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Mr. Either/Or

By Aaron Poochigian

A Study Guide for Students

Synopsis

Mr. Either/Or grabs the reader by the proverbial lapels of classic noir and sets out on a digital-speed adventure through modern day New York City, all in the unlikely but dazzling literary form of epic verse. The protagonist is either You, or at least someone like you, the second person, uncovering a dangerous truth about a pair of relics from ancient China. You then quickly pivot into a world of interplanetary intrigue of apocalyptic proportions, both saving the planet and walking away with the girl at the end. Poochigian has drawn a graphic novel in lines of verse for Generation Z with colorful variations of rapid fire poetry meant not only to be read on the page, but seen on a sketchpad the of the wordlover's imagination. It is surely meant to be felt on tongue and lips as well.

Why Include This Book in the Classroom?

Aaron Poochigian has created a bridge from the present day back the beginnings of the novel form, with a tip of his fedora to the *Beowulf* poet, as well as the verse of epic poets long ago. It would not be a stretch to say he conjures the spirit of the ancient bards, the spoken word artists of the pre-literate world. Indeed, *Mr. Either/Or* would seem almost unfulfilled read alone, without an audience of classroom peers to puzzle-out and speak aloud his up-to-the-minute conceits of poetry.

Author Bio

Aaron Poochigian earned a Ph.D. in Classics from the University of Minnesota in 2006 and an M.F.A. in Poetry from Columbia University in 2016. His book of translations from Sappho, *Stung With Love*, was published by Penguin Classics in 2009, and a translation of Apollonius' *Jason and the Argonauts* was released October 2014. For this work in translation he was awarded a 2010-2011 grant by the National Endowment for the Arts. *The Cosmic Purr*, (Able Muse Press), a book of original poetry was published in 2012, and many of the poems in it collectively won the New England Poetry Club's Daniel Varoujan Prize. Poochigian's work has appeared in such journals as *The Guardian*, *Poems Out Loud* and *POETRY*.

Study Questions

Section 1: A Cinch

1. What effect does use of a second person protagonist (you) have on the reader?
2. Would the story work without the prologue? What does it achieve?

Writing Prompt: Write a short poem in second person. Now, re-write it using first person.

Section 2: Girls Against Boys

1. Discuss the nature of action in the story. Does one typically associate action with poetry? Why or why not? Discuss.

2. In the first half of *Mr. Either/Or*, the author uses two forms of verse. What is the prominent conceit in the more compact (iambic) lines of text? What is the prominent conceit in the “broken-up” lines? How does each affect the telling of the story?

Writing Prompt: Write a poem wherein something happens, with a beginning, middle and end.

Section 3: The One True Religion

1. What is an epithet in literature? Epithets are used in *Mr. Either/Or* in up-to-date and creative ways. Can you name a few?

2. What does “Zach Berzinski” suggest to you when *Mr. Either/Or* finally identifies himself? Is it his real name?

Writing Prompt: Write some action verse that a partner can read aloud back to you.

Section 4: Good Morning, Twilight

1. What is the meter of the longer lines? What is the meter of the broken lines?

2. Poochigian introduces yet another form of verse in this section. Can you identify it?

3. What does the use of the word “Twilight” suggest to you?

Writing Prompt: Think of other poems in common meter, or ballad form, and write a parody of one.

Section 5: When Worse Comes to Worse

1. What is the function of identity in the story? What is the difference between identity and usual notions of nationality and culture. Reflect a moment on the title.

2. *Mr. Either/Or* is a creative alloy of a number genres of either literature, or popular culture. Name a few.

Writing prompt: Write a description of your own inner secret agent—either in verse or prose.

Section 6: The Tough Go Shopping

1. An epic poem typically reflects or pays homage

to a geography, a nation or a people. What is it in *Mr. Either/Or*?

2. Do you notice a difference in your feelings when the good reptilian dies as opposed to Jagger dying?

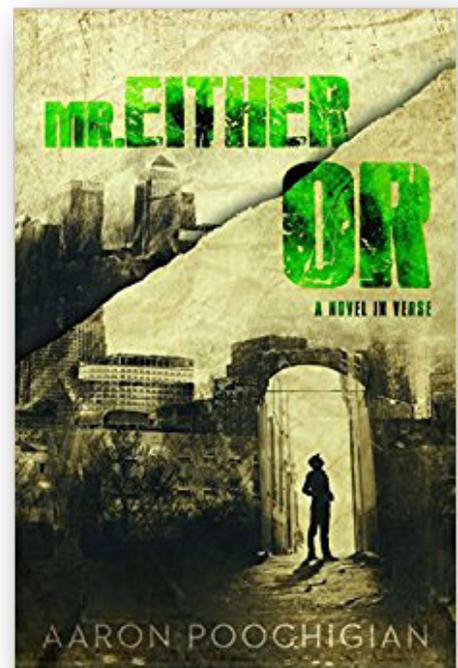
Writing Prompt: Write a page of a few short paragraphs that describes your hometown/state.

Section 7: At the Messiah Complex

1. What role does religion play in the story?

2. The storytelling goes into alliterative verse one last time near the end, and this lasts for about twice as long as any other use prior. What does this tell you about the use of this verse form in the storytelling?

Storytelling Prompt: Find a suitable section that your group can read aloud. Divide it up for a round-robin. Hand-off the narrative around a circle line by line, or half-line by half-line. Try to keep the action moving. Do it two or three times if necessary. (Hint: Poetry is a game, not a test.)



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