II. Literature-based Lesson

This activity is meant for high school English students in grades 9 and 10.

By Melissa Butcher

This literature-based lesson contains an excerpt from the novel *Krik? Krak!*


Translated from its original French, this novel is a collection of stories about Haitian women and connected through common threads of love, hardship, loss, persecution, and creation. The selection focused upon by this lesson is entitled “New York Day Women.” Suzette tells this story as she follows her homemaker mother through the streets of New York. As she pursues her mother in secret, Suzette also describes her mother’s little quirks, appearance, and even the sayings her mother has adopted over the years. All sections appearing in bold in this excerpt were written as such within the story to express the comments made by the mother.

Yet, here she is, my mother, who I left at home that morning in her bathrobe, with pieces of newspapers twisted like rollers in her hair. My mother, who accuses me of random offenses as I dash out of the house…

* 

My mother, who watches the lottery drawing every night on channel 11 without ever having played the numbers.

* 

A third of that money is all I would need. We would pay the mortgage, and your father could stop driving that taxicab all over Brooklyn.

* 

I follow my mother, mesmerized by the many possibilities of her journey. Even in a flowered dress, she is lost in a sea of pinstripes and gray suits, high heels and elegant short skirts, Reebok sneakers, dashing from building to building.

My mother, who won’t go out to dinner with anyone.
If they want to eat with me, let them come to my house, even if I boil water and give it to them.

My mother, who talks to herself when she peels the skin off poultry.

Fat, you know, and cholesterol. Fat and cholesterol killed your aunt Hermine.

...My mother, who stuffs thimbles in her mouth and then blows up her cheeks like Dizzy Gillespie while sewing yet another Raggedy Ann doll that she names Suzette after me.

I will have all these little Suzettes in case you never have any babies, which looks more and more like it is going to happen.

Background About the Selection:

These students are a heterogeneous mixture, hailing from a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities. By using this multicultural selection, I hope to give the students a taste of other cultures as well as something that might seem familiar to the practices of their own customs. Although this work talks about the lives of Haitian women, this story still has universal themes to offer. Students will be able to read and listen to the piece and begin to pick up on the type of relationship that exists between mother and daughter. These relationships may mirror the students' own relationships with family members, making the story more realistic and motivating for them to read and discuss. This story also focuses on how dialogue and tone affect the reading while exploring how vocabulary, description, and a cause-effect relationship play significant roles in the piece.

Suggestions for Instruction in Content Area:
This lesson incorporates the following objectives in the Assistance Stage of a larger unit on the composition of descriptive and reflective essays:

- The student will read and analyze a variety of literature. Explain the relationships between and among elements of literature: characters, plot, setting, tone, point of view, and theme.
- The student will develop narrative, literary, expository, and technical writings to inform, explain, analyze, or entertain.
- The student will participate in and report small-group learning activities.
- The student will read and critique literary works from a variety of eras in a variety of cultures. Explain similarities and differences of structures and images as represented in the literature of different cultures. Identify universal themes prevalent in the literature of all cultures. Describe cultural archetypes in short stories, novels, poems, and plays across several cultures. Examine a literary selection from several critical perspectives.

From the content area, this story focuses on how the use of style and description play a major role in the formation of language through writing. This activity can also be used as a review of adjectives and the construction of descriptive essays. More importantly, this piece allows them to start thinking about how writers use dialogue and anecdotes in their writing to draw their readers actively into the story.

The structure of the plan is as follows, but this particular lesson emphasizes the Assistance Phase of the PAR framework:

- Preparation: The teacher gives the essential literary and historical background in a PreP activity on the word Haiti.
- Assistance: The teacher then reads the selection aloud. The students read it in groups a second time and establish a jot chart for causal relationships (a sample jot chart is located at the end of this lesson plan). Next, there is a class discussion on the relationships between the format of the selection and the characters. Students also review/discuss how description plays a pivotal role in establishing the “uniqueness” of the mother.
- Reflection: The students brainstorm about one of their own family relationships, remembering quotes exchanged by them and physical characteristics, and they write reflective responses to the piece and their own relationships in a journal entry (a graphic organizer would also work well here). Then students write a short narrative piece describing their relationship with another family member, paying attention to detail and incorporating elements of the selection’s style.

I decided to use the jot chart to establish cause-effect relationships in the composition of the piece. In bold letters, the mother’s reactions to certain topics are given and often tie into the daughter’s previous passage. By having students connect the two incidents, the students will be able to understand the delicate connections between dialogue and narration as well as how meticulously the story plot is formed. Without the commentary, the story loses some of its appeal because the students would not get to experience the feelings, hints, and tone – in essence, the personality – of the mother. This manipulation of language and repeated words helps to twist the story into innovative conversations without the plot seeming forced and fragmented. Likewise, this blend of humor and
curiosity appeals to the students and teaches them that not all writing is boring or incomprehensible. Lastly, this piece lets them connect to their own lives and inspires them to learn about other cultures through reading and to discover other universal themes that exist between stories and cultures. By experiencing other cultures and reflecting upon universal themes, students become more capable of connecting the threads that run similar in their own lives, thus providing them with a large collection of future writing topics and techniques.

Suggestions for Instruction in Language Arts:

This lesson plan incorporates all of the components of language arts instruction. First of all, students listen to a read-aloud done by the teacher. This read-aloud is geared to help them to break down the story into two main voices with distinctive tones. This step in the Assistance phase has been added to allow students to hear the story and to pick up on images, tones, and sounds that they may not have recognized without the initial oral reading.

Secondly, students are compelled to read and discuss the work. By working in groups, students can learn together about the relationships between the voices as well as the characters. They may also point out how certain elements of the story reinforce their learning from the PreP activity and begin to connect the use of dialogue to the effectiveness of the piece. Students in class discussions can also focus on how detailed descriptions affect the credibility of the piece.

I also used writing in conjunction with reading to get the students to reflect upon the piece and to strengthen their learning of the content. By intertwining reading and writing through jot charts, students begin to see the connections and movement of the plot. With this type of reading assistance, they will comment on how one word in a string of sentences maneuvers the plot to another panel of the story without sacrificing the story’s overall theme. Writing also allows students to connect the story to their own lives and relationships through journal entries, and later on in the reflection stage, students get to apply their understandings of characterization, detailed description, dialogue, and literary technique to their own writing, thereby enhancing their understanding of language and writing skills. As a result, students will reflect upon how writing can be both entertaining and can occur from experiences in their own lives – not just from the critical analysis of texts and other formal styles of writing.
### Sample Jot Chart on Cause and Effect Relationships within the Story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause Statement or Word</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Page Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“accuses me of random offenses”</td>
<td>Mother issuing comments</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“watches the lottery drawing”</td>
<td>“A third of that money is all I would need.”</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“who won’t go out to dinner with anyone”</td>
<td>“If they want to eat with me, let them come to my house…”</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Raggedy Ann doll that she names Suzette…”</td>
<td>“little Suzettes in case you never have any babies.”</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>