

A Pilgrimage to the Land of the Self through Poetry
A lesson by Aimee Hendrix

Grade level: High School

Subject: English

Generalizations:

A significant element of identity is comprised of the place or places one encounters in life. Place can refer to a geographic entity, the site of an activity, or a metaphoric location. Exploring place will lead to a greater sense of the self; it is also helpful in expressing one's self to others. Experimentation with the topics, forms, and devices of other writers is an engaging and challenging way to build writing skills for struggling, progressing, and accomplished student writers. Multi-step writing processes create quality and depth in writing.

Guiding Questions:

What places are important to you? Why?
What is Natasha Trethewey's tone in "Pilgrimage?" How do diction, imagery, and details reflect this tone?
Does the tone shift at any point?
What is the effect of the structure and syntax of this poem?
What inferences can you make about Vicksburg, Mississippi? What is the significance of the images in the poem of this place?
What do writings about place show about yourself, Natasha Trethewey, and your classmates?
What is the significance of the title, "Pilgrimage?"

Objectives:

Explore personal identity through an exploration of place.
Analyze how identity and place are explored by writers through a variety of literary devices.
Use generative writing and poetry analysis to craft an original work.
Improve writing through the use of revision and editing strategies.

Procedure:

- Students will start off with a "quick list" in a writing journal. Prompt: *What places belong to you...or to which places do you belong?*
- After listing about 3-10 places, students will choose one place to expand through writing. Prompt: *Pick one place on your list and describe it in detail. You will find it helpful to create at least a couple of vivid images in your writing.* Allow around 10 minutes for this.
- Students will add another "quick list" to their journal. Prompt: *List at least 5 things that make this place unforgettable. Why is it that you can never leave? Why is it that this place won't leave you?*
- Read: "Pilgrimage" by Natasha Trethewey.
- Students will analyze Trethewey's poem for meaning and craft. In preparation for creating their own poem, students should focus specifically on tone, overall structure, imagery, word choice, and syntax.
- Students write in their journals again. Prompt: *Describe your attitude (or attitudes) towards the place you've been writing about. Explain what led you to those feelings?*
- Students will create a shadow poem of "Pilgrimage." Though the student poem will mirror prescribed aspects of Trethewey's poem, it will be about their place and reflect their feelings

towards the place. Requirements could be as flexible as only reflecting the couplet structure of the poem and the motif of place, or as challenging as mirroring the structure, syntax, and tone shifts exactly. In all cases, the “Pilgrimage” will serve as inspiration for the student poem.

- Students will create a final draft of the poem after self and/or peer revision and editing.
- Optional: Students could place their poem inside of an origami house, decorated to reflect the student or the student’s chosen place. Presentation or display works well as a beginning of the year activity.
- Before turning in the poem, students reflect over the experience in a journal. Prompt: *What does your poem about place show about you?*

Resources and Materials:

Pen, official journal (or just paper), a copy of Natasha Trethewey’s poem “Pilgrimage” (Available for viewing at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19652> as of 7/15/09)

Evaluation related to objectives:

Students will participate in discussion and written activities for analysis of the meaning and craft of “Pilgrimage.”

Students will participate in generative writing and list-making as pre-writing, in drafting activities, and apply revising and editing strategies to their poems and the poems of others.

Students will create structured poems that reflect a sense of place and express the place’s connection to their personal identity.