

Loose Ends

✦ Rita Dove

Learning Goals

- write a précis
- evaluate an author's thesis
- handle difficult vocabulary
- create a dialogue and multimedia presentation

For years the following scene would play daily at our house: Home from school, my daughter would heave her backpack off her shoulder and let it thud to the hall floor, then dump her jacket on top of the pile. My husband would tell her to pick it up—as he did every day—and hang it in the closet. Begrudgingly with a snort and a hrrumph, she would comply. The ritual interrogation began:

“Hi, Aviva. How was school?”

“Fine.”

“What did you do today?”

“Nothing.”

And so it went, every day. We cajoled, we pleaded, we threatened with rationed ice cream sandwiches and new healthy vegetable casseroles, we attempted subterfuges such as: “What was Ms. Boyers wearing today?” or: “Any new pets in science class?” but her answer remained the same: “I dunno.”

Asked, however, about that week's episodes of “MathNet,” her favourite series on Public Television's “Square One,” or asked for a quick gloss of a segment of “Lois and Clark” that we happened to miss, and she'd spew out the details of a complicated story, complete with character development, gestures, every twist and back-flip of the plot.

Is TV greater than reality? Are we to take as damning evidence the soap opera stars attacked in public by viewers who obstinately believe in the on-screen villainy of Erica or Jeannie's evil twin? Is an estrangement from real life the catalyst behind the escalating violence in our schools, where children imitate the gun-'em-down pyrotechnics of cop-and-robber shows?

Such a conclusion is too easy. Yes, the influence of public media on our perceptions is enormous, but the relationship of projected reality—i.e., TV—to imagined reality—i.e., an existential [real] moment—is much more complex. It is not that we confuse TV with reality, but that we prefer it to reality—the manageable struggle resolved in twenty-six minutes, the witty

repartee within the family circle instead of the grunts and silence common

to most real families; the sharpened conflict and defined despair instead of vague anxiety and invisible enemies. “Life, my friends, is boring. We must not say so,” wrote John Berryman, and many years and “Dream Songs” later he leapt from a bridge in Minneapolis. But there is a devastating corollary to that statement: Life, friends, is ragged. Loose ends are the rule.

What happens when my daughter tells the television's story better than her own is simply this: the TV offers an easier tale to tell. The salient points are there for the plucking—indeed, they're the only points presented—and all she has to do is to recall them. Instant Nostalgia! Life, on the other hand, slithers about and runs down blind alleys and sometimes just fizzles at the climax. “The world is ugly, / And the people are sad,” sings the country bumpkin in Wallace Stevens's “Gubinnal.” Who isn't tempted to ignore the inexorable fact of our insignificance on a dying planet? We all yearn for our private patch of blue.

✦ Rita Dove was Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993–1995. Her poetry has earned many awards. She received a Pulitzer Prize for *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), a collection of poems based upon the lives of her grandparents, who came to Ohio in the early twentieth century. *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999) was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. (Born Akron, Ohio 1952)

RESPONDING

Meaning

1. A *précis* is a brief summary, or abstract, of a longer piece of writing in which the most important points are concisely presented in logical order and in a readable form. Write a *précis* of this essay.
2. a) In the third-to-last paragraph, the author asks if the explanation for her daughter's behaviour is because TV is greater than reality. Then she says that that conclusion is too easy and offers another one (we prefer TV to reality because it is manageable and tidy; this is her thesis). What is your opinion of her conclusion? Would you say it is also “too easy”? Explain.
b) What do the two final sentences in the essay mean? How do they connect to the author's thesis?