

THINKING
BIG

An Educator's Guide to The 19th Annual
Chicago Humanities Festival
OCTOBER 3 - NOVEMBER 16, 2008

chf

www.chfestival.org

Robert Irwin *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow & Blue* ©2006. Linear polyurethane paint on 6 aircraft honeycomb aluminum rectangles, overall installed: 10'-1/2" x 54' x 22'; aluminum rectangles: 16' x 22' each. Photo by: Genevieve Hanson / Courtesy PaceWildenstein

Poet: Anne Carson

Anne Carson, Poet



Anne Carson is a Canadian poet, essayist, translator, and a professor of Classics and comparative literature at the University of Michigan. Carson lived in Montreal for several years and taught at McGill University,

where she was the Director of Graduate Studies in Classics. Though distinguished, Carson's academic training did not run a straight path. The fascination with classical literature which dominates her work began to take root in high school. There, a Latin instructor introduced her to the world and language of Ancient Greece and tutored the future poet privately. Enrolling at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto, she left twice – at the end of her first and second years. Frustrated with curricular constraints, Carson retired to the world of graphic arts for a short

time. She did eventually return to the University of Toronto where she completed her B.A. in 1974, her M.A. in 1975 and her Ph.D. in 1981.

Carson's books of poetry include *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (2001), winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry; *Economy of the Unlost* (1999); *Autobiography of Red* (1998), shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the T.S. Eliot Prize; *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1996); *Glass, Irony and God* (1995), shortlisted for the Forward Prize; and *Goddesses and Wise Women* (1992). Carson is also a classics scholar, the translator of *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2002), and the author of *Eros the Bittersweet* (1998). Carson's awards and honors include the Lannan Award, the Pushcart Prize, the Griffin Trust Award for Excellence in Poetry, a Guggenheim fellowship, and the MacArthur Fellowship.

poets.org. 1997-2008. The Academy of American Poets.
29 April. 2008 < <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/317>>

wikipedia.com. Wikipedia Foundation, Inc.
29 April. 2008 < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Carson>

Getting to the Core: Excerpt

Cassandra Float Can

Classicist and poet Ann Carson on the etymological poetics of translating Aeschylus

"Sometimes I feel I spend my whole life rewriting the same page," announced Ann Carson, Anna-Maria Kellen Fellow at the American Academy (in Berlin), to an audience gathered at Radialsystem V. "It is a page with 'Essay on translation' written at the top. Then quite a few paragraphs of good strong prose. These begin to break down toward the middle of the page." As a classicist, translator, and poet, Carson's sensation for language – instead of continuing in standard prose – visits the etymological alcoves of ages past and reanimates its old words with visionary, electric voice.

Carson read from a work about and of Aeschylus's Agamemnon, wherein Cassandra, a daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy, is taken as slave and concubine by Argos, King of Troy. Cassandra's beauty had caused the god Apollo to grant her the gift of prophecy. When she did not return his love, however, Apollo placed a curse on her that would prevent anyone from ever believing her predictions.

Carson's reading/text was divided into three parts, or "cuts": original, birthday, and final – though no reasoning was given for the division. It is here that Carson's reading takes on the feats for which is known: artfulness, playfulness, interpretive turns unforeseen; art. Each version played with the themes of the veil,

of cutting, of prediction, association, of seeing beyond. Her translation of Aeschylus becomes self-reflective, falling unawkwardly back onto itself in the act of translation, itself a kind of prediction of meaning; the combined voices of Aeschylus and Cassandra, and Carson reads:

*Behold my oracle no longer out from veils
Shall be glancing like a newly married bride
But as brightness blows the rising sun open
It will rush my oceans forward into light
A grief more deep than me.*

Some kind of levity breaks the oracle-like triumphing of visionary power when Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, asks Cassandra, following the delivery of 270 lines of Greek, "What's the matter? Don't you speak Greek?" Aeschylus, Carson notes, himself opens to the self-reflexivity of his performance – nods to the known fact that the entire play should be being spoken in Trojan.

Associative yet deliberate thinking leads Carson's talk to talk about German phenomenologist philosopher Edmund Husserl and his quest for being (and of the 30,000 unpublished, handwritten pages he left behind), and to the more contemporary Gordon Matta-Clark, an artist (or, architect) whose giant cut houses, piers, and other large objects were part of the revolutionary and massive artworks of the late 1960s and 1970s.

She makes Husserl, Matta-Clark, and Cassandra do the same work, makes us see that they are doing the same work, that translation is doing this work, too: cutting, seeing, opening, revealing, lifting a veil. Yet, as always -- and though she performs rather than simply "reads" her work -- Carson steers clear of the work that Cassandra is condemned to do: "I don't think I've ever been in the mindset of Cassandra," the translator-poet answers to a question about her relating to her subjects. "It's a strategy of avoidance," she says. "I want you to think about them, not me."

http://www.americanacademy.de/home/program/on-the-waterfront/blog/2007/10/06/cassandra_float_can/188/detail/

Anne Carson is a distinguished, award-winning poet, essayist, translator; she has won the Pushcart Prize and the MacArthur Fellowship.

Lesson Plan: Cassandra and Urban Environment: Witness and the Structures of Our Lives

Essential Question: In the modern urban environment, we find ourselves living in at least two kinds of structures – physical buildings and domestic situations (our family makeup). We might assume that buildings and families stay the same while we grow up, but these constructs are also ever-changing and eroding, giving way to new and suddenly shifting perspectives. In our time, as well as Cassandra's time, what does it mean to witness and to testify in the face of change and resistance? What is it like to speak what you know is the truth when no one will listen?

REFLECTION: Poem

Cassandra

By Robinson Jeffers

The mad girl with the staring eyes and long
white fingers
Hooked in the stones of the wall,
The storm-wrack hair and screeching mouth:
does it matter, Cassandra,
Whether the people believe
Your bitter fountain? Truly men hate the truth,
they'd liefer
Meet a tiger on the road.
Therefore the poets honey their truth with ly-
ing; but religion—
Vendors and political men
Pour from the barrel, new lies on the old, and
are praised for kind
Wisdom. Poor bitch be wise.
No: you'll still mumble in a corner a crust of
truth, to men
And gods disgusting—you and I, Cassandra.

[famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/robinson_jeffers/po-](http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/robinson_jeffers/poems/17107)

[ems/17107](http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/robinson_jeffers/poems/17107)

www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0401/poetrymonth/carson/poem.html

Goals

This lesson is most suitable for English/Language Arts and Social Sciences classes. Students will use visual analytical skills as inspiration for imaginative and thoughtful creative writing. It requires that students spend time organizing their thoughts before moving from a visual to a literary medium.

Objectives

Students will explore the meaning of “witness” and “perspective” with the goal of producing a developed narrative (it could be a dialogue between people in the photograph, the voice of a building, a scene from a story, a letter from a person or building in the photograph) in which the student writes about the past, present and future of the perspective in the photograph.

Materials & Resources

Students can use one or more of these options as a springboard for this project:

- a family photograph from the present or the past, particularly one from the student’s place/country/city of origin
- Matta-Clark Collection Online Archive, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: http://collections.sfmoma.org/THA2798*1
- Artnet.com tribute to Matta-Clark: <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/FEATURES/smyth/smyth6-4-04.asp>
- Chicago History Museum, Great Chicago Stories: <http://www.chicagohistory.org/greatchicagostories/site/storymap/index.html?story=6>

If you need background information on the myth of Cassandra, visit Wikipedia’s page.

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cassandra>
“In Greek mythology, Cassandra was the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. Her beauty caused Apollo to grant her the gift of prophecy. However, when she did not return his love, Apollo placed a curse on her so that no one would ever believe her predictions.”

Timeframe

The activity will take place in three parts over one week. There will be a homework assignment the night before classroom discussion and free-writing to prepare for the main creative writing assignment. The students will need a few days for their creative piece.

Process and Procedure

1. To prepare for this activity, have your students choose at least one source from the Materials list; they will utilize this as a source to help develop their “witness” narrative.
2. Take your students on a 15-minute walk. If it’s possible to go outside and view buildings, that would be optimal; if your environment does not allow this, ask your students to walk around their own neighborhood or community after school. While on the walk students will take notes on their experience in the built environment. Along the way, ask your class to think about structures – physical buildings and domestic situations (our family makeup). How do they change over time? What are the forces that encourage these changes, in our world or neighborhood, and in our families?
3. If students are not already familiar with the mythology of Cassandra, provide them with a brief introduction. Familiarizing students with Cassandra’s relationship with Agamemnon is also central to a discussion about witness. Also, review the work of Gordon Matta-Clark. He is a large-scale installation artist—a disruptionist—who completed much of his work in the 1970s.

One blogger, after listening to Anne Carson read her translation of Cassandra’s final scene wrote, “It seems that inevitable destruction is the connection between Matta-Clark’s buildings and Cassandra’s threshold. Cassandra stands before Agamemnon’s home and envisions its ruin. It’s completely unavoidable. Her speeches to the chorus before she enters the house are stunning in their lyrical power but they are useless. Cassandra could have stepped inside without a word but, instead, she gives prophecy another try, though she’s fully aware that she won’t be understood. She’s casting a light that no one will see until it’s over. Like the light in those remaining, surviving images of Matta-Clark’s “cuts.” ” (<http://www.stingykids.net/2008/04/demolition.html>)

4. Have your students free-write in class for ten minutes after your discussion. They will develop their main story idea and choose a narrative form. Their narrative can be a dialogue between people in the photograph; it can be first person, using a building as the narrator; a short story; or a letter from a person or building in the photograph to another. The shift in perspective between time periods does not have to be drastic, some of Gordon Matta-Clark’s incisions in buildings cause only a slightly noticeable shift in the building’s positioning, yet the entire structure is altered. What is witnessed by their story’s narrator, and also by them as the writer? How do their narratives connect with Matta-Clark’s emphasis on abandoned domestic buildings (old houses and apartment complexes)? What about the other artificial, i.e. man-made structures (not only buildings but social structures) which we inhabit?
5. Have your students share their narratives in class. Revisit Cassandra and the themes of truth, witness, and prophecy. She stood before the home of Agamemnon and saw the destruction, not only of Agamemnon and herself, but also the alteration/shifting/destruction of the physical structure (Agamemnon’s home) and the infrastructure (the people inside).

Assessment

A selection from the Materials list; notes from the walk, the narrative and discussion before and after.

Acknowledgements

The Chicago Humanities Festival receives principal support for its education programs from Nuveen Investments, Inc. and the Polk Bros. Foundation. Additional support for education programs is provided by: Julie and Roger Baskes, The Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, The Lloyd A. Fry

Foundation, The Field Foundation of Illinois, Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, Terra Foundation for American Art, Lohengrin Foundation, Inc. The Children's Humanities Festival is presented by Target in conjunction with the Chicago Humanities Festival.



Northern Trust