

## Speaker/Narrator/Character Perspective

Read the following poem by Tracy K. Smith, poet laureate of the United States from 2017 to 2019 and current professor of creative writing at Princeton University. She happens to be African American. Her race is important for this lesson because the speaker in “The United States Welcomes You” is not African American, but rather a person of power who doesn’t welcome outsiders.

Read the poem below focusing on the speaker’s perspective, how it is revealed, and whether it shifts. Then complete the chart analyzing both the speaker and audience’s perspective. For purposes of this lesson, the audience serves as characters whom the speaker addresses. Even though these unnamed characters do not speak, they act. Look for signals from the speaker that will give you hints about the characters’ actions. The first five have been filled in with possible responses. You should feel free to replace them with other ideas.

### The United States Welcomes You Tracy K. Smith

Why and by whose power were you sent?  
 What do you see that you might want to steal?  
 Why this dancing? Why do your dark bodies  
 Drink up all the light? What are you demanding  
 That we feel? Have you stolen something? Then     5  
 What is that leaping in your chest? What is  
 The nature of your mission? Do you seek  
 To offer a confession? Have you anything to do  
 With others brought by us to harm? Then  
 Why are you afraid? And why do you invade     10  
 Our night, hands raised, eyes wide, mute  
 As ghosts? Is there something you wish to confess?  
 Is this some enigmatic type of test? What if we Fail?  
 How and to whom do we address our appeal?

Text	Speaker/Narrator Perspective	Character Perspective
The United States Welcomes You	U.S. welcomes all people	N/A
Why and by whose power were you sent?	Questions the legitimacy of outside groups	N/A
What do you see that you might want to steal?	Believes African Americans or Immigrants are thieves	N/A

Why this dancing?	Doesn't approve of cultural practices of African Americans or immigrants.	Continue to practice traditions from their place of origin.
Why do your dark bodies Drink up all the light?	Resents people of color	N/A
What are you demanding That we feel?		
Have you stolen something?		
Then What is that leaping in your chest?		
What is The nature of your mission?		
Do you seek To offer a confession?		
Have you anything to do With others brought by us to harm?		
Then Why are you afraid?		
And why do you invade Our night, hands raised, eyes wide, mute As ghosts?		
Is there something you wish to confess?		
Is this some enigmatic type of test?		
What if we Fail?		

How and to whom do we address our appeal?		
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### Shifting Perspectives and Comparisons

Perspectives often shift as characters encounter new environments, ideas, or experiences. In “The United States Welcomes You” the perspectives of both the speaker and the characters shift. Furthermore, the speaker’s comparison of the characters to ghosts reveals a disregard for the characters as humans with equal rights and opportunities. The characters have a difficult struggle to gain respect and the American promise of equal justice under the law.

The chart below delineates some of the key shifts for both the speaker and the characters.

Line	Interpretation of the Shift
“What are you demanding That we feel?” (Lines 4-5) “Have you stolen something?” (Line 6)	The speaker shifts from accusing the characters/audience of unlawful behavior to apparently listening to their wishes, but returns to accusations in line 6. The speaker is condescending and insincere.
“What is The nature of your mission?” (Lines 6-7)	The characters have evidently put their wishes before the authority of the speaker. These could range from economic concerns to legal ones.
“And why do you invade Our night, hands raised, eyes wide, mute As ghosts?” (Lines 10-12)	These lines are significant for both the speaker and the characters. The characters are no longer talking but are actively protesting. Talking has not worked.  The fact that the speaker compares the characters to ghosts takes the dehumanization to a new level. They are no longer living, breathing humans, but rather scary and unable to communicate in a language the speaker understands.
“What if we Fail?” (Lines 13-14)	For the first time the speaker shows some vulnerability.
“How and to whom do we address our appeal?” (Line 14)	In the end the speaker does not change perspectives on the characters’ legitimacy. Even though uncertain of what to do next, the speaker is looking for validation of his elitist perspective.