

## History, Culture, and the Author

Behind every work of literature is a writer—the individual responsible for crafting the words on the page. A writer’s words may entertain, inform, or inspire, but they may also reveal glimpses into his or her background, beliefs, or times. Perhaps the writer endured the horrors of a war you’ve only read about, or grew up in a family very different from your own. Learning more about writers and the forces that shaped their lives can help you discover unexpected layers of meaning in the literature you read.

### COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:

**RL 4** Determine the figurative meaning of words as they are used in a text; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **RL 6** Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of world literature. **RI 4** Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **RI 6** Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text.

### Part 1: The Writer’s Background

“Write what you know” is often the first piece of advice that writers receive. Whether they intentionally follow it or not, many writers produce works that are influenced by personal factors in their lives, such as heritage, national identity, customs, and values. For example, consider the following excerpt from Paule Marshall’s short story “To Da-duh, in Memoriam.” On one level, the work is a poignant story about family. But by reading the background and asking yourself a few questions, you can discover just how personal the story is.

## from *To Da-duh, in Memoriam*

Short story by Paule Marshall

**BACKGROUND** Paule Marshall was born in Brooklyn, New York, but her family came from the island of Barbados. Her story draws on her memories of a childhood visit to her grandmother (nicknamed Da-duh). “Ours was a complex relationship,” she has written, “close, affectionate yet rivalrous.” Marshall has said that the rivalry between the grandmother and the granddaughter in the story is supposed to represent a struggle between cultures, old and new.



... She stopped before an incredibly tall royal palm which rose cleanly out of the ground, and drawing the eye up with it, soared high above the trees around it into the sky. It appeared to be touching the blue dome of sky, to be flaunting its dark crown of fronds right in the blinding white face of the late morning sun.

5 Da-duh watched me a long time before she spoke, and then she said, very quietly, “All right, now, tell me if you’ve got anything this tall in that place you’re from.”

I almost wished, seeing her face, that I could have said no. “Yes,” I said. “We’ve got buildings hundreds of times this tall in New York.”

### QUESTIONS TO ASK

**What beliefs and values are reflected in the writing?**

Through the interaction between the characters, Marshall conveys a respect for the old (the palm tree) and an acknowledgment of the new (skyscrapers).

**What aspects of the author’s background are evident?**

Though Marshall was born in New York, she too visited her grandmother in Barbados as a child.

**What does the background reveal about the author’s motivation for writing this story?**

Marshall is communicating her understanding of cultural conflicts.

## MODEL 1: ANALYZING A POEM

Read this poem “cold” first, noticing what images it calls to mind.

# Women

Poem by Alice Walker



They were women then  
My mama's generation  
Husky of voice—Stout of  
Step  
5 With fists as well as  
Hands  
How they battered down  
Doors  
And ironed  
10 Starched white  
Shirts  
How they led  
Armies  
Headragged Generals  
15 Across mined  
Fields  
Booby-trapped  
Kitchens  
To discover books  
20 Desks  
A place for us  
How they knew what we  
*Must* know  
Without knowing a page  
25 Of it  
Themselves.

### Close Read

1. “Women” is full of images that suggest physical force. One is boxed. Find two more images.
2. What one word would you use to describe the women in the poem? Explain your choice.
3. Reread lines 19–26. What do you think the women did for their children?

## MODEL 2: THE WRITER'S BACKGROUND

Now read this background information about Alice Walker. How does learning about the poet change or enhance your understanding of her poem?

**BACKGROUND** Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1944, a time of legal segregation and organized violence against African Americans. The eighth child in a family of sharecroppers, she grew up in a black community that nurtured and protected its children. Her mother and aunts were strong women  
5 who maintained their independence despite racism and poverty and fought for a better future for the young. Inspired by these role models, Walker became a civil rights activist and writer.

### Close Read

1. In line 14 of the poem, the speaker describes the women as generals. What might she see as the enemy they were fighting?
2. Using information from the background and the poem, explain why Walker may admire women of her mother's generation.

## Part 2: Historical and Cultural Influences

The historical and cultural setting of a work may also influence a writer's use of language, including **figurative language** and **diction**. To fully understand some works of literature, you need a sense of their **historical** and **cultural context**—the social and cultural conditions that influenced their creation. What was happening at the time a work was written, both in the writer's hometown and in the world at large? What issues or social problems were people grappling with? By uncovering answers to questions like these, you can often gain deeper insights into literature.

When John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939, the Great Depression had been going on for ten long years. The novel presents a sympathetic portrayal of farmers who are forced to leave their land. Notice how reading the background and asking some questions can help you understand Steinbeck's work as social commentary on the harsh injustices of the time.

### from *The Grapes of Wrath*

Novel by John Steinbeck

**BACKGROUND** During the Great Depression, life was especially difficult for farmers on the Great Plains, where a severe drought turned the land to desert. High winds brought terrible dust storms that killed crops and livestock and blotted out the sun for days. Some farmers gave up, abandoning their land. Others struggled to hold on, relying on government aid—"relief"—in the form of food, money, and jobs. Many were evicted when they couldn't pay their mortgages or when wealthy landowners replaced sharecroppers with mechanical tractors. Many farmers fled to California in search of promising jobs, only to find backbreaking, low-paying work.



#### QUESTIONS TO ASK

##### How does the conflict reflect the struggles of the times?

The sharecroppers' conflict—being evicted from their land—was one that many poor farmers experienced during the Great Depression.

##### How are the characters portrayed?

The pleas of the sharecroppers make them seem desperate. Expressions like "rolled away" make the landowners seem indifferent.

##### How does your knowledge of history help you understand what you are reading?

Steinbeck knew that the reality of life in California did not measure up to the promise of "reach[ing] out anywhere and pick[ing] an orange." Therefore, the portrayal of California as a paradise becomes ironic.

*This is an exchange between landowners and sharecroppers they are about to evict:*

But if we go, where'll we go? How'll we go? We got no money.

We're sorry, said the owner men. The bank, the fifty-thousand-acre owner can't be responsible. You're on land that isn't yours. Once over the line maybe you can pick cotton in the fall. Maybe you can go on relief. Why don't you  
5 go on west to California? There's work there, and it never gets cold. Why, you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange. Why, there's always some kind of crop to work in. Why don't you go there? And the owner men started their cars and rolled away.

**MODEL 1: ANALYZING FICTION**

This excerpt is from a short story that is set several years after the California gold rush of the mid-1800s. As you read it, consider what you already know about that time.

from *The Californian's Tale*

Short story by **Mark Twain**

Now and then, half an hour apart, one came across solitary log cabins of the earliest mining days, built by the first gold miners. . . . In some few cases these cabins were still occupied; and when this was so, you could depend upon it that the occupant was the very pioneer who had built the cabin; and . . .

5 that he was there because he had once had his opportunity to go home to the States rich, and had not done it; had rather lost his wealth, and had then in his humiliation resolved to sever all communication with his home relatives and friends, and be to them thenceforth as one dead. Round about California in that day were scattered a host of these living dead men—

10 pride-smitten poor fellows, grizzled and old at forty, whose secret thoughts were made all of regrets and longings—regrets for their wasted lives, and longings to be out of the struggle and done with it all.

It was a lonesome land! Not a sound in all those peaceful expanses of grass and woods but the drowsy hum of insects; no glimpse of man or beast;

15 nothing to keep up your spirits and make you glad to be alive.

**Close Read**

1. What do you learn about the men who live in the cabins? Cite details that help you understand their situation.
2. Identify four phrases or details that suggest a sense of desolation and hopelessness.

**MODEL 2: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT**

The following background explains how the promise of gold lured thousands to California in 1848. As you read, consider how this information enhances your understanding of the “wasted lives” of the men in Twain’s story.

**BACKGROUND** On a winter morning in 1848, workers discovered gold east of Sacramento, setting off an epidemic of “gold fever.” Thousands of young men left their homes and traveled west in the hope that they would strike it rich. The first to arrive found that there was plenty of gold to go around—but

5 not much else. Prices for food and other supplies shot sky-high in the rough frontier towns. Newly rich miners let their fortunes slip away, confident they could get more. By mid-1849, however, gold became much harder to find. Soon, many gave up and left, turning the “boom” towns into ghost towns.

By the time Samuel Clemens went west in the early 1860s, the wild

10 hopes of the gold rush years had turned to bitter disillusionment. After a few unsuccessful months of working as a miner, Clemens gave up and began a new career as the writer Mark Twain.”

**Close Read**

1. Reread the boxed details in Twain’s story. What information in the background helps you understand the narrator’s description of the land and its inhabitants?
2. In your opinion, is Twain’s tone toward the miners sympathetic? Explain.

## Part 3: Analyze the Text

Zhang Jie is one of the most acclaimed writers from the People’s Republic of China. Her story “Love Must Not Be Forgotten” takes place during the 1970s, when Communist ideals affected how people viewed the institution of marriage. Read this background about China during that time and about the life of Zhang Jie. Then use the information in the background to help you analyze an excerpt from her story.

### BACKGROUND

#### A Writer in the People’s Republic

**For the Greater Good** In 1949, Mao Zedong and his Communist forces took control of China. In 1966, Mao felt that new blood was needed to keep the ideals of communism alive, so he implemented the Cultural Revolution. For the next several years, groups of young radicals removed and replaced older Communist Party leaders, who were executed or imprisoned.

Despite sweeping political changes, many Chinese customs were slow to change. For example, centuries-old traditions dictated that marriages be arranged by couples’ families when the couples were still young children. New laws enacted by the Communists allowed individuals to choose their own marriage partners. However, marrying for love was still frowned upon, because Communist teachings encouraged individuals to suppress personal desires for the greater social good.

**The Fight Against Injustice** Both personal hardships and the harsh political climate in Communist China helped shape the life of the writer Zhang Jie. She has written, “These circumstances made me sensitive to all injustice and inequality. . . . I determined to fight injustice all my life.” Born in 1937, Zhang Jie grew up in poverty during the war-torn years before communism. She dreamed of studying literature at the great university in Beijing and of



Zhang Jie

becoming a writer. Zhang Jie’s dreams were put on hold when the government assigned her to a subject considered more useful to the nation: economics.

After graduation, Zhang Jie worked as a statistician. She married a colleague and gave birth to their daughter in 1963. Then came the Cultural Revolution, when millions of educated white-collar workers were sent to harsh work camps to be “re-educated” in Communist thought. Despite her loyalty to communism, Zhang Jie was sent thousands of miles away to a labor camp, where she spent four years tending pigs and slogging through rice paddies.

**A Writer at Last** Zhang Jie was 40 when she finally was able to publish her first story, which won a major award. Soon she was one of the most popular writers in China—and one of the most controversial. “Love Must Not Be Forgotten” raised a storm of protest from party officials, who thought the story undermined traditional attitudes toward marriage.

from

## LOVE MUST NOT BE FORGOTTEN

Short story by **Zhang Jie**

I am thirty, the same age as our People's Republic. For a republic thirty is still young. But a girl of thirty is virtually on the shelf.

Actually, I have a bona fide suitor. Have you seen the Greek sculptor Myron's Discobolus? Qiao Lin is the image of that discus thrower. Even the padded  
5 clothes he wears in winter fail to hide his fine physique. Bronzed, with clear-cut features, a broad forehead and large eyes, his appearance alone attracts most girls to him.

But I can't make up my mind to marry him. I'm not clear what attracts me to him, or him to me.

10 I know people are gossiping behind my back, "Who does she think she is, to be so choosy?"

To them, I'm a nobody playing hard to get. They take offense at such preposterous behavior.

Of course, I shouldn't be captious.<sup>1</sup> In a society where commercial production  
15 still exists, marriage like most other transactions is still a form of barter.

I have known Qiao Lin for nearly two years, yet still cannot fathom whether he keeps so quiet from aversion to talking or from having nothing to say. When, by way of a small intelligence test, I demand his opinion of this or that, he says "good" or "bad" like a child in kindergarten.

20 Once I asked, "Qiao Lin, why do you love me?" He thought the question over seriously for what seemed an age. I could see from his normally smooth but now wrinkled forehead that the little grey cells in his handsome head were hard at work cogitating. I felt ashamed to have put him on the spot.

Finally he raised his clear childlike eyes to tell me, "Because you're good!"

25 Loneliness flooded my heart. "Thank you, Qiao Lin!" I couldn't help wondering, if we were to marry, whether we could discharge our duties to each other as husband and wife. Maybe, because law and morality would have bound us together. But how tragic simply to comply with law and morality! Was there no stronger bond to link us?

30 When such thoughts cross my mind, I have the strange sensation that instead of being a girl contemplating marriage I am an elderly social scientist.

Perhaps I worry too much. We can live like most married couples, bringing up children together, strictly true to each other according to the law. . . . Although  
35 living in the seventies of the twentieth century, people still consider marriage the way they did millennia ago, as a means of continuing the race, a form of barter or a business transaction in which love and marriage can be separated.

1. **captious**: overly critical.

### Close Read

1. Which details in the background help you understand why Zhang Jie chose to write about a woman who questions social values?
2. What values do you think Zhang Jie and her narrator share? Support your answer.
3. Reread the boxed text. How was marriage viewed in China during the 1970s? Does the narrator support this view? Explain.
4. What aspects of this story might Communist Party officials have considered controversial? Support your answer, using details from both texts.