

Learning Metaphor from a Nikki Giovanni Model

Although this is not my original idea, but one suggested by Carol Jago, I have used it with success. I find that the lesson works well when trying to get students to write, notice, and appreciate powerful, original metaphors and similes. The lesson also helps in community building.

First, I have students read Giovanni's *The World Is Not a Pleasant Place to Be*.

The World Is Not A Pleasant Place to Be
by Nikki Giovanni

The world is not a pleasant place
to be without
someone to hold and be held by

a river would stop
its flow if only
a stream were there
to receive it

an ocean would never laugh
if clouds weren't there
to kiss her tears

the world is
not a pleasant place to be without
someone

We discuss the poem, what it means, etc. and Giovanni's use of metaphor to develop idea. Then I tell students we are going to write a class poem with each student contributing a metaphor stanza that continues to develop Giovanni's idea.

I have students write more than one metaphor, so they can choose the best to add to the class poem. Also, on the odd chance that one student's metaphor might be too close to another student's metaphor, there are other choices.

When the students have completed writing the metaphors, we write the class poem(s). I provide large sheets of butcher paper on which each group can write its version of Giovanni's poem. As Jago suggests, the groups entitle their poem(s):

The World Is Not A Pleasant Place to Be
by Poetry and Drama Students
Inspired by Nikki Giovanni
(or With Special Thanks to Nikki Giovanni)

The poems begin with Giovanni's first stanza and end with her last. The developing stanzas are the students' metaphors. I make certain that each student either initials her or his stanza or signs her or his name to the group's poem, so readers can identify the poet of each stanza. After the students complete their group poems, I have them hang their poems out in the corridor to share with the entire student body.

As Jago indicates, I give students notecards and ask them to read each poem and to comment about a stanza that they thought was effective, unique or interesting. Then I give those comment cards to

the student poet(s) who wrote the stanza(s). I ask poets who receive cards to share the comments with the rest of us, so we can hear what the class thinks about effective metaphors.

Another activity that works well is to have students give a choral reading of their poem after they have it on the butcher paper. This year my students had a poetry coffeehouse for the public at the New York Mills Cultural Center, and we began the evening with a choral reading of our combined poems. The class and I discussed how next year it would be a good idea to have members of the audience write metaphor stanzas to the poem and have them end the evening with their version of Nikki Giovanni's poem. I am having another coffeehouse this spring, so I might try it then.

Here are some stanzas written by my students and me:

An autumn leaf would not
dare drop
from its branch
if the good ground
were not below to break
its fall.

Grass would never wave
if the wind weren't there
to blow it.

Stars would not shine
if night wasn't there
to grace their beauty.

Trees would not wave
if the winds weren't there
to caress them.

There would be no clouds
if the sky weren't there
to hold them.

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Presented at MCTE Spring Conference BPN Plenary Session, 4/26/02