

**International curriculum Module Development  
Module: The Poetry and Prose of Octavio Paz: An Overview**

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**Spring 1997**

**Paradise Valley Community College  
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(writings) have on contemporary American literature; and / or the effect international writers have on defining culture.

Students will gain an overview of the various themes and literary techniques of Octavio Paz, 1990 Nobel Prize winner. Students will be introduced to an influential contemporary writer whose writing has been said to explore the question: What does it mean to be Mexican? Students will enhance their understanding of how international writers affect contemporary literature.

*The module might apply to the other courses, such as:*

ENG 113 Writers and Current Issues  
ENG 202 World Literature after the Renaissance  
ENH 204 Literature of Today  
ENG 210 Creative Writing  
ENG 214 Poetry Study

The module can be expanded or contracted to fit the needs of the course and / or course instructor. A 50-minute class period would explain the significance of the writer and his work. Two-50 minute class periods would allow for an introduction and a viewing of a video in which Paz reads his work. Three-50 minute sessions would permit a closer examination of specific works and allow for class discussion regarding those works.

## 2) CONTENT

### a) *Outline*

Introduction:

Latin America's foremost living poet, Octavio Paz received the Nobel Prize in 1990. His evocative writing seeks to define what it is to be Mexican, fusing elements of modern and classical Spanish with pre-Columbian civilization"  
Lannan Foundation

Octavio Paz: Born 1914; Mexican poet, essayist, critic, nonfiction writer, editor, journalist and translator. The first Mexican to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Some of his most celebrated works include:

*La laberinto de la soledad (The Labyrinth of Solitude)* -- a sociocultural analysis of Mexico

precepts and Mexican landscape (174).

## 2) Reconciling Opposites

Paz's work, writes John M. Fein in *Toward Octavio Paz: - A Reading of His Major Poems, 1957-1976*, often deals with the problems of the fragmentation of modern man. Paz's "wish" is to reconcile "opposites." Moreover, continues Fein, Paz sees poetry, itself, as a kind of paradox -- that which "both denies and transforms reality" (3-4).

This notion of language as a reconciling force can be seen in the following poem.

*Between What I See And What I Say. . .*

*for Roman Jakobson*

Between what I see and what I say,  
between what I say and what I keep silent,  
between what I keep silent and what I dream,  
between what I dream and what I forget: poetry.

It slips  
between yes and no,  
says  
what I keep silent,  
keeps silent  
what I say,  
dreams  
what I forget.

It is not speech: it is an act.

It is an act  
of speech.

Poetry

speaks and listens:  
it is real.  
And as soon as I say  
*it is real*

poetry  
comes and goes

between what is

and what is not.

It weaves  
and unweaves reflections.  
Poetry

scatters eyes on a page,  
scatters words on our eyes.  
Eyes speak,

words look, looks think.

To hear

thoughts,  
see  
what we say,

touch the body of an idea.

Eyes close,

the words open.

[from: *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz* (485-87)]

### **3) The Power of Language**

Certainly this yearning toward the blending of discordant opposites is a major theme in his work. However, ultimately Paz views poetry as a kind of deliverance. In his prose work, *The Bow and the Lyre*, he writes:

*Poetry is knowledge salvation, power, abandonment. An operation capable of changing the world, poetic activity is revolutionary by nature; a spiritual exercise, it is a means of interior liberation. Poetry reveals this world; it creates another. Bread of the chosen; accursed food. It isolates; it unites. Invitation to the journey; return to the homeland. Inspiration, respiration, muscular exercise. Prayer to the void, dialogue with its absence: tedium, anguish, and despair nourish it. (3)*

a) Language transcends politics and history but are "nourished by a common history."

b) Mexicans, he states, are "Europeans yet...are not Europeans" -- having a language and history which have origins in "Spain, Portugal and the Counter-Reformation" as well as the "ancient and splendid civilizations" of pre-Columbian Mexico.

This history created both a "presence" and a "separation" for the Mexican people. This diversity is an example of a basic and significant difference between Latin-American and Anglo-American literature.

c) To find his present "literary place" in the world, Paz had to seek his origins. "Modernity," he said, "led me to the source of my beginning, to my antiquity. Separation became reconciliation. . . In this pilgrimage in search of modernity I lost my way at many points only to find myself again. I returned to the source and discovered that modernity is not outside but within us. It is today and the most ancient antiquity; it is tomorrow and the beginning of the world; it is a thousand years old and yet newborn."

Clearly, in *Sun Stone* Paz attempts to use the past as a way of defining his Mexican present. This major collection of poems is structured according to various elements in the Aztec calendar (CLC 174).

## 5) Non-linear Time; Myth

Time perhaps is cyclical and thus immortal," states Paz in an 1972 with Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria and Emir Rodriguez Monegal, published in *Diacritics*. Non-linear -or perhaps for lack of a better definition -- time as experienced by the emotional self as well as collective consciousness -- is often cited as a characteristic of various cultures such as seen in Mexico and in Mexican-American society. Paz appears to view the myth and poetry as expression of the *experience* non-linear time. He states:

*Such, at least, is the time of myths and poems: it turns back over upon itself, it repeats itself. But man is finite and is not repeated all men know that they are going to die. They know it, they feel it, they dream it, and they die. The same thing happens with the other basic human experiences: love, desire, work. These experiences are historical: they are repeated Poems are machines that produce time and that continually return to their origins. . . Our experiences are not historical, but we are. Each one of us is unique but the*

*Early Poems: 1935-1955* 1973 *Selected Poems* 1984

*The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz* 1988

*Selected Bibliography of Other Works* (listed here in English)

*The Bow and the Lyre* 1973

*The Double flame: Love and Eroticism.* 1995. *Essay on Mexican art.* 1993.

*Convergences: Essays on Art and Literature.* 1987.

*The Labyrinth of Solitude* 1961 *On Poets and Others.* 1986.

*One Earth, Four or Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History* 1985.

c) *Notes*

Film strip available to augment this module:

*New trends in Poetry.* Princeton: Films for the Humanities, Inc. 1979.

Call number: PQ7081 .8651979 unit 10

Videos available to augment this module:

*Octavio Paz, an uncommon poet.* Princeton: Films for the Humanities, Inc. 1979. (29 minutes: Paz talks about his childhood, his activities as a political activist, and his view on poets, poetry, and language.)

Call number: PQ7297 .P285 Z47 1979

On order as of Fall 1986

*Octavio Paz.* Los Angeles: Lannan Foundation. 1989. (60 minutes. Paz reading from *Collect Poems of octavio Paz, 1957-1987* at Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C., with his translator reading English versions. Paz is interviewed in English by poet Lewis MacAdams and in Spanish by Professor Enrico Santi. Excellent resource.)

### **3) METHODOLOGY**

a) *Instructor's role*

The instructor might begin by using the lecture format. The focus should be on the literary characteristics found in Paz's work.

Examples of discussion questions:

- a) Do you agree or disagree with Paz regarding the power that language has to "change reality?" Explain and give examples from your own life.
- b) What does Paz mean when he states "*poetic activity is revolutionary by nature?*" How can poetry be revolutionary?
- c) Paz sees his Mexican culture as the consequence of diverse cultures -- for example, Spanish and Aztec. Why does he see this as a strength?
- d) Explain the statement: "*Our experiences are not historical, but we are.*"
- e) How is myth an expression of "timelessness?" Are there any modern myths to which you respond?

#### 4) EVALUATION

Students might be given a short excerpt from Paz's work and asked to analyze it in terms of his literary themes.

Or students might be asked to write a short paper on one of the following:

- a) One distinguishing characteristic of Paz revolves around the notion of opposites -- and the possibility that opposites may somehow be united. In your view, is this possible? For example, can culture and nature ever really come to terms with one another? Is there a "middle ground" between the mediative and the sensuous? Between thought and action? Between emotion and reason? Between the way time is experienced "by the clock" and the way time is experienced by our emotions?
- b) Do you agree or disagree with Paz when he speaks about going back to one's past as a way of defining one's present life? Give examples drawn from your reading to support your position.