

# Unleashing Sorrow and Joy

## Writing Poetry from History and Literature

BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN

LILA WROTE THAT CELIE, from *The Color Purple*, was a “record/on your shelf/the one/dressed/in dust and age/...the one/your liquor-heavy fingers/find/on days/your red water eyes/don’t know the difference...” Don wrote that she was the “cold hard black floor/everyone walked on.” Both students capture the essence of Celie through their poetry. Over the years, I have learned that sometimes writing a poem or interior monologue from history or literature can create a space in the classroom for a different way of knowing, a different way of expressing knowledge about a fictional character or a historical decision. My skin, my blood, my bones understand events before my mind catches up

and processes the information. Too often, learning becomes recitation, the dull retelling of facts, but writing poetry helps unleash sorrow or joy, the human understanding of loss and creation across cultures, centuries, and continents, so I try to create opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge through poetry and interior monologues as well as essays. Because my units extend for five to 10 weeks, poetry also provides new venues for students to explore their understanding of the unit. Writing poetry creates breaks for us to review concepts, materials, and re-engage in our studies with new sensibilities.

I don’t give quizzes. They feel like a “gotcha” set up to catch students who haven’t read.



Dylan Leerman

*Linda Christensen conferencing with a student.*

I know who hasn't read, and I'm trying to entice students in rather than push them out. These poetry pit stops help students get caught up, and re-engage them in the content so they can learn from their classmates, but they also provide structures for the students who have read to catch their breath and talk about the "texts" in new ways.

I experiment with new poetry frequently, but I've found three "frames" for content-driven poetry that help students capture details from the unit and herd those facts into poetry. The frames I use most often are: Metaphor poem, "Write that I..." poem, and the "Mirror" poem. With each of the poems, I find a pause point during the first quarter when I introduce the poetry format by encouraging students to write a "gift" poem about someone in their life. Daniel Clark-Rizzio's poem about "Grandpa Joe" provides a model of the metaphorical poem. I use the same procedure as I move through the exercise whether it is personal or literary: Steep students in the models, point out key features in the poems, write, and share in a read-around about form and content.

## Metaphor Poems

I begin by reading Don Pendleton and Lila Johnson's poems about Celie. As we read each poem, I ask, "What comparison does the writer use?" Students point out that Don Pendleton compares Celie to the floor, then to the ceiling. I ask: "What is he saying about her? What does that metaphor imply about how Celie changes?" As we move to Lila Johnson's poem, we talk about how Lila compares Celie to a worn record "full of cracked songs . . . the one your liquor-heavy fingers find." I ask, "What story does Lila tell us through this metaphor?" As we examine

and talk about the poems, I encourage students to notice that Lila's comparison isn't random; she informs the reader about Celie's life.

We look at how the initial metaphor in Lila's poem—Celie is a record—is expanded by the vocabulary and language the writer chooses: cracked songs, jackets, golden sounds, record. As a class, we brainstorm metaphors for the character and play with expanding the language in the same way Lila and Don did in their poems. In *Their*

*Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, I asked, "How would you describe Janie's relationship with her husbands?" Kirk said she was like a possession for Joe. He wanted to show her off. "How would you draw that? What metaphor could you use to show that relationship?" Stephanie said Janie was like a ring on Joe's finger. Emma said Joe put her on pedestal, which kept her away from the other people in town. "So if she's a ring or she's on a pedestal, what other words would you use to extend the poem? What words go with ring and pedestal? Look back at how Lila used words related to records. What words can you use? List those

words and then weave those words in as you write your poem."

Once students have a sense of how to proceed with the poem, I pass out paper and crayons, which is always a big hit in the high school classroom. I ask students to create a metaphorical drawing for one of the characters (literary or historical depending on the unit). I say: "I'm not concerned about your artistic ability. I want to see your thinking about the characters. Think metaphorically." I've discovered that the time students spend drawing allows them to think more deeply about their work. It's not unusual for students to get stuck, so as I travel around the room, I ask a few students to share their drawings and discuss the comparison in order to get other students started.

---

*Sometimes writing  
a poem or interior  
monologue from history  
or literature can create  
a space in the classroom  
for a different way of  
knowing, a different way  
of expressing knowledge  
about a fictional  
character or a historical  
decision.*

---

After students create their metaphorical drawings, they expand the language of the metaphor in the same way that Don and Lila did in their poetry. I say: “On the back of your paper, write an explanation of your metaphor. Then list the vocabulary or language to expand the metaphor. If it’s a garden, go for flowers, hose, water, vegetables, etc.” Students share their drawings and metaphors in a quick whip around the classroom. I encourage classmates to help those who are struggling with the expansion and vocabulary. By this time, the students who were stuck have a good idea of how to proceed.

Then students write their poems. I encourage them to look back at the models. “When you are not sure how to move forward, look back at how Lila, Don, Jessica, and others wrote their poems [see examples]. Think about whether you want to use first person like Lila and Don. If you do, then you begin your poem with either the name or the metaphor: ‘I am Celie.’ Or you can begin in third person like Daniel Clark-Rizzio, ‘Grandpa Joe was a boxer.’”

The creation of the metaphor pushes students to develop a stronger understanding of characters because they have to explain how the metaphor works. Although I like the poetry that comes from this exercise, I also appreciate that the activity helps students develop a frame for a potential essay.

## Write That I...

Many years ago, I found a wonderful poem about a woman on a balcony. The poem started, “Write that I...” In the jumble of my file cabinets and my moves, I lost the original poem, but I didn’t lose my love for this opening, so I wrote a poem from the point of view of Molly Craig, the main character in the movie *Rabbit-Proof Fence* to use as a model with students. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a film about the Australian government’s policy of placing mixed-race Aboriginal children in boarding schools.

I begin by reading my poem “Molly Craig” out loud. I ask students to highlight the poem with two colors of highlighters: “Highlight the repeating lines in one color. For example, ‘Write

that I’ is a repeating line. What other lines repeat? Highlight the details about Molly’s life in the other color.” Students usually identify the lines “write that I,” and “tell them,” etc. But if they don’t, I point out that the poem uses a series of phrases that help weave the content together: Write that I; tell them that I; when you write my story, say that I. Students are also quick to point



Bob King / Corbis

out all of the details from the movie. If they don’t notice, I show them that I use specific information: Names of people and places, dialogue from the movie, characters’ actions.

Now that they have student models, I ask students to look at how Jayme Causey used the repeating line “Write that I...” in his poem about the Soweto Uprising.

Once students understand that frame of repeating lines—write that I, say that I, when you tell my story—I encourage them to add phrases that would hook their poem forward. “What other phrases could you use to anchor your stanza?”

Then we generate a list of characters for their poems. As we make the list, I encourage them to think about minor characters, bystanders, as well as objects in the landscape. For example, when we studied about the Soweto Uprising, students listed Hector Pieterse, who was killed by the police during the uprising, Hector's sister, the photographer, and a teacher whose students walked out; but they also listed the school building, the flag, the bullet that killed Hector.

## Mirror Poems

Lucille Clifton is one of my favorite poets. I love the way her poem, "what the mirror said," celebrates her beauty and strength instead of her flaws. Her poem is sassy and talks back to the traditional standards that measure a woman's beauty:

*listen,  
you a wonder.  
you a city  
of a woman.  
listen,  
somebody need a map  
to understand you.  
somebody need directions  
to move around you.*

Originally, I used this poem as a praise poem, telling students, "Make a list of what you can praise about yourself: Be extraordinary, go all out. Imagine you are Lucille Clifton. This is the time to brag about your culture, your language, your hair, your skin tones, your brain, your school, your neighborhood."

Using Clifton as a model, I asked students to notice how Clifton entered the poem. They noted that her poem begins with the title, "what the mirror said." Curtina talked about how Clifton personifies the mirror, so the mirror is telling her how great she is. Sabrina talked about how Clifton's mirror is the opposite of the mirror in Disney's *Snow White* that ranks the women. Instead of telling them their strengths,

*that* mirror demands comparison, "Who is the fairest of us all?"

Using Lucille Clifton's poem as a frame, I ask students first to write a praise poem about themselves, as Chetan Patel does in his poem "Tiger Eyes." I give them three potential openings to use or to inspire them to create their own: "Listen,/You a" or "The mirror told me,/" or "I look into the mirror/And watch the history inside of me." Chetan's poem provides an excellent model for students' personal poems. Students can see their heritage, history, or language, and use the specifics of their neighborhood home or their historical home, as Chetan does, naming rivers, mountains, and food. The repeating line "I see" links his poem forward as he stacks detail after detail in lists.

*I look into a mirror  
and watch the history inside of me  
flood out.  
I see the Kshatriya warrior,  
sword in hand,  
the Sudra laborer,  
working hard at his feet.  
I see the stories passed  
under the Banyan tree  
and the cleansing Ganges,  
slicing down the Himalayas.*

Once students have a grasp on the idea of the poem personally, I use it as a frame for their literary and historical poems. Franchesca Naimi's poem "Jackie Robinson" demonstrates how to take the same model of opening line, and repeating line with details, to write about a historical or literary figure. After researching Robinson for her unsung hero project, Franchesca used details from his life to build her poem—from the racist epithets when he entered the field to the fastballs pitched at his head. (See Bigelow, "Teaching Unsung Heroes.")

My student Robin researched Bob Moses, the Civil Rights organizer and educator. He

wrote in the first person from Bob Moses' point of view:

*I organized the Mississippi Freedom Summer.  
I witnessed people being beaten  
for registering to vote.  
I was arrested.  
I was beaten.  
I was jailed.  
I saw good friends murdered  
because they were part of the movement.  
Through the years I have lost  
friends and possessions,  
but I have never lost hope.*

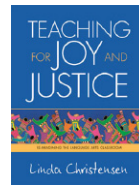
As always, we end with a read-around, but in addition to pointing out what is working in

the poem, we also use the poetry as a way to deepen our discussion about the literature or history we're studying.

## References

Bigelow, Bill, "Teaching Unsung Heroes,"  
*A People's History for the Classroom*.  
Rethinking Schools. 2008.

**Linda Christensen** is director of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. She is also an editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine.



This article is from Linda Christensen's book, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, published by Rethinking Schools. To learn more about Rethinking Schools visit [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org) or call 800-669-4192.

This article is offered for use in educational settings as part of the **Zinn Education Project**, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. Contact Rethinking Schools directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications.

For more information:

**Rethinking Schools**  
[www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)  
800-669-4192

**Teaching for Change**  
[www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)  
800-763-9131

# Student Poems

## **Celie**

by Don Pendleton

*I am Celie.  
I am the cold hard black floor  
everyone walked on.  
People have stained me and laughed  
but I stayed solid under them  
and did not squeak.  
I am the floor now  
but once you go downstairs  
I become the ceiling.*

## **Celie**

by Lila Johnson

*I am a record  
on your shelf  
the one  
dressed  
in dust and age  
full  
of cracked songs  
you play  
when you are blue  
the one  
pushed  
behind the others  
cool black jackets  
smooth golden sounds  
the one  
your liquor-heavy fingers  
find  
on days  
your red-water eyes  
don't know the difference  
just an old record  
you play me  
when you are blue*

## **Temperamental Rainfall**

by Erika Miller

*I am Shug.*

*I am the rain.*

*I come when I want to.*

*When you are on your hands  
and knees begging for me,  
I'll be showering someone else.*

*When you are able  
to exist without me,  
I'll show up.*

*I might sprinkle you  
or flood you.*

*And when the ground dries,  
I'll be gone.*

## **Shug Avery**

by Jessica Rawlins

*I am Shug.*

*I am the sweet breath  
every man holds onto at night.*

*I am the lingering scent that stays  
to bring memories of violets  
and lily kisses.*

*I am the sugar perfume  
that comes on strong,  
burns the senses,  
then vanishes,  
leaving nothing,  
but the life of a stolen thought.*

## **Grandpa Joe**

by Daniel Clark-Rizzio

*Grandpa Joe was like a boxer,  
except that he fought for others.*

*He swung hard at tycoons  
to help the labor unions.*

*With a quick jab to the politicians  
who did not let blacks vote.*

*Grandpa Joe was a boxer  
who pounded on his typewriter  
to let everyone know how he felt.*

*He trained for years for his battles.*

*He fought, sometimes forgetting  
to make himself happy.*

*Grandpa Joe was like a boxer  
who had soft hands when he rocked his kids.*

*He helped his family stay out of the ring,  
so they could watch safely, but never step in.*

## **Molly Craig**

by Linda Christensen

*Write that I grew up in Jigalong  
With my mother and grandmother.  
Say that it was my home,  
No there weren't walls,  
And no there weren't beds,  
And yes, we were poor,  
But when did love come in units  
Counted up in dollar bills?  
When did family become something you could count  
Instead of something you could count on?  
Tell them that I learned to read animal tracks,  
Filter water from roots in a desert, cook over an open fire,  
And find my spirit bird  
Before most kids learn to read words.  
And yet, Mr. Devil calls me uneducated.  
He wants to teach me to sweep, empty buckets,  
Wring water from white people's sheets.  
Tell them instead of beating me and shaming me  
For my color, my dirty hair, my language,  
My mother taught me through praise,  
"Good tracker," she said,  
"You brought us a fat one."  
When you write my story, tell Mr. Devil that my mother's grief  
Could not be counted, not tallied up in his books,  
My mother's grief strummed along 1200 miles of rabbit-proof fence  
And hummed me home.  
Say that I wasn't half anything,  
Not half caste, not half black, not half white,  
Yes, when you tell my story,  
Say that when I'm home,  
I'm whole.*



## **Soweto Uprising**

Group poem from Grant  
African American English, 2007

*Write that I  
Had the stone,  
Cupped in my palm.  
It was hard.  
It was cold.  
Just like the white man's heart.  
Remembering the Afrikaans  
They stuffed down  
My throat  
I threw the stone  
Just like they tried  
To throw away  
My culture.*

## **Soweto Uprising**

by Jayme Causey

*Write that I  
sang as loud as I could  
in unison with my brothers and sisters  
until a deafening "Nkosi Sikeleli' iAfrika"  
was all that could be heard.  
Write that I,  
along with my people,  
posed no threat to the police  
except for  
the threat of our knowledge  
the threat of our desire  
the threat of our power  
marching united and strong  
like a pack of lions.*

## **Tiger Eyes**

by Chetan Patel

*I look into a mirror  
and watch the history inside of me  
flood out.*

*I see the Kshatriya warrior,  
sword in hand,  
the Sudra laborer,  
working hard at his feet.*

*I see the stories passed  
under the Banyan tree  
and the cleansing Ganges,  
slicing down the Himalayas.*

*I see the village Panchayat,  
the Lok Sabha,  
the House of People.*

*I see the deep-fried Samosas,  
full of carrots and peas,  
wrapped in flour,  
ready to eat.*

*I see the river flooding  
in the monsoons,  
the locusts lying  
in the fields of Jammu.*

*I see the tiger eyes  
waiting in the high grass,  
for me to come back  
and relive the past.*

## **Jackie Robinson**

by Franchesca Naimi

*I look in the mirror  
and watch the history inside of me flood out.*

*I see the warrior from within  
walk onto the baseball field.*

*I hear the hateful words from bigots.*

*I feel the spikes of a runner's cleats  
cut my legs.*

*I see my son's eyes looking up to me,  
admiring his heroic father.*

*I see the 100-mph-fast pitch  
drive straight at my head.*

*At last I see my dreams come true:  
Major League baseball is integrated.*