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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2005 Volume I: The Uses of Poetry in the Classroom

Who's Your Daddy? Comprehension Strategies and Poetry Basics through Poems about Fathers

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Throughout my experience teaching middle school English, one of the complaints that I have heard often from students is how difficult it is to understand poetry. However, understanding poetry and the ability to speak and write intelligently about it are major requirements of many standardized tests; the ability to demonstrate this knowledge is also evidence of higher order thinking, which is a trait that teachers work diligently to cultivate in their students. The objective of this unit will be to provide students with tools so that they can feel confident in their ability to read, understand and speak intelligently about poetry and other types of literature. This curriculum unit is designed to be approximately six weeks long and was created with the middle school student in mind, particularly the seventh graders that I teach. Completion of this unit will provide students with specific comprehension tools (visualizing, clarifying, connecting to prior experiences) that will help them perform literary analysis of all kinds while also introducing them to the basics of poetry.

A colleague of mine said that when teaching, it is best to help students go from the ego out. In other words, begin with something that students can in some way recognize as familiar. Once we have shown them how they are related to the bigger picture, that connection provides a foundation for the later learning that will occur with texts that do not possess that same sense of connectedness. Whether students can identify with the anger in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" or sense the care in the voice of the father-like speaker in Rudyard Kipling's "If", the theme of fatherhood provides a foundational theme that everyone can, in some capacity, relate to.

Developmentally, the care that fathers can give is crucial to middle school students. Not only will this study give students necessary tools for analyzing and understanding poetry, but it will also encourage them to persevere with hope in spite of their individual experiences (or lack thereof) with their own fathers.

(Developed for English, grade 7; recommended for English, grades 7-9)

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