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May 2nd, 2015

ENG 112B: Young Adult Literature

UNIT OF STUDY: TESTIMONIAL POETRY

Poetry is one of the most overlooked and under-utilized genres of English education within our education systems today. However, there are many themes, both modern and antiquated, that if carefully introduced to a young adult audience, could be well received and could even become a solid platform from which to launch into various related aspects of English education. Testimonial poetry, or poetry that defines a person's character or feelings concerning a specific topic, allows for a two-pronged learning approach: it provides a basis from which to learn the values of explication and close analysis of poetry while relating to topics and themes important and appealing to young adults. I believe the power and passion of poetry becomes most relevant to young adult audiences when it coincides with closely held philosophies, beliefs, and perspectives regarding the struggles of young adult life. Thus, by identifying poetry that conveys potential similarities to these closely held philosophies, beliefs, and perspectives, these poems can become the vehicle from which young adults can both approach and explore topics otherwise inaccessible, such as: race, love, hate, and coping with the mechanics of coming-of-age. As these subjects are often difficult for adults to introduce and receive a positive response from, I believe testimonial poetry becomes uniquely accessible, for both adults and teenagers, as they also represent challenge to take a position regarding any topic.

When I first began exploring testimonial poetry, the first poem that immediately came to mind was Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz". The first time I had ever read this poem was in one of the classes I took at my junior college, but what made me think of this poem first was how powerfully it

related to my own upbringing, and how, if I had read it when younger, it might have shaped or affected the thinking and behavior of my younger self. If my initial reaction was to internalize this poem and frame it in the context of my younger self, wouldn't young adults of a similar age be able to take advantage of its context as well? I would present this poem as a means of dissecting Roethke's viewpoint so that the students could explicate it within the context of how it might relate to them personally. Following this, I would introduce the students to Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays", so that they might compare and contrast the qualities of both poems and how they communicate differently while on the same emotional wave-length.

Part One: Introduction

A. Each class period spent on testimonial poetry will begin with the students reading a poem that define a specific viewpoint concerning an important topic, such as race, romance, hate, politics, or coping with coming-of-age. The students can be segregated into groups corresponding to these topics, or given the opportunity to choose which topic they would prefer. At least one student from each group will read aloud a poem to the class.

Examples of testimonial poetry include the following:

1. "Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes (Race)
2. "Romance" by Edgar Allen Poe (Romance)
3. "Fire and Ice" by Robert Frost (Hate)
4. "On the Pulse of Morning" by Maya Angelou (Politics)
5. "Wild Orphan" by Allen Ginsberg (Coming-of-age)

B. The students will be asked to keep a journal and write responses to these poems after the students decide which topic and corresponding poem has been deemed their favorite. They can journal from any of the following prompts:

1. *What do you feel is the main theme of this poem?*

2. *How does this poem relate to literature?*
3. *Examine the word choices made in the poem; why do you think they are important?*
4. *Examine the length, form, and rhyme scheme of the poem. Why do you think these are important?*
5. *How does this poem affect you personally? Explain how it does or does not, and why.*

Part Two: Content

A. Testimonial poetry defined: what is testimonial poetry?

1. Testimonial poetry is defined similarly to that of testimonial literature, which is described as: “literature that presents evidence or personal accounts” of things such as human rights abuses, violence and war, and living under the conditions of social oppression.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Testimony#Literature>

2. Testimonial poets besides Theodore Roethke and Robert Hayden include: Langston Hughes, Edgar Allen Poe, Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, and Emily Dickinson.

B. Class reading of “My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke.

1. The canonical poets that will be the focus of my unit of study are Theodore Roethke and Robert Hayden, and I will be specifically using the Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz” and Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays” as my centerpieces. First, the students will conduct a silent and sustained reading of “My Papa’s Waltz”. Once this has been completed, students will be selected from amongst the class to read portions of “My Papa’s Waltz” aloud, each student being assigned a single sentence to read from until the poem is completed.

2. Once the aloud reading is completed, the students will be given an appropriate amount of time to complete the Poetry Analysis worksheet. The worksheet will consist of the following requirements:

- a. *Topic:* What topic does this poem specifically target?

b. *Context:* How does this poem approach the topic? What are the possible meanings and relationships between the words and images found in the poem?

c. *Paraphrase:* To encourage the students to search for depth in the poem, each student will re-write the poem using their own thoughts and words. Each re-written line should attempt to be more complex than the original lines.

d. *Discussion Questions:* Once each student has finished paraphrasing the poem, the students will be given time to discuss as a group the poem and share with each other the results of their worksheets. During this time, the students will answer several questions concerning the results of this discussion. Examples of possible questions include: What is the possible cultural significance of this poem? How many ways can this poem be interpreted? What literary devices are used within this poem? How do the images found within the poem encourage a specific interpretation?

C. Class reading of “Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden.

1. The class will repeat the steps found within Section B of Part Two.

2. Once these steps have been completed, a class discussion will take place comparing and contrasting these two poems.

C. Creative Writing Prompt

1. The students will be required to write from a creative writing prompt after the discussion comparing and contrasting Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz” and Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays”. The students will be provided approximately ten to fifteen minutes to complete this writing assignment, and will then share the results of this exercise with the class.

Part Three: Beyond

Students can use the techniques learned previously in this unit of study to read other genres loosely related to testimonial poetry. Paraphrasing specifically can help students examine poetry content and help the students to understand complex literary passages. One practical application of

how this unit of study might further the students understanding of poetry and its power of connection is through examining modern examples of spoken word poetry. For the following examples, a computer capable of communicating with the internet will be needed:

1. Shane Koyczan: "To This Day", which is spoken word poetry about being bullied.

(https://www.ted.com/talks/shane_koyczan_to_this_day_for_the_bullied_and_beautiful?language=en)

2. Gaunte's "Action", which is spoken word poetry about taking action against rape and rape culture. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cKlnqzt9GQ>)

3. Neil Hiborn's "OCD", which is spoken word about dealing with the condition known as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnKZ4pdSU-s>)

4. Andrea Gibson's "Sleeping", which is spoken word about loving her Vietnam Veteran father.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSGMXBQFVes>)

Examples of testimonial Poetry include:

"A Dream Deferred", by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Romance, by Edgar Allen Poe

Romance, who loves to nod and sing,

With drowsy head and folded wing,

Among the green leaves as they shake

Far down within some shadowy lake,

To me a painted paroquet

Hath been—a most familiar bird—

Taught me my alphabet to say—

To lisp my very earliest word

While in the wild wood I did lie,

A child—with a most knowing eye.

Of late, eternal Condor years

So shake the very Heaven on high

With tumult as they thunder by,

I have no time for idle cares

Through gazing on the unquiet sky.

And when an hour with calmer wings

Its down upon my spirit flings—

That little time with lyre and rhyme

To while away— forbidden things!

My heart would feel to be a crime

Unless it trembled with the strings.

Fire and Ice, by Robert Frost

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

On the Pulse of Morning, by Maya Angelou

A Rock, A River, A Tree

Hosts to species long since departed,

Marked the mastodon,

The dinosaur, who left dried tokens

Of their sojourn here

On our planet floor,

Any broad alarm of their hastening doom

Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,

Come, you may stand upon my

Back and face your distant destiny,

But seek no haven in my shadow,

I will give you no hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than

The angels, have crouched too long in

The bruising darkness

Have lain too long

Facedown in ignorance,

Your mouths spilling words

Armed for slaughter.

The Rock cries out to us today,

You may stand upon me,

But do not hide your face.

Wild Orphan, by Allen Ginsberg

Blandly mother

takes him strolling

by railroad and by river

-he's the son of the absconded

hot rod angel-

and he imagines cars

and rides them in his dreams,

so lonely growing up among

the imaginary automobiles

and dead souls of Tarrytown

to create

out of his own imagination

the beauty of his wild

forebears-a mythology

he cannot inherit.

Will he later hallucinate

his gods? Waking

among mysteries with

an insane gleam

of recollection?

The recognition-

something so rare

in his soul,

met only in dreams

-nostalgias

of another life.

A question of the soul.

And the injured

losing their injury

in their innocence

-a cock, a cross,

an excellence of love.

And the father grieves

in flophouse

complexities of memory

a thousand miles

away, unknowing

of the unexpected

youthful stranger

bumming toward his door.

My Papa's Waltz

By Theodore Roethke

The whiskey on your breath

Could make a small boy dizzy;

But I hung on like death:

Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans

Slid from the kitchen shelf;

My mother's countenance

Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist

Was battered on one knuckle;

At every step you missed

My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head

With a palm caked hard by dirt,

Then waltzed me off to bed

Still clinging to your shirt.

Those Winter Sundays

By Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early

and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,

then with cracked hands that ached

from labor in the weekday weather made

banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.

When the rooms were warm, he'd call,

and slowly I would rise and dress,

fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,

who had driven out the cold

and polished my good shoes as well.

What did I know, what did I know

of love's austere and lonely offices?

POETRY ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

Name:

Date:

Assignment:

Title of Poem:

Topic:

Context of Poem:

Paraphrase of Poem: (Feel free to use a blank sheet of paper and staple it to the back of this handout if necessary.)

Creative Writing Prompts

Instructions: You will have ten to fifteen minutes to write using one of the following prompts in your journal. Remember to focus on use of imagery, diction, and taking a definitive stance or position regarding your chosen topic.

OPTION 1: Each and every one of us has an issue or issues that they struggle to give voice to. Write a poem about something, anything that you have difficulty talking about.

OPTION 2: Using situations chosen from your memory, write a poem about a situation or event from your personal history that impacted you greatly. This poem must feature a specific circumstance, such as when you decided you wanted to go to college, the moment you knew you had become an adult, or when you had decided enough is enough.

OPTION 3: Choose up to three phrases from Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" that resonate with you; a phrase does not necessarily mean an entire line, and you may choose to focus on specific words and how they affected both you and the poem itself. Create a poem that employs these same phrases that apply to you personally.