Lesson plan for

“poetry” by dionne irving

Published in spring 2009 Issue



Note to the teacher

Incorporate contemporary fiction into your curriculum with some or all of these components of complete lesson plans, downloadable in customizable Word documents:

* **About the Author** provides context for the story and authors’ perspectives on contemporary literature and the art of writing it

* **Pre-Reading Activities** engage students in relevant whole-class, small-group or individual exercises
* **Post-Reading Discussion Prompts** address the categories of story/theme and craft/writing
* **Post-Reading Writing Prompts** stimulate analytical and creative thinking and writing
* **Further the Discussion** suggests literature with similar subjects or themes, as well as ways for teachers and students to connect with the author

**PLEASE NOTE**: All stories for *Carve* lesson plans are available to read free online (see link at plan’s onset*)*. However, authors hold the rights to their stories; do not photocopy or distribute without their written permission.

Feedback

We’d appreciate if you could take a moment to give us your feedback at <https://www.carvezine.com/lesson-plans-feedback>. Thank you!

“Poetry” by dionne irving

Story Text & Audio Player

<https://www.carvezine.com/story/2009-spring-irving>

subjects

Self-construction, self-destruction, relationship dynamics, transitions to adulthood, poetry, life as poetry, irony

Content Warnings

Sexual situations, drinking, offensive language

synopsis

The second person narrator of “Poetry” takes readers on a journey of the life of a poet from her teenage years into adulthood. She embodies a character and lives out a plot the story presents as inevitable, ending the narrative in middle age with her ultimate failure as an artist and profound estrangement and loneliness.

audio version

Approx. 24 minutes

About the Author

Dionne Irving’s work has appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *The Crab Orchard Review*, *The New Delta Review*, and other places. She is a professor at St. Mary's College, a women's college in South Bend, Indiana. Irving has been influenced by contemporary prose writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Junot Diaz, Zadie Smith, and Lorrie Moore and by the poetry of John Donne and Elizabeth Bishop, to name just a few. This diverse group of writers influences her voice, her narrative structure, and her approach to plot. These artists' work serves as a framework both for a discussion of her work and as a way to understand some of the themes present in “Poetry.” Currently, Irving is working on a historical novel, *Quint*, which follows the lives of a set of famous Canadian quintuplets born in the years before the Second World War.

pre-reading activitY

Individually

Free-write in response to this question: How do we become who we become?

As a group

Make a master list of internal and external forces that shape the adults we become. Which of these forces can we control? How?

post-reading discussion prompts

story/theme

1. Review the many references to poems, poets, and poetry in the story. How do these references cumulatively define the terms? Could poetry be replaced in the story with another art? Why or why not?
2. The story presents the poet as playing a role in a story already scripted and with an inevitable conclusion. Why and to what effect?
3. What do you learn about the poet from each section of the story?
4. Why is this poet increasingly lonely and estranged from men?
5. How is the story poetic in terms of plot?

post-reading discussion prompts, cont’d

craft/writing

1. What is the effect of the second person point of view?
2. How does the writer use irony in the story—both in the narrator’s language and tone and in the plot?
3. F. Scott Fitzgerald declared, “Action is character.” What actions does Irving use to construct the poet’s character?
4. How is the story poetic in form?

post-reading writing prompts

analytical Writing

1. “It isn’t you,” the poet tells a rejected lover, “It's the poetry.” Select additional key references to poetry in the story and analyze their significance. How does the story define “poetry”? What makes the poet’s poetry “good” or “bad,” successful or unsuccessful?
2. Compare the poet’s interactions with men. What do they have in common? How do they change over the years? Why?

You can use a version of this graphic organizer to develop your analysis:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1st interaction | 2nd interaction | Etc. | Conclusions |
| Description |  |  |  |  |
| Similarities |  | | |
| Differences |  | | |

1. Explore tone, or the attitude the story has for its subject, and mood, or the story’s atmosphere. How does the writer establish both? To what ends for you as the reader?

post-reading writing prompts

Creative Writing

1. Write a portrait of a different kind of artist.
2. Write from the perspective of one of the men the poet engages with. How do you imagine he perceives her? How does he perceive himself?
3. Rewrite one of the story’s scenes to have a different outcome.
4. Render the story as a series of panels in a graphic novel. Develop images that speak to the essential elements in key scenes and use quotes from the story as captions.

further the discussion

Literary Connections

* Eileen Myles, Inferno: A Poet’s Novel
* Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*
* James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
* T.S. Eliot, “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”
* Lorrie Moore, *Self-Help*
* Jamaica Kincaid, “Girl”
* Jay McInerney, “It’s Six A.M. Do You Know Where You Are?”

Connect with the author

The teacher may contact this author to further the discussion. Students are also encouraged to leave comments on the story’s page online. Comments are subject to moderation.

Email: [dionneirving@gmail.com](mailto:dionneirving@gmail.com)

* Yes, author is available for Skype or phone sessions.
* Yes, students may contact directly by email with comments and questions.
* Yes, teachers may contact by email on behalf of students with comments and questions.
* Yes, teachers may snail mail letters on behalf of students. (Please contact author for mailing address.)