

We Live By What We See at Night

“We Live by What We See at Night” is a poem written by Martín Espada and published in 1991.

MARTIN ESPADA

Tier 2 terms

flickered, moist, barracks, glimpsed, interrupted, craving, burrowed, exile

Web Version: <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/we-live-by-what-we-see-at-night>

When the mountains of Puerto Rico
flickered in your sleep
with a moist green light,
when you saw green bamboo hillsides
before waking to East Harlem rooftops
or Texas barracks,
when you crossed the bridge
built by your grandfather
over a river glimpsed
only in interrupted dreaming,
your craving for that island birthplace
burrowed, deep
as thirty years' exile,
constant as your pulse.

Source

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TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

1. Question
What sights of Puerto Rico does the speaker mention? Cite line numbers.
2. Question
Compare the way the speaker describes Puerto Rico with the way the speaker describes the United States.
3. Question
Why is Puerto Rico important to the narrator?
4. Question
Rework these lines into a single sentence that conveys their meaning.

5. Question

Immigration and place are two themes this poem touches on. Cite evidence from the text to illustrate these themes.

6. Question

How does the author use imagery in the poem and how does the technique give meaning to the poem?

7. Question

Why do you think the poem is titled "We Live by What We See at Night"?

TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Question

What sights of Puerto Rico does the speaker mention? Cite line numbers.

Answer

The speaker sees mountains in line one, bamboo hillsides in line four, a bridge in line seven and a river in line nine.

2. Question

Compare the way the speaker describes Puerto Rico with the way the speaker describes the United States.

Answer

The descriptions of Puerto Rico are vivid and colorful, for example, “moist green light” and “green bamboo.” They are personal, for example, bridge built by your grandfather.” The descriptions of the United States are minimal, even lacking, for example, “rooftops” and “barracks.”

3. Question

Why is Puerto Rico important to the narrator?

Answer

It is where the narrator was born.

4. Question

Rework these lines into a single sentence that conveys their meaning.

Answer

Even though you only see your birthplace in your dreams, the strong feelings you have for it are consistent and never-ending.

5. Question

Immigration and place are two themes this poem touches on. Cite evidence from the text to illustrate these themes.

Answer

Responses will vary but should discuss that there are several mentions of location and geography in the poem, as well as the importance of birthplace and the experience of exile.

6. Question

How does the author use imagery in the poem and how does the technique give meaning to the poem?

Answer

Using few words, the poem is able to paint a picture of Puerto Rico’s natural environment, including its mountains, green light, bamboo hillsides, rivers and island surroundings. This description is important for the reader to understand the object of the narrator’s dreams and “craving.”

7. Question

Why do you think the poem is titled “We Live by What We See at Night”?

Answer

Thoughts of the narrator's homeland, Puerto Rico, come to them in their dreams while they are asleep at night. Puerto Rico is "burrowed" deep into the narrator's subconscious, what many believe comes out in our dreams. So it's literally what they "see at night," but it's also what they live by in the sense that it never leaves them.