

Wisdom Poetry

By: Elizabeth Brown

Education Level: Junior High, High School

Genre: Poetry

Time frame: one class period (this could potentially be expanded to two, depending on available class time and student interest)

Objective: To explore how poetry can convey truth and impart encouragement.

Prior knowledge and skills: the ability to think abstractly, to understand metaphor

Required materials: Writing materials, a ball or spool of thick thread, yarn or string (preferably gold, although it could be any color, really; preferably thicker than sewing thread), audio/video player/projector

Literary model: William Stafford, "The Way It Is,"

<https://grateful.org/resource/the-way-it-is-william-stafford/>

William Blake, "Eternity," <https://poets.org/poem/eternity>

C.P. Cavafy, "Ithaka," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51296/ithaka-56d22eef917ec>

William Ernest Henley, "Invictus,"

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51642/invictus>

Invictus recording:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAa6qdBN7Z0>

Sequence of activities: 30-35 minutes

After handing out copies of the poems, I ask the students to humor me, as I am going to trying out something new. I take the roll of string/yarn/thread and ask the students to unwind and hold onto a section while passing it to the next student (it helps to stand next to students and assist with this process) until everyone is holding a piece of the thread. Then we turn to William Stafford's poem, "The Way It Is." I briefly introduce the poet and ask for a student to read the poem out loud—all while everyone is still holding on to the thread. We talk about the poem. What do they think the thread represents? After discussion, it's okay to retrieve/roll up the thread.

Option: depending on student interest and time, you could also mention William Blake's quote from "Jerusalem" (if possible, write it on the board beforehand): "I give you the end of a golden string; / only wind it into a ball, / It will lead you in at Heaven's gate, / Built in Jerusalem's wall." Give context to the quote, then ask the students what they think it means.

Briefly introduce William Blake and then have another student read the poem “Eternity” out loud. It is helpful to explain archaic words and phrases. Then ask, what do you think this poem is referring to? What do you think it means to truly love someone/ something?

Then we turn to “Ithaka.” Introduce C.P. Cavafy, and give context to this poem as needed. Some students will know the story of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Give context or have students volunteer to give context for this poem and the significance of Ithaka (Odysseus’s home and final destination.) Define Poseidon (god of the sea) Cyclops (one-eyed giant) and Laistrygonians (cannibalistic giants). Ask a student to read the poem out loud. Afterward, lead a discussion. What do you think Ithaka means in the poem? What might Ithaka mean to you? What are your dreams and goals? Talk about what it means to be the hero of your own journey.

Introduce William Ernest Henley, mention that he was diagnosed with a kind of tuberculosis that affected the bones, and that at age sixteen, his left leg was amputated below the knee. Years later, his other foot faced amputation but was saved by surgery. Define “Invictus” (Latin for “Unconquered.”) Have a student read the poem out loud. (Although, if pressed for time, skip the student reading and just go to the video.) Introduce the recording. Apparently, this was Nelson Mandela’s favorite poem; remembering it gave him strength when he was in prison. Talk briefly about Nelson Mandela and the struggle for South African independence. Watch the video and lead a brief discussion.

Writing: 10-15 minutes

Hand out lined paper. Have the students take 10-15 minutes to write a poem to their younger selves. What would you say to that younger self? Another option would be to write a poem to their future self, or to even someone just like themselves. What would you say to that self/person? What wisdom would you impart?

As always, students are free to write anything they like, although I’ve found that most (if not all) choose this exercise. Overall, this has been one of my most popular and meaningful classes.