Alexander Academy – English Studies 12 – Vicedom/Todd

**Analyzing Poetry**

Marilyn Dumont: Helen Betty Osborne

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 5  10  15  20  25  30 | Betty, if I set out to write this poem about you  it might turn out instead  to be about me  or any one of  my female relatives  it might turn out to be  about this young native girl  growing up in rural Alberta  in a town with fewer Indians  than ideas about Indians,  in a town just south of the 'Aryan Nations'         it might turn out to be  about Anna Mae Aquash, Donald Marshall or Richard Cardinal,  it might even turn out to be  about our grandmothers,  beasts of burden in the fur trade  skinning, scraping, pounding, packing,  left behind for ‘British Standards of Womanhood,'  left for white-melting-skinned women,  not bits-of-brown women  left here in this wilderness, this colony.         Betty, if I start to write a poem about you  it might turn out to be  about hunting season instead,  about 'open season' on native women  it might turn out to be  about your face       young and hopeful  staring back at me      hollow now  from a black and white page  it might be about the 'townsfolk'    (gentle word)  townsfolk who 'believed native girls were easy'  and 'less likely to complain if a sexual proposition led to violence.'         Betty, if I write this poem. |

(1996)

1. **Research & Presentation**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Helen Betty Osborne | Ann Mae Aquash | Donald Marshall | Richard Cardinal | Aryan Nations |

* Prepare a short 3-minute presentation (Google Slides or PowerPoint) presentation on your assigned topic. The presentation will be graded.
* There are 3 simple rules for your presentation:
  + cite your sources
  + don’t read off of notes or the slides
  + don’t use too much text on your slides, work with bullet points/images

1. **Vocabulary**

*In order to understand the poem better, a few phrases need clarification:*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Phrase | Explanation |
| beasts of burden (l.16) |  |
| “British Standards of Womanhood” (l.18) |  |
| white-melting-skinned women (l.19) |  |
| bits-of-brown women (l.20) |  |
| colony (l.21) |  |
| easy (l.31) |  |
| sexual proposition (l.32) |  |

1. **Discussion: Questions to the poem**

*Come up with three questions to this poem. Which parts do not make sense? Which concepts are hard to grasp? Which images are confusing?*



* …
* …
* …

***Now let’s try to answer those questions together!***

1. **Marilyn Dumont**

*Even though the poet him- or herself usually plays a very limited role in how poems are interpreted, it is important to know a little bit about Marilyn Dumont in this particular unit of poetry.*

Poet and writer Marilyn Dumont earned her BA from the University of Alberta and MFA from the University of British Columbia. She is of Cree and Métis (pronunciation: “may-TEE”) ancestry. Her first collection of poetry, A Really Good Brown Girl (1996), won the 1997 Gerald Lampert Memorial Award from the League of Canadian Poets. Other collections include green girl dreams Mountains (2001); that tongued belonging (2007), winner of the McNally Robinson Aboriginal Book of the Year; and The Pemmican Eaters (2015), which won the 2016 Writers’ Guild of Alberta’s Stephan G. Stephansson Award.

Dumont’s poetry explores how the structural legacies of Canada’s racist and colonial history continue to be lived realities for First Nations and Métis communities. In an interview with Room magazine, Dumont says, “Writing has saved my emotional, spiritual, and intellectual life in a country where I wasn’t supposed to exist, let alone thrive. It allows me to sort out the mess of structural inequity, bureaucratic obfuscation, colonial racism, and sexism. It allows a space for my voice and sense of self.”

Dumont has taught at the Banff Centre for the Arts and served as a mentor in its Aboriginal Emerging Writers program. A former writer-in-residence at the Edmonton Public Library and numerous Canadian universities, she serves on the board of the Public Lending Rights Commission of Canada. She is an associate professor in the Arts and Native Studies Program at the University of Alberta.

1. **Interpretation**

*Take notes on the results of our discussion.*

**Discussion:**

1. What is the main message of the poem? What would could a thesis statement look like if you were to write an essay on it?
2. What is special about the form of the poem and how does it support the message?
3. How does the imagery in this poem support the message?
4. Why is the poem directly addressed to Betty Osborne?
5. Why does the speaker use conditional clauses to start the 1st stanza, the 3rd stanza, and at the very end?