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Volume: **Issue:**
Month/Year: 1998**Pages:**

Article Author: Catherine Barnett

Article Title: Square Toes and Icy Arms: How to Simplify as You Personify

Imprint: New York : Teachers & Writers Collaborative, ©1998.

ILL Number: 219460669

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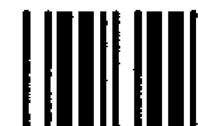

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CATHERINE BARNETT

Square Toes and Icy Arms

How to Simplify As You Personify

"IS ANGER A MAN or a woman?" I asked a student in class last week. The young woman—she is sixteen and has a one-year-old son—thought for a long moment, about to give up. "Tell me what Anger looks like," I asked, "where he or she lives. Close your eyes and tell me everything you know about this character." I roamed around the classroom, and when I made it back to her desk, she had written:

> Anger's hands are hammers. His teeth are two-edged swords. His head is made of stone. Anger has no face, just two beady little eyes. His eyebrows always hang low. Anger tastes bitter.

This exchange took place during one of my favorite exercises. The student's writing owes its energy and power to passages from Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, and her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Throughout these works, Hurston personifies both the fictional and real worlds, turning philosophical concepts (like time and fate), life passages (like death), and even the weather into active characters.

In *Their Eyes*, she uses an unusual personification to describe the damage wrought by a flood: "Havoc was there with her mouth wide open." The overflowing lake itself takes on human characteristics: thunder "woke up old Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed. Began to roll and complain like a peevish world on a grumble. . . . The people felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the seawalls to chain the senseless monster in his bed." Hurston gives the sun a distinct personality throughout the novel. Janie, the main character, goes to bed one night filled with doubt about her new husband, Tea-Cake, who had disappeared with her money. It is the sun who first reassures her:

> Janie dozed off to sleep but she woke up in time to see the sun sending up spies ahead of him to mark out the road through the dark. He peeped

> up over the door sill of the world and made a little foolishness with red. But pretty soon, he laid all that aside and went about his business dressed all in white.

Night, too, takes on human characteristics in Hurston's Florida: "Night was striding across nothingness with the whole round world in his hands."

In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston writes that "fate was watching us and laughing" and that Hurston herself has "been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots." In an unpublished chapter, Hurston personifies Time, calling him "hungry" as he "squats" and "waits." She sees his footprints, and gazes into his reflections:

> His frame was made out of emptiness, and his mouth set wide for prey. Mystery is his oldest son, and power is his portion. For it was said on the day of first sayings that Time should speak backward over his shoulder, and none should see his face. . . .

Death makes a dramatic appearance in both Hurston's novel and in her autobiography. In *Their Eyes*, Janie encounters Death as she watches her husband grow weak:

> So Janie began to think of Death. Death, that strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West. The great one who lived in a straight house like a platform without sides to it, and without a roof. What need has Death for a cover, and what winds can blow against him? He stands in his high house that overlooks the world. Stands watchful and motionless all day with his sword drawn back, waiting for the messenger to bid him come. Been standing there before there was a where or a when or a then. She was liable to find a feather from his wings lying in her yard any day now. . . .

In a deft 100 words, Hurston manages to give the idea of death a home, gestures, a history, feathers, and flesh.

Those eerie square toes reappear in her autobiography as she describes the day her mother died. Hurston was nine years old and no match against "that two-headed spirit that rules the beginning and end of things called Death."

> The Master-Maker in His making had made Old Death. Made him with big, soft feet and square toes. Made him with a face that reflects the face of all things, but neither changes itself, nor is mirrored anywhere. Made the body of Death out of infinite hunger. Made a weapon for his hand to

> satisfy his needs. . . . Death had no home and he knew it at once. . . . He was already old when he was made. . . . Death finished his prowling through the house on his padded feet and entered the room. He bowed to Mama. . . .

Try reading either of these passages aloud—several times over—to a class of students and see how the room quiets. I've read Hurston's work to fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, and to a group of teen mothers. Something about those square toes and that feather—you can see it sailing slowly to the inevitable ground—stops chatter and commands attention.

I like to give the students examples of personification from other writers, if time allows. A poem titled "Go Down Death" by James Weldon Johnson (who with his brother composed "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a song once known as the Negro national anthem) complements Hurston's prose. Death appears in the third stanza of Johnson's poem:

> And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice
> That broke like a clap of thunder:
> Call Death!—Call Death!
> And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven
> Till it reached away back to that shadowy place,
> Where Death waits with his pale, white horses.
>
> And Death heard the summons,
> And he leaped on his fastest horse,
> Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.
> Up the golden street Death galloped,
> And the hoof of his horse struck fire from the gold,
> But they didn't make no sound. . . .

Later in the poem, Johnson writes that Death "didn't say a word, / But he loosed the reins on his pale, white horse / And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides. . . . And the foam from his horse was like a comet in the sky." At the end of this poem, Death cradles a smiling woman in his "icy arms."

The contrasts between Hurston's and Johnson's personfications help students realize that there is no "right" way to treat something that is as universal as death. And the simple fact that both writers end up with such peculiar and striking images—that Death can take such different guises, unique to each writer's vision—leads the class naturally to an all-important discussion of clichés and how to avoid them.

The best way to get around clichés, I tell students (and myself), is to be as specific as possible. Two fifth graders' efforts with this exercise provide good examples of how to dig beneath the surface of clichés. One girl began with a stereotype, defining "courage" rather than personifying it. "Courage," she wrote, "is a brave person who is not afraid of anything." But as she worked she began to discover more about her character:

> Courage is a man of human size. He wears a white t-shirt and tight blue jeans and has a beautiful voice. He is nineteen years old. He's 100 times stronger than any man. He can lift up the Empire State Building.

Imagining herself as Courage, another girl worked her way from the general—"I am invisible"—to the very specific:

> I can only be seen in the dark. I sneak in people's houses when they are afraid. I calm them down by putting their hands on my heart. . . . I like to drink rain and eat five feet of clouds a day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I sleep underground where the ants live.

Along with my plea—this prayer! this push!—for specificity and detail comes another, equally essential to this (and every) exercise: *include the five senses.* Johnson's poem illustrates the power of sensory detail: his Death has those "icy arms," his horse is silent as it gallops down the gold street.

By now some students may be getting confused. Two Deaths, five senses, a dozen details—what's going on? If so, a brief discussion of personification is in order. "How and why give human traits to something as seemingly abstract as death?" I ask them. I encourage the students to name some other abstractions they might want to personify.

I often make this same mistake: at the mention of "abstract," faces go blank, so I simply ask the students for words they hear over and over—words they've heard so often they've lost their meaning. Words like death, love, happiness. What others? As a class, we create a list. Even though these words are universal, the lists reflect the make-up and concerns of each class. At a school in uptown Manhattan, for example, fifth graders thought of Trouble, Fear, Racism, Greed, and Courage. A class of teen mothers came up with Depression, Fatigue, and Ambition.

It is often a good idea to start by writing a group description. This loosens everybody up, and creates a mood for writing. The students

choose which word they want to transform into a character; a group of teen mothers, for example, chose "Pain." I usually ask a few leading questions, borrowing heavily from Hurston and Johnson and encouraging students to bring the senses into their descriptions. With the teen mothers, responses came fast. "Pain," they said (as I wrote their words on the blackboard),

> . . . wears dirty sneakers and a black sweatshirt. He lives on the corner of your block, an unwanted visitor. He has gold teeth, an afro, dirty fingernails. He never uses condoms. His voice is rusty, scratchy, screechy. He says, "I love you, I love you, I love you. Hi Baby. Suffer. You look good." He tastes like lime and hot sweat. His face feels like alligator skin. He has calluses all over his feet. He's afraid of losing honor.

Soon I ask each student to choose his or her own word from the long list of words on the board and to create a living, breathing character out of it.

"You never hear Fatigue," wrote one fifteen-year-old mother who had given birth six weeks earlier. "He is so quiet and smooth. He comes to you like thirst and leaves like wind. He touches the weakest part of your body, which is your eyes. He lives anywhere he wants to live. . . ." Her friend, also the mother of a young boy, discovered a very different Fatigue:

> Fatigue drags her feet all day. Her shoes make a scraping sound against the ground and whenever she passes by someone they yawn. She carries a pillow and blanket in a shopping cart, along with a clown. When she pulls the clown's chord it plays "Rock-A-Bye Baby" and that soothes her. . . . Her voice is gentle and she is soft spoken. Her mellow voice will hypnotize you and make you sleepy. She always says Relax, don't work so hard, there's always tomorrow. . . .

Another young mother wrote a brief sketch of Ambition, a woman who "walks with her head high":

> She wears yellow. When you look at her she slows and dazzles in front of your eyes. Her hair and nails are always neatly done. . . . She carries a crystal rock in her pocket. She always says believe in yourself and you can do anything.

A fourth grader with learning disabilities described Fear as someone who "brings a warrant made out of fire." Peace, wrote one of his

classmates, "is a lady with love written all over her." Love is always a popular figure in this exercise, and appears in many guises. One defiant fifth grade boy surprised his classmates with his portrait of Love as a man who carries a suitcase. He smells like apples. He wears black pants, a white t-shirt, white shiny shoes. . . . In his suitcase he carries presents for his wife and love poems. He has friends who say, "We care about you." He gives everyone presents and sometimes says I love you. Every day he goes to church and prays.

Two third grade girls came up with very different pictures of Love. "Love is when the sky turns blue," wrote one shy girl. "She comes knocking on my door quietly. Then she calls my name five times. And I say, "Who is it? Who is it? Who is it?" Her classmate saw Love as a boy. "When I hug him," she wrote, "it feels like his eye has heaven in it." At a neighboring desk, a boy wrote about "Anger, a man with a black robe":

> His eyes are strange. One of them is black and one of them is brown. When he touches the ground it cracks. He goes down into the ground and says, "Come, Michael, Come." And I follow him to the underground. I see angry faces. I was saying, "It can't be true. It can't be true. It can't be true." And everything in the underground faded and he said, "Please don't leave me. Please, Please."

Happiness, wrote another third grader, "looks like my grandmother. She is wearing black pants and a black shirt. She is carrying presents. She lights candles."

After reading aloud the Hurston or Johnson excerpt (or both), you might choose a few of he following personification sketches by third, fourth, and fifth grade students to demonstrate how others have transformed words like Wealth, Jealousy, and Sadness into characters of their own.

> Wealth is somebody who is dressed in a polka-dot suit. I call him when me and my sister need some cash in our stash. When he comes to give us money he drops a gold coin on the ground. And then he throws a sack of money to each of us. His teeth are yellow and his face is green and his eyes are blue, and his ears are flat but oval shaped. All the time in his pockets he has gold coins. Real gold coins. And he never spends his money. He saves it up all the time.

Jealousy goes around looking at things that other people have that he wants. He is always jealous of the clothes they wear, the things they carry out. He mumbles to himself, "I wish I had that," with a frown on his face. I always see him at the bakery buying a muffin. When he sees me he says, "Get out of my way, kid, you bother me!" I don't know what he has in his suitcase, but people say he carries a dead bird in there. I think he keeps it for good luck.

Sadness has sad, big, blue eyes and skinny lips. He smells like the breeze in the sun. He has a deep low voice. He is never happy and he carries a broken heart in his hand. You can see him in the alleys at night. He is very skinny and has little toes. He wears only a worn-out suit.

Joy looks like an elf. He wears a green overcoat and green tight pants. He carries many, many presents. His voice is very high and screechy. He has white hair and a long beard. You can find him on special occasions.

Sadness just came to my house. All she did was ask for sugar, but she looked so sad her eyes were watery. . . . She told me her daughter just died. She got hit by a car. And she could remember when she held her in her arms when she was born. The old lady has bags on her eyes. She has a cane. She was leaning on me crying.

This exercise acquaints students with Hurston's work and with the technique of personification, and it can also lead them to their best writing. The pleasure of reading Hurston's prose aloud is soon matched by listening to the students read their own. Their images are often so strong that their descriptions—like Hurston's—approach the intensity and lyricism of prose poems.

Bibliography

(*Note: All Hurston quotations are from the two books noted below; the James Weldon Johnson poem "Go Down Death" appears in many anthologies; I found it in* American Negro Poetry, *edited by Arna Bontemps.*)

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Patricia Spears Jones

Experience, Experiment

Using Black Poetry in Creative Writing Classes

Introduction

It is surprising that few writing teachers seem to use work from the African American branch of the American literary canon. Or when they do, they rely on familiar poets such as Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks or on works based on popular culture, such as rap. They remain less than willing to familiarize themselves with the astonishing range of work that could well serve poetry students from beginners to advanced students of this great art. Just to give a writing instructor an idea of that range, one could work with the narrative and persona poems by Ai and Rita Dove, the linguistic investigations of Lorenzo Thomas and Nathaniel Mackey, and the blues-based work of Sterling Brown or spoken-word veteran Sekou Sundiata.

The Usual Suspect: Gwendolyn Brooks

A few years ago I taught a community workshop entitled "Approaches to Writing History in Poetry." My aim was to get the participants to use narrative and their own personal take on historical events. One of the poets whose work served to spark discussion and inspire students was Gwendolyn Brooks. I used her poem, "The Chicago Defender Sends a Man to Little Rock." An excellent introduction to Brooks's formal strategies and recurrent themes, this poem also gets students to look more carefully at ways to use formal techniques. In delving into the psychological and professional turmoil faced by the poem's speaker, Ms. Brooks uses elements found in her best work: well-executed rhyme scheme, unabashed Christian symbolism, and irony to undercut flourishes of sentimentality. The poem's narrator couches his outrage at the treatment of The Little Rock Nine, the Black students who integrated Central High School in 1957. In this poem, Brooks covers more ground than in the often used "We Real Cool." "The Chicago Defender"