

Street Trash: Poems

Grades

12+

Author

Celeste Gonzales

Illustrator

Allison Strauss



Author Bio

Celeste Gonzalez is an L.A.-based writer/editor and sometimes model. Her work appears in high profile magazines and literary journals. After recently being diagnosed with cancer, she decided to document her journey with a blog entitled, *The Literary Pinup*. When not blogging about her cancer treatment in five-inch heels or writing poetry and spills her hazelnut coffee, she can be found wandering the streets of L.A. Fashion District or perusing local vintage shops.

Illustrator Bio

Allison Strauss grew up among writers, and is particularly fond of projects that meld poetry and prose with visual art. Allison thanks the Ryman Arts Foundation, Ragan Art Academy, The Armory Center for the Arts, Peter Fetterman Gallery and the Pasadena Waldorf School for nourishing her as a young artist. She went on to earn her degree in art from Colorado College where she drew cartoons for the school paper. Since returning to her native Los Angeles, Allison has enjoyed seasonal positions with Hill Nadell Literary Agency, *The Los Angeles Review Of Books*, *Slake* and Vroman's Bookstore. She's usually carrying either a sketchbook or a novel. Her work can be viewed at <http://allisonstraussart.com>.

Summary

In this revealing collection of short poems, the narrator moves through different times and space, and encounters various women and their struggles to be strong and survive: teenage moms, a woman locked into a cheap hotel room, a drug addict, an abused young girl, a depressed woman, a suicidal teenager, a left-behind lover, etc.

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed

Writing Anchor Standards-Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

Research for Building and Presenting Knowledge

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

READING Standards

Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
- Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

Craft and Structure

- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

- Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Academic Vocabulary to Explore

(See vocabulary approach in Appendix A of CCSS.)

Tier Two

Marrow
Pegasus
Delinquent
Picasso's blue period
Anchor
Socialite
Psychosis
Couture
Psychotherapy
Adrenaline
Pimp
Brothel

Complementary Poem to Introduce BEFORE Reading the Text

Diving Into the Wreck

by Adrienne Rich

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers

the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.

There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.

Otherwise
it is a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body.
We circle silently
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress

whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

Warm-up Questions

(To introduce the story, should be used as a quick write or a journal/reflection piece.)

1. Tell about a woman's struggle, whether it's a family member, a friend, or someone you know. Or maybe it's your own. Nothing is too insignificant. What came out of the struggle?
2. Tell about a woman you've met who has a lot of pride. Why does she have pride? How does that pride affect events in her life?

Main Idea for Study

The struggles and experiences of women can be dark and complex.

Possible Themes for Study

- Women sometimes face more struggles than men in life.
- Life is not necessarily fair, but we learn to love it.
- Survival in the face of adversity.
- Owning who you are.
- The dark side of humanity.
- The struggle to cope with loss, love, and the trials of existence.

Focus Questions

1. There are different types of struggles, some circumstantial and some existential. Discuss these types by each section of the poem.
2. The narrator takes a bird's eye view of each protagonist's story. Discuss the advantage and disadvantage of this writing style.
3. There is one place that shows the narrator's empathy and hope for women. Discuss where it is and how it's shown. (Section: *You* – “You'll still rise up and not for me or for him / I know your strength”)

(The focus questions can be used for a Socratic Seminar and/or a writing assignment.)

Comprehension Questions

1. (Section: *Vegas*) What does the author allude to when she wrote “not even the maid with clean towels / no one offering to turn the bed down”?
2. (Section: *Vegas*) What does it mean when the narrator says “since I sleep alone with the telephone book / at my side in order to feels something, some / name next to me”? Is the narrator searching for somebody in the phone book? Or, searching for a connection with another human being? What's your take on this?4. (Diner Talk) Why is the narrator unable to hold a conversation? Where is this sense of alienation coming from? What is it about the search for happiness? What explains the binge eating described?
3. (Section: *In the Lion's Den*) “Ocean blue dress ripped to shreds / Everyone took their piece” What does the analogy of ocean blue dress mean? What is the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist of this section?
4. (Section: *In the Lion's Den*) At the end of the poem, it tells the story of a man leaving a woman. Read the description of the woman's pain. How is it different from the undisturbed tone of the man's words?
5. (Section: *The Apartment*) Describe the highs and lows of the relationship portrayed in this section. (Highs: nursery. Lows: smashing Jack Daniels, etc.)
6. (Section: *Sandee Marie*) What is the theme in this section? Discuss the friendship and betrayal between the two women. How did it all start and end?
7. (Section: *Amsterdam*) How does the narrator pretend “I'm not a tourist”?

Text-dependent Questions

These questions may be used for Response to Literature writing pieces. They should not be used as comprehension questions.

1. Does the author allude to the root of all these women's suffering across time and space? Is it bad luck? Is it because of their gender? Or is there something collective here, e.g., social injustice and gender inequality? (Section: *You* – “Believe me girl, you ain’t alone.”)
2. Talk about your favorite section of the poems and why.
3. Why do the poems start with *Street Trash* and end with *Amsterdam*? At the end of the poems, why does the narrator feel the need to pretend not to be a tourist? Why the city of Amsterdam?
4. What comes out of misery and suffering, if the author has addressed it?
5. Why is the author writing about the tribulations and struggles of women? Why not write about women who are happy professionals?

Types of Writing – Exercises & Activities

Narrative

1. Pick your favorite protagonist from one section of the poem and write a poem from that character's perspective in first person voice.
2. Human suffering is universal and can be bleak. Write a short story or poem with a new angle on portraying suffering (whether it's with humor, indicating the purposefulness of suffering, or from a non-sufferer's point of view).

Descriptive

Write a short poem describing the city of Vegas or Amsterdam, from the details you received from this poem. Otherwise, write a short poem about a city of your choice.

Expository/Analytic

1. Read the poem *Diving Into the Wreck* by Adrienne Rich. What does the wreck symbolize? Who are the mermaid and merman and how do they relate to wreck? Are some of the women in *Street Trash* like this wreck? Discuss.
2. How do you think the various women in *Street Trash* view themselves? Discuss the role of our self-image in the decisions that we make about our lives and futures.
3. Think of a young girl in your life. In a journal entry, write about what kinds of advice you'd give her to ensure that she lives a great life. Share your advice with the class.

Additional Reading & Writing Exercises

Read two books from Susan Brownmiller: *Femininity* and *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*.

Possible Instructional Approaches

Activity

1. Cut images of women out of newspapers, magazines and advertisements. Create a collage from these images. Write a short analysis to accompany the collage. What similarities and differences do you see in the images? What messages about women and what is expected of them are conveyed in the images? Is this the reality of women? Why or why not?

Students will need: Magazines, ads, and newspapers; scissors; glue; construction paper.

2. Guest speaker. Invite a great school counselor to come in and speak with the students. How can students work with the counselor (and other counselors) to help them access resources and opportunities?

Field Trip

1. Look up when local poetry readings will be taking place at a coffee shop in your neighborhood or even in another part of your city. Arrange an after hours or weekend class trip to attend one of the poetry readings. Afterwards, divide sections of *Street Trash* amongst the class members and have each student stand up and do a poetry reading style reading of their section.

Alternatively, have students read their original poetry from one of the other writing assignments in this curriculum for their reading.

2. Visit the Women's Studies department of a local college or university. Beforehand, arrange for several professors to meet with the students in one of the lecture halls and share what Women's Studies is all about and why it's an important area of academic study.