

Exile

Poem by Julia Alvarez

Crossing the Border

Poem by Joy Harjo

What makes you feel like an **OUTSIDER?**

KEY IDEA Have you ever felt separate from others, like you did not belong? A sense of **alienation** can come from having a different ethnic background, being dressed differently, having different values, or other causes. Almost everyone has had such feelings at one time or another.

QUICKWRITE Write a brief journal entry about a time when you felt alienated. Where were you, and what made you feel different from others? Did the others intend to make you uncomfortable? What thoughts ran through your mind, and what did you end up doing? Exploring your own experience may help you understand the speakers in the two following poems.



LITERARY ANALYSIS: NARRATIVE POETRY

A **narrative poem** is a poem that tells a story. Like a short story, it contains characters, setting, and a plot driven by conflict. However, the narrative in a poem is much more condensed. The speaker begins to relate events immediately, without introducing himself or herself as a short story's narrator might. The story is developed through compact images instead of lengthy description or passages of dialogue. Time may shift abruptly, without clear transitions.

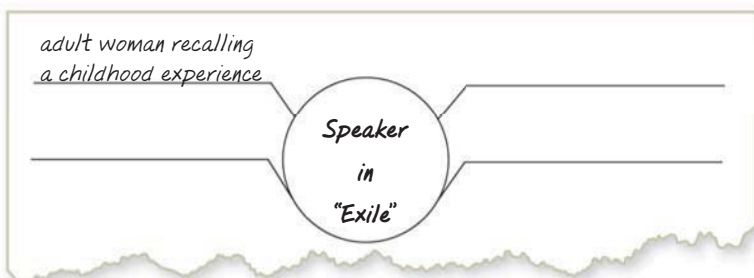
As you read "Exile" and "Crossing the Border," prepare to summarize the stories told in the poems. Ask these questions:

- Who are the characters?
- What are the settings?
- What conflicts do the characters face?
- How are the conflicts resolved?

READING STRATEGY: READING POETRY

The following strategies can help you unlock the meaning of the two poems in this lesson, in addition to that of other poetry you'll read in this book.

- You must read a poem slowly, line by line. Notice how the lines are grouped in **stanzas**, comparable to that of other paragraphs in prose. Visualize the images in each stanza.
- It is especially important to interpret **figurative language** in poetry. Often, words in poems communicate ideas beyond their literal meaning. The speaker in "Exile," for example, refers to herself as swimming but is not physically doing so. The key to understanding the poem is seeing what she compares to swimming.
- You must work to identify the **speaker** of a poem, often without many clues. Make inferences about gender, age, ethnicity, and attitudes. Reading the poem aloud may help you hear the speaker's voice. Using a graphic like the one shown, take notes about the speaker in each poem.



Julia Alvarez: American-Born Immigrant

Julia Alvarez was born in New York City but lived in the Dominican Republic until she was ten. Her Dominican parents had previously emigrated to the United States, but shortly after Julia's birth they returned to their homeland. At that time, it was ruled by Rafael Trujillo, a cruel dictator. The family was forced to flee in 1960 after Julia's father's participation in a failed plot to overthrow Trujillo. They returned to New York, where Alvarez had to adjust to a new language and way of life. "A lot of what I have worked through," she says, "has had to do with coming to this country and losing a homeland and a culture."

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Julia Alvarez
born 1950

Joy Harjo: Word Artist

Joy Harjo was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her mother was part Cherokee, and her father was a full-blooded Muskogee, or Creek. Growing up, Harjo expected to become a visual artist but later decided to devote herself to poetry. Harjo often writes about the clash between Native American culture and the culture of mainstream America. She has noted that native women "constantly bump up against images of Indians that have nothing or nearly nothing to do with our lives."



Joy Harjo
born 1951



MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For more on Julia Alvarez and Joy Harjo, visit the **Literature Center** at **ClassZone.com**.

Exile

JULIA ALVAREZ

Ciudad Trujillo,¹ New York City, 1960

The night we fled the country, Papi,
you told me we were going to the beach,
hurried me to get dressed along with the others,
while posted at a window, you looked out

5 at a curfew-darkened Ciudad Trujillo,
speaking in worried whispers to your brothers,
which car to take, who'd be willing to drive it,
what explanation to give should we be discovered . . .

On the way to the beach, you added, eyeing me.
10 The uncles fell in, chuckling phony chuckles,
What a good time she'll have learning to swim!
Back in my sisters' room Mami was packing

a hurried bag, allowing one toy apiece,
her red eyes belying her explanation:
15 *a week at the beach so Papi can get some rest.*
She dressed us in our best dresses, party shoes. **A**

Something was off, I knew, but I was young
and didn't think adult things could go wrong.
So as we quietly filed out of the house
20 we wouldn't see again for another decade,

I let myself lie back in the deep waters,
my arms out like Jesus' on His cross,
and instead of sinking down as I'd always done,
magically, that night, I could stay up, **B**

ANALYZE VISUALS

How do you interpret this surrealistic painting, titled *Utopie* [Utopia]? What connections can you make between it and the poem "Exile"?

A NARRATIVE POETRY

Notice the place and time of events. Who are the people mentioned and what **conflicts** do they face?

B READING POETRY

The speaker is not literally floating in water. What is she actually doing?

1. **Ciudad Trujillo**: the name of the capital of the Dominican Republic from 1936–1961, which the dictator Trujillo renamed after himself.



Utopie (1999), Bob Lescaux. Oil on canvas, 81 cm × 65 cm. Private Collection. Photo © The Bridgeman Art Library.

25 floating out, past the driveway, past the gates,
in the black Ford, Papi grim at the wheel,
winding through back roads, stroke by difficult stroke,
out on the highway, heading toward the coast.

Past the checkpoint, we raced towards the airport,
30 my sisters crying when we turned before
the family beach house, Mami consoling,
there was a better surprise in store for us!

She couldn't tell, though, until . . . until we were there.
But I had already swum ahead and guessed
35 some loss much larger than I understood,
more danger than the deep end of the pool. **C**

C NARRATIVE POETRY
What new **conflict** does
the speaker recognize?

At the dark, deserted airport we waited.
All night in a fitful sleep, I swam.
At dawn the plane arrived, and as we boarded,
40 Papi, you turned, your eyes scanned the horizon

as if you were trying to sight a distant swimmer,
your hand frantically waving her back in,
for you knew as we stepped inside the cabin
that a part of both of us had been set adrift. **D**

45 Weeks later, wandering our new city, hand in hand,
you tried to explain the wonders: escalators
as moving belts; elevators: pulleys and ropes;
blond hair and blue eyes: a genetic code.

We stopped before a summery display window
50 at Macy's, *The World's Largest Department Store*,
to admire a family outfitted for the beach:
the handsome father, slim and sure of himself,

so unlike you, Papi, with your thick mustache,
your three-piece suit, your fedora hat, your accent.
55 And by his side a girl who looked like Heidi
in my storybook waded in colored plastic. **E**

We stood awhile, marveling at America,
both of us trying hard to feel luckier
than we felt, both of us pointing out
60 the beach pails, the shovels, the sandcastles

no wave would ever topple, the red and blue boats.
And when we backed away, we saw our reflections
superimposed, big-eyed, dressed too formally
with all due respect as visitors to this country.

65 Or like, Papi, two swimmers looking down
at the quiet surface of our island waters,
seeing their faces right before plunging in,
eager, afraid, not yet sure of the outcome. **F**

D READING POETRY

In what sense have the speaker and her father been “set adrift”?

E NARRATIVE POETRY

Notice that the **setting** has changed. What new **conflict** does it present?

F READING POETRY

What ideas does this comparison to swimmers bring to mind?

CROSSING THE BORDER

JOY HARJO

We looked the part. **G**
It was past midnight, well into
the weekend. Coming out of Detroit
into the Canada side, border guards
5 and checks. We are asked, “Who are you Indians
and which side are you from?”
Barney answers in a broken English.
He talks this way to white people
not to us. “Our kids.”
10 My children are wrapped
and sleeping in the backseat.
He points with his lips to half-eyed
Richard in the front.
“That one, too.”
15 But Richard looks like he belongs
to no one, just sits there wild-haired
like a Menominee would.
“And my wife. . . .” Not true.
But hidden under the windshield
20 at the edge of this country
we feel immediately suspicious.
These questions and we don’t look
like we belong to either side.

“Any liquor or firearms?”
25 He should have asked that years ago
and we can’t help but laugh.
Kids stir around in the backseat
but it is the border guard who is anxious.
He is looking for crimes, stray horses
30 for which he has no apparent evidence. **H**

G READING POETRY
Read the first stanza
aloud. What do you learn
about the speaker in the
poem?

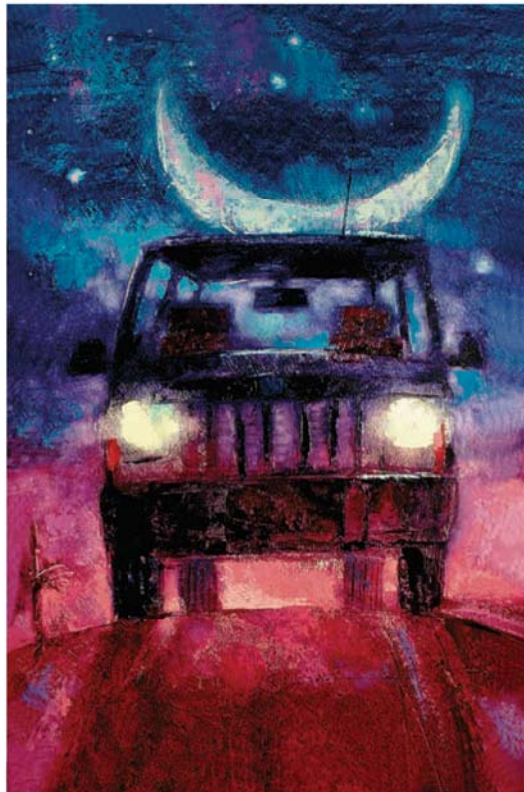
H NARRATIVE POETRY
What is the **conflict**
between the border guard
and the Indians?

“Where are you going?”
Indians in an Indian car, trying
to find a Delaware powwow
that was barely mentioned in Milwaukee.
35 Northern singing in the northern sky.
Moon in a colder air.
Not sure of the place but knowing the name
we ask, “Moravian Town?”

The border guard thinks he might have
40 the evidence. It pleases him.
Past midnight.
Stars out clear into Canada
and he knows only to ask,
“Is it a bar?”

45 Crossing the border into Canada,
we are silent. Lights and businesses
we drive toward could be America, too,
following us into the north. 1

1 READING POETRY
What aspects of America
might follow the Indians
into the north?



Sports Utility Vehicle in Moonlight. Todd Davidson. © Todd Davidson/Getty Images.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** In “Exile,” where do the adults tell the speaker that the family is going?
2. **Clarify** Where does the family actually go?
3. **Recall** In “Crossing the Border,” what border is the speaker trying to cross?
4. **Clarify** Why do the speaker and the others in the car want to cross the border?

Literary Analysis

5. **Analyze Narrative Poetry** Using the following chart, analyze the narrative elements present in “Exile” and “Crossing the Border.” Describe each element in the appropriate box.

<i>Characters</i>	<i>Setting</i>
<i>Conflicts</i>	<i>Resolution (?)</i>

6. **Interpret Figurative Language** Think about the experience Alvarez compares with swimming in “Exile.” How fitting is the comparison?
7. **Make Inferences** In “Crossing the Border,” how does the speaker feel after crossing into Canada? Explain how you know.
8. **Compare Speakers** Use the graphics you created as you read to describe the speaker in each poem. How do the speakers differ? How do they both express **alienation**?
9. **Evaluate Poetry** Which poem more effectively tells a story? Which poem is more successful at creating a **mood**? Support your answers with evidence.

Reading-Writing Connection

WRITING PROMPT

Write a Story Passage

How does a narrative poem differ from a short story? Write **three to five paragraphs** of a short story based on one of the poems. Then, in two or three sentences, comment on what is lost in the translation to prose.

SELF-CHECK

A successful rewrite will . . .

- keep the poem’s speaker as the story’s narrator
- express the same ideas as the poem