

BUILDING AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF READERS

INTRODUCTION and OBJECTIVES:

This activity aims to build an online community of critical readers across the Degree of English Studies at the University of Valencia. Using a digital reading site such as eComma or Classroom Salon, students from different literary modules engage in the collective analysis and discussion of a literary text. A general reading guide is provided by the lecturers but other interpretations and readings of the text are also encouraged. Students are invited to interact with each other's ideas to enrich their collective reading experience and critical thinking skills.

READING GUIDE

“A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

(From *The Thing around Your Neck*. London: Fourth Estate, 2009, pp. 43-56)

1. PRE-READING CONTEXT:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-) is a Nigerian (Igbo) writer whose creative work has been translated into over thirty languages. Her novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2005), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013) have won several international awards and her TED talks, *The Danger of A Single Story* (2009) and *We Should All Be Feminists* (2012), have been seen by millions around the world. Her short story collection, *The Thing around Your Neck* was published in 2009.

2. GUIDE TO READ THE STORY AUTONOMOUSLY AND IN A PEER-ASSISTED ONLINE ENVIRONMENT:

Read the short story and watch Adichie's TED talk “The Danger of A Single Story”. Then reflect on the following issues, write a few ideas and share the comments, critical insights or impressions you had as a reader in the collaborative, online educational site *Classroom Salon*.

“A Private Experience” – Potential Topics for Discussion:

- Where is the story located? What clues in the story may help us learn more about the historical events unfolding around the main characters? Find out more about these.
- Who is the narrator of the story? Describe the narrative voice and its effects on the reader.
- How are the two main characters depicted? What/how do we learn about them?
- Consider the representation of gender and whether there are specific clues about gender construction. Why do you think the “other woman” remains unnamed throughout the story? What other female characters are mentioned and what is their function in the story?
- Discuss issues of class, ethnicity, religion.... How are Nigeria’s diverse postcolonial cultures represented?
- How do each of the women experience war and ethnic conflict? What do they know about it? How do they address it?
- Two important topics in the story are those of prejudice and grief. Reflect on these topics highlighting specific moments of the text in which these (and other related) issues are explored.
- Space (consider the spatial distribution and symbolism of the store)
- Other issues that could be addressed are: family, nation, memory, difference.
- At the end of the story, what is the woman’s scarf a symbol of?

4. APPLYING DIFFERENT CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE READING OF “A PRIVATE EXPERIENCE”

This section is meant to be used in the module “Practical Criticism of English Literature”

If you check the Teaching Guide for the subject “Crítica Práctica de la Literatura Inglesa” the course has two basic components and purposes: a critical one and a technical one. The first one is described as such:

A ‘critical’ component aims to guide students in the practical application to literary texts in English of a variety of critical approaches and of key concepts in the study of language, literature and culture. **Emphasis is placed in helping students develop the critical skills needed to understand and provide a reasoned response to texts in English in relation to issues such as gender relations, social stratification, ideological censure or religious and philosophical questions.** Selected literary works in English will be used throughout the course as reference texts on which different approaches will be applied (our emphasis).

-What is your critical response to issues of gender relations, social stratification, ideological censure or religious and philosophical questions in Adichie’s story?

-Which of the critical approaches (or combination of them) studied in the subject *Practical Criticism Applied to English Literature* would you favor in a critical reading of this short story?

- Consider a text-based approach or close reading. Is there any repeated device creating temporal structure in the narration? Are there privileged stylistic effects?

- There seems to be in the text an awareness of class and power that invites a materialist or Marxist reading. Adichie uses an Igbo word in her talk to refer to “the power structures of the world”. Which one? Does the context of war affect in any way class relations? Would it be possible to combine this approach with a feminist one?

-Can you find any archetypal symbol in the story?

-In terms of reader response, can you assess your own reception and consider the degree of collaborative effort required by the reader in order to “actualize” the meanings of the story and/or to fill in the gaps opened by the text? Did reading the short story change in any way your perception of African literature and increased your awareness of what the author refers to as “the danger of a single story”?

5. FURTHER RESEARCH:

Read other short texts by Adichie and use the *MLA International Bibliography* database to find peer-reviewed secondary sources on her work to expand your knowledge about her oeuvre. Share these resources with your peers in the digital reading site.