Silk Road
By Daneen Wardrop

A Study Guide for Students

Synopsis
Silk Road is a collection of poems written in the persona of Donata Polo, who observes a newly connected world while attending to her everyday activities. In unbidden moments, she turns to perceive the economics of contact between the people of Europe and China, recognizing both tensions and camaraderie in their links across the globe.

Why Include This Book in the Classroom?
This book retells the history of the Silk Road from the perspective of Donata Badoer, who married Marco Polo after he returned from his travels. It gives readers a view of the effects of this historical event on the East and West, both politically and culturally, from a different point of view. Readers glean historical information on the Silk Road through the eyes of a woman for the most part forgotten as time moves forward. Silk Road is a book of historical and gendered perspectives.

Author Bio
Daneen Wardrop is the author of seven books, including three collections of poetry: The Odds of Being, Cyclorama, and most recently Life as It, which received the 2017 Independent Publisher Book Award. She is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and a Robert H. Winner Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America.

Study Questions
Section 1: A Coin Shaped Space
1. The entirety of Silk Road is written as a persona poem through the eyes of Donata Polo. In what ways would your reading experience differ if it was written in the third person?

2. Wardrop made a conscious decision to tell the story from Donata’s perspective rather than that of her husband, Marco Polo. How do you think it would change if it were told from his perspective?

Writing Prompt: Choose a woman from history, research the details of her life, and write a persona poem (in first-person voice) about a real or imagined event in her life.

Section 2: Every Time I Inhale
1. Silk Road focuses on the economic implications of the trade route that channeled spices, jewels, and silk across continents, and also resulted in the financing of warfare and slavery. These dynamics affect Donata’s relationship with Marco. Can you find details in the poems that show that tension?

2. Describe some geopolitical and economic tensions today. Are there ways in which they affect us personally?

3. The poems in Silk Road also address the effect of stories on people, especially in the interchanges between the newly intertwined worlds of East and West. How do you see stories, particularly word of mouth, affecting situations in our current world?

Writing Prompt: Write a personal narrative focusing on a social, political, or economic event that concerns us today and affects you personally (however obliquely).
Section 3: Fish-gleams We Imagined Carats
1. Donata considers how economic trade affects institutions, including ones as powerful as the spread of Christianity. When considering these effects, do you believe she is being cynical, practical, or something else?

2. How do you interpret Donata’s saying, “Money: how rich is your trust?”

3. Describe Donata’s views on marriage and motherhood. Point to passages where you see these ideas most clearly.

Writing Prompt: Write an essay focusing on a project in your school or community that has been shaped by the back-and-forth negotiations between ideals of the project and the realities of funding. If you wish, you could frame the essay as a letter to the board member, coordinator, or leader of the project.

Section 4: I Am Used To My Desire
1. Rusticello, the ghostwriter of Marco Polo’s book, The Description of the World, is sometimes credited with adding the more fantastical parts. Discuss Donata’s opinions and feelings toward Rusticello (here in this section, and also in sections a, b, and g of Silk Road) and how they affect her relationship with her husband.

2. Donata mentions that Marco does not talk about his imprisonment where he and Rusticello wrote the book (“You’re silent about the prison in Genoa…”). What do you think his silence implies?

3. In speaking about desire, Donata says, “the trouble with desire . . . is feeding it just enough . . .” What do you think she means by this statement?

Writing Prompt: Construct a haiku about desire. Make sure that images alone do the heavy lifting of the poem.

Section 5: By a Dollop of Moonlight Become
1. Donata finds herself empathizing with the people Marco met along the Silk Road. What are some of the ways we develop empathy with people of other cultures and countries? How does she?

2. Donata states, “empires burn empires.” Discuss historical and personal views of the significance of this line.

Writing Prompt: China is currently funding a massive infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative, to rebuild the Silk Road. The vibrant time period of Donata Polo may soon have a corollary in our own time. To get a sense of how Donata might have felt in registering the ways geopolitics affect economic prosperity and suffering, look at these striking images from the silk road under construction:
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/08/a-new-silk-road

Write a poem addressing a person (or an object) in one of these images.

Section 6: After Falling in the Canal from Reaching
1. How does serious illness change the dynamic of a familial relationship? Can it alter the ways one relates to others outside that relationship? How do such changes manifest for Donata?

2. Why does Donata compare and contrast herself to Mary, mother of Jesus? How fruitful is the comparison?

Writing prompt: Write a journal entry about your interactions with a family member or close friend during an extended illness and examine how those interactions and roles shifted during that time. You may want to include one or two brief verbal exchanges.

Section 7: The Translation that Loops
1. Discuss the change in interactions between Donata and Marco presented in this section. How do Donata’s perceptions of their marriage change?

2. How do her attempts to work through their problems translate to modern relationships?

Writing prompt: Consider an object of importance to two people in a relationship (say, a shirt, a button, a skateboard); do a free writing, showing how an event important to the the people in the relationship revolved around that particular object.

Section 8: The Story’s Latitude
1. We often say that we define ourselves by the stories we tell. Donata seems to define herself partially by the stories Marco tells. To what extent is your life swayed by the incidents in the lives of others? Think about how your life is influenced by people you don’t know, such as celebrities.
2. To some degree, culture and technology from the East transformed the personal lives of Europeans in the 1300s, in both obvious and subtle ways. How does Donata show this was a factor in her case?

Writing Prompt: In a personal narrative, identify one or two ways in which you are changed and/or connected to others around the globe by a product or trend (digital, fashion, musical, etc.) from another country.

Section 9: Uncrumple More Story
1. Track how Donata’s view of her relationship with Marco shifts throughout the book. How does this correlate to what a woman’s life was expected to be? How does it correlate to expectations now?

2. Discuss figures who have been forgotten in history, then recovered. Why do you think they were forgotten?

Writing Prompt: Write a paragraph or prose poem about a historical figure recovered to us after the period in which she or he lived. What might the figure say about the time lapse in recognition?