

They Never Had It Made: Writing about Obstacles and Resilience with Nikky Finney
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Grade level: High School (can also be used for 6th-8th grades)

Learning Objectives: Using repetition, description, and narrative arc to create meaning in poetry

Description: I came up with this lesson in anticipation of poet Nikky Finney's visit to the CAPE school. I felt like the themes would be resonant to students there and also wanted to have them try out using her work as a prompt and jumping off point.

Sequence of Activities:

Introduce Lesson (5 mins)

Talk about the phrase "He Never Had It Made." Brainstorm on board. What does that imply? What do we think the poet will be trying to discuss in the poem based on that title?

Introduce Literary Tools: Discuss Repetition & Sensory Description (5 mins)

Talk about the way repetition helps to reinforce and expand. Talk about the ways in which sensory description allows the reader to more clearly see and be invited into the world of the poem.

Engage with the Text (15 mins)

[Watch video of Nikky Finney reading the poem in its original context](#), when her father was being inducted as the first African-American Supreme Court Justice in South Carolina. Talk about the poem and context. Discuss the use of repetition.

Read the poem again. Stop at certain stanzas to point out the use of sensory detail. Ask and discuss why sensory description is helpful in these moments.

Talk about the poem, its message and meaning.

Individual Writing (20 mins)

Prompt: Think of a person in your life who "never had it made" but who managed somehow to overcome some of the obstacles presented to him, her, them. This person can also be yourself.

Begin your poem with "He/She/They/I never had it made." Then use specific details to explain how that relates to this particular person's experience. Use sensory detail to help the reader understand the person's experience.

Sharing (5 mins)

Time for students who wish to share their writing to share with class.

He Never Had It Made

These words read upon the investiture of Ernest A Finney, Jr. as the first Black Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the state of South Carolina. December 1, 1994 Columbia, S. C.

Just a plain brown paper sack boy
from a place and people
who sweet fed him everything in double doses
just in case his man size should ever
wear a hole

An ordinary brown corduroy boy
from folk who never had it made
but still managed to make
whatever they were to be from scratch

A regular little fellow
whose mother never got to bathe or watch him grow
or even gaze him from the farmhouse window
where he loved to sit on a summertime box
of Virginia cured day dreams
umbrellaed by the big oak tree
and inbetween chores
and stare away at the longest dirt road
the only way in or out
to grandpop's farm
the same country road that all country boys
tried to stare down in their day
wondering what or who could ever be
at the end of all the dirt
watching it for signs of life
maybe somebody from the city might visit
some somebody from one of those shiny ready made
places
who could make magic
of a brown boy's country fried beginnings

Maybe one of those far away places
would take him just as homespun as he was
and grow him up to be something legal
maybe handsome
even dap debonair
and he might just become
the somebody who could easy talk
the most complicated of things
for the regulars

and for all others be
shiny as new money

From the first he was looking to be
one of those new Black men
who came visiting from the North
The good Lord willing and the creek don't rise

But he never had it brought out on some royal platter
never promised to him at his broken bones of a birth
the making of this man's silk deeds
came straight from polyester dreams
from tears and sea water sweat
from love and dirt work and the graciousness of his
God
all following him like a North star

to talk pretty at the State College of South Carolina
one of those kinds
with the pocket chains and the shiny grey suits
with a hundred pounds of law books
under their arms
just like some kind of natural growth
stout with the law on their minds
devotees of justice
maybe he could be one of their kind

He never had it made
he only had a proud father and a circle of stubborn
arms and wiggling fingers
to keep his dying mama's promise
to raise the boy up at their sides
and not just anywheres
Don't let no strangers have him
knowing he would never have her there
to see to any of the raising herself

This one
that one there
had it sweetened and sifted
chewed up and spit back on his plate
he for sure had it prayed over
then chicken scratched around
in somebody's kitchen who loved him
through and through
over somebody's fire who pointed first to his
pantslegs
an then maybe a switch
whenever he was off his daily chalk straight line

And from beneath his granddaddy's wagon wheels
and form up under his people's stern tutelage
he was surely begun
but it wasn't nothing guaranteed
you know the ways I mean
all silver and engraved

He might'a had it boiled up every morning
explained and preached and on sunday gospelized
by an early rising grandmother
then a significant Claflin College
And I'm quite sure he soda jerked it back and forth
and baked his dreams in his own high hopes
to try and make sure it could so maybe happen

He always loved the law
even in the middle of all those many years
when his own daughter argued history to him
poeting always what wasn't right fair or true
how he with the calm of a sailor
who had seen the ocean at its worst and then its best
with all the faith two eyes could keep safe for her
how he would always no matter say
"The law works, Girl."

And his own poetry has kept what was right right
and he has kept her and the law breathing

*A steady drop of water
will wear a hole in a rock, Daughter.
Such are the vicissitudes of life, Son.
If you see me and the bear fighting,
you go and help the bear, my friend.
It's alright Babygirl, you win some and you lose some.
Just do the best you can with what you got everybody.*

He is the justice man
and from his waiting tables as a young lawyer
for the white and the privileged
to this day here he has always believed
back then as boy with only a road
up here as man who never looks back
the law works Girl

Papa
Daddy
The Justice Man
you never had it made
but here you are making it
and all of us cross over with you
proud as peacocks in our brightest polyester
maybe that's what Pop
maybe that's what Mama Carlene
would say