspense, I do think that the retrospective voice also makes I feel like this character might notice the colors, the smells, but there wouldn't be the same remembering of them. Looking back over time, the narrator would attribute stronger qualities to the objects she saw, and place images in groups the way Greenway has in this narrative. If the story unfolded in the present, it might make more sense for a character to describe more mundane things, or in this case, for the character not to describe things she's become used to – joss sticks, green jungle, mangosteens and papayas -- because they are familiar items. The specific details also compensate for the fact that the retrospective voice could be too dreamy, too imprecise as memory.

I think a point in the story at which the retrospective voice could sag is in the middle. This voice can tend to be too dreamy, too much reflection without action. In this case, the most exciting bit of rising action has already taken place by the novel's midpoint (Kate and Frankie's kidnap by two communists, Kate dropping the bomb for the men, Frankie's abuse in her absence). To avoid this slowdown, Greenway uses a scene in the nearer past to build more suspense. "Many years later, when I am grown up with children of my own, I am living in the same city as Lewis and Trung. One day Lewis

calls up to invite me to dinner” (96). It’s not clear if this is the actual present from which the narrator of the story is telling it, because it, like the rest, is in present tense. But the scene itself provides another clue – and ratchets up the tension – when Lewis, Trung, and the narrator watch old movies, the image of Frankie on the screen brings up old emotions. “Gently, Trung lays her hand on my shoulder, comforting, making sure it’s all right for me to see Frankie. Lewis looks away” (97). So, if it wasn’t clear before, another crumb is tossed out – something has happened to Frankie. This scene serves to increase the dramatic tension, letting the reader wonder, once more, what will happen to Frankie as the narrator continues her tale.

The slow pace of The Member of the Wedding – a story of a girl’s changing emotions in the few days before her brother’s wedding – may make it appear devoid of suspense. Even the setting of the book – a hot southern summer, where the characters lounge around the kitchen table or sit out on the porch – might transform the book into a languid musing on growing up. Yet McCullers manipulates the novella’s time sequence to heighten the tension within Frankie, the main character, and of the plot itself.

Even though the novella itself is full of imagery and moments that are often dreamlike and hazy, McCullers sets out the novel’s central conflict from the beginning quite straightforwardly:

It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid. (3)

The novella’s premise comes right in the first lines – something is going to happen this summer to Frankie, and she’s feeling afraid and disassociated from the world. This sounds stupid, but I never knew you could just say right out what the conflict was in

a “real” novel. I always thought this turned the story into a potboiler. This novel is full of gorgeous imagery and ideas, but the clarity that comes in these original lines start the tension in the novel from the beginning (and the reader can recall this opening during times of recollection that may seem disconnected from the novel’s apparent direction in later pages).

I suppose the only problem with setting something out so clearly is that the writer has to back up on what s/he promises later in the story. In the section of the novel that makes up the other part of my mailing, I feel like I made a bit of a promise at the end that I’m not sure I can follow through on – maybe that’s why I don’t always set things out clearly, because I realize then I have to follow up on what I start out with.

As McCullers makes good her promise, she uses time dynamically to increase tension in a novella that takes place over a brief time period. The novella opens on a Friday afternoon, then jumps backward to Thursday, when Frankie anticipates the visit of her brother and future sister-in-law on Saturday (8). This shift of time seems strange, but makes the reader look forward to not only the wedding, the main focus of Frankie’s attention, but also to the visit of the couple. The delay, I think, makes the reader anticipate this moment, which helps keep the pages turning. Then, with a few sentences, McCullers shifts the narrative from Saturday morning to Saturday afternoon.

The sun woke them early the next morning, the white August sun. . .

Frankie was a person who had never thought about a wedding. That was the way they were that August morning when her brother and the bride walked into the house.

“Oh, Jesus!” Frankie said. The cards on the table were greasy and the late sun slanted across the yard. (18)

While this transition is easy to miss, its role in creating tension comes in Part 2 of the novella, when the reader realizes that now Frankie (or F. Jasmine) is moving through

events of the Saturday that have been skipped in the first section. I think taking out this chunk of time makes what happens in Part 2 all the more intriguing. It sets up the idea that something important, worthy of separation, must have happened in this time period.

The passage of time also allows the reader to see how Frankie's view of the world affects her interactions with others. Frankie, as F. Jasmine, feels quite worldly as she enters the Blue Moon with the soldier, but she's not worldly enough to realize he's drunk and flirting with her. "The soldier leaned over the booth table and, still staring at her, he began to walk his fingers, the second and third fingers of both hands, across the table toward her. . . F. Jasmine had the sense that something strange was going to happen" (88). They set up a date for that evening, and the reader wonders if something even stranger will happen. This was the point that I began reading more quickly, interested to see if she would keep her date, or realize what the soldier had in mind and stay home.

When she does arrive at the appointed time, Frankie still doesn't quite realize what is going on. "This sure is a funny hotel," she says to the soldier (163).

Her unawareness of the soldier's motives also makes the reader realize (even more so than before) that while Frankie sees herself as adult, her perspective on others is quite naïve. While she sits with the soldier earlier in the day, she thinks of her brother and sister-in-law, how they will cross glaciers in Alaska, gallop camels in Africa (86-87). By showing Frankie's skewed view of relationships, McCullers sets up Frankie for an even larger fall at her brother's wedding. The reader feels disjointed, too – and when McCullers describes the disastrous wedding scenes in just a few lines, they seem inevitable – we don't need to see an extended version, as we've already recognized that Frankie's view of the world doesn't line up with the people around her. This discrepancy

between Frankie's reality and the adult world, and the way it widens during the course of the book, makes the reader forge ahead to the wedding scene, even though the result is no surprise.

I think that's one of the most interesting aspects of all of these books. When the suspense leads to each climax, the outcome is not unexpected. I'd always thought that page-turning quality was the presence of plot twists and surprises. But each of these books grabbed my interest and pulled me along toward the (anticipated) end. Success might come from the right balance of planting scenes that create tension with leaving a few unknown details for the moment the plot reaches its climax.

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1. Critical Response Paper #2 (due Tuesday, October 10, by start of class) Respond briefly to each of the following three passages from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey": lines 83-102, lines 102-111, and/or lines 120-135. Give an explanation of the meaning of the selected passage(s) and the emotion expressed therein. Reflect on such words and phrases as "sublime," "moral being" and "never did betray." (You are on the right track if you use these keywords in your response--not addressing each term will result in a deduction of points). Your explanation, while not a "Sample Response Essay" was written as part of an in-class exercise I did with my freshmen college students. Each student wrote a response and we compiled the best comments into one essay. I then took the essays from both classes and wrote up the following example. The essay responds to "Let's Stop Scaring Ourselves" by Michael Crichton. The article was originally published in Parade Magazine on December 5, 2004. A critical response paper is viewed like a critique or evaluation of somebody's essay. You should just reveal and convey your own thoughts about the things you have read in this written sample. Writing a response paper doesn't mean that you simply state what you like or don't like in somebody's paper. Your task is to analyze and find out strong and weak sides of the essay in reasoning, organization and style. In addition, a good response paper example is a persuasive one. It should contain facts, examples and personal experience to prove your own thoughts and ideas about the written sample and MY NAME IS KHAN Critical Response Essay. What is a critical response essay? Finally, all critiques involve discussion of personal responses based on own opinions, prior knowledge, and opinions ("Writing the Critical Response"). Prewriting and Preplanning. The dialectical journal and other materials provided in your packet shall serve as the prewriting for this assignment. All students will handwrite an initial draft in class. For those who are not writing a second research paper, this assignment is extra credit. For those who do not write a second research paper, this is a required assignment. During research paper work days, this is the assignment students not drafting a second research paper should be completing. Below is a collection of strong (and exceptionally strong) response papers from students. All received high grades. They are good examples of insightful thinking and strong writing. Response 1. Of all of the common assumptions that we discussed in class, I think one of the most common is the idea that a children's text should in some way teach the reader something. We of course talked about the term didactic, and how a didactic book strongly pushes a lesson onto the reader, telling them that they should believe this or that. The stereotype for children is that they should learn valuable, and critical lessons that will help them in life. "South Park" greatly destroys these lessons, as the children perpetually get more offensive and silly as they mimic the actors in "Asses of Fire."