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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Surrealism

“My Life with the Wave” by Octavio Paz

Surrealism is a movement in art and writing, begun by the French poet André Breton in 1924 with the publication of his manifesto *Le Manifeste du Surréalisme*. It stated that a deeper reality exists, which to mortal minds is unfathomable. To mirror that profound reality, surrealist artists are fond of bizarre and dreamlike imagery. Drawing on the theories of Sigmund Freud, surrealists seek to create their art according to the dictates of the unconscious mind.

Surrealism flourished between World Wars I and II. Such artists as Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), René Magritte (1898-1967), and Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) painted surrealist works at different points in their careers. Reading Octavio Paz’s “My Life with the Wave” as a Surrealist prose poem is only one of several possible interpretations of this fascinating short story. First published in 1976, it can be read as an erotic allegory, an exploration of the artist’s relationship with his muse, a short story exploring magical realism, or in ways yet undiscovered.



Discussion Activities

The following statement summarizes André Breton’s surrealist ambition: “I believe in the future transmutation of those two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality, so to speak. I am looking forward to its consummation, certain that I shall never share in it, but death would matter little to me could I but taste the joy it will yield ultimately.” How might this surrealist claim apply to Octavio Paz’s story “My Life with the Wave”?

Although “My Life with the Wave” is a fantastical story, which elements of the plot resemble other, more traditional stories students have read? In particular, how does the story seem like a conventional love affair? Ask students to identify specific moments in the story where the language evokes a typical romance between two people. Can the story still be considered Surrealist?



Writing Exercise

In his Nobel lecture Octavio Paz said, “We pursue modernity in her incessant metamorphoses yet we never manage to trap her. She always escapes: each encounter ends in flight. We embrace her and she disappears immediately: it was just a little air.” In their journals, have students write two paragraphs considering how this quotation might provide clues to interpreting the story.



Homework

Reread “My Life with the Wave,” then read Handout Three in this guide. Ask students to write two paragraphs explaining the reasons why they agree or disagree with Thiel’s interpretation.