

READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Reading, Writing, and Responding to Poetry Video Transcript

Student:

"Nine. Phoenix forgets to unash."

Student:

"Ten. Going, going, gone."

Student:

"11. Gods of shovels and black veils."

Student:

"12. What once passed for kindling."

Student:

"13. Fireworks at dawn."

Ben Berman:

We're going to be thinking about names for a little bit. I want you to think about one nickname that either you have had that really suited you well, or a nickname that you had that you hated-- it just did not work for you. Or a nickname that you would like to make up for yourself.

We started out thinking about names and our relationship to names on a personal level.

Student:

My sister used to call me Sushi, which was... I hated it.

Berman:

Why did you hate it?

Student:

Because I didn't want to be a food.

Fletcher:

My name, Fletcher, started as a nickname, because there are so many Johns in my family. My parents liked a Chevy Chase movie called "Fletch" at the time.

Student:

I actually kind of like when people make nicknames, because someone is thinking of me enough to, like, call me in a specific way.

Berman:

And then we looked at a couple of poems that dealt with the subject of names and thought about how the poets approached those poems differently.

We're going to start by reading a poem by Linda Pastan, who we looked at last week with "The Quarrel." Is someone willing to read us this one?

Student:

"David means beloved. Peter is a rock. They named me Linda, which means beautiful "in Spanish, a language I never learned. Even naked we wear our names. In the end we leave them behind, carved into desktops and gravestones."

Berman:

Today's lesson connects to the imagery lessons, in that a lot of the work that we're working on is thinking about the relationship between things and the ideas behind things, or the relationships between things.

Student:

"My grandfather gave me a name in Hebrew I never heard, but it died with him. If I had taken that name, who would I be? And if he calls me now, how will I know to answer?"

Berman:

All right, so I'd like you all to take a minute with this poem sort of quietly, and to find a particular moment or line that you find compelling or interesting.

Poetry asks for a sort of deep contemplation. And that's not a mode that a lot of students, even adults, are often able to work in. You sort of model how to sit with something for a long time by not moving quickly through it. One skill that I was hoping my students would walk away with is how do you look at something for a long time and wonder about it, and ultimately get to something that surprises you, that reveals something important to you?

Student:

Something that sort of struck me was when she was talking about, "My grandfather gave me a name in Hebrew I never heard, but it died with him." And that reminded me of something I've heard which says that you basically die twice-- like, once when you die, then once when your name is said for the last time. The name is sort of, like, synonymous with your life. And I tend to think of it as separate from the two, which Linda Pastan touched on, too.

Student:

The second part, after what Sarah said, the, "And if he calls me now, how will I know how to answer," it was just, like, because... I don't know, I just kind of, like, felt sad after. Because it was the person who named the person, like, is calling what they named them, yet they, like, aren't... don't... they don't know what the person called them. So it's kind of like the nicknames, too. Like, if you change your name, you're, like, leaving a whole side of you for, like, people who know you one way. And you're, like, morphing into people who know you another way, but you're completely leaving behind the other half.

Berman:

A lot of kids are taught to, like, mark up poems, and look for the metaphors, and speak about the image. You have to sort of be equipped from an emotional standpoint to discuss something. I think a lot of times you have to have really thought about something rather than just looking at, like, the technical aspects of a poem.

Student:

And the other line about the boy who's wandering alone in the Holocaust and lost his name, like, he feels lost because he doesn't have that small thing.

Berman:

I want to add one thing to that, too. Because I think one thing that's neat about this poem in particular is that I don't think there's a single way of thinking about the name. I think it wanders through a lot of ways.

Each poem gave us a different way to think about names. So one was very specific to a wandering path of thinking about your own name, and the many ways you think about yourself. The "Alternate Name for Black Boys" poem was really thinking about collective groups.

All right, we're going to look at the next one by Danez Smith, who is a spoken word poet. So I was thinking maybe for this one we can read it out loud and sort of go around and read it.

Student:

"One. Smoke above the burning bush."

Student:

"Two. Arch nemesis of summer night."

Berman:

And then did some emulation exercises, where the kids had three different prompts, and then chose one of them to actually try writing about their names, or someone's name.

Look on the back. I'm going to give you three options for emulations. And we're going to try one of them, and see what it's like not to just try to unpack it and read it, but to actually produce one in this spirit. Jacob, would you read us the first one?

Jacob:

"Like Linda Pastan, write a poem contemplating what is behind your name. Try to approach your name from multiple angles, consider its meaning in various languages, perhaps, or its personal significance in your family history."

Berman:

So all of them are just different approaches. Some kids love writing about themselves, some hate it.

Armand, would you read us the second option?

Armand:

"Think about a group that you belong to, and come up with a list of alternate names for that group."

Berman:

Some belong to groups that they feel are misunderstood, and that gives them an access.

All right, the last one is an exercise from, actually, a fiction book called "The 3:00 A.M. Epiphany." But it works for a poetry writing activity. Fletcher, would you read us this one?

Fletcher:

"Names. Take the full name, including middle name, of someone you love. Write down as many words from this name as you can."

Berman:

It's really about just varying technique and subject matter for different kids.

All right, let's take ten minutes and write something and see where it takes us.

First of all, I think it's really hard to write a poem in a classroom. So a lot of times in-class writing is just generation of things, a chance to sort of get some scratch ideas down, and then at night they do more of the writing.

Jacob:

So I just kind of free wrote it, and then I'm just going to go back and revise it later into poem form. I started with Jacob, and then Yaakov in Hebrew. "Yaakov, here he comes, grabbing the heel, "coming from behind, but in the end taking the lead. "Yaakov on a journey, wrestling with God to become Israel. Or just a boy echoing his mom's grandfather."

Berman:

I don't grade any of their poems. I give them full credit for writing poems and trying it out. And all of my feedback is conversational feedback.

So if you come from it from a place of, like, what is it truly about, being a journalist, and you find that image that is, like, evocative but not descriptive...

Student:

Yeah.

Berman:

...you'll come up with some interesting...

Student:

So I think something more metaphorical.

Berman:

I evaluate their thinking about their poetry and what they're reading and they're writing. So in addition to the poems they're writing, they write these two-page reflective essays on what they've been reading, the exercises that we've been doing in class, the discussions we do in class, and then their own growth as writers. The reflective essay that they write is their primary grade.

All right, so try to find a place to stop, somewhere where you are. You wrote two poems-- one yesterday, thinking about the advice, and one that you're starting today.

So a part of it, I think, is giving them an opportunity to know, I'm not judging whether you're a good or bad poet-- take as many risks as you want. I'm much more interested in giving you feedback on your own personal growth and the depth of your thinking about the issues that we're discussing in class.

Figure out how you can take a paragraph and turn it into a poem without just cutting it up into lines. Have a wonderful day. We'll see you tomorrow.