

# ***Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature***

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## Editors' Introduction

In David Lodge's 1984 novel, *Small World: An Academic Romance*, the search for a UNESCO endowed chair is the Holy Grail of the academy. Lodge satirizes the academy in all its zeal, traditions, politics, and buffoonery, with characters paralleling ancient knights, wizards, and witches from medieval romances. Though dated for us in the twenty-first century, the mission of these academics is not dissimilar to our own:

"Scholars these days are like the errant knights of old, wandering the ways of the world in search of adventure and glory."

"Leaving their wives locked up at home?"

"Well, a lot of the wives are women, these days. There's positive discrimination at the Round Table." (63)

Graduate students find themselves somewhere between Sir Percival and a zealous squire: busy with the requirements of every seminar, meeting someone else's expectations, yet anxious to get out into the world on their own, in search of some elusive *thing* that will bring satisfaction and perhaps some salvation -- some confirmation that graduate school has been worth it.

And yet, there is a zeal and a commitment beyond the seminar that drives literature students. It's a love of the text, an appreciation for hard work and talent, and a respect for centuries of tradition and individual craftsmanship. At the University of Houston, graduate students are full of this admiration, appreciation, and respect. But too often, the seminar becomes an end in itself -- a closed cycle of reading, sitting, listening, receiving an assignment, submitting a paper, receiving a grade. Reboot with another semester. We decided we wanted and needed more.

In the summer of 2010, literature students began planning the 2011 Literature Conference at the University of Houston, which would take us beyond the seminar cycle. We wanted to share our learning with more than just a professor, to receive more than just some written feedback once a semester. We also felt that we needed more opportunity to practice professionalization of our papers and presentations -- from writing real proposal abstracts, to submitting them for consideration, then preparing a presentation before our peers.

We also wanted to highlight one of the University of Houston's strengths -- that of diversity and multiculturalism. To reflect UH's diverse student body, we chose to focus on the theme of "The American Tapestry: Multicultural Influences in Late American Literature," and we were very pleased with the proposals that came in. As you will see in this issue's selection, not only are multiple nationalities, languages, and ethnicities represented, but the student scholars

who presented these papers also reflected our intention to represent diverse voices.

The Conference Committee expresses our gratitude to the English Department at the University of Houston for their support, Dr. Holly E Heard of Rice University for her introductory remarks, Dr. Robert Donahoo of Sam Houston State University for his keynote presentation, and especially each student participant for their participation and professionalism. Finally, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to each member of the Conference Committee for their enthusiasm, professionalism, commitment, and patience, and for the copy editors and proofreaders of this issue for their diligence and attention.

Bruce J. Martin  
Conference Committee Chair  
Editor, *Plaza*