

POETRY, FEMINISM, AND PROTEST

Introduction

In this set of lessons, students will explore the often-overlooked relationship between poetry and politics. Poets like Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde create vital dialogue about the relationship between the daily lives of women and structures of power. The poems and essays below will be examined through a feminist-activist lens.

- Anne Sexton, "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman"
- Adrienne Rich, "Anne Sexton: 1928- 1974"
- Audre Lorde, "Power" and "Poetry is Not a Luxury"

Essential Question:

- How can poetry serve as a form of feminist social protest?

FOR THE TEACHER: ADRIENNE RICH AND ANNE SEXTON

1. Explain to students that after Anne Sexton took her own life in 1974, Adrienne Rich delivered a eulogy for Sexton, celebrating her poem "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman."
2. Explain to the students how Sexton's poem is central to Rich's eulogy of Sexton and helps to better illustrate what Rich and others mean when they try and expand the definition of feminist poetry.
3. Ask your students to read the poem by Sexton and essay by Rich and to complete the attached questions. Then use those answers to inform a class discussion.
4. Feminist theorist bell hooks defines feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." After students have answered the worksheet questions, share hooks's definition of feminism and ask students to consider how Rich's essay and Sexton's poem address feminist ideas or goals.
5. For further reading:
In a 2013 issue on women in fiction, *Vice* magazine included a fashion spread of seven models depicting famous female writers who died by suicide, but without any mention of the writers' works. While the spread was panned by critics, it nonetheless reinforced the idea that women poets' suicides are something to be celebrated or marveled at. Ask your students to read the following articles, and compare them to Adrienne Rich's stance on the ways in which the suicides of women writers are romanticized.
 - Danielle Nelson, "[Turning Famous Women Writers Who Committed Suicide into a 'Lookbook.'](#)" *Ms.* 9 July 2013.
 - Jenna Sauers, "[Vice Published a Fashion Spread of Female Writer Suicides,](#)" *Jezebel*, 17 June 2013.

FOR THE TEACHER: AUDRE LORDE

1. Introduce Audre Lorde's short essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" in which she privileges the experiences of women over Eurocentric, patriarchal, and capitalist ideology. In her essay, she sets up a theoretical framework through which to read and understand poetry.
2. Assign Lorde's essay, as well as her poem "Power," and ask your students to complete the worksheet questions. The questions can be used to inform a class discussion.

STUDENT WORKSHEET

POETRY, FEMINISM, AND PROTEST

ADRIENNE RICH AND ANNE SEXTON

“Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman”

1. What is the central idea of Sexton’s poem?
2. Who is the speaker in the poem?
3. What are the images Sexton uses?
4. What is the meaning behind the term “String Bean”?
5. What is Sexton trying to convey to the reader?
6. Are there any symbols within the poem? If so, what are they?

“Anne Sexton: 1928-1974”

1. Rich mentions that Sexton read her poem “Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman” at a read-in against the Vietnam War. What significance does the poem take on within this particular context?
2. Rich writes: “Her head was often patriarchal, but in her blood and her bones, Anne Sexton knew.” What did Sexton know? Look up the word “patriarchal” if it is unfamiliar to you.
3. Identify the four ways Rich believes women “destroy” themselves. How are these actions self-destructive?

STUDENT WORKSHEET

POETRY, FEMINISM, AND PROTEST

AUDRE LORDE

“Poetry is Not a Luxury”

1. *Luxury* is defined as a condition of great comfort, ease, and wealth, and something that is unnecessary. Before thinking about Lorde’s argument in “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” identify one or two reasons why poetry might be considered a luxury.
2. Lorde argues that poetry “forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.” How does poetry help us to predicate or build our hopes and dreams? How is “survival and change” made into language, ideas, and action?
3. What does Lorde mean when she says poetry is *not* a luxury?
4. What does she think poetry is or should be?

“Power”

1. Define the terms *poetry* and *rhetoric*.
2. What are the important distinctions between these two terms?
3. What meanings do these terms take on in Lorde’s poem?
4. How is “poetry” like killing one’s self? How is “rhetoric” like killing one’s children?
5. Which characters in the poem seem to have power? Which characters seem to lack power?
6. Identify images in the poem and discuss the feelings or ideas they evoke.
7. Read Jim Dwyer’s *New York Times* article about the police killing Lorde references in the poem (see link below). What comment does the poem “Power” seem to make on the shooting death of Clifford Glover and the trial of police officer Thomas Shea?

Jim Dwyer, *New York Times* “A Police Shot to a Boy’s Back in Queens, Echoing since 1973.”

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