

Breath as Metaphor - Poetry Exercise

Purpose

To understand authors' use of breath as a metaphor in existing works of literature and poetry. Several works are provided from different literary traditions from around the world emphasizing the symbolic and metaphysical importance of breath to humans throughout history.

Overview

This section will require students to critically read two poems, answer factual questions concerning the pieces, and then discuss the different uses of breath as a metaphor. Students may then use the samples as a starting point for their own creative efforts.

Time

1 two hour session for the reading and initial analysis of the given works, and then assign the development of their own creative writing piece as a homework assignment. A following session could be used for sharing students' works and their creative processes.

Key Concepts

People throughout history have considered breathing to be a mysterious and symbolic process.

The breath can be used as a flexible metaphor for use in creative works; also think of synonyms like spirit, life, and air.

Skills

Critical reading
Interpretation of literature
Creative writing

Materials

The two handouts are the only materials needed. Access to word processing software and Internet would be useful for production of any writing and essay products.

Background

There is considerable creative writing associated with breath and breathing, particularly in the Eastern religious traditions of China and India. Teachers may choose to supplement the provided works with other poems dealing with breath. Several searchable poetry databases (such as "Poem Finder") exist which can help locate these works. Many authors have used the concept of breath as a metaphor for life or for other processes. The absolute necessity of breath for life as well as its seeming invisibility in our everyday lives combine to create a rich source of creative inspiration for authors. Other creative works may also explore the issues of air pollution, respiratory illness, and chronic illness that are all associated with breath and breathing.

Another interesting way to introduce the topic is to list a number of famous authors or even celebrities that have asthma for students to get them thinking about this chronic illness might impact these individuals' creative work. For instance, Charles Dickens, Marcel Proust, and Oliver Wendell Holmes all suffered with asthma or breathing

problems. This information and many more names can be found online at http://asthmatrack.org/famous_asthmatics.html.

Procedure

Read the following pieces in class or as a take home assignment. Explore the following questions:

- ❖ Is the author discussing the actual physical process of breathing?
- ❖ Who is the subject of the piece?
- ❖ What is the metaphor that breath is used to explore (if any)?
- ❖ Is this a question you as a student can relate to?
- ❖ Is the piece open to interpretation or is it very specific to a time and place?

Also a number of pieces used breath differently within the same poem – make them seek these out and define how breath is used within the same poem.

The student can identify other uses of breath as a metaphor in other works.

The student can write their own pieces about breath as a descriptive work or as a metaphor. The student can write this as a short story, a letter, a journal/diary entry, or an essay. As an alternative to writing prose, students could also write poetry, *haiku*, and a rap song or create visual art expressing issues raised by the classroom discussion of breath/breathing.

Then the student can present their work to their classmates.

Further Investigation

- Students can be asked to seek out other creative writing literature on breath or air quality-related topics.
- The instructor could lead the students in some simple breathing exercises from the practice of yoga or meditation.
- Even a very basic exercise of this type can draw students' attention to the breath and the use of the breath as a tool for self-awareness.

Student Assessment

Give the following creative writing components to each student as a guide to their creative writing products:

- ❖ Identify the different uses of breath and analogous words in the creative writing pieces.
- ❖ Briefly summarize these uses.
- ❖ Create short story, a letter, a journal/diary entry, or an essay. As an alternative to writing prose, students could also write poetry, *haiku*, and a rap song or create visual art expressing issues raised by the classroom discussion of breath/breathing.
- ❖ Practice reading this story aloud in a convincing manner.
- ❖ Be prepared to answer questions concerning your creative writing product.

Assign points for the following components of the critical writing products:

- ❖ Were the different uses of breath correctly identified?
- ❖ Were these uses correctly summarized?

- ❖ Did the creative writing piece of the student describe how the student feels about breath, air and related issues?
- ❖ Could the student answer questions from the audience about their story?

Breath as Metaphor

I breathed enough to learn the trick,

By Emily Dickinson (American, 1900-0000)

I breathed enough to learn the trick,
 And now, removed from air,
I simulate the breath so well,
 That one, to be quite sure

The lungs are stirless, must descend
 Among the cunning cells,
And touch the pantomime himself.
 How cool the bellows feels!

Questions:

- 1) What is the "trick" the author is referring to?

- 2) Might knowing more about Emily Dickinson's life tell us more about what the poem meant to her?

- 3) Is the author using breath as a metaphor for being alive? For being in love? Who is the "himself" she mentions? God?

- 4) What do *simulate*, *stirless*, *cunning*, *pantomime*, *bellows* mean? Does knowing these meanings help clarify the meaning of the poem? Are they all real words?

- 5) What does the poem mean to you?

Only Breath

By Jeladdin Rumi (1207-1273, lived in what is now Afghanistan)

Not Christian, Jew, or Muslim, not Hindu,
Buddhist, Sufi or Zen. Not any religion

or cultural system. I am not from the East
or the West, not out of the ocean or up

From the ground, not natural or ethereal, not
composed of elements at all. I do not exist,

am not an entity in this world or the next,
did not descend from Adam or Eve or any

origin story. My place is placeless, a trace
of the traceless. Neither body or soul.

I belong to the beloved, have seen the two
worlds as one and that one call to and know,
first, last, outer, inner, only that
breath breathing human being.

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The morning wind spreads its fresh smell.
We must get up and take that in,
that wind that lets us live.
Breathe before it's gone.

Questions:

1. What does the breath signify to Rumi?
2. Rumi was probably the best-known Sufi in history. Why does he deny that religious title in this poem?
3. What are the "two worlds" Rumi refers to?
4. Why does Rumi say to breathe before the wind is gone?