

Autobiographical and Archeological: A Poetry Lesson

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Grade Level: Middle-High School

Time Frame: 45 - 60 minutes

Objective: Students will draw inspiration from Suzi Garcia's "A Modified Villanelle for My Childhood" to write poems that draw upon personal and family narratives. Students will consider their role as poetry archeologists.

Prior Knowledge and Skills: Grade level reading and comprehension

Required Materials: Paper, pencil, and Suzi Garcia's "A Modified Villanelle for My Childhood" (provided below)

Sequence of Activities:

1. Welcome and Introduction (10-15 minutes)

The teaching artist can use this time to introduce themselves, what inspires them to write poetry, and perhaps even share some writing of their own. Students can also introduce themselves. In addition to sharing their names, students can answer/share their response to the following (or another fun question the teaching artist invents):

*Imagine yourself as an animal, object, or color.
What do you have in common with that animal, object, or color?*

Following introductions, facilitate a relaxed, informal, low stakes discussion on the following question, reminding students there is no such thing as a "right/wrong" answer. We're sharing our opinions, in so far as we are comfortable to do so. These questions set students up to think about their own personal histories:

What are the ingredients of you? How would you describe your character or personality?

*What personal stories influence who you are?
These could be family stories, family history, stories from your childhood, etc.*

2. Literary Model and Discussion (10 minutes)

The teaching artist can share the following before inviting a student to read the below poem aloud:

Poetry (and any writing) can be autobiographical, meaning it tells *your* story. Your unique and specific background and journey, whether talking about your childhood, adulthood, or even your ancestry and family history as major ingredients of yourself.

“A Modified Villanelle for My Childhood” by Suzi F. Garcia does just that. As we read the poem, pay special attention to the way she strings words together. Words that sound alike or rhyme (or almost rhyme, which is a slant rhyme). As the poem is read out loud, try finding and listening to the rhythm. Is it a rhythm you can snap your fingers, clap your hands, or tap your foot to?

[Read the poem here.](#)

Questions for Discussion:

What is a myth? How can a poem about yourself be mythical?
Think of one myth about yourself (write it down or share it out loud).

What do archaeologists do? How can a poem be archeological? Is a poet an archeologist?

3. Individual Writing (10-15 minutes)

In a quiet, focused atmosphere, perhaps with each student finding their own special place to write (a corner, the school garden, or simply at their desk with some folders up for privacy), invite students to dive into their own writing. Below is the full prompt:

Write an autobiographical poem that is both archeological and mythical. Write a poem about *you*. Fill it with lots of detailed images or description about your personality, family history, childhood, dreams and hopes and wishes, and more. Who *were* you? Who *are* you? Who do you want to become?

Mythical can also mean magical. Magical can mean telling a truth about yourself through metaphors, exaggerations, symbolism, or wild imagination. You can be bold here. You want wings? Give yourself wings. You want to be a fire-breathing dragon? Be a fire-breathing dragon. Stay playful, trust your imagination. Your imagination knows you deeply.

4. Sharing (15-20 minutes)

Never force sharing, that's my personal philosophy. Writing and art can be intensely personal and if the atmosphere is right, students will decide if it's timely to share. So this section is simply to create an inviting space for those who do feel ready to share. You can invite students to read their own poems, have a friend read it for them, or even have the teacher read it for them.

5. Illustration and Extension Activities

If the teaching artist wished to extend the lesson over multiple days, they could use the below prompts:

1. Write an autobiographical poem that takes one word and rhymes it throughout the poem in a song-like way. Garcia uses words that end in “-ical” like magical, radical, biblical, comical. Another example would be words that end in “-azing”, such amazing, star-gazing, razing. End most of your lines with these rhyming words and sprinkle them in other places throughout the poem too.
2. Draw a self-portrait out of words. Instead of lines, use written words that describe who you are, who you want to be, who you were, who you could be, etc. Some words can be big, some small. Use regular handwriting, cursive, bubble letters, and more. The only rule is: you can't draw lines. Words, words, and more words.

Draw an outline with pencil and use pen to make the words follow the outline. When the portrait is done, erase the pencil outline so only the pen words remain.

3. A challenge: Explore the villanelle aspect of Garcia's poem! Learn more about villanelles here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/villanelle#:~:text=A%20French%20verse%20form%20consisting,final%20couplet%20in%20the%20quatrain>.

Which lines or words are repeating in Garcia's poem? Use several highlighters to color code repeating lines/words. Then write your own villanelle. You can use your poem from the initial autobiographical writing exercise in this lesson plan and modify it to fit the villanelle form.