

# 1

## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, we explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Born in 1978 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Dinaw Mengestu fled the country with his family during the Red Terror and has spent most of his life in the United States. While *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* draws in part from his relatives' experiences with the communist revolution in Ethiopia, the book is a work of fiction rather than a memoir. Mengestu has said that the idea for his main character Sepha Stephanos came when he was living in the Washington, DC, area and encountered an Ethiopian shopkeeper. Although the details of his experience have been different, Mengestu strongly identifies with his characters' sense of alienation and detachment, particularly because he lived in between different cultures and worlds as an Ethiopian immigrant in Illinois. Today, he is an accomplished author and a creative writing professor at Georgetown University. He has continued to weave his observations from his travels and experiences in Africa into his writing.

### Discussion Activities

Provide students with a composition notebook that will serve as a reader's journal.

After dividing the students into small groups, have them discuss the differences between fiction, memoir, and autobiography. Why do they think Mengestu chose to write this story as fiction? What advantages or disadvantages are created for the writer and for the reader? Then ask them to make a list of details about Mengestu's life. What elements from the author's biography are present in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*?

### Writing, Research, or Group Exercise

Ask the students to consider autobiographical details from their lives or those of their families. Have them write a short essay about their lives. Would they choose fiction, memoir, or autobiography to write their own stories?

### Homework

Assign Chapters 1 and 2.

Distribute Handout One: 'Imaginary Homelands' and the Immigrant Experience. Ask students to read it in preparation for a discussion about immigration in Lesson Two.

# 2

## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes within the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

*The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* examines a series of displacements experienced by African immigrants and refugees in the United States as they reconcile being neither here nor there. Often, immigrants to the United States will attempt to recreate their native home in literal and symbolic ways. In addition to exploring how immigrants refashion their lives in their new geographic homes, Mengestu also examines more local displacements of gentrification, wherein urban neighborhoods such as Logan Circle experience rapid changes in demographics due to an influx of wealthier residents. Mengestu highlights how displacement, dislocation, and marginalization can happen not just among immigrants moving across countries and continents but also in local, communal shifts.

### Discussion Activities

In the beginning of the novel, we encounter the narrator, Sepha Stephanos, and his two close friends, also African immigrants who have not returned home in almost two decades. At the same time, Stephanos narrates how Judith, a white woman who is a scholar of American history, and her biracial daughter Naomi move into the neighborhood, also leaving behind their former home. Discuss the following questions regarding moving and migration:

- What are some examples of how the novel's African immigrants attempt to assimilate into American culture? What are some examples of how they resist assimilation?
- What are some examples of how Logan Circle has changed with residents like Judith moving in?
- African immigrants Stephanos, Joseph, and Kenneth bond by playing the African dictators game. What is the significance of this game for them? What does the game indicate about their reaction to their displacement?

### Writing, Research, or Group Exercise

Ask students to research the events of the Red Terror in Ethiopia. How do these socio-political circumstances shape the lives of characters like Sepha Stephanos?

### Homework

Assign Chapters 3 and 4.

Ask students to write in their journals about an experience moving to a new neighborhood, city, or state. If they have never moved, ask them to write a creative piece imagining what that experience might entail. How does a move affect family, friendships, and school relationships? Do they see any differences or similarities in their transitions real or imagined compared to those of Stephanos or Judith?

# 3

## Lesson Three

### FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or can exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third-person (he, she, or they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Mengestu tells the story of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* through his narrator, Sepha Stephanos. Alternating the chapters between the past and the present enables Mengestu to show, as William Faulkner said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” This strategy allows the readers to feel the past’s impact on Stephanos’s present, as he struggles to keep his store, deals with heartbreak, and recalls the trauma of his father’s kidnapping in Ethiopia. By presenting the story in a non-linear form, Mengestu encourages his audience to read for more than just plot development. In revealing Stephanos’s feelings and tragic past in a restrained, unsentimental manner, Mengestu offers a thoughtful narrative that creates an intimate bond between the narrator and the reader.

### Discussion Activities

After dividing the students into small groups, ask them to examine how Mengestu alternates between past and present from chapter to chapter. What are the strategies used to signal this shift? What are the effects of this method?

### Writing, Research, or Group Exercise

Ask students to respond as a group to the following questions: What are the instances where you truly understand Stephanos and feel a connection to his character? What narrative strategies contribute to this?

### Homework

Assign Chapters 5 and 6.

Ask students to explore Stephanos’s point of view and write about it in their journals. What if the book were written from Judith’s point of view instead? Naomi’s? The uncle? How would it change if alternating chapters were told from different characters’ points of view?

# 4

## Lesson Four

### FOCUS: Characters

A central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An anti-hero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the anti-hero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Sepha Stephanos is the protagonist of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, yet the novel relies on the intimacies he forges with a host of other characters. His weekly hangouts with “Ken the Kenyan” and “Joe from the Congo” represent an important aspect of how Stephanos remakes a family far away from Ethiopia. Together they reminisce about their pasts, African politics, their jobs, and their daily interactions, creating a sense of community in a country that they are still struggling to call home. Similarly, Stephanos develops a special kind of intimacy with Naomi, who visits him in his store, helping him dust, clean, and invent stories. In this way, Mengestu invites the reader to examine how relationships with other characters reveal Stephanos's longings, desires, and hopes.

### Discussion Activities

In small groups, ask students to review the characters and their roles in the novel. How does Mengestu develop different characters, paying close attention to details such as dialogue? Compare and contrast the relationship Stephanos has with Joseph and Kenneth versus the one he creates with Naomi. What are some of the similarities and differences?

### Writing, Research, or Group Exercise

Ask students to choose any character in the novel except Sepha Stephanos. Have the students examine how this character is important to the novel as a whole. What are some significant traits of the character? What is his or her relationship with Stephanos? How does the character function in the novel? Why do you find this character compelling? What more would you want to know about him or her?

### Homework

Assign Chapters 7 and 8.

In their journals, ask students to identify some examples of dialogue between characters that articulate the individual traits of each of the characters. Then, ask students to write a fictional dialogue between the characters, taking care to maintain their individual personalities and speech patterns.

# 5

## Lesson Five

### FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to senses like sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Mengestu employs figurative language sparingly in the novel, but when he does, it has a profound effect. Some of the most evocative and obvious uses of metaphors and similes occur when Stephanos recalls phrases his father used to say—for example, “A bird stuck between two branches gets bitten between both wings.” Joseph, who dreams of being a poet, also employs figurative language. Mengestu often uses similes, metaphor, and imagery to more fully convey a character’s complexity.

### Discussion Activities

Ask students to discuss and analyze the following quotes and examine the imagery, similes, and metaphors that appear in the descriptions. What is important about the context of each of the quotes? Why do you think Mengestu employs figurative language in these instances?

A man, I told myself, is defined not by his possessions but by the company he keeps. That was a phrase I had stolen from my father, along with this: the character of a man is like the tail of a monkey; it is always behind him. (End of Chapter 4)

“Dante is finally coming out of hell, and that is what he sees. ‘Some of the beautiful things that heaven bears.’ It’s perfect, I tell you. Simply perfect. I told my teacher that no one understands that line like an African because that is what we lived through. Hell every day with only glimpses of heaven in between.” (End of Chapter 7)

I remember another aphorism of my father’s, one that he used to say whenever we passed someone pissing openly in the street: add color to life when you can. (End of Chapter 7)

### Writing, Research, or Group Exercise

Ask students to experiment by writing their own figurative language and non-figurative language sentences. What are the particular challenges they encounter and why?

### Homework

Assign Chapters 9 through 11.

Present options for and begin discussing final essay and/or capstone projects.

Distribute Handout Two: Gentrification, Urban Renewal, and Restoration. Ask students to read it in preparation for Lesson Six.

# 6

## Lesson Six

### FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning or end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

While Mengestu highlights the importance of physical space and geography in his characters' lives, he also develops the ways in which spaces become symbolic in revealing larger ideas and issues. For example, locales such as Sepha Stephanos's store (which he largely neglects) and Judith's house (which she meticulously restores and furnishes) are particularly symbolic as they represent both the physical and emotional needs of each character. In a way, they are both symbols of the American dream, and both are destroyed (Stephanos's store is looted, Judith's house is burned down). Through the representation of these spaces, Mengestu shows how the characters' hopes and dreams for a different future encounter several obstacles and ultimately, are crushed.

### Discussion Activities

Ask students to examine the passage where Mengestu describes Stephanos's store and Judith's house. What are the physical descriptions of each of these spaces in their different states? What do these physical descriptions represent? Consider having a student sketch out an image of each space based on the group descriptions.

### Writing, Research, or Group Exercise

Ask students to write about another major symbol in the novel (the Colonial Grill, the statue of General Logan, Uncle Berhane's letters to U.S. presidents, Naomi's gift to Stephanos, the cuff links Stephanos inherits from his father, etc.). What are the characteristics and contexts of these symbols? What do they contribute to the overall meaning of the novel and its major themes?

### Homework

Assign Chapters 12 and 13.

# 7

## Lesson Seven

### FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters that encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief for each character. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Sepha Stephanos undergoes a journey not uncommon to refugees, exiles, and émigrés, who have been forced to flee their home because of political, religious, or other forms of persecution. Moving from Ethiopia to Washington, DC, Stephanos decides to run his own shop in Logan Circle. But, unlike many immigrant narratives that focus on attaining the American dream, Stephanos wants a quiet life where he can avoid the ghosts and trauma of his past. It isn't until Naomi and Judith enter his life that he begins to want more—slowly starting to rebuild his store and, more importantly, allowing himself to dream for more. His transformations and shifts are subtle, not grand, and often seem more like setbacks rather than triumphs. Through the character of Stephanos, Mengestu highlights the difficulty of immigrant journeys, the tensions of living in between worlds, and the ways in which people need more than just a place to be, but people with whom they can share that place.

### Discussion Activities

Ask students to examine two characters other than Sepha Stephanos. How do they face significant obstacles? What do we learn about them through their struggle? What do they learn about themselves? Do they change, and if so, how?

### Writing, Research, or Group Exercise

Ask students to choose one character from the novel whose challenges and obstacles they identify with. Ask them to identify one or two passages in which they saw this character struggle, overcome, or develop. What in particular is significant to the character's development in the selected passages? What specifically about the character's attitudes, feelings, and experiences are relevant to their own life experience?

### Homework

Assign Chapters 14 and 15.

Have students complete an expository/close reading of one passage from the novel, attentive to character development, language, and dialogue.

# 8

## Lesson Eight

### FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story’s conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

In *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, Mengestu does not follow a traditional narrative structure. Shifting from past to present allows Mengestu to emphasize the interior thoughts of his protagonist, Sepha Stephanos. Even though Mengestu does not write his chapters in a linear fashion, he does reveal plot elements in carefully constructed ways—framed around how Stephanos processes them, rather than when they happen chronologically. For example, while readers know that Stephanos is haunted by ghosts from the past and wants to “persist unnoticed” in America, Stephanos does not reveal the details of his father’s kidnapping and his subsequent exile until after he digs through Uncle Berhane’s letter. In part, Mengestu is less concerned with plot development and more interested in layering the past onto the present.

### Discussion Activities

Ask students to identify how Mengestu’s narrative shifts from past to present affect the reading of the novel. If you already know what will happen (for example, Judith leaving the neighborhood), what other aspects of the novel do you focus on? Why?

### Writing, Research, or Group Exercise

Ask students to identify a writing partner, and together, to write a one-page essay about the activities of their previous weekend, using a chronological narrative structure. Then have the writing partners compose a second one-page essay about the same weekend activities shifting from a chronological account to a narrative structure using foreshadowing, flashbacks, and inner thoughts. What do the writing partners feel is the most successful way of describing their weekend and why?

### Homework

Finish the novel by reading Chapter 16. Remind students of due date for essays and/or capstone projects. Ask students to start brainstorming which essay/project they would like to work on.

# 9

## Lesson Nine

### FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of the novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often considers these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts, or from new points of view.

Many of the themes present in Mengestu's novels are universal. The characters in this novel experience loss of home, alienation, racism and classism, longing for love, and nostalgia for a past life. *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* explores many themes present in some of the most canonical pieces of Western literature, including Dante's *Inferno*, as many of its characters experience crushing isolation and a deep sense of loss.



### Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Working in small groups, have students identify major themes in the novel. Ask them to create a comprehensive list together once they've completed their group discussion. Have students find two passages or quotes that connect to a key theme. How does this particular theme work across the novel? Ask students to share their ideas with the class.



### Homework

Remind students of due dates for upcoming essay and/or capstone projects. Distribute Handout Three: The American Dream. Ask students to read it and respond to the following questions: How do different characters in the novel grapple with the American dream? Does it seem that some characters have a better chance of achieving it?

# 10

## Lesson Ten

### FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer’s voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

One of the great joys of fiction is its ability to help readers recognize themselves in characters that on the surface seem nothing like us or with whom we don’t believe we have anything in common. A work of fiction will make us encounter uncomfortable, difficult, and sometimes controversial issues in order to examine the textures and layers of our own experience and perception. While Mengestu focuses on a specific experience of exile in the United States, Stephanos’s emotional landscape and the architecture of his feelings reflect many of our own experiences: loneliness, heartbreak, longing for family, and nostalgia for a place left behind. Placing his character in specific circumstances but showing the larger connection to our humanity is an important aspect of why we might consider this a great novel.

### Discussion Activities

Ask students what makes a book great to them. What are the characteristics of books they enjoy reading? Why? What is a book they were surprised they enjoyed?

On the board, have students compile a list of characteristics that make a “great book.” Once they’ve made the list, ask them to examine these qualities. Are there some that seem more important than others?

Finally, have the students discuss if *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* is a “great book.” Why or why not?

### Writing, Research, or Group Exercise

Ask students to write a 350-word book review of the novel. In the review, they should: 1) consider the strengths of the novel; 2) outline the limitations of the novel; 3) include relevant quotes; 4) articulate major themes; and 5) describe to other readers why they’d enjoy this novel.

### Homework

Begin working on essays or capstone projects.

## ‘Imaginary Homelands’ and the Immigrant Experience

In his essay, “Imaginary Homelands,” Indian British author Salman Rushdie talks about the needs of those who have left their native home for a foreign place: “It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriated, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.” This sense of loss, which urges immigrants to continually look back, is a significant part of how homelands in the diaspora are constructed—the home of their native land is one they imagine, remake, and nostalgically recall in their new, foreign space. One of the most common ways to recreate home in a foreign place is by practicing cultural and social forms that foster community—such as cooking, dancing, and speaking native languages.

In the United States, immigrants from other countries have reestablished their cultural practices in various ways. Most popularly, there are enclaves of communities such as Little Italy, Little Tokyo, Chinatown, Tehrangeles, and of course, Little Ethiopia. Washington, DC, is home to the largest diasporic Ethiopian population outside of Ethiopia. Little Ethiopia, located between 9th Street and U Street in DC, has many shops, restaurants, and services displaying signs in Amharic and English. It is an area flourishing with Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians alike—a hybrid, re-mixed version of foods, sounds, and smells that are part Ethiopian and part American.

In the novel, Mengestu explores other sites such as the apartment complex where his Uncle Berhane lives, where “time, distance, and nostalgia” have persuaded immigrants to faithfully recreate home in a new setting. Walking into the building Stephanos notes, “there is an entire world made up of old lives and relationships transported perfectly intact from Ethiopia... Living here is as close to living back home as one can get...” Part of what Mengestu shows is that Ethiopians in this complex are worried about their culture vanishing—that soon there “won’t be any Ethiopians. They’ll all become American.” Through this example, Mengestu expresses the immigrant’s struggle of coming to a country and fearing the loss of language, customs, and traditions in order to assimilate. Furthermore, Mengestu examines the difficulties of building a life in a country where you have to start all over again despite your skill. To that end, the novel explores the challenges and dynamics of immigrants who leave home in search of a new one. As Mengestu has said, “The character is driven by a search for a sort of home ... what I think is a pretty universal and pretty common feeling.”



## Gentrification, Urban Renewal, and Restoration

While *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* focuses on the massive displacement of immigrants across continents, Mengestu is also interested in exploring more local phenomena such as how neighborhoods in American cities change across time—experiencing waves of migration and displacement that are perhaps less obvious, but still profound. A major shift in the United States landscape after World War II was a result of the phenomenon labeled white flight, wherein Anglo American residents of major metropolitan cities like Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC, left for the suburbs, taking major economic resources with them. In the 1970s and 1980s, these cities were left abandoned, with crime and poverty rates soaring.

But by the 1990s, areas such as Logan Circle in Washington, DC, experienced changes in their population and status (as Stephanos recalls before opening his store, “Logan Circle was still predominately poor, black, cheap, and sunk in a depression”), particularly due to a trend termed gentrification or urban renewal. This migration brought wealthier residents—many of whom were

white—into areas such as Logan Circle, which were less expensive and composed primarily of African Americans, Latinos, and Asians. With the enclave of wealthier residents came restoration and revitalization of abandoned buildings and homes, along with more businesses and tourists. However, these positive changes also brought a series of displacements of longtime residents because they could no longer afford to live or shop there.

These displacements continue in cities experiencing gentrification across the United States. A 2013 study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, which measured gentrification based on home values, lists the following as the top 10 gentrifying cities in the United States: Boston, Seattle, New York, San Francisco, Washington, Atlanta, Chicago, Portland, Tampa, and Los Angeles. Each city’s story varies, with artists and tech workers leading the gentrification wave in some cases, government workers in others. Regardless of a new resident’s profession, age, race, education level, or religion, their presence represents change—creating the potential for tensions as well as for community improvements.



## The American Dream

In the United States Declaration of Independence, principal author Thomas Jefferson, alongside other leaders, declared: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Since 1776, this line has become synonymous with the democratic ideals and promises possible in the United States of America. While access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was possible for some Americans, other Americans—particularly African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Asians—were prohibited from realizing this dream more fully.

By the 1950s and 1960s, Americans continued to pursue how this dream could be realized for more people, with advances in civil rights and women’s rights movements. Another major shift occurred with Lyndon Johnson’s signing of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. While he stated that there would not be major changes to American demographics, the new immigration

policy did in fact contribute to significant shifts. Until 1965, most immigrants to the United States hailed from Europe. But within five years of the bill’s passage, the number of immigrants from South Asia, the Middle East, Central America, and Africa grew exponentially. With these changes came a new wave of immigrants who struggled with assimilation, dislocation, and access to the American dream due to racial, economic, and social barriers.

In *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, Stephanos struggles with achieving the American dream, in part because he is not eager to acclimate and assimilate in order to become a “successful American.” Other longtime Logan Circle residents like Mrs. Davis or Franklin Henry Thomas cannot fully achieve the lifestyle promised by the American dream largely because of their racial and economic standing. Through these characters, Mengestu explores the fraught history of the American dream, revealing how the realities of life often limit the possibilities for immigrants and native-born Americans alike to attain this ideal.