

My Mother Pieced Quilts

Poem by Teresa Palomo Acosta

quilting

Poem by Lucille Clifton

What gives **MEANING** to simple things?



READING 4 Draw conclusions about elements of poetry.

Is there a song that reminds you of a particular time or place in your life? Perhaps there is a food that makes you think of a special person or holiday. Simple things like these can have a unique meaning when they represent something more. In the poems you are about to read, you'll see how simple things can have personal significance.

SURVEY Take an informal survey of five to ten classmates to find out what simple things have the most meaning for them. What types of things come up most often? As a class, create an answer to the question "What gives meaning to simple things?"

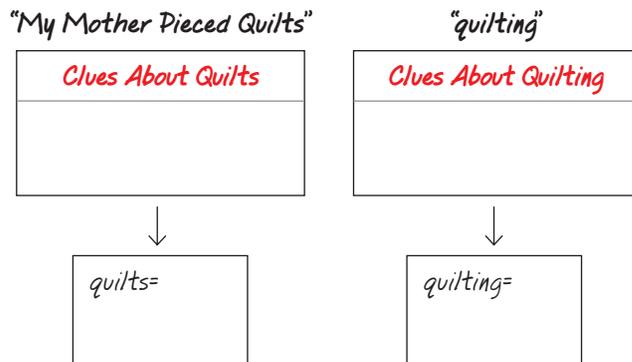


LITERARY ANALYSIS: SYMBOL IN POETRY

Symbols are people, places, and things that stand for something beyond themselves. Writers often use them to convey complex ideas in a few words. For example, in the poems you are about to read, quilts and quilting represent something more significant than an object or activity. To understand these symbols, use the following tips:

- Think about the big ideas each line or stanza expresses. Ask: *What message about families, art, or other big topics is the poem communicating?*
- Pay attention to the poet's word choice. Ask: *Which words have positive associations? Which have negative associations?*
- Notice how the symbol relates to the big ideas in the poem. Ask: *In what way do quilts or quilting help convey the poem's message?*

Use graphics like the ones shown to write down clues that help you understand each symbol. You'll finish filling in the graphics later.



READING SKILL: DRAW CONCLUSIONS

You often must **draw conclusions** to understand the message a poet is trying to share. A conclusion is a belief you arrive at or a logical judgment you make by combining your inferences about the poem with your personal knowledge and experience.

To help you draw a conclusion, you can fill in a statement like this: "I believe ____ because ____ and ____." For example, "I believe the daughter respects her mother because she seems awed by her mother's talent and because I know from experience how important adult role models are." As you read "My Mother Pieced Quilts" and "quilting," fill in your own statements to draw conclusions about the value of quilting.



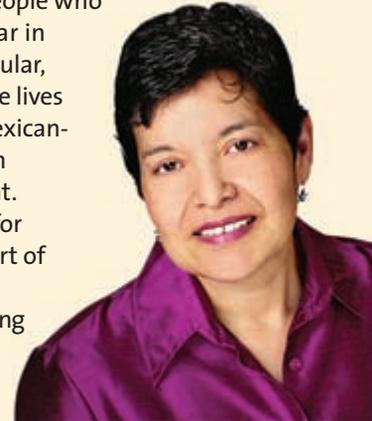
Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Teresa Palomo Acosta

born 1949

Women's Advocate

Teresa Palomo Acosta grew up in central Texas, where she enjoyed listening to her grandfather tell colorful stories about her family's history in Mexico and Texas. Acosta's work as a writer springs from her desire to tell stories about people who don't usually appear in literature. In particular, she writes about the lives and struggles of Mexican-American women in the past and present. Widely recognized for her efforts in support of women, she's been named an Outstanding Woman in the Arts.

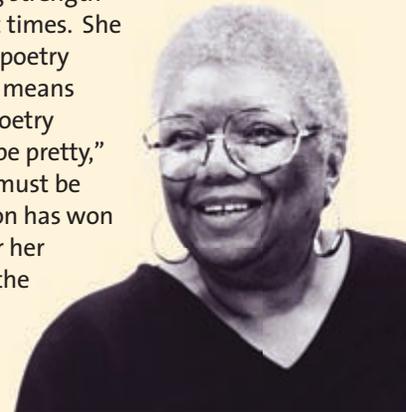


Lucille Clifton

born 1936

Creating Beautiful Poems

Lucille Clifton grew up in the state of New York and was the first in her family to finish high school and attend college. Her poetry often deals with her African-American roots and having strength through difficult times. She believes writing poetry explores what it means to be human. "Poetry doesn't have to be pretty," she said, "but it must be beautiful." Clifton has won many awards for her work, including the National Book Award and an Emmy Award.



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My Mother Pieced Quilts

Teresa Palomo Acosta

they were just meant as covers
in winters
as weapons
against pounding january winds

5 but it was just that every morning I awoke to these
october ripened canvases
passed my hand across their cloth faces
and began to wonder how you pieced
all these together
10 these strips of gentle communion cotton and flannel nightgowns
wedding organdies
dime store velvets **A**

how you shaped patterns square and oblong and round
positioned
15 balanced
then cemented them
with your thread
a steel needle
a thimble

20 how the thread darted in and out
galloping along the frayed edges, tucking them in
as you did us at night
oh how you stretched and turned and re-arranged
your michigan spring faded curtain pieces
25 my father's santa fe work shirt
the summer denims, the tweeds of fall **B**

Analyze Visuals ▶

What recognizable objects can you find in this quilt? Tell what each might **symbolize** to the quilt maker.

A SYMBOL

In what ways are the quilts more than covers?

B DRAW CONCLUSIONS

How does the mother's skill in making the quilt mirror her role in the family?



in the evening you sat at your canvas
—our cracked linoleum floor the drawing board
me lounging on your arm
30 and you staking out the plan:
whether to put the lilac purple of easter against the red plaid
of winter-going-
into-spring
whether to mix a yellow with blue and white and paint the
35 corpus christi noon when my father held your hand
whether to shape a five-point star from the
somber black silk you wore to grandmother’s funeral **C**

you were the river current
carrying the roaring notes
40 forming them into pictures of a little boy reclining
a swallow flying
you were the caravan master at the reins
driving your threaded needle artillery¹ across the mosaic²
cloth bridges
45 delivering yourself in separate testimonies.³

oh mother you plunged me sobbing and laughing
into our past
into the river crossing at five
into the spinach fields
50 into the plainview cotton rows
into tuberculosis wards
into braids and muslin⁴ dresses
sewn hard and taut to withstand the thrashings of twenty-five years **D**

stretched out they lay
55 armed/ready/shouting/celebrating

knotted with love
the quilts sing on **E**

C SYMBOL

Reread lines 31–37.
What parts of life do
the fabrics in the quilt
represent?

**D DRAW
CONCLUSIONS**

Think about the images
the **speaker** uses as she
describes her mother. What
is the speaker’s attitude
toward her mother?

E SYMBOL

What does the **speaker**
mean when she says “the
quilts sing on”? Consider
how the quilt represents
the family itself.

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1. **artillery** (ār-tīl’ə-rē): large weapons that are operated by crews.
 2. **mosaic** (mō-zā’īk): a picture or design created when small colored pieces of stone or tile are set into a surface.
 3. **testimonies** (tēs’tə-mō’nēz): declarations.
 4. **muslin** (mūz’līn): sturdy cotton fabric.

quilting

Lucille Clifton



Crossing Borders (1995), Deidre Scherer. Fabric and thread. © Deidre Scherer.

somewhere in the unknown world
a yellow eyed woman
sits with her daughter
quilting.

5 some other where
alchemists¹ mumble over pots.
their chemistry stirs
into science. their science
freezes into stone. **F**

10 in the unknown world
the woman
threading together her need
and her needle
nods toward the smiling girl

15 *remember*
this will keep us warm. **G**

how does this poem end?
do the daughters' daughters quilt?
do the alchemists practice their tables?
20 do the worlds continue spinning
away from each other forever?

1. **alchemist** (äl'kə-mīst): a chemist who tries to turn metals into gold.

▲ Analyze Visuals

What might the gesture in this picture symbolize?

F DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Does the **speaker** present the place where the alchemists are in a positive or negative way? Tell what words in this stanza make you think so.

G SYMBOL

How is the world where the mother and daughter quilt different from the alchemists' world?

Comprehension

- Recall** What were the quilts in “My Mother Pieced Quilts” meant for?
- Recall** In “My Mother Pieced Quilts,” what does the mother consider doing with the black silk from the grandmother’s funeral?
- Summarize** Describe the alchemists’ work in “quilting.”



READING 4 Draw conclusions about elements of poetry.

Literary Analysis

- Visualize** In “My Mother Pieced Quilts,” the poet uses vivid language to create a picture of the fabrics, patterns, and colors of the quilts. What three descriptive phrases best help you visualize the quilts?
- Clarify a Line** In “quilting,” the mother threads together “her need and her needle.” What need might quilting fulfill for the mother? Think about why it’s important for her to share the experience with her daughter.
- Interpret a Question** In “quilting,” the poem ends with the following question: “do the worlds continue spinning away from each other forever?” Think about how the worlds are contrasted in the poem. Why might they be moving apart? Explain your answer.
- Analyze Symbols** Finish filling in your graphics with any additional clues to the meanings of “quilts” and “quilting” in the two poems. In “My Mother Pieced Quilts,” what do the quilts symbolize? In “quilting,” what does the act of quilting symbolize? Write the answers in your graphic.
- Draw Conclusions** In a chart like the one shown, list examples from the poems of the practical, creative, and social reasons for quilting. Based on this list, what can you conclude about the value in making quilts?

	<i>Reasons for Quilting</i>
<i>Practical</i>	
<i>Creative</i>	
<i>Social</i>	

Extension and Challenge

- Creative Project: Art** If you were to make a quilt to represent your life, what would it look like? Think about the fabrics, colors, and designs you would choose and their meaning to you. Then make a collage of your quilt.



What gives **MEANING** to simple things?

If the speaker of “My Mother Pieced Quilts” were asked what gives her bed covers meaning, what might she say?

Conventions in Writing

◆ GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT: Use Participles and Participial Phrases

You can make your writing interesting by varying your sentences. Using participles at the beginning of some sentences can help you add variety.

A **participle** is a verb form that acts as an adjective. A **participial phrase** consists of a participle plus its modifiers and complements. There are two kinds of participles. Present participles usually end in *-ing*. Past participles usually end in *-ed* or *-en*. Each of them can be used at the beginning of a sentence. In the examples below, notice how two sentences are combined to create one sentence that opens with a participle or participial phrase.

Original: The girl smiles. She hands her mother the thread.

Revised: **Smiling**, the girl hands her mother the thread.

Original: The mother passed the quilt down to her daughter. The quilt was a family heirloom.

Revised: **Passed down from mother to daughter**, the quilt was a family heirloom.

PRACTICE Combine each pair of sentences to create one sentence that opens with a participle or participial phrase.

1. My mother worked every night. She made three quilts a year.
2. We look at the patches. We are reminded of our past.
3. I complained. I made excuses not to help her sew.
4. My mother sewed. She talked about her own childhood.
5. I treasure the quilts I have. I want to make some for my children.

For more help with participles, see page R61 in the **Grammar Handbook**.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Delve deeper into “My Mother Pieced Quilts” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

WRITING PROMPT

Extended Response: Write a Speech

Imagine a museum has decided to show the quilts described in “My Mother Pieced Quilts.” The speaker of the poem has been asked to discuss her mother’s work. Write a **one-page speech** in which the speaker explains to the audience how the quilts were created and what they mean to her.

REVISING TIP

Review your speech. Have you varied your sentence openings? If not, add interest to your writing by beginning at least one sentence with a participle or participial phrase.



ORAL AND WRITTEN CONVENTIONS 19A Use and understand the function of participles.

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