

Poetry as Social Justice

Reading & Writing Poetry

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Grade Level	9th – 12th Grade	**Time Frame**	2-3 class period(s)
Subject	English/Language Arts	**Duration**	110 minutes
Course	American Literature, Composition, Creative Writing		

Essential Question

How can poets engage in social justice?

Summary

After reading a poem and article about the death of an African American man, students read an article about the death of an African American boy and write an elegy for him in response. While this lesson is currently aligned only to 9th grade standards, it would be appropriate to teach in grades 9th through 12th, adjusting standards as needed.

Snapshot

Engage

Students read the Ross Gay poem "A Small Needful Fact" about Eric Garner and discuss what they notice and wonder.

Explore

Students read a newspaper article about the death of Eric Garner and use the Why-Lighting strategy.

Explain

Students make connections between the poem and the newspaper article using the Paired Texts H-Chart.

Extend

Students read a newspaper article about the death of Tamir Rice, using the Why-Lighting strategy, then write their own poem about Tamir.

Evaluate

Students share their poems in small groups and with a Gallery Walk and then compare their poems to Clint Smith's poem "Playground Elegy."

Standards

Oklahoma Academic Standards: English Language Arts (Grade 9)

9.2.R.1: Summarize the main ideas and paraphrase significant parts of increasingly complex texts.
9.4.W.2: Select language to create a specific effect in writing according to purpose and audience.

Attachments

- A Small Needful Fact—Poetry as Social Justice - Spanish.docx
- A Small Needful Fact—Poetry as Social Justice - Spanish.pdf
- A Small Needful Fact—Poetry as Social Justice.docx
- A Small Needful Fact—Poetry as Social Justice.pdf
- Eric Garner and Michael Brown—Poetry as Social Justice - Spanish.docx
- Eric Garner and Michael Brown—Poetry as Social Justice - Spanish.pdf
- Eric Garner and Michael Brown—Poetry as Social Justice.docx
- Eric Garner and Michael Brown—Poetry as Social Justice.pdf
- H-Chart Template—Poetry as Social Justice - Spanish.docx
- H-Chart Template—Poetry as Social Justice - Spanish.pdf
- H-Chart Template—Poetry as Social Justice.docx
- H-Chart Template—Poetry as Social Justice.pdf
- Officer Who Killed Tamir Rice Fired For Rule Violations On Job Application—Poetry as Social Justice - Spanish.docx
- Officer Who Killed Tamir Rice Fired For Rule Violations On Job Application—Poetry as Social Justice - Spanish.pdf
- Officer Who Killed Tamir Rice Fired For Rule Violations On Job Application—Poetry as Social Justice.docx
- Officer Who Killed Tamir Rice Fired For Rule Violations On Job Application—Poetry as Social Justice.pdf
- Playground Elegy—Poetry as Social Justice - Spanish.docx
- Playground Elegy—Poetry as Social Justice - Spanish.pdf
- Playground Elegy—Poetry as Social Justice.docx
- Playground Elegy—Poetry as Social Justice.pdf

Materials

- Computer/projector access
- “A Small Needful Fact” attachment (one for each student)
- “Playground Elegy” attachment (one for each student)
- Officer Who Killed Tamir Rice Fired for Rule Violations on Job Application attachment (one for each student)
- H-Chart attachment (one for each student)
- Eric Garmer and Michael Brown attachment (one for each student)
- Highlighters
- Sharpie or Mr. Sketch Markers
- Writing tool

20 minutes

Engage

Tell students that they will be reading a poem about an American man who died.

Distribute copies of the poem "A Small Needful Fact" (see Attachments) and, if possible, pull up the poem on your projector.

Read the poem aloud. Read it aloud, but you can also ask if any students are willing. It is helpful to hear the poem multiple times. You could even ask one student to read the poem in a voice that gets quieter and quieter.

Note

For students unfamiliar with Eric Garner, the poem's final ironic line may not make much of an impact. That will be addressed later in the lesson.

Using the I Notice, I Wonder strategy, ask students what they notice and wonder about the poem.

Possible Notices and Wonderings

Some possible notices are: (1) It is one long sentence. (2) It repeats words and phrases. (3) It is one stanza. (4) It has short lines. (5) Its diction is easily understood. Some possible wonderings are: (1) Who is Eric Garner? (2) What does the word *horticulture* mean? (3) Why did the poet use the word *needful* in the title?

Ask students to circle the word they find most important in the poem. Have them compare their answers with a partner or small group. Then, ask for a few volunteers to share with the whole class and to justify their answers.

25 minutes

Explore

Tell students they are going to learn more about Eric Garner, the man from the poem, by reading a magazine article. Tell students they will need a highlighter and writing tool for this activity.

Pass out "Eric Garner and Michael Brown: Deaths Without Indictments" and tell students to follow along as you read the article aloud. You can also have students each take turns reading a paragraph aloud. If they can handle it, students can also silently read the article.

Now, using the Why-Lighting strategy, invite students to highlight the important passages from the article and to explain their reasoning in the margins.

Lead the whole class in a discussion about their highlights and how their understanding of Eric Garner has changed.

Some possible questions:

1. How did Eric Garner die? [A police chokehold]
2. What were Eric Garner's last words? ["I can't breathe."]
3. Why are Garner's last words significant? [They show he is crying out for help. They foreshadow his death.]
4. Who is to blame for Garner's death? [Some students will blame the officer who choked him. Others might say Brown shouldn't have been breaking the law to begin with.]

15 minutes

Explain

Now students will make connections between the poem and magazine article by using the Paired Texts H-Chart Strategy.

Have students turn a piece of paper or their notebook from portrait to landscape and draw the outline of a big capital H. An H-Chart template is located in the Attachments section. You can handout an H-Chart to each student, if you wish.

In the first leg of the H, invite students to make a list of important information about Eric Garner they learned from the poem. Take time to discuss in small groups or as a class.

Sample Responses

He worked for the Parks and Recreation Horticulture Department. He was a large man. He put plants into the earth.

In the second leg of the H, invite students to make a list of important information about Eric Garner they learned from the magazine article. Pause again for discussion.

Sample Responses

He had six children. He died from a police chokehold. His last words were "I can't breathe." The police officer was not punished for killing Garner. Garner was arrested for selling illegal cigarettes in Staten Island in New York City.

On the center line of the H-Chart, students should write about the biggest takeaway about Eric Garner that they learned from both pieces of writing. Take time to share out some responses.

Sample Responses

Garner's death did not have to happen. Garner's death was an injustice. Garner should still be alive like the plants he planted.

At this time, invite students to examine the final two lines of the poem: "like making it easier / for us to breathe." Students should note its irony—that the plants Eric Garner planted help us to breathe and Garner's last words were "I can't breathe."

30 minutes

Extend

Tell students that contemporary poets—poets who are alive today—engage in social justice when writing about current events and civil rights. Poetry can, indeed, be political.

Explain that they will read another article about the death of a Black person at the hands of police, except this time he is a 12-year-old boy.

Pass out the NPR article "Officer Who Killed Tamir Rice Fired For Rule Violations On Job Application."

Ask students to use the Why Lighting strategy while you read the article aloud (or allow for collaborative/independent reading opportunities).

Give students time after reading to compare their notes with a partner and then to discuss as a whole class.

Q & A

During discussion, you might ask some of these questions: (1) How did Tamir Rice die? (2) What happened to the officer who shot Tamir? (3) How did the city of Cleveland apologize to Tamir Rice's family? (4) What do Tamir Rice's death and Eric Garner's death share in common? (5) How are their deaths different?

Invite students to think about how they would write a poem for Tamir Rice. Give them time to brainstorm and then write a draft of a poem in honor of Tamir, like how the poet Ross Gay wrote a poem in honor of Eric Garner. Inform students that the genre of this poem is an elegy, a poem written for someone who has died. To help students brainstorm, provide some possible poem titles for them like: "Twelve Years Old," "On the Playground," or "Not Guilty."

Note

Students who are having trouble writing their poem might try using the found poetry technique. For more information, read https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/found-poem-poetic-form.

Evaluate

Once all students have written a draft of a poem, ask them to share in groups of three or four.

Have groups each pick one poem to share with the whole class in a modified Gallery Walk. You can have the author of the poem decide if they wish to stay behind and read the poem aloud to each group. Give enough sticky notes to each group, so they can leave two comments on each poem.

Students should rotate clockwise around the room, taking time to read or listen to each poem before leaving some feedback.

Once the Gallery Walk is completed, give students time to read their feedback and discuss it with their groups. Provide time for some whole-group conversation about the feedback that was given. Will any students revise their poems based on the feedback from their classmates?

Then, tell students you have one more poem for them that was not in the Gallery Walk. Pass out "Playground Elegy" (attached) or simply display it with your projector and read it aloud. Even though Tamir Rice is not named in the poem, the details point to his being the "new child" since the setting is a park/playground.

Give students time to discuss the poem with a partner or small group, then as a whole class.

Q & A

Teachers might ask these questions about "Playground Elegy": (1) What do raised hands signify to the speaker in his childhood? (2) What do raised hands mean to the speaker as an adult? (3) Why is the speaker's race significant to this poem? (4) How is this poem connected to Tamir Rice?

Using a website like PollEverywhere or Mentimeter, have students vote for the best Tamir Rice poem from the poems that were presented in the Gallery Walk as well as Clint Smith's "Playground Elegy." If technology is not available for this, use the Sticky Bars strategy.

Resources

- Chandler, A. (2014). Eric Garner and Michael Brown: Deaths without indictments. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/eric-garner-grand-jury-no-indictment-nypd/383392/
- Dwyer, C. (2017). Officer who killed Tamir Rice fired for rule violations on job application. NPR. http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/05/30/530733542/officer-who-killed-tamir-rice-fired-for-rule-violations-on-job-application
- Gray, R. (2015). A small needful fact. https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/small-needful-fact
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Gallery walk / Carousel. Strategy. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/118
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Mentimeter. Tech Tools. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/tech-tool/645
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Paired texts H-Chart. Strategy. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/132
- K20 Center. (n.d.). PollEverywhere. Tech Tools. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/tech-tool/662
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Sticky bars. Strategy. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/129
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Why-Lighting. Strategy. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/128
- Smith, C. (n.d.). Playground elegy. http://www.stilljournal.net/clint-smith-poetry.php
- For more information on the poetic forms discussed in this lesson:
    - https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/found-poem-poetic-form
    - https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/elegy-poetic-form