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Triptych: The Three-Legged World, In Time, and Orpheus & Echo

By Peter Grandbois, James McCorkle and Robert Miltner

A Study Guide

Synopsis

Between two covers are three books: *The Three-Legged World* by Peter Grandbois, *In Time* by James McCorkle, and *Orpheus & Echo* by Robert Miltner. They are bound by no prior agreement or collaboration: it has no precedent with this publisher. Grandbois and McCorkle are veteran Etruscans, and Robert Miltner is a valued colleague. Etruscan brings these three books together because they exerted upon our editors a gravitational pull. Sufficient on their own, these books achieve new altitudes when aligned.

Author Bios

Peter Grandbois has written ten books, the most recent *half-burnt* (Spuyten Duyvil). He is a senior editor at *Boulevard* and teaches at Denison University.

James McCorkle is the author of *Evidences* (selected for the 2003 Honickman First Book Award) and *The Subtle Bodies* (Etruscan Press). He teaches at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

Robert Miltner's prose poetry collection, *Hotel Utopia* (New River Press), won the Many Voices Project poetry prize. He is an emeritus professor at Kent State University Stark.)

Reasons to Include in the Classroom

Triptych provides a unique experience in which three poets, who have great similarities as well as great differences, can be compared side by side. This provides the student with the chance to compare and contrast within a single text, while assuring the instructor that the poets have connective ideas.

Study Questions & Writing Prompts

The Three-Legged World

1. As opposed to using antonyms in "There is no one to write this," Grandbois uses the prefix "un." How does this affect the overall feel of the poem? How would the poem change if these prefixes were changed?
2. In line three of "Sometimes I think I hear," we read "It doesn't like being alone." What doesn't like being alone – the voice or the map? Could it be something else?
3. The first period in "All that can be heard" is on line seventeen, coming after the word "night." Prior to that, the poet uses commas. What effect does this have on the reader? Why is it important to have the period there?
4. How does the poem "Sometimes when I look at myself I see" divide into three "acts"?
5. The two stanzas of "There are no secret lives" have significantly different tones. Compare the stanzas and ask how they are the same. Find the "secret rhymes" within the lines. Prompt: Where can you hide?
6. Prompt: Use the verbs from "Calling us back" to write a poem – whispers, shudders, cocooned, wandering, pulses, abandon.
7. Grandbois uses the term "worm-dark" in "That we do not perish." Looking through his poetry, can you find other examples of "worm-dark" places?
8. In line 7 of "Now begins the silent season," what does Grandbois mean when he says "I often wake to discover I'm someone else?" How does that line impact the line that follows – "as if we could leave anything behind?"
9. Prompt: Write a poem about your own "infected sky."

The Three-Legged World (cont'd)

10. How does the scattering of the lines in Grandbois' "The breaking of tongues" work to impart meaning in this poem? What does it do for the pacing? How does it compare to the format of the works by Miltner?

11. How would "Something like faith" change if Grandbois had changed the first "thing" at the end of the piece? What would you change it to?

12. Find the four internal rhymes in "Here is the river here is the dream." What effect is created by the fact that they are not all at the end of the lines?

13. In line 11 of "What mud-drunk song waits," what does Grandbois mean by "three-legged world"? Prompt: Write a poem with your own, specific "legged" world.

14. Prompt: Take a poem you've already written. Use numbers to outline the different acts of it.

15. The first stanza of "This winter bone-house" has an internal rhyme pattern with the long "e" sound – sleet, knee, field, before. How does this sound continue on through the piece? What sort of tonal note does this repeated "e" sound create? How does that sound differ when read to yourself as opposed to reading aloud?

16. Prompt: Write a poem about an unfortunate god.

17. The poems "My body haunts itself" and "My body faded like a shadow" are poems about a body disremembered, about the loss of someone. Write your own poem about the loss of someone.

18. How would "The universe is like a corpse" change if the word "like" was removed from the first line?

19. In "The alchemist is thinking of his secrets," a prose poem about death and secrets, how does the style of the poem fit the topic? Who is your alchemist and what secrets do you want to hear?

20. In "The color of hands," Grandbois pulls up the images of Schrodinger and Pavlov. Write a poem intertwining other historical people outside of the literary world.

21. In "Waiting for revelation," there is a strong presence of words with an "s" sound. What does this do to the overall sound of the piece? Where else in Grandbois' work do we see this?

22. Prompt: Grandbois' poem "Rain" employs a very specific poetic structure. Copy this style in a piece of your own.

The Three-Legged World (cont'd)

23. Prompt: Read "Light water beneath the dark." Find/Research a god you've never heard of, then write a poem about yourself as that god.

24. Prompt: Grandbois creates a visual texture in "Sleep." Use this style to create a poem with texture.

In Time

1. In "The Visible World," McCorkle repeats the word hummingbird in several different languages – chuparro, chupamirto, chupamiel, colibri. McCorkle does this again in the poem "Fire Regime" with the words chaparral and fynbos. What effect does this have on a poem?

2. Prompt: Write a poem about things outside of the scale of visibility.

3. How do the facts outlined in the beginning of "May Days" set the tone for the rest of the piece? Does the stanza after the second break (beginning on line 29) help better define the piece on whole?

4. In "Peonies," McCorkle references Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet "How Do I Love Thee." Find a poem well known to you and use lines from it, changing those lines in some way to make them more uniquely your own.

5. McCorkle uses the cicadas in several poems. What sensory element do they add to the poems? How is this sensory element lost on a reader from an area without cicadas? Does McCorkle define cicadas well enough to be understood by those readers?

6. On lines 19-20 of "The Saffron Gatherer," read the line "I've left the garden / untended for too long." Given that this poem is referencing war, what is McCorkle's untended garden?

7. How do the three acts in "The Water Column," which illustrate the three vertical aspects of a water column, reflect life?

8. Prompt: McCorkle references a number of biological and zoological terms in this poem, and yet he is able to make their meanings known within the lines following the term. Using words that are specific to another area of interest to yourself, write a poem in which those words are used, their meanings made apparent in later lines.

In Time (cont'd)

9. Prompt: Read the poem “Fire Regime.” Write a poem on your thoughts about global warming.

10. Read the poem “Anthracite.” How does the repetition of the word “necessity” connect to a poem about a type of coal? If life is represented in the “teeth of the great wheels” then what is anthracite?

11. Prompt: The poem “Euphrates” asks the question “What would creation be if creation is the breaking of forms?” Answer that question in a poem.

12. Prompt: Write a poem answering the four questions asked in McCorkle’s poem “Owling.”

13. How does the limited line structure in “Thule” relate to the theme of the poem? How does the move into the “you” in stanza 11 alter that structure?

14. “Source Code” and “Updraft” bring in the exactness of a binary, computer-like tone. Write a poem with this same stark duality as equality.

15. Virga is defined as a mass of streaks of rain appearing to hang under a cloud. Use this word as the theme of a poem.

16. In “Kill Holes,” McCorkle compares a person to a canopic jar. Taking into account the term “kill hole” references the belief that broken pottery releases the spirit, how does this poem knit together kill holes and human existence? Prompt: Write a poem about someone or something we only know about because they no longer exist.

Orpheus & Echo

1. Prompt: Read Miltner’s poem “Island.” Write a poem from the world of “as if.”

2. Prompt: Pull a person from mythology into the modern day. Write a poem about his/her experience in the modern world.

3. Miltner writes often about Eurydice and love. How are the land lines of his poems expressive of the woman beyond the myth?

4. Prompt: A Tone poem is a piece of orchestral music typically in one movement on a descriptive or rhapsodic theme. Write your own tone poem on marriage or loss.

Orpheus & Echo (cont'd)

5. Prompt: Write a poem about people as damaged fruit.

6. An Epithalamium is a song or poem celebrating marriage and is sung for the bride on her way to the marriage chamber. Is Miltner’s poem “epithalamium [dream song]” about marriage or loss?

7. Prompt: Read “Narcissus Boulevard [selfie video with soundtrack].” Miltner tends to riff in places, increasing the essence of an image through repetition of sound. Write a poem that mimics this style.

8. In “number ten [fantasy],” Miltner writes “desire is memory of touch of skin.” How does this thought present itself in the other love poems in this collection?

9. Prompt: What do your ghosts sing?

10. Miltner uses an ampersand (&) regularly in his work. Compare two Miltner poems and their use of &. What is its effectiveness? How would the poems read if the word “and” was substituted?

11. Prompt: Read “the river Nox & the caves of Hypnos [fantasy].” Write to the line “memory’s other name is ghost.”

12. Prompt: Take lines from several of your own poems and arrange them into an echo poem of your work.

General

1. Prompt: In each of these poets’ work, there is the use of the negative to define a thing. Use these types of negatives in a poem.

2. How do the concepts of faith and nature meet in these poems?

3. All three poets focus on love. Find one love poem from each and compare how imagery is used.

4. Each of these poets employs a distinct style through spacing, punctuation, or page layout. How do the different styles work in favor or against the poems presented?

5. All three poets refer to the reader at some point. How does the breaking of the fourth wall in this manner effect you as a reader? Write a poem that addresses the reader directly in this way.

General (cont'd)

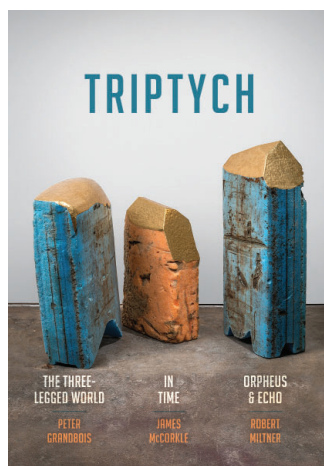
6. Find a poem from each poet that is told in present tense. How would these poems change if set in past tense? Future tense?
7. Each poet marries the modern to mythology. Find examples of this and compare the different efforts.
8. All three poets discuss the making of poetry within their work. Find examples and compare how they do this.
9. Each of these poets center their images around specific birds. Find examples of these birds within the poems and explore what each poet is trying to convey by using that bird as opposed to another.
10. All three poets are storytellers within their works. Find a “story” from each poet and compare.
11. Compare Miltner’s use of Eurydice to McCorkle’s use of cicadas.

Standards for the English Language Arts (compiled by NCTE and IRA)

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Standards for the English Language Arts (compiled by NCTE and IRA) (cont'd)

5. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
6. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
7. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.



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