

## Reading Exercise: Two Ways of Seeing

*How our interpretations are swayed by the questions we ask.*

[I break the students into four groups, giving two groups the first set of questions, and two groups the second set. I make the groups sit in the four corners of the room to minimize overhearing other groups' discussion. This basic exercise could be duplicated with any story as long as you base your questions on different ways of approaching the text. Amy Tan's "Two Kinds" or James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" would be good texts for this treatment.]

### First Set of Questions for **Virgil Suárez, "A Perfect Hotspot"**

Even though the short story is written from the son's point of view, Antonio gives plenty of evidence to help us see through the father's eyes, too. In your group, work on the following:

1. Imagine you are Antonio's father. Write a short paragraph explaining what your ice cream business means to you, what you have gained through becoming the King of Ice Cream, and why it is important to pass it on to your son. Include details and line numbers to help us see what elements in the story make you as readers begin to understand what's happening with the father.
2. What kind of father is this man? Record details and line numbers that help you come to your conclusion. Why does he tell the story of the wild dog on p. 135?
3. Certain themes are repeated throughout—the father's obsession with counting the money, carrying the box of money, making sure he gets every last cent possible out of customers, never giving away anything, and of course not running over babies. Are these normal behaviors for an ice cream truck driver? Why can't Antonio understand them rather than getting angry at them?
4. How do you explain the ending scene? Do you understand the father's decision? How do you interpret, "From now on you're on your own?" Will he really put the truck up for sale? Why is his face expressionless rather than angry?
5. When you learn that his wife has died, does that change your view of the father?

### Second Set of Questions for **Virgil Suárez, "A Perfect Hotspot"**

1. What is your impression of Antonio, the narrator of "A Perfect Hotspot?" Describe him in detail. What adjectives would you use to characterize him? Do you consider Antonio a spoiled brat, or is he a sympathetic character? If you find him sympathetic, explain why. If you don't, explain why.
2. Antonio notices all sorts of unsavory details about his customers that feed into his disgust at what he's doing. What are some of the most graphic (include line numbers)? Why doesn't he notice anything good?

3. In order to escape his present reality, Antonio keeps reverting in his mind to places he'd rather be, all involving swimming. Why is swimming so important to him? Compare swimming and the gritty details of working in an ice cream truck. How do they differ?
4. Is Antonio more like his father or his mother? What makes you say that?
5. What do you think will happen to Antonio after the story ends?

[After each group is done, circle up for a larger discussion group. I often then ask each student to say which character he or she feels the most sympathy for as we go around the circle; invariably they choose the one their group spent more time thinking about, or they say "both." Many report that they came into the class sure that their interpretation was correct but then saw another side to the story after group work and discussion.

This exercise was mentioned frequently on the "Me as a Reader" portfolio essay as something that made them realize that their gut reaction may not be their last reaction to short fiction. It also leads well into a discussion of different critical approaches in the next unit.]