

Unleashing Sorrow and Joy

Writing Poetry from History and Literature

BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN

LILA WROTE THAT CELIE, from *The Color Purple*, was a “record/on your shelf/the one/dressed/in dust and age/...the one/your liquor-heavy fingers/find/on days/your red water eyes/don’t know the difference...” Don wrote that she was the “cold hard black floor/everyone walked on.” Both students capture the essence of Celie through their poetry. Over the years, I have learned that sometimes writing a poem or interior monologue from history or literature can create a space in the classroom for a different way of knowing, a different way of expressing knowledge about a fictional character or a historical decision. My skin, my blood, my bones understand events before my mind catches up

and processes the information. Too often, learning becomes recitation, the dull retelling of facts, but writing poetry helps unleash sorrow or joy, the human understanding of loss and creation across cultures, centuries, and continents, so I try to create opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge through poetry and interior monologues as well as essays. Because my units extend for five to 10 weeks, poetry also provides new venues for students to explore their understanding of the unit. Writing poetry creates breaks for us to review concepts, materials, and re-engage in our studies with new sensibilities.

I don’t give quizzes. They feel like a “gotcha” set up to catch students who haven’t read.



Dylan Leerman

Linda Christensen conferencing with a student.

I know who hasn't read, and I'm trying to entice students in rather than push them out. These poetry pit stops help students get caught up, and re-engage them in the content so they can learn from their classmates, but they also provide structures for the students who have read to catch their breath and talk about the "texts" in new ways.

I experiment with new poetry frequently, but I've found three "frames" for content-driven poetry that help students capture details from the unit and herd those facts into poetry. The frames I use most often are: Metaphor poem, "Write that I..." poem, and the "Mirror" poem. With each of the poems, I find a pause point during the first quarter when I introduce the poetry format by encouraging students to write a "gift" poem about someone in their life. Daniel Clark-Rizzio's poem about "Grandpa Joe" provides a model of the metaphorical poem. I use the same procedure as I move through the exercise whether it is personal or literary: Steep students in the models, point out key features in the poems, write, and share in a read-around about form and content.

Metaphor Poems

I begin by reading Don Pendleton and Lila Johnson's poems about Celie. As we read each poem, I ask, "What comparison does the writer use?" Students point out that Don Pendleton compares Celie to the floor, then to the ceiling. I ask: "What is he saying about her? What does that metaphor imply about how Celie changes?" As we move to Lila Johnson's poem, we talk about how Lila compares Celie to a worn record "full of cracked songs . . . the one your liquor-heavy fingers find." I ask, "What story does Lila tell us through this metaphor?" As we examine

and talk about the poems, I encourage students to notice that Lila's comparison isn't random; she informs the reader about Celie's life.

We look at how the initial metaphor in Lila's poem—Celie is a record—is expanded by the vocabulary and language the writer chooses: cracked songs, jackets, golden sounds, record. As a class, we brainstorm metaphors for the character and play with expanding the language in the same way Lila and Don did in their poems. In *Their*

Eyes Were Watching God, for example, I asked, "How would you describe Janie's relationship with her husbands?" Kirk said she was like a possession for Joe. He wanted to show her off. "How would you draw that? What metaphor could you use to show that relationship?" Stephanie said Janie was like a ring on Joe's finger. Emma said Joe put her on pedestal, which kept her away from the other people in town. "So if she's a ring or she's on a pedestal, what other words would you use to extend the poem? What words go with ring and pedestal? Look back at how Lila used words related to records. What words can you use? List those

words and then weave those words in as you write your poem."

Once students have a sense of how to proceed with the poem, I pass out paper and crayons, which is always a big hit in the high school classroom. I ask students to create a metaphorical drawing for one of the characters (literary or historical depending on the unit). I say: "I'm not concerned about your artistic ability. I want to see your thinking about the characters. Think metaphorically." I've discovered that the time students spend drawing allows them to think more deeply about their work. It's not unusual for students to get stuck, so as I travel around the room, I ask a few students to share their drawings and discuss the comparison in order to get other students started.

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After students create their metaphorical drawings, they expand the language of the metaphor in the same way that Don and Lila did in their poetry. I say: “On the back of your paper, write an explanation of your metaphor. Then list the vocabulary or language to expand the metaphor. If it’s a garden, go for flowers, hose, water, vegetables, etc.” Students share their drawings and metaphors in a quick whip around the classroom. I encourage classmates to help those who are struggling with the expansion and vocabulary. By this time, the students who were stuck have a good idea of how to proceed.

Then students write their poems. I encourage them to look back at the models. “When you are not sure how to move forward, look back at how Lila, Don, Jessica, and others wrote their poems [see examples]. Think about whether you want to use first person like Lila and Don. If you do, then you begin your poem with either the name or the metaphor: ‘I am Celie.’ Or you can begin in third person like Daniel Clark-Rizzio, ‘Grandpa Joe was a boxer.’”

The creation of the metaphor pushes students to develop a stronger understanding of characters because they have to explain how the metaphor works. Although I like the poetry that comes from this exercise, I also appreciate that the activity helps students develop a frame for a potential essay.

Write That I...

Many years ago, I found a wonderful poem about a woman on a balcony. The poem started, “Write that I...” In the jumble of my file cabinets and my moves, I lost the original poem, but I didn’t lose my love for this opening, so I wrote a poem from the point of view of Molly Craig, the main character in the movie *Rabbit-Proof Fence* to use as a model with students. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a film about the Australian government’s policy of placing mixed-race Aboriginal children in boarding schools.

I begin by reading my poem “Molly Craig” out loud. I ask students to highlight the poem with two colors of highlighters: “Highlight the repeating lines in one color. For example, ‘Write

that I’ is a repeating line. What other lines repeat? Highlight the details about Molly’s life in the other color.” Students usually identify the lines “write that I,” and “tell them,” etc. But if they don’t, I point out that the poem uses a series of phrases that help weave the content together: Write that I; tell them that I; when you write my story, say that I. Students are also quick to point



Bob King / Corbis

out all of the details from the movie. If they don’t notice, I show them that I use specific information: Names of people and places, dialogue from the movie, characters’ actions.

Now that they have student models, I ask students to look at how Jayme Causey used the repeating line “Write that I...” in his poem about the Soweto Uprising.

Once students understand that frame of repeating lines—write that I, say that I, when you tell my story—I encourage them to add phrases that would hook their poem forward. “What other phrases could you use to anchor your stanza?”

Then we generate a list of characters for their poems. As we make the list, I encourage them to think about minor characters, bystanders, as well as objects in the landscape. For example, when we studied about the Soweto Uprising, students listed Hector Pieterse, who was killed by the police during the uprising, Hector's sister, the photographer, and a teacher whose students walked out; but they also listed the school building, the flag, the bullet that killed Hector.

Mirror Poems

Lucille Clifton is one of my favorite poets. I love the way her poem, "what the mirror said," celebrates her beauty and strength instead of her flaws. Her poem is sassy and talks back to the traditional standards that measure a woman's beauty:

*listen,
you a wonder.
you a city
of a woman.
listen,
somebody need a map
to understand you.
somebody need directions
to move around you.*

Originally, I used this poem as a praise poem, telling students, "Make a list of what you can praise about yourself: Be extraordinary, go all out. Imagine you are Lucille Clifton. This is the time to brag about your culture, your language, your hair, your skin tones, your brain, your school, your neighborhood."

Using Clifton as a model, I asked students to notice how Clifton entered the poem. They noted that her poem begins with the title, "what the mirror said." Curtina talked about how Clifton personifies the mirror, so the mirror is telling her how great she is. Sabrina talked about how Clifton's mirror is the opposite of the mirror in Disney's *Snow White* that ranks the women. Instead of telling them their strengths,

that mirror demands comparison, "Who is the fairest of us all?"

Using Lucille Clifton's poem as a frame, I ask students first to write a praise poem about themselves, as Chetan Patel does in his poem "Tiger Eyes." I give them three potential openings to use or to inspire them to create their own: "Listen,/You a" or "The mirror told me,/" or "I look into the mirror/And watch the history inside of me." Chetan's poem provides an excellent model for students' personal poems. Students can see their heritage, history, or language, and use the specifics of their neighborhood home or their historical home, as Chetan does, naming rivers, mountains, and food. The repeating line "I see" links his poem forward as he stacks detail after detail in lists.

*I look into a mirror
and watch the history inside of me
flood out.
I see the Kshatriya warrior,
sword in hand,
the Sudra laborer,
working hard at his feet.
I see the stories passed
under the Banyan tree
and the cleansing Ganges,
slicing down the Himalayas.*

Once students have a grasp on the idea of the poem personally, I use it as a frame for their literary and historical poems. Franchesca Naimi's poem "Jackie Robinson" demonstrates how to take the same model of opening line, and repeating line with details, to write about a historical or literary figure. After researching Robinson for her unsung hero project, Franchesca used details from his life to build her poem—from the racist epithets when he entered the field to the fastballs pitched at his head. (See Bigelow, "Teaching Unsung Heroes.")

My student Robin researched Bob Moses, the Civil Rights organizer and educator. He

wrote in the first person from Bob Moses' point of view:

I organized the Mississippi Freedom Summer.
I witnessed people being beaten
for registering to vote.
I was arrested.
I was beaten.
I was jailed.
I saw good friends murdered
because they were part of the movement.
Through the years I have lost
friends and possessions,
but I have never lost hope.

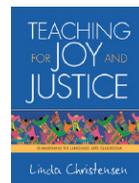
As always, we end with a read-around, but in addition to pointing out what is working in

the poem, we also use the poetry as a way to deepen our discussion about the literature or history we're studying.

References

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Student Poems

Celie

by Don Pendleton

*I am Celie.
I am the cold hard black floor
everyone walked on.
People have stained me and laughed
but I stayed solid under them
and did not squeak.
I am the floor now
but once you go downstairs
I become the ceiling.*

Celie

by Lila Johnson

*I am a record
on your shelf
the one
dressed
in dust and age
full
of cracked songs
you play
when you are blue
the one
pushed
behind the others
cool black jackets
smooth golden sounds
the one
your liquor-heavy fingers
find
on days
your red-water eyes
don't know the difference
just an old record
you play me
when you are blue*

Temperamental Rainfall

by Erika Miller

I am Shug.

I am the rain.

I come when I want to.

*When you are on your hands
and knees begging for me,
I'll be showering someone else.*

*When you are able
to exist without me,
I'll show up.*

*I might sprinkle you
or flood you.*

*And when the ground dries,
I'll be gone.*

Shug Avery

by Jessica Rawlins

I am Shug.

*I am the sweet breath
every man holds onto at night.*

*I am the lingering scent that stays
to bring memories of violets
and lily kisses.*

*I am the sugar perfume
that comes on strong,
burns the senses,
then vanishes,
leaving nothing,
but the life of a stolen thought.*

Grandpa Joe

by Daniel Clark-Rizzio

*Grandpa Joe was like a boxer,
except that he fought for others.*

*He swung hard at tycoons
to help the labor unions.*

*With a quick jab to the politicians
who did not let blacks vote.*

*Grandpa Joe was a boxer
who pounded on his typewriter
to let everyone know how he felt.*

He trained for years for his battles.

*He fought, sometimes forgetting
to make himself happy.*

*Grandpa Joe was like a boxer
who had soft hands when he rocked his kids.*

*He helped his family stay out of the ring,
so they could watch safely, but never step in.*

Molly Craig

by Linda Christensen

*Write that I grew up in Jigalong
With my mother and grandmother.
Say that it was my home,
No there weren't walls,
And no there weren't beds,
And yes, we were poor,
But when did love come in units
Counted up in dollar bills?
When did family become something you could count
Instead of something you could count on?
Tell them that I learned to read animal tracks,
Filter water from roots in a desert, cook over an open fire,
And find my spirit bird
Before most kids learn to read words.
And yet, Mr. Devil calls me uneducated.
He wants to teach me to sweep, empty buckets,
Wring water from white people's sheets.
Tell them instead of beating me and shaming me
For my color, my dirty hair, my language,
My mother taught me through praise,
"Good tracker," she said,
"You brought us a fat one."
When you write my story, tell Mr. Devil that my mother's grief
Could not be counted, not tallied up in his books,
My mother's grief strummed along 1200 miles of rabbit-proof fence
And hummed me home.
Say that I wasn't half anything,
Not half caste, not half black, not half white,
Yes, when you tell my story,
Say that when I'm home,
I'm whole.*

Soweto Uprising

Group poem from Grant
African American English, 2007

*Write that I
Had the stone,
Cupped in my palm.
It was hard.
It was cold.
Just like the white man's heart.
Remembering the Afrikaans
They stuffed down
My throat
I threw the stone
Just like they tried
To throw away
My culture.*

Soweto Uprising

by Jayme Causey

*Write that I
sang as loud as I could
in unison with my brothers and sisters
until a deafening "Nkosi Sikeleli' iAfrika"
was all that could be heard.
Write that I,
along with my people,
posed no threat to the police
except for
the threat of our knowledge
the threat of our desire
the threat of our power
marching united and strong
like a pack of lions.*

Tiger Eyes

by Chetan Patel

*I look into a mirror
and watch the history inside of me
flood out.*

*I see the Kshatriya warrior,
sword in hand,
the Sudra laborer,
working hard at his feet.*

*I see the stories passed
under the Banyan tree
and the cleansing Ganges,
slicing down the Himalayas.*

*I see the village Panchayat,
the Lok Sabha,
the House of People.*

*I see the deep-fried Samosas,
full of carrots and peas,
wrapped in flour,
ready to eat.*

*I see the river flooding
in the monsoons,
the locusts lying
in the fields of Jammu.*

*I see the tiger eyes
waiting in the high grass,
for me to come back
and relive the past.*

Jackie Robinson

by Franchesca Naimi

*I look in the mirror
and watch the history inside of me flood out.*

*I see the warrior from within
walk onto the baseball field.*

I hear the hateful words from bigots.

*I feel the spikes of a runner's cleats
cut my legs.*

*I see my son's eyes looking up to me,
admiring his heroic father.*

*I see the 100-mph-fast pitch
drive straight at my head.*

*At last I see my dreams come true:
Major League baseball is integrated.*

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