implications of the title of both the book and the chapter in explaining Postman's main idea and the examples he provides in its support.

2. Discuss the extent to which television has altered people's habits—the effects it has had on their leisure activities, on how they learn, and on family life. Explain your view of the benefits and drawbacks of television as a medium of communication. You may wish to focus on something as specific as television news.

3. Write an essay in which you explore the benefits and drawbacks of another technological development for communication—the computer, for example, the Internet, or the cell phone. Consider the extent to which your chosen technology has affected both how we communicate and what we communicate. And consider both its benefits and drawbacks, as you explain its effects on public and private life.

Anna Quindlen (b. 1952) wrote a column for the New York Times op-ed page during the early 1990s. She resigned her position in 1994 to devote more time to writing fiction. Since then she has published three novels, One True Thing, Black and Blue, and Blessings. Her most recent book is Rise and Shine, a work of nonfiction. In her work as both a columnist and a writer of fiction and fiction books, Quindlen's focus remains on social issues, especially the role and experience of women, and on family life. Her writing is down to earth and close to home. "Between the Sexes, A Great Divide" reveals Quindlen's wit and warmth as a writer and as a person.

Anna Quindlen

Between the Sexes,
A Great Divide

In "Between the Sexes, A Great Divide," Anna Quindlen describes the gulf that separates boys and girls, men and women. She begins with the image of the empty space in the middle of a junior high school dance floor, girls huddled together on one side of the room, boys clustered on the other. Quindlen returns to this image later in the essay, using it to suggest the ways men and women live in separate and differentiated mental and emotional spaces.

Although Quindlen plays up the ways that men and women, girls and boys are divided from one another, she finds a way to reconcile their gender differences. Quindlen suggests that the two sexes do indeed eventually come together as partners, first on their school dance floor and later as married couples. And it is the dances both literal and figurative, she observes, not the differences, that matter.

Perhaps we all have the same memory of the first boy-girl party we attended. The floors were waxed, the music loud, the air thick with the smell of cologne. The boys stood on one side of the room and the girls on the other, each affecting a nonchalance belied by the shuffling male loafers and the occasional high birdlike sound of a female giggle.

Eventually, one of the taller, better-looking boys, perhaps dogged by two slightly shorter, squeakier acolytes, would make the big move across the chasm to ask the cutest girl to dance. Eventually, one of the girls would brave the divide to start a conversation on the other side. We would immediately develop a certain opinion of that girl, so that for
the rest of our school years together, pajama parties would fairly crackle
when she was not there.

None of us would consciously know it then, but what we were seeing,
that great empty space in the center of the floor as fearful as a trapdoor,
was the great division between the sexes. It was wonderful to think of the
time when it would no longer be there, when the school gym would be a
great meeting ground in which we would mingle freely, girl and boy, boy
and girl, person to person, all alike. And maybe that’s going to happen
sometimes in my lifetime, but I can’t say I know when.

I’ve thought about this for some time, because I’ve written some lovin-
thing about men, and some nasty things too, and I meant them all.
And I’ve always been a feminist, and I’ve been one of the boys as
well, and I’ve given both sides a pretty good shot. I’ve spent a lot of
time telling myself that men and women are fundamentally alike,
mainly in the service of arguing that women should not only be per-
mitted but be welcomed into a variety of positions and roles that only
men occupied.

And then something happens, a little thing usually, and all I can see
is that great shiny space in the middle of the dance floor where no one
ever meets. “I swear to God we are a different species,” one of my friends
said on the telephone recently. I can’t remember whether the occasion
was a fight with her husband, a scene at work or a contretemps with a
mutual male friend of ours. No matter. She’s said it before and she’ll say
it again, just like all my other friends have said it to me, and I to them.
Men are the other.

We are the other, too, of course. That’s why we want to believe so
badly that there are no others at all, because over the course of human
history being other has meant being symbols of divinity, evil, carnal
degeneration, perfect love, fertility and death, to name a few. And any-
body who has ever been a symbol knows that it’s about as relaxing as
sitting on a piece of Louis XV furniture. It is also true that over the
course of history, we have been subordinate to others, symbols of weak-
ness, dependency and emotions run amok.

Yet isn’t it odd that I feel that the prejudice is somehow easier to deal
with than the simple difference? Prejudice is evil and can be fought,
while difference simply is. I live with three males, one husband and two
sons, and occasionally I realize with great clarity that they are gazing
across a divide at me, not because of big differences among us, but
because of small ones.

The amaryllis bulb haunts me. “Why did you put an onion in a pot in
the bathroom?” my elder son asked several months ago. I explained that
it was not an onion but an amaryllis bulb and that soon it would grow
into fabulous flowers. “What is that thing in the bathroom?” his father
said later the same day. Impatiently I explained again. A look flashed
between them, and then the littlest boy, too. Mom. Weird. Women.

Once I would have felt anger flame inside me at that. But I’ve done
the same so many times now. On the telephone a friend and I will be
commiserating about the failure of our husbands to listen when we talk,
or their inexorable linear thinking, or their total blindness to the use
and necessity of things like amaryllis bulbs. One of us will sigh, and
the other will know what the sigh means. Husband. Strange. Men. Is it any
wonder that our relationships are so often riddled with misunderstand-
ings and disappointments?

In the children you can see the beginnings, even though we raise
them in households in which mothers do things fathers once did, and
vice versa. Children try to nail down the world, and themselves, early on
and in a very primitive and real way. I remember a stage with my elder
son in which, going through the supermarket or walking down the street,
he would pin me down on each person walking by, and on such disparate
cultural influences as Vanna White and Captain Kangaroo, by demand-
ing that I tell him which genitalia category they fell in. Very soon, he got
the idea: us and them, him and her. It was all very well to say that all
people are the same inside (even if I had believed it) but he thought the
outside was very important, too, and it helped him classify the world.

I must never forget, I suppose, that even in the gym, with all that
space between us, we still managed to pick partners and dance. It’s the
dance that’s important, not the difference. (I shouldn’t leave out who
leads and who follows. But I speak to that from a strange perspective,
since any man who has ever danced with me can attest to the fact that
I have never learned to follow.)

I have just met the dance downstairs. My elder son has one of his best
friends over, and he does not care that she is a girl, and she does not care
that he is a boy. But she is complaining that he is chasing her with the
plastic spider and making her scream, and he is grinning manically
Possibilities for Writing

1. To what extent do you find Quindlen's argument about the divide between the sexes persuasive? Do you find her images and examples compelling? Why or why not?

2. If women are indeed the "other" to men, and vice versa, then how does this otherness of each gender affect their ability to work together? What do women's and men's sexual differences mean for women being, as Quindlen argues, "not only permitted but welcomed into a variety of positions and roles that only men occupied"?

3. Write your own essay about the divide (or lack of one) between women and men. You may wish to use examples from your own experience to show how men and women misunderstand each other, or how they approach things in different ways. Or you may wish to use Quindlen's essay as the basis for a persuasive essay in which you agree, disagree, or qualify what Quindlen says about the great divide between the sexes.

Richard Rodriguez (b. 1944) is a native of San Francisco, the son of Mexican-American immigrants. A self-described "scholarship boy," he attended Catholic schools as a child and later Stanford and Columbia universities; he received undergraduate and graduate degrees in English from the University of California at Berkeley. Rodriguez currently works primarily as a journalist; he is an editor for the Pacific News Service, and he contributes to such periodicals as Harper's and U.S. News and World Report, as well as writing columns for the Los Angeles Times. His commentary about American life and Hispanic culture on PBS's NewsHour won him the prestigious Peabody Award in 1997. His best known publication, however, is Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez, his 1982 collection of autobiographical essays exploring his growing up as the son of immigrant parents.

Richard Rodriguez

Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood

"Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood" was originally published in The American Scholar (1980/1981) and later served as the opening chapter of Rodriguez's intellectual autobiography, Hunger of Memory. In "Aria," Rodriguez describes growing up in a bilingual and bicultural world, the son of Mexican immigrants who lived in a mixed-race neighborhood in Sacramento, California.

In this essay, Rodriguez reflects on the tensions he experienced at school and at home between the Spanish-language world of his parents and his past, and the English-language world of his school and his adopted country. Rodriguez describes what is gained and what is lost as he makes the transition from Spanish to English, and between the different social and cultural contexts associated with each.

I remember, to start with, that day in Sacramento, in a California now nearly thirty years past, when I first entered a classroom—able to understand about fifty stray English words. The third of four children, I had been preceded by my older brother and sister to a neighborhood Roman Catholic school. But neither of them had revealed very much about their classroom experiences. They left each morning and returned each afternoon, always together, speaking Spanish as they climbed the five steps to the porch. And their mysterious books, wrapped in brown shopping-bag paper, remained on the table next to the door, closed firmly behind them.