
Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* and the Rejection of the Private Self

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RICHARD RODRIGUEZ, the son of Mexican-American immigrants, was born in 1946 in San Francisco, California. Rodriguez graduated in 1967 from Stanford University, received an M.A. from Columbia University in 1969, and attended graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley. His journey through the American educational system, his abrupt decision to leave the academic life, and his alienation from his parents' culture are chronicled in his landmark collection of autobiographical essays, written and published separately between 1973 and 1981: *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982). Controversial when first published, it became one of the most debated texts in U.S. Latino letters. In this aesthetically beautiful book, Rodriguez discusses significant social and political issues, using incidents from his own life to illustrate his points, including the change of language from Spanish to English upon beginning school and a confrontation with affirmative action programs.

Rodriguez's second collection of essays, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1992), explores a variety of subjects as diverse as the conquest of Mexico, AIDS, and the spiritual and moral landscapes of the United States and Mexico. Rodriguez is considered one of the foremost essayists in the United States, and he is a frequent guest on public television and radio.

ANALYSIS OF THEMES AND FORMS

Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, published in 1982 to both critical acclaim and heated controversy, is one of the most elegantly crafted Mexican-American texts. It is also, certainly, one of the most vilified, having gained its notoriety among Chicano critics from its author's apparent rejection of his ancestral Mexican roots. Readers of Rodriguez's complex yet reticent memoir have condemned it as conservative in its decrying of the evils of affirmative action programs, "assimilated" in its apparent lack of sympathy with the Chicano movement's emphasis on *la raza* (a political identification of the Hispanic "race"), and *agringado* (affected by or assimilated into the Anglo community) in its depiction of the heinousness of bilingual programs. Rodriguez's refusal to embrace Chicano politics and identity quickly turned him into a *pochó*, a Mexican American who denied his heritage. He insists that they are not of any particular interest to him. He writes in *Hunger of Memory*, "I do not search Mexican graveyards for ties to unnameable ancestors."¹ Often, he avows, he could barely bring himself to concede that he was "of Mexican ancestry"; not for him a search for identity in the mythical Aztlán, the fabled place of origin that gave the Chicano movement its most powerful symbol of ancestry and roots. As Jeffrey Louis Decker writes in his review of Rodriguez's second book, *Days of Obligation*, "[T]he principal objection Chicano critics raise regarding the work of Richard Rodriguez concerns his failure to engage the reality of the Mexican experience in America."²

Yet, upon its publication, *Hunger of Memory* received remarkable praise in the mainstream media. It was the first book written by a Chicano to be widely and enthusiastically reviewed by publications such as the *New York Times Book Review*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*, which had never before offered such critical consideration to a Hispanic text. Their acclaim stood in stark contrast to the critical backlash from Chicano critics, who perceived that Anglos believed they had found in the book "a key to understanding the Mexican-American and debates related to bilingual education and affirmative action."³ For Anglos Rodriguez became, in the years immediately following the publication of *Hunger of Memory*, "the voice of 'Hispanic America.'"⁴ The ensuing years, and the publication of his second book, *Days of Obligation*,⁵ have only solidified his position as the most ubiquitous and recognizable Hispanic public intellectual in the United States. Excerpts from his work are routinely included in the anthologies and "readers" that form the staple of freshman English offerings, and discussions of his work are de rigeur in courses on ethnic literature and multiculturalism in the United States.

The text of *Hunger of Memory* consists of a prologue, "Middle-Class Pastoral," and six loosely connected, chronologically arranged autobio-

graphical essays focusing on Rodriguez's education. The first of these, "Aria," chronicles how the intimate space of Rodriguez's childhood home, where Spanish is the household language, is lost through his determination to learn English and have access to what he calls "public society." The condemnation of bilingual education in "Aria" is developed more fully in the second essay, "The Achievement of Desire," which narrates how his pursuit of education, seen primarily through his love and enjoyment of books, alienates him from his relatively uneducated, Spanish-speaking parents. In "Credo," he links the theme of alienation to his identity as a Mexican Catholic, establishing in the process the basis for the confessional tone of the entire text, which he links to the seminal influence of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. The fourth essay, "Complexion," explores Rodriguez's unease about his dark skin and what he calls his Indian features. These uncomfortable markers of difference keep reminding him of the ethnicity he seeks to escape through education. In "Profession," Rodriguez focuses on his negative feelings about affirmative action, illustrated by his refusal to accept a teaching position at Yale which he believes has come to him as a result of policies that marginalize him as a less-deserving "ethnic" candidate. "Mr. Secrets," the sixth and last essay, considers the alienating gap that has developed between him and his siblings and their parents as a result of their education and concomitant rise into the middle class.

Hunger of Memory is consistently described as an ethnic autobiography, although its structure as a group of interrelated essays makes that classification somewhat inadequate. The genre of ethnic autobiography requires the articulation of a life from within the bounds of a particular ethnic experience, but Rodriguez seeks to evade the "ethnic literature" label and defines his trajectory toward adulthood as one of disassociation from his ethnic roots. His "metaphor of self" is rooted in his acquisition of a language and a universe of knowledge that can erase the marks of ethnicity that are his undesired ancestral and historical legacy. The "arsenal of literary techniques" he deploys to document this accomplishment seek, not to connect him to his ethnic experience, as is the case in the ethnic autobiography, but to separate himself from a notion of self limited by ethnicity. His position, as Bill Shuter has argued, is that "an authentic ethnic identity cannot survive, and should not be expected to survive, either a public education or the acquisition of a public self."⁶

Rodriguez's repeated allusions to Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography, mark that text as providing a generic example more powerful than the many ethnic autobiographies that precede *Hunger of Memory*. Like the *Confessions*, *Hunger of Memory*, a model of relentless introspection, is written in the confessional mode, as the elaboration of a systematic process of self-inquiry, self-accusation, and acknowledgment of an alienated selfhood. Rodriguez must confess his insistence on

learning English as a betrayal of the intimacy of his childhood home; he must recount the progress of his education as a narrative of youthful transgression; he must contextualize his process of maturation as a violation of family life.

Hunger of Memory, as an example of the bildungsroman or chronicle of development, narrates the path followed by a lower-class immigrant child toward success as a middle-class American citizen. As such, it is the very essence of an ethnic autobiography. However, the very success that gives the narrative its coherence—Rodriguez's attainment of a graduate degree in English at one of the country's most prestigious private institutions—is one he repudiates because he finds that it may be perceived as having been achieved through the assistance of the affirmative action programs he deplors. This repudiation of affirmative action programs, which constitutes the most impassioned gesture of disavowal of an ethnically defined experience, is the natural outcome of a text that presents the problem of the Mexican-American child as one made up of endless sets of binary oppositions. Rodriguez insists on seeing the choices available to him as the child of immigrants, not as fluid, multiple, and nuanced, but as rigidly defined as a series of polarities that must be resolved in favor of assimilation: masculine versus feminine, private versus public, Spanish versus English, Catholic versus Protestant, silence versus speech, Mexican versus American. As Rosaura Sánchez has argued, "Rodriguez's metaphysical imaginary [*sic*] is based on a selectively posited grid of categories that allow him to explain differences between American culture and Mexican culture on the basis of dichotomies."⁷

Perhaps the most central of these dichotomies is the one between the public and private spheres. Rodriguez valorizes the "public" over the "private" man, positing the dichotomy as if it were indeed a natural one, as if an individual, when seeking to define his or her identity, were forced to select only one from among many possibilities of development. There is a fundamental fallacy in Rodriguez's positing the need for such a choice, which is most clear to the reader in his arguments concerning the need to embrace an "American" identity (a step that necessitates his relinquishing his Mexican culture) and in his reduction of Spanish to the private sphere.

Rodriguez, as he makes clear in *Hunger of Memory*, "prefers consenting to the myth of a common American identity traceable to New England and the Puritans."⁸ His acceptance of this ideological construct, which assumes one single and elementary form of Americanness as a "transcendental truth," leads him to the assumption that in order to become "American" and enter the public sphere, he must cease to be "Mexican"; he must sacrifice all aspects of his identity that can be traced to his parents' ancestry, history, and culture. *Hunger of Memory* does not posit a

multicultural America, where immigrants such as Rodriguez's parents can enter "public life" while retaining their language and culture in their private and public lives. Instead, he suggests that the immigrant's only opportunity for integration into American culture depends on his or her willingness to relinquish the markers of his previous identity.

The most salient marker of Rodriguez's Mexicanness (other than his body, which is discussed below) is language. He presents Spanish as the single most powerful obstacle to assimilation (or to entering the public sphere, in the text's construction) for Mexican Americans. Hence the frequent allusions to language and learning, primarily to William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in which Caliban seizes the language of Prospero and uses it as a tool to transcend his own limitations. Caliban becomes the model for Rodriguez's own transcendence of the obstacles presented by his Mexicanness—hence the importance given in the text to the process of his education as the path that will lead him from Spanish to English, from Spanish to American culture, and from ignorance to a narrowly defined "culture." In fact, most of the text of *Hunger of Memory* details the discovery of the English language and his mastery of English as a tool. The powerful role of literary allusions in *Hunger of Memory*, allusions rooted in the traditions of English literature, are Rodriguez's textual evidence of the mastery of the dominant culture's tools that he has acquired through his education. Critical praise for Rodriguez as an "exceptional stylist" (Márquez 133) comes in recognition of this mastery.

Hunger of Memory is regarded by many critics as "a eulogy for a lost intimacy embodied in his Spanish-speaking childhood" (Danahay 294). But here, once again, the text demonstrates Rodriguez's narrow perceptions on culture and language—Rodriguez insists on seeing Spanish as a language of the home and intimacy and fails, in the process, to consider its richness and literatures. Tomás Rivera justly chastises Rodriguez for reducing the rich historical and cultural tradition of the Spanish language to a personal voice that "lacks the intelligence and ability to communicate beyond the sensibilities of the personal interactions of personal family life."⁹ Of this personal family life, Rodriguez will retain only Catholicism as a part of his identity, although he still will consider the Catholic part of himself (as he regards the Spanish part of himself) as "ancient, cynical, feminine" and childlike, whereas Protestantism will always be depicted as forceful and male.

Hunger of Memory, its uncelebrated ideology and anguished exploration of a self at odds with his ancestry notwithstanding, remains, more than a decade after its publication, "the most sustained and illuminating treatment of the 'problems of assimilation,' " a process poignantly conveyed in the text through the author's alienation from his body, a body whose brownness he has learned to view, not as a proud link to his ancestry, but as a shameful, oppressive symbol: "I am the only one in

the family whose face is severely cut to the line of ancient Indian ancestors. My face is mournfully long, in the classical Indian manner; my profile suggests one of those beak-nosed Mayan sculptures—the eaglelike face upturned, open-mouthed, against the deserted, primitive sky” (115).

Rodriguez piercingly describes his growing up ashamed of his body—“I wanted to forget that I had a body,” he writes, “because I had a brown body” (126). His earliest awareness of his darkness of skin linked it with hard manual labor, powerful muscles, low intellectual achievement, and poverty, the very things to which he, as a bookish young boy with academic ambition, would have been loath to aspire. Rodriguez’s “metaphor of self,” in the words of one of his critics, “is rooted in his acquisition of language and knowledge,”¹⁰ in the escape from the very physicality that he has come to identify with brown bodies. As a young adult attending Stanford, he sought to understand Mexican-American class oppression through performing physical labor in a construction site. He learned that the moment of closest identification with *los pobres*—the poor—came about the moment when the summer sun had made his face and hands look like those of the Mexican workers; it was also the moment of his greatest awareness of the difference between them. His education had separated them because it had given him a different “attitude of mind,” a different “imagination of himself” (138). The security that his intellectual development had given him allowed him later to repossess his body by taking up long-distance running, which he considered a middle-class sport. When he entered his thirties he gained the body he never had earlier in his youth: “the stomach lipped tight by muscle; the shoulders rounded by chin-ups; the arms veined.” This body he can clothe in the double-breasted Italian suits and custom-made English shoes that have become the “reassuring reminders of public success” (136–137).

Hunger of Memory is imbued with the “great anxiety” and “precious sadness” of Rodriguez’s rejection of the “duality of his working class origins” and his embrace of “middle class manners.”¹¹ He emerges from the text as an individual whose essential goals are privacy and isolation, “capable of functioning only as an isolated and private individual, deprived of any organic connection with his ethnic group, his social class, and finally even his own family.”¹² His disconnection from his roots and his family leaves him with a onerous burden of guilt (the guilt of the private man rather than that of the man committed to the *la raza* movement) which he seeks to exorcise through the emplotting of his narrative in an archetypal pattern of the tale of confession and redemption. Sin, purification, and rebirth, the stages of the Christian hagiography, structure Rodriguez’s path from his privileging of public over private self, through the crisis of self-recognition at the British Museum while writing his dissertation on the metaphysical poets, to the renunciation of all his

ill-gained (because tainted by affirmative action) success, and his self-imposed cloistering in the solitude of a San Francisco apartment and a secretive life: a cloister where the spirit of the “large picture of a sad-eyed Christ, exposing his punctured heart,” which hung prominently in his parents’ home, continues to preside. The penitent Richard Rodriguez of the conclusion of *Hunger of Memory*, metaphorically flagellated through confession and invoking the mea culpas necessary for absolution, is but an adult version of the child who would “study pictures of martyrs—white-robed virgins fallen in death and the young, almost smiling, St. Sebastian, transfigured in pain” (84)—martyred, but ultimately triumphant.

This aspect of *Hunger of Memory* is highlighted when the text is read against the background of “Late Victorians,” an essay Rodriguez included in *Days of Obligation*, in which he again evokes the twin images of confession and the martyred body to describe the ravages of AIDS in San Francisco’s gay community. “St. Augustine writes from his cope of dust that we are restless hearts, for earth is not our true home,” he reminds us in “Late Victorians,” Rodriguez’s reticent and guarded public declaration of his own homosexuality. The coda to the meditations on the body in *Hunger of Memory*, it brings a new dimension to Rodriguez’s insistence on the rejection of the private self in his earlier book.

Toward the end of the period chronicled in *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez describes his mother as having begun to call him Mr. Secrets because he reveals so little of himself and his work to his mother. In “Late Victorians” the secrecy is revealed as that imposed or self-imposed on the homosexual.

The San Francisco of the infinitely moving “Late Victorians” is a city of bodies prey to “tragic conclusions”: a young woman steps off the railing of the Golden Gate Bridge “[t]o land like a spilled purse at [the author’s] feet” (27); at the Gay Freedom Day parade, “plum-spotted young men” slide by on motorized cable cars; a gay newspaper begins to accept advertisements from funeral parlors and casket makers, another invites homemade obituaries. A city that had had the experience of “watching the civic body burn even as we stood, out of body, on a hillside, in a movie theater” (27), this city is portrayed as joining in true community as AIDS becomes “a disease of the entire city.”

The Richard Rodriguez of “Late Victorians,” though still self-cast as the quintessential outsider, acknowledges a community, not the community of Chicano ethnicity, but that of life-loving homosexual men forced to grow to confront loss and death. The identification with a community brings forth a rare instance of accusation in Rodriguez’s work. Speaking of the disappearance of so many friends and acquaintances, he wonders why it had not “led us to interrogate the landscape.”

AIDS, Rodriguez argues, is “a plague of absence . . . condensed into

the fluid of passing emotion" (40). It is not a metaphorical disease, but one that underscores the fragility of the body. It was not so in the glory days, the salad days of the Castro District, when "paradise [could be found] at the baths," where a body could float "from body to body, open arms yielding to open arms in an angelic round" (43). The image of the pre-AIDS gay body in "Late Victorians" is predominantly seraphic, built on visions of angels before the fall, bathed in the balmy and merciful halo of the city. For Rodriguez, a writer whose iconography is fundamentally Catholic, AIDS signals the Fall, the recalling to nature of men who "aspired to the mock-angelic settled for the shirt of hair" and are forced to face penance, martyrdom, and death (45).

The collective martyred body, the dead body, is silhouetted against the image of Rodriguez's sculpted body begun in *Hunger of Memory*. The well-exercised body in the earlier text, becomes in "Late Victorians" a body emasculated by the connection between the collective body and death. Bodybuilding becomes "a parody of labor, a useless accumulation of the laborer's bulk and strength" (39). The gym, at once "a closet of privacy and an exhibition gallery," is "nothing if not the occasion for transcendence" where lats can become angelic wings, and the homosexual can move from autosexuality to nonsexuality, the penitence of those guilty of nothing more than being still alive.

For Rodriguez, the martyrdom of the collective, communal body brought about by AIDS confirms a philosophy of life rooted in a Catholic upbringing that taught him not to dream of utopia. The point of Eden, for him, "is not approach but expulsion," and he, a man who had never "learned to love what is corruptible," ends his essay on a note of fruitlessness and penance, a "barren skeptic" uncomfortably shifting his tailbone upon a cold, hard, church pew (47). The overpowering final image is that of the expelled angel, disembodied by the need to eschew a sexuality painfully connected to death, vilified by an ethnic community whose spokesman he refused to be, expelled from paradise, again a penitent, marked by the sin of individuality and yet still blessed with life amidst death. This image of expulsion denies the very possibility of an identity founded on ancestry. Chicano versions of ancestry do not provide comfortable models of identity for a homosexual male; homosexuality, in turn, in its insistence on being "the central fact of identity," through its "covenant against nature" making progeny impossible, sentenced him to the "complaisancies of the barren house" (37).

TEACHING THE WORK

1. There are numerous sources of background information that could prove helpful in approaching *Hunger of Memory*. Perhaps most important are Rodriguez's own autobiographical works, particularly his collection

of essays, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (New York: Viking, 1992) and four of his essays: "An American Writer," in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-13; "An Education in Language," in *The State of the Language*, ed. Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 129-39; "Going Home Again," *American Scholar* 44 (1974-1975): 15-28; and "Mixed Blood, Columbus's Legacy: A World Made Mestizo," *Harper's* (November 1991): 47-56. For a biographical and critical overview of Rodriguez's career, see Mary E. Teller, "Rodriguez, Richard," in *Contemporary Authors*, ed. Hal May (Detroit: Gale Research, 1985), 429-30; and Richard D. Woods, "Richard Rodriguez," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Chicano Series* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), 214-16. Although Rodriguez is not fond of granting interviews, readers can find interesting insights into the background to his work in Paul Crowley, "An Ancient Catholic: An Interview with Richard Rodriguez," in *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*, ed. Thomas J. Ferraro (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 259-65. Of special interest are two essays on teaching *Hunger of Memory* that offer alternative readings of the text: Martin A. Danahay, "Breaking the Silence: Symbolic Violence and the Teaching of Contemporary 'Ethnic' Autobiography," *College Literature* 18, no. 3 (October 1991): 64-79; and Antonio C. Márquez, "Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* and New Perspectives on Ethnic Autobiography," in *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures: Nineteen Essays*, ed. John R. Maitino and David R. Peck (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 237-54.

2. *Hunger of Memory*, a richly nuanced text, offers a seemingly inexhaustible list of possible theoretical and thematic approaches, some of which are suggested below. Chief and foremost is perhaps the consideration of genre. Is *Hunger of Memory* an example of an ethnic autobiography or a collection of loosely linked autobiographical essays that lack the narrative structure and personal insight needed for true autobiographical writing? How does the text compare with other examples of ethnic autobiography (see "Other Sources")? Discuss the way the text treats the issue of cultural assimilation and ethnic identity.

3. *Hunger of Memory* locates its emotional center on Rodriguez's rejection of the notions of how to be a Mexican American offered by his parents and relatives. Examine and discuss how the author constructs his own problematic notion of Mexicanness by exploring the text's depiction of the conflicts between generations. Rodriguez approaches the tensions between these relationships across generations from multiple perspectives, beginning from the family's history, as having followed a "natural" trajectory in Mexico, until their migration to the United States. Compare the different constructions of ethnic identity between Rodriguez and his parents' generations.

4. These intergenerational conflicts can also be examined through an analysis of Rodriguez's representation of the body as a marker of ethnicity. Identify the allusions to the Mexican body—his own and those of the Mexicans he comes across: family, relatives, gardeners, and other Mexican laborers. Discuss how these passages indicate Rodriguez's attempts to address the one insurmountable obstacle to his complete assimilation: the body that carries with it distinct aspects of his ethnic ancestry. Such a reading of the text can yield greater understanding of the complexities of Rodriguez's awareness of the links between his body and his belonging to a Mexican population perceived as an underclass.

5. Trace the traumatic impact of this intergenerational separation through Rodriguez's depiction of his problematic relationship with language—the rejection of Spanish, which he regards as necessary to enter American public life. A review of the many allusions to Spanish as the language of home and intimacy, seen against his protestations of English as a public language, could serve as the basis for a revealing examination of the fallacy of language at the center of *Hunger for Memory*, especially as it can serve to mask other reasons behind his desire for separation from his parents. A reading of the text in this light could be linked to a critique of the book as a text that outlines the power of education as an instrument of acculturation.

6. There are in the text numerous references to notions of manhood that could offer substantial material for an examination of gender identity in the light of ethnic identity. These can be highlighted through the contrast between Rodriguez's emphasis on retaining his religious identity as a Catholic and his desire to break the ties between his Mexican childhood and his American manhood. A student interested in this theme could undertake parallel readings of *Hunger for Memory* and Saint Augustine's *Confessions* to ascertain how various concepts of identity are formed and why this seminal Catholic text constitutes such a powerful pre-text for Rodriguez's memoir.

7. An examination of what we could call architectural elements in Rodriguez's work could yield most interesting insights into cross-generational tensions: the contrast between domestic and public spaces (the family home, school, the British Museum Library, and so on); the juxtaposing of the screen doors of his family's working-class home and the sliding doors of the homes of his middle-class Anglo friends; the framing of Mexican men in external spaces (as construction workers, gardeners, and so on) as the means of signaling their contributions to, as well as their exclusion from, middle-class inner spaces. These and other delineations of space in the text can be read as pointers to cross-generational differences, of the separation between the private and public spaces to which Rodriguez attaches such significance in the text.

NOTES

1. Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982). All references are to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
2. Jeffrey Louis Decker, "Mr. Secrets: Richard Rodriguez Flees the House of Memory," *Transition* 61 (1993): 124–33.
3. Tomás Rivera, "Richard Rodriguez' *Hunger for Memory* as Humanistic Antithesis," *MELUS* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 5.
4. Ramón Saldívar, "Ideologies of the Self: Chicano Autobiography," *Diacritics* 15, no. 3 (1985): 26.
5. Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (New York: Viking, 1992). All references are to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
6. Bill Shuter, "The Confessions of Richard Rodriguez," *Cross Currents* 45, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 95.
7. Rosaura Sánchez, "Calculated Musings: Richard Rodriguez's Metaphysics of Difference." In *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 160.
8. Ibid. Sánchez is, in her turn, paraphrasing Myra Jehlen's "Introduction: Beyond Transcendence" to *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 14.
9. Rivera, "Richard Rodriguez," 8.
10. Antonio C. Márquez, "Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* and the Poetics of Experience," *Arizona Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 135.
11. Saldívar, "Ideologies," 27.
12. Ibid.

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fense of *Hunger of Memory* analyzes the text as "the autobiography of a writer."

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