

Strategy: Using Poetry to Introduce Work and Class Issues

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Context:

In literature courses to introduce longer texts with working-class themes, in composition courses where work or class was a theme, and creative writing classes to show my students that the working class world is represented in many of today's contemporary poems. However, I believe that this exercise could be used in any course where class issues are introduced.

Description:

When I use this exercise, I show the chosen poem on the overhead and ask students one (or sometimes more) of the following questions:

1. What does the poem say about work?
2. How is work defined in this poem?
3. What class is represented in this poem?

I also ask students to point to specific places in the poem to support their answer.

Because many of my students (in all of my classes) come into my course with a general fear of poetry, I tell them not to search for one mysterious right answer. Instead, I use their answers for the start of discussion.

The choice of specific poems can lead the class into different directions of discussion. For example, some poems explore specific events in labor history. Chris Llewellyn in *Fragments From the Fire* describes the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire that killed 146 (mostly women) people, and Muriel Rukeyser in her poetry sequence "The Book of the Dead" explores the tragedy of the Hawk's Nest incident in West Virginia where hundreds of miners died of silicosis. A more recent choice is Martin Espada's "Alabanza" which celebrates the lives of the cooks, waiters and waitresses who were working at the Windows on the World restaurant on September 11, 2001.

However, poems don't have to be about specific events in history in order to be effective for this exercise. Many of the poems that would work are poems that depict everyday lives. For example, I often use the poetry of Jim Daniels, Jan Beatty, Maggie Anderson, Jeanne Bryner, Diane Gilman Fisher, Sherry Fairchok, Lisa Coffman, Marilyn Nelson, Philip Levine, and Jo McDougall. I have also used work from a local poet named Jason Irwin.

In general, this exercise could work in any classroom setting as long as the instructor leads the course discussion away from poetic form. Students, once they understand that they don't have to provide a specific literary analysis of the poem, often bring up lively and interesting discussions about various work and class issues.

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