

# CREATIVE WRITING COURSE

by Thomas Greene / artwritehub

## Voice, Identity & Transformation

*A Progressive Creative Writing  
Curriculum for High School*

Sponsored by  
**Progressive**  
YOUNG ARTIST AWARDS 

**New season opening Jan 1, 2026!**

PYAA's upcoming season will focus on the theme of **CHANGE**, inviting students to explore transformation in personal, social, and artistic forms. **Medalists will automatically advance to the Annual Competition.**



# COURSE INTRODUCTION

Creative writing is one of the most powerful tools a young person can possess. It gives students the agency to define themselves, to explore the complexity of their identities, and to transform personal experience into art. This curriculum centers the work of contemporary progressive authors – writers who speak truth to power, challenge systems of oppression, and illuminate the beauty, struggle, and resilience of marginalized communities.

Students will study and be inspired by voices such as Audre Lorde, Sandra Cisneros, Ocean Vuong, Warsan Shire, Ada Limón, Mary Oliver, bell hooks, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, Rebecca Solnit, Toni Morrison, Roxane Gay, Jesmyn Ward, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Their writing models authenticity, courage, vulnerability, and the commitment to transformation – all central to this course and to PYAA's 2026 theme: CHANGE.

## Throughout this course, students will:

- Develop an authentic writing voice
- Explore how identity shapes storytelling
- Use imagery, metaphor, and sensory detail
- Write fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction
- Engage in critical thinking and self-reflection
- Practice writing as resistance, empowerment, and liberation
- Assemble a writing portfolio suitable for PYAA submission

The course is designed for inclusivity, depth, and creative freedom. Students will investigate their own identities, wrestle with difficult questions, and experience the joy of discovering their artistic abilities.

At its heart, this curriculum celebrates the idea that:

***Your voice is your power. Your story is your truth. Your writing is a force for change.***

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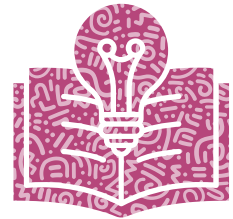
## WEEK 1 — LESSON 1

# Writing as Identity: Voice, Truth & Self-Definition

Featured Authors: Audre Lorde, Sandra Cisneros, Ocean Vuong

## TEACHER MINI-LESSON

Today's lesson introduces the idea that voice in creative writing emerges from identity—from culture, language, memory, race, gender, sexuality, and the lived experiences that shape a person. Writing is not only a form of expression; it is a form of self-definition, especially for communities whose stories have often been marginalized or misrepresented.



### Write on the board:

*“Your silence will not protect you.” — Audre Lorde*

Lorde, a Black lesbian feminist poet, believed that silence is a tool of oppression. People from marginalized identities are frequently pressured to remain quiet—to avoid conflict, to conform, or to protect themselves. Lorde argues that silence does not create safety; instead, it reinforces systems that deny one's humanity. Writing becomes a form of resistance: naming truth, claiming space, and asserting identity in a world that often discourages such honesty.

Lorde's work teaches that writing becomes powerful when it is rooted in lived experience and when it confronts, rather than avoids, the realities that shape a person's life.



**Next, introduce Sandra Cisneros. Write:**

*"I am a story." — Sandra Cisneros*

Cisneros' writing emerges from the textures of everyday life in a Chicana, working-class community. She often writes about girlhood, bilingual identity, cultural expectations, and the conflict between belonging and independence.

Paraphrase the key idea from *The House on Mango Street*.

Cisneros' narrator describes her name as "heavy" and "muddy," expressing how language carries emotional and cultural weight. A simple description becomes a metaphor for how identity can feel shaped by forces outside oneself—family expectations, gender norms, cultural traditions.



Cisneros demonstrates that accessible language can hold deep emotional and political meaning. Her writing shows students that voice can be authentic, grounded, and culturally specific without needing to be complex or ornate.

## PYAA COMPETITION SPOTLIGHT

New season opening Jan 1, 2026!

PYAA's upcoming season will focus on the theme of CHANGE, inviting students to explore transformation in personal, social, and artistic forms. Medalists will automatically advance to the Annual Competition.

Click here for more information: <https://www.pya-awards.org/competition/>

Encourage students to keep all writing from this lesson, as identity-driven work often aligns naturally with this year's theme.

**Now introduce Ocean Vuong. Write on the board:**

*“I’ll love you better.” — Ocean Vuong*

Vuong’s voice is marked by tenderness, vulnerability, and lyricism. His writing reflects the experiences of a queer Vietnamese American whose life is shaped by war, immigration, and intergenerational trauma. Yet he often chooses gentleness as his primary mode—a way of reclaiming humanity in the face of violence or erasure.

Paraphrase the tone from *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*:

Vuong describes childhood moments through metaphors that turn ordinary experiences into emotional landscapes. A classroom becomes a site of pressure; a conversation becomes a battlefield of memory and fear. Vuong’s language reveals how marginalized identities carry histories that reshape how the world feels.

Vuong teaches that vulnerability can be a form of resistance, and that voice does not need to be loud to be powerful.

## Unifying the Three Voices

- **Lorde** writes with urgency.
- **Cisneros** writes with cultural memory.
- **Vuong** writes with tenderness.

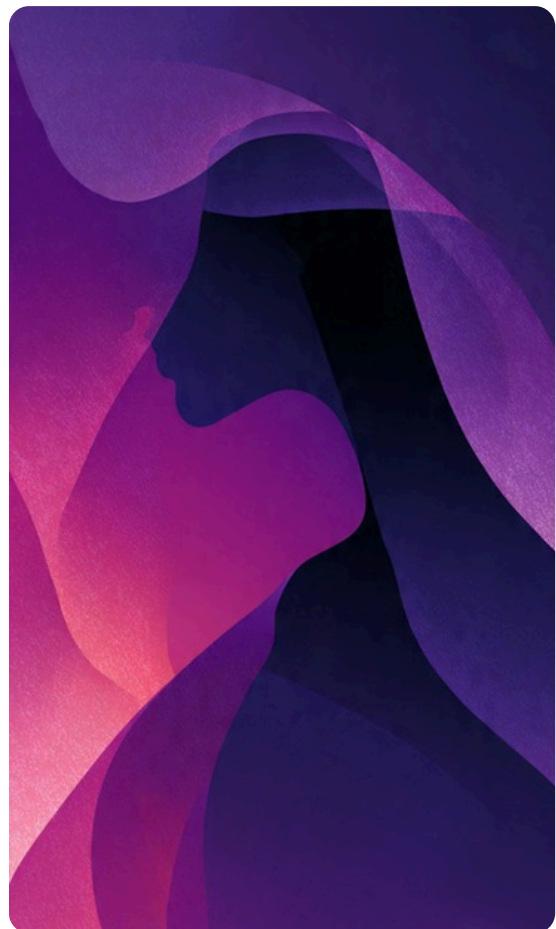
Together, they show that:

**Voice emerges when writers transform lived experience into art—especially experiences shaped by change, displacement, or struggle.**

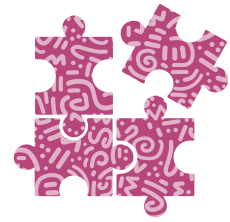
This frames creative writing as a space where students can explore identity while practicing craft. Their languages, cultures, and stories are legitimate and valuable sources of literature.

Conclude by stating:

**Your identity is not an obstacle to creative writing—it is the engine of your voice.**



## CLASS ACTIVITIES



### 1 Identity Mapping (15 minutes)

Students draw an “identity constellation” including names, languages, cultural background, important communities, memories, fears, hopes, and key changes.

Then they select three elements and write a 100–150 word reflection on how these influence their voice.

### 2 Voice Transformation Exercise (10 minutes)

Students rewrite the sentence “I walked home alone.” in three different voices:

- urgency in the style of Lorde
- lyricism inspired by Vuong
- concise, image-driven tone of Cisneros

### 3 “Silence Will Not Protect You” Free-Write (7 minutes)

Prompt:

Write about a moment when you stayed silent. Why? What changed?

## HOMEWORK



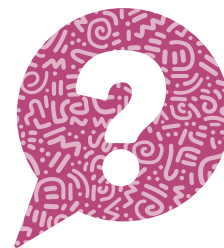
### Free-Write Journal #1 – CHANGE (1 page)

Write about a moment when a change—large or small—shifted your sense of self.

Encourage metaphor, sensory detail, and reflection.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- 1** How do identity and lived experience shape a writer's voice?
- 2** What do Lorde, Cisneros, and Vuong reveal about the relationship between silence and expression?
- 3** Why can vulnerability be a powerful force in writing?
- 4** How does cultural context affect the meaning of a story?

## PYAA CONNECTION — THEME: CHANGE

PYAA's new season opens January 1, 2026, and centers on the theme CHANGE. Writing that explores identity, transformation, or self-discovery often becomes strong material for submission.

More information: <https://www.pya-awards.org>



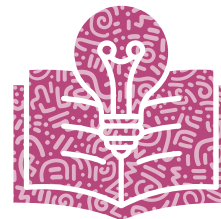
## WEEK 1 — LESSON 2

# Imagery, Metaphor & the Body

Featured Authors: Warsan Shire, Ada Limón, Mary Oliver

## TEACHER MINI-LESSON

Today's lesson explores how writers use imagery and metaphor, especially through representations of the body and the natural world, to communicate emotional truth. Imagery is not just decoration—it is a way of thinking. For many contemporary feminist and intersectional writers, the body becomes a site of memory, resistance, and identity.



### Begin by writing on the board:

*"I am the wound." — Warsan Shire*

Shire, a Somali British poet, often writes about displacement, war, womanhood, and survival. Her imagery is bold, visceral, and immediate. She frequently uses the body as metaphor—skin as history, blood as inheritance, bones as maps of trauma. Her poems make the interior visible.

### Paraphrase a moment from her poem *Home*:

Shire describes the body reacting to violence—not in a literal sense but as a metaphor for the impossibility of comfort. Through imagery of burning, breaking, or dislocation, she conveys the emotional geography of exile. These metaphors give shape to intangible experiences like fear, dislocation, and memory.

### Explain to students:

**Shire uses imagery to articulate what cannot be spoken directly.**

Her metaphors transform the body into a language of survival.



**Next, introduce Ada Limón. Write:**

*“The heart is a fist.” – Ada Limón*

Limón’s poetry blends everyday moments with emotional depth. She frequently writes about empowerment, resilience, and the relationship between the self and the natural world. While Shire’s metaphors often emerge from pain, Limón uses imagery to reveal endurance and connection.

**Paraphrase a moment from The Carrying:**

Limón describes holding tension and grief inside the body—shoulders tightening, the chest folding inward—but then shifts to imagery of animals and landscapes as sources of renewal. Her descriptions of horses, leaves, or rivers are not mere scenery: they become emotional companions, teaching the speaker how to keep going.

**Explain to students:**

**Limón uses imagery to transform emotional struggle into possibility.**

Her metaphors often move from contraction to expansion—from the body closing to the world opening.

**Now introduce Mary Oliver. Write on the board:**

*“You only have to let the soft animal of your body love.” – Mary Oliver*

Oliver’s poetry is known for its clarity, simplicity, and spiritual grounding in nature. Yet this simplicity is deceptive: her images carry profound insight about identity, freedom, and the desire to live authentically.

**Paraphrase a moment from Wild Geese:**

Oliver gives the reader permission to abandon the pressure to be “good” or perfect. Instead, she turns to the natural world—geese flying overhead, rain falling, forests breathing—and uses these images to remind us that belonging is a birthright. Her imagery suggests that the body is part of nature, not separate from it, and thus worthy of rest, compassion, and acceptance.

**Explain to students:**

**Oliver uses nature as metaphor for inner freedom.**

Her images are gentle but transformative, encouraging a return to the body and to the self.

**Now introduce Ocean Vuong. Write on the board:**

*“I’ll love you better.” — Ocean Vuong*

Vuong’s voice is marked by tenderness, vulnerability, and lyricism. His writing reflects the experiences of a queer Vietnamese American whose life is shaped by war, immigration, and intergenerational trauma. Yet he often chooses gentleness as his primary mode—a way of reclaiming humanity in the face of violence or erasure.

Paraphrase the tone from *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*:

Vuong describes childhood moments through metaphors that turn ordinary experiences into emotional landscapes. A classroom becomes a site of pressure; a conversation becomes a battlefield of memory and fear. Vuong’s language reveals how marginalized identities carry histories that reshape how the world feels.

Vuong teaches that vulnerability can be a form of resistance, and that voice does not need to be loud to be powerful.

## Unifying the Three Voices

Though their styles differ, Shire, Limón, and Oliver share a common approach:

- **Shire** uses visceral imagery to reveal wounds and memory
- **Limón** uses embodied metaphor to express resilience
- **Oliver** uses nature as a guide toward liberation and self-acceptance

Together, they demonstrate that imagery is not merely descriptive—it is **emotional architecture**. A well-crafted metaphor allows readers to feel what the writer feels and to inhabit perspectives that might otherwise be inaccessible.

Conclude the mini-lesson by stating:

**Imagery allows writers to translate emotion into sensation.**

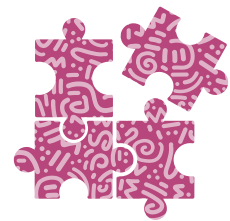
Metaphor transforms personal experience into shared understanding.

## PYAA COMPETITION SPOTLIGHT

PYAA's 2026 theme CHANGE invites students to explore how transformation is felt in the body or mirrored in nature. Imagery-rich poems and metaphors often become strong submissions.

Learn more or prepare students for entry at:  
<https://www.pya-awards.org/competition/>

## CLASS ACTIVITIES



### 1 Body as Metaphor (15 minutes)

Students choose a body part—hands, spine, heartbeat, Skin, shoulders—and generate five metaphors for it.

Example prompts:

- “My hands are...”
- “My heartbeat feels like...”
- “My back remembers...”

Students then expand one metaphor into a 3–4 sentence image-driven paragraph.

### 2 Emotional Imagery Mini-Poem (10 minutes)

Students select one theme:

- migration
- girlhood
- grief
- resilience
- liberation

They write a 6-line poem, requiring at least one sense per line (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste).

### 3 Line-Break Workshop (10 minutes)

Students take this prose sentence:

**“I carried what I could not say.”**

They create **three different poems** by breaking the line in different places. Discuss how form shapes emotion.

## HOMEWORK

### Poem #1 — Image & Metaphor (12–20 lines)

Write a poem centered on a body-based or nature-based metaphor.

Encourage students to:

- use sensory detail
- ground abstract emotions in concrete images
- allow the metaphor to evolve over the poem
- connect to a moment of change



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1** How do Shire, Limón, and Oliver use imagery to express emotions that are difficult to articulate directly?
- 2** What makes a metaphor effective or moving?
- 3** How does connecting the body to nature change the meaning of an image?
- 4** How can imagery communicate transformation or change?



## PYAA CONNECTION — THEME: CHANGE

Imagery and metaphor are powerful tools for exploring transformation. Encourage students to save today's work for possible submission to PYAA's 2026 competition.

More information: <https://www.pya-awards.org>

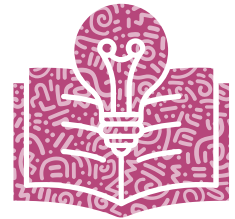
## WEEK 1 — LESSON 3

# Writing Against Oppression: Voice as Resistance

Featured Authors: bell hooks, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, Rebecca Solnit

## TEACHER MINI-LESSON

Today's lesson introduces writing as a form of resistance—a way of naming injustice, challenging oppressive systems, and reclaiming one's humanity. Progressive feminist authors often turn to writing when traditional forms of power fail them. Their voices push back against silence, invisibility, and erasure.



### Begin by writing on the board:

*“Joy is resistance.” — bell hooks*

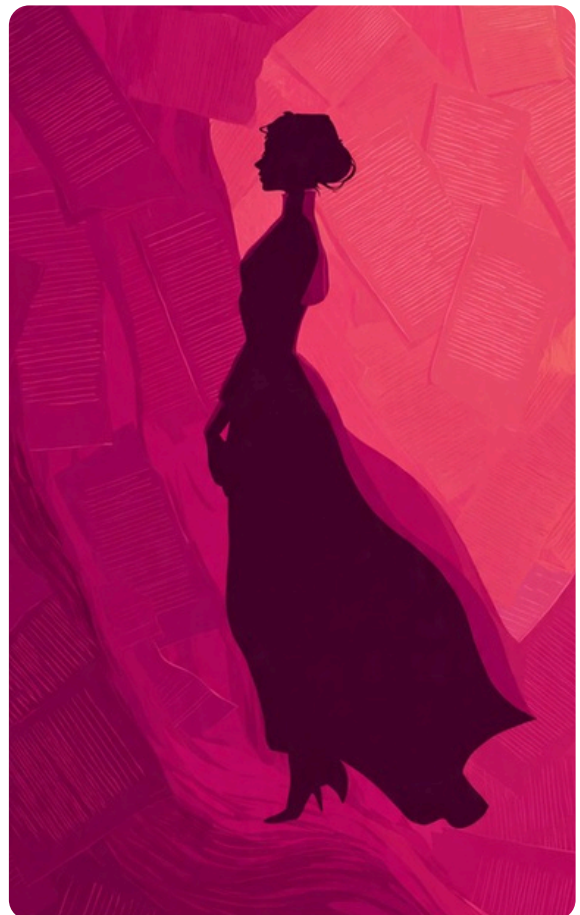
Explain that bell hooks—a scholar, feminist, cultural critic, and storyteller—believed that joy is not trivial or frivolous. For marginalized communities, joy itself can defy racist, sexist, and heteronormative structures that attempt to limit their possibilities.

### Paraphrase from Talking Back:

Hooks describes how speaking truth, especially for Black women, was historically punished. The act of writing or speaking becomes a rebellion against systems that demand obedience and submission. Writing, in hooks's view, becomes an entry point into freedom—where the self asserts its right to exist fully.

### Emphasize:

For hooks, voice is power. Writing becomes a home for the self when society refuses to offer one.



**Next, introduce Adrienne Rich. Write:**

*“The moment of change is the only poem.” – Adrienne Rich*

Rich, a major feminist poet and essayist, viewed political awakening as a poetic act. For her, poetry was not separate from activism—it was the language through which new forms of consciousness were born.

**Paraphrase a key idea from “When We Dead Awaken”:**

Rich argues that women’s voices have been historically shaped by patriarchal expectations. To write truthfully, a woman must unlearn these constraints and rediscover her authentic voice. The “moment of change” refers to those inner shifts where a person reclaims the authority of their own experience.

**Explain to students:**

Rich suggests that writing becomes transformative when it reflects the exact moment a person recognizes their own power.

This directly connects to the course theme of CHANGE.

**Now introduce Alice Walker. Write on the board:**

*“Resistance is the secret of joy.” – Alice Walker*

Walker, author of *The Color Purple* and *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, writes about Black womanhood, generational trauma, and resilience. Her work often centers characters who reclaim voice after long histories of silencing.

**Paraphrase a moment from Walker’s essays:**

Walker describes how creativity—even in the face of oppression—becomes a form of spiritual survival. She writes about ancestors who expressed themselves through quilting, gardening, storytelling, cooking—all forms of artistry that were not recognized as “literature” but were nonetheless powerful.

**Tell students:**

Walker teaches that creativity itself is resistance. To imagine beauty despite hardship is a radical act.

**Introduce Rebecca Solnit. Write:**

*“Hope is a gift you don’t have to surrender.” — Rebecca Solnit*

Solnit writes about feminism, environmental justice, civil rights, and the power of narrative in shaping culture. She argues that stories determine what a society believes is possible.

**Paraphrase a concept from Solnit’s essays:**

Solnit describes how oppressive systems often work by controlling narratives—by making people believe that change is impossible or that their voices do not matter. Writing stories of resistance challenges these narratives and opens space for collective imagination.

**Explain to students:**

Solnit reframes writing as a civic act—one that shapes the future by redefining what we believe can change.

**Unifying the Four Voices**

While their styles differ, hooks, Rich, Walker, and Solnit share a commitment to writing as liberation:

- **hooks:** voice as empowerment
- **Rich:** consciousness as poetic transformation
- **Walker:** creativity as generational survival
- **Solnit:** narrative as cultural change

Together, they show that writing can challenge injustice, reclaim identity, and create new possibilities.

**Conclude the mini-lesson by stating:**

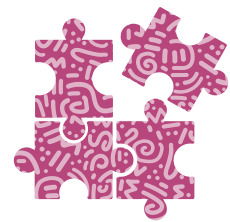
Resistance writing does not require shouting. It requires telling the truth—even when the truth is inconvenient, uncomfortable, or unheard.



## PYAA COMPETITION SPOTLIGHT

PYAA's 2026 theme CHANGE aligns directly with this lesson: resistance writing is rooted in transformation—of self, of narrative, of community. Many strong submissions emerge from stories of awakening, empowerment, or reclaiming voice. Learn more or prepare students for entry at: <https://www.pya-awards.org/competition/>

## CLASS ACTIVITIES



### 1 Resistance Paragraph (10–12 minutes)

**Prompt:**

Write 150 words about a moment when you resisted something—or wish you had.

**Encourage students to use:**

- internal conflict
- emotional detail
- sensory descriptions
- metaphor

### 2 Oppression & Change Brainstorm (10 minutes)

Students create a two-column chart:

**Left column:** Silencing Forces (fear, expectation, stereotypes, rules, labels...)

**Right column:** Liberating Forces (creativity, courage, community, self-knowledge...)

Ask students to identify which forces appear in their own lives.

### 3 Voice Reclamation Exercise (10 minutes)

Students write a short monologue from the perspective of:

- someone speaking up after long silence
- someone discovering a truth they didn't know they held
- someone whose voice has been underestimated

Focus on tone, tension, and internal revelation.

## HOMEWORK

### Character Sketch #1 — Resistance & Change

Create a character whose identity has been shaped by silencing or by speaking out.

Include:

- their personal history
- what they fear
- what they want
- what begins to change in them

1–2 pages.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 What does bell hooks mean by “joy is resistance”?
- 2 How do Rich and Solnit show that change begins with consciousness?
- 3 How does Walker portray creativity as a survival tool?
- 4 When has writing helped you reclaim your own voice or sense of truth?
- 5 Why do oppressive systems often rely on silence?



## PYAA CONNECTION — THEME: CHANGE

Resistance writing is inherently about transformation—of identity, power, or understanding. Encourage students to save their writing from this lesson as strong potential material for PYAA’s 2026 competition.

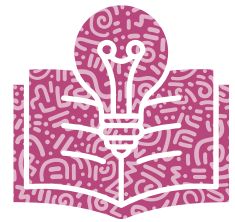
More information: <https://www.pya-awards.org>

## WEEK 2 — LESSON 4

# Progressive Storytelling: Conflict, Liberation & the Arc of Change

Featured Authors: Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, Jesmyn Ward, Roxane Gay, Gloria Anzaldúa

## TEACHER MINI-LESSON



Today's lesson introduces students to story structure through the lens of progressive literature. Instead of viewing plot as merely a sequence of events, we examine how conflict, tension, and transformation arise from systems of power—race, gender, class, sexuality, borders, and the pressures they exert on characters.

In traditional storytelling instruction, conflict is usually framed as “character vs. character,” “character vs. nature,” etc.

But progressive storytelling asks deeper questions:  
Who or what holds power in this story?

- Who is excluded? Who is silenced?
- What systems create conflict?
- What would liberation or change look like for this character?

This approach not only strengthens fiction but also aligns with the theme of CHANGE central to PYAA's 2026 competition.



## 1 Toni Morrison & the Roots of Conflict

Write on the board:

*“Freeing yourself was one thing.” – Toni Morrison*

Explain that Morrison’s characters often face conflicts rooted not in personal flaws but in historical and systemic forces—racism, generational trauma, poverty, and cultural memory.

**Her stories teach that the heart of narrative conflict is often:**

- inheritance (trauma passed through generations)
- communal identity
- the struggle for self-worth in oppressive environments

**Paraphrase a moment from *Beloved*:**

A mother’s fear does not arise from imagination but from the brutality of slavery and its afterlives. The conflict is internal, external, historical, and psychological all at once.

**Tell students:**

In Morrison’s work, the turning point is not when the plot twists, but when the character recognizes a new truth about their own humanity.

## 2 Sandra Cisneros & the Small Conflicts That Shape a Life

Write

*“It was the moment you knew.” – Sandra Cisneros*

Cisneros often writes small, intimate conflicts—words unsaid, borders crossed, expectations resisted. These small tensions accumulate and become transformative.

**Paraphrase a moment from *Mango Street*:**

A girl overhears adults speaking about her, and in that instant, she sees the world differently. The conflict is subtle—an internal awakening—and yet it changes the course of her identity.

**Explain that Cisneros shows us:**

**The smallest moments can be turning points. Story arcs can rise from a shift in self-understanding, not just from dramatic events.**

### 3 Jesmyn Ward & Survival as Story Arc

Write:

*“We are still here.” — Jesmyn Ward*

Ward’s characters often struggle against multiple forces: poverty, racism, addiction, grief, natural disasters. Her stories are shaped by perseverance, not victory. Conflict originates from the environment—literal and societal.

#### **Paraphrase a moment from *Salvage the Bones*:**

A family prepares for a hurricane, but the emotional storm is just as powerful. Ward interlaces physical danger with fragile hope.

#### **Explain:**

Ward’s story arcs rise not from escape, but from endurance. Transformation may look like surviving another day.

### 4 Roxane Gay & the Internal-External Split

Write

*“To be seen is a risk.” — Roxane Gay*

Gay’s writing frequently explores the tension between who we are and who the world allows us to be. Conflict emerges from the mismatch between internal identity and external expectations.

#### **Paraphrase from her essays:**

A woman may feel powerful internally yet is treated with fragility by society; or she may feel broken inside yet perform confidence in public.

#### **Explain that Gay shows:**

The story arc often revolves around resolving—or acknowledging—the gap between the inner and outer self.



## 5 Gloria Anzaldúa & Borderlands as Narrative Engine

Write:

*“A border is a wound.” — Gloria Anzaldúa*

Anzaldúa’s work centers the idea that borders—physical, cultural, linguistic, spiritual—create conflict. Characters exist in in-between spaces where identity feels contested.

### Paraphrase a key idea:

A character who speaks two languages may feel they belong to neither world and both. The conflict becomes one of integration, fragmentation, or reinvention.

### Explain:

Anzaldúa teaches that tension arises when a character stands at the edge of two selves—and must choose to reconcile or redefine.

## Unifying the Five Voices

**Morrison:** systemic conflict

**Cisneros:** intimate awakening

**Ward:** survival and endurance

**Gay:** internal vs. external identity

**Anzaldúa:** borderlands and hybridity

Together, they redefine “plot” as:

a journey toward greater truth, autonomy, voice, or belonging.

Conflict is not just what happens—it is what presses on a character’s identity.

Change is not just external—it is internal, relational, cultural, ancestral.

### Conclude:

Progressive storytelling teaches that the true climax is often the moment a character understands themselves differently.

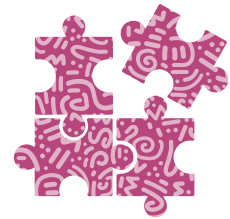
## PYAA COMPETITION SPOTLIGHT

Stories that explore identity, awakening, tension with society, or internal transformation align closely with PYAA’s 2026 theme CHANGE. Students are encouraged to save drafts and story ideas from this lesson for future submission.

More information:

<https://www.pya-awards.org/competition/>

## CLASS ACTIVITIES



### 1 Conflict Mapping Exercise (10–12 minutes)

Students choose one source of conflict:

- societal expectation
- family duty
- internal shame
- cultural pressure
- gendered rules
- the border between two identities

Students map:

What does the character want? What prevents them? What must change?

### 2 Micro-Fiction Tension Write (10 minutes)

Prompt:

Write 6–8 sentences where a character experiences a subtle moment of awakening.

**Examples:** overhearing a remark, receiving unexpected news, witnessing injustice, or feeling unseen.

Focus on tension, not plot.

### 3 Drafting the Arc (10 minutes)

Students outline a story using 5 steps:

1. Who am I before
2. What pressure or conflict appears
3. What begins to shift
4. What moment of recognition occurs
5. Who am I after

This becomes the foundation for their Week 2 short story draft.

## HOMEWORK



### Flash Fiction #2 – The Moment of Change

Write a 300–500 word story centered on a moment that transforms the character’s sense of self.

#### Encourage:

- internal conflict
- atmospheric detail
- metaphor
- tension grounded in identity

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- 1 How do these authors redefine “conflict”?
- 2 What does “liberation” look like in a story that doesn’t have a happy ending?
- 3 What systems or pressures shape your characters?
- 4 How can a subtle moment create a powerful turning point?
- 5 Why is internal change sometimes more important than external action?

## PYAA CONNECTION — THEME: CHANGE

This lesson gives students the foundation to create stories rooted in transformation—ideal for submitting to PYAA’s 2026 competition.

More information:

<https://www.pya-awards.org>