

Lesson on Love and Forgiveness Based on Tobias Wolff's "Firelight"

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Note to Teachers: An Explanation of the Focus on Love and Forgiveness

As young people learn to make their way in the world, they discover the values that will guide them. Sometimes they need examples outside themselves to shed light on their own lives, and often it is through literature and music that they can encounter, grapple with and, perhaps, even resolve some of the issues that face them.

The following lesson focuses on the topics of love and forgiveness, using a song and short story to stimulate reflection, analysis and discussion. The Beatles' song "All You Need Is Love" engages students in analyzing the lyrics as they begin their focus on love. Students then explore the subtle manifestations of love and forgiveness between a mother and son in Tobias Wolff's short story "Firelight." The love in the story shows itself in small and sensitive acts of recognition and acceptance, acts that sometimes appear to be instinctive rather than calculated. Reading and discussing "Firelight" invites students to consider the apparently insignificant moments that can create the fabric of a loving life. Following a discussion of the story, students will create a narrative that shows their understanding of unspoken expressions of love and forgiveness.

Materials Needed for Lesson

- Lyrics to "All You Need Is Love" (Available to read at www.dmbatles.com/song.php?song=15 or www.allspirit.co.uk/allyouneed.html)
- CD of "All You Need Is Love"
- "Firelight" by Tobias Wolff, available to read at http://thegodparticle.com/2004_09/fiction04wolff.html
- Questions for discussion of "Firelight" (Handout 1)
- Prompt for personal writing
- (Rubric) to assess personal writing (Handout 2)



This lesson is offered to educators by the Campaign for Love & Forgiveness as a tool to encourage young people to think about and practice love and forgiveness. Launched in 2006, the campaign combines PBS programming, community activities and events, and online discussions to encourage contemplation and conversation about how love and forgiveness can effect meaningful change in individuals and society. Initiated by the nonprofit Fetzer Institute, www.fetzer.org, the campaign encourages community conversations, inviting participants to connect and share about the topics of love and forgiveness. Learn more at www.loveandforgive.org.

Directions for Part One

Lesson Objective

Students will use song lyrics to explore their understanding of the meaning of love.

Time Needed:

- 10 minutes to play “All You Need Is Love” and answer questions
- 10 minutes for full-class discussion of answers

Procedure

1. Read the lyrics to the Beatles song “All You Need Is Love.” Then play the song.
2. Ask students to write for five minutes on the following questions:
 - How do you define love? Your answer may come from the song or from your own beliefs.
 - Do you believe that “All You Need Is Love” (can) accomplish the things the song describes (for example, “save,” “sing,” “say,” “make,” “know”)? Why or why not?
3. Engage students in a full-class discussion of answers.

Notes: You may offer a definition of love if you feel it is necessary. Here are two definitions:

- a profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person
- a feeling of warm personal attachment or deep affection, as for a parent, child, or friend¹

Directions for Part Two

Lesson Objective

Students will explore how word and tone choices convey messages of love and forgiveness.

Time Needed

- 15–20 minutes to introduce “Firelight”
- 30 minutes to read “Firelight”
- 25 minutes to answer questions in small groups or pairs
- 20–30 minutes for whole class discussion

Introducing “Firelight”

The goal of the following introductory exercise is to lead students, with the teacher’s help, toward an understanding of the effect of the word and tone difference between “She lied” and “She messed up” in the first two sentences and “Circumstances did not allow her ...” in the third sentence.

“She lied” is accusatory, even aggressive and angry, and conveys neither love nor forgiveness; “She messed up” is milder, yet still assesses blame and responsibility, offering only grudging forgiveness. Only “Circumstances did not allow her to keep this promise” refuses to blame her for letting the speaker down.

Sensitizing students to the importance of word choice in a story might well heighten their awareness of the importance of word choice in their lives.

Sentence 3 is the first sentence of “Firelight” and sets the tone for the story.

¹Source: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/love>

Procedure

1. Write sentence 1 on the board:
My mother swore we'd never live in a boardinghouse again, but she lied.
2. Ask students to paraphrase the sentence. Ask students to characterize the *tone* of the sentence. Write the words describing the tone on the board. (*Tone* is the feeling surrounding the words.)
3. Leave sentence 1 on the board and write sentence 2 on the board. *My mother swore we'd never live in a boardinghouse again, but she messed up.*
4. Ask students to paraphrase the sentence. Ask students to characterize the *tone* of the sentence. Write the words describing the tone on the board.
5. Finally, write sentence 3 on the board. Leave sentences 1 and 2 on the board. *My mother swore we'd never live in a boardinghouse again, but circumstances did not allow her to keep this promise.*
6. Ask students to paraphrase the sentence. Ask them to characterize the *tone* of the sentence. Write the words describing the tone on the board.
7. After the introductory activity, ask students to read "Firelight." If you prefer, you can assign the reading for homework. Distribute the discussion questions (Handout 1). Students can work in pairs or small groups to answer the questions.
8. After students have responded, facilitate a whole-class discussion, making sure that students understand
 - what "tacit" and "implicit" mean
 - that the narrator and his mother express their love and forgiveness tacitly
 - the difference between explicit and implicit expressions of love

Note: The discussion questions on Handout 1 follow the path that the introductory questions set by focusing on language and tone. In addition, the questions invite students to consider other literary techniques the author uses to make his story effective and moving.

Directions for Part Three: Writing and Sharing Your Own Work

Lesson Objective

Students will write a story that expresses love or forgiveness, using what they have learned about word choices and tone.

Time Needed

- 30 or more minutes for writing (If teachers prefer, students can complete the writing assignment for homework.)
- 30 minutes for sharing in small groups and as a whole class
- 10–15 minutes for self-assessment, using the rubric (Handout 2)

Procedure

1. Students will engage in a writing assignment using the following prompt:
 - How do you tell someone you love or forgive him or her without using words?
 - Using "Firelight" as your inspiration, write a story in which you create a character or characters who express love or forgiveness by their actions rather than by their words. Your story can be based on a true incident, but you could also create a story from your imagination.
 - As you write, remember to *show* not *tell* what your characters are doing or feeling.
 - Look at the rubric (Handout 2) before you begin, so that you have a sense of what your writing should contain.

2. When students have completed their writing, have them meet in groups of three to five. Each student should read his or her piece aloud to the group; then each group should choose one person to read his or her piece aloud to the whole class.
3. After students use the rubric (Handout 2) to assess their work, they can revise their pieces before submitting them. The teacher can either publish the revised pieces or create a bulletin board display of the narratives.

Handout 1
Discussion Questions for “Firelight” by Tobias Wolff

Directions: The questions below will ask you to go *beyond* observation and summary to *interpretation*. In other words, look for the effect of *how* the words and sentences create the *tone*. Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Reread the first sentence of the story. Then note the language in the rest of the first paragraph – “worse,” “unfriendly,” “funereal,” “smells,” “disheartened,” “coughing his lungs out.” How does the language set the *tone* of the story?
2. The second paragraph begins “My mother said this was only temporary. We were definitely getting out of there.” What is the effect of these two short sentences together? What do they show about the narrator’s view of his mother?
3. The third paragraph begins “We couldn’t actually take a place yet.” What is the effect of the words “actually” and “yet”? If you were adding a second part to this sentence, what would it be? What feelings is the narrator conveying toward his mother?
4. “She didn’t like too much admiration. It suffocated her” (page 2). What do these sentences tell you about the *narrator’s* feeling toward his mother? Find another instance on page 2 that shows his feelings.
5. As the narrator and his mother are walking on the campus of the university, “The light began to fail and the wind turned raw” (page 3). Why doesn’t the narrator tell his mother he is cold? What does his hesitancy reveal about his feelings toward her?
6. As the narrator and his mother enter Dr. Avery’s house, the narrator says, “The first thing I saw was the fire” (page 4). Look through the rest of page 4 and write down three or four details and images that contrast with the boardinghouse life he knows. What do these details and images share?
7. After the narrator and his mother stay and eat brownies, he says, “The logs settled in the fireplace very softly, like some old sleeping dog adjusting his bones” (page 7). What is the tone of this scene? What does it lull the narrator into thinking?
8. When the retrospective narrator (*retrospective* means he is telling the story after it is over) notes that he had spent just enough time at the Avery’s “to get warm and lose sight of the facts” (page 8), to what facts is he referring?
9. His mother at first does not understand why he had been reluctant to leave, but when he says “I’m a little cold” (page 8), she gives him her jacket and offers to take him for pizza. What are her *actions* saying?
10. The narrator says, “I blamed my mother for it, for taking me outside again, away from the fire. I knew it wasn’t her fault, but I blamed her anyway—for this and the wind in my face and for every nameless thing that was not as it should be” (page 9). For what larger things is he blaming her? What details (page 10) show you that he forgives and loves her?

Handout 2
Rubric for Personal Writing Assignment
based on “Firelight” by Tobias Wolff

Your name _____

Characters	Advanced	Proficient	Developing	Emerging	Beginning
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Readers care about characters. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Characters are developed and continue to develop over the course of the story. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Situation is appropriate to the assignment about love and forgiveness.	Comments: 				
Plot	Advanced	Proficient	Developing	Emerging	Beginning
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The problem or plot is believable. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The narrative has “drama”—events that keep the audience engaged. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The conclusion ties up the elements of plot; it addresses issues of love and forgiveness in a satisfying way.	Comments: 				
Style	Advanced	Proficient	Developing	Emerging	Beginning
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The writer’s details make the story vivid. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The story is well-organized from beginning to end—all elements belong. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The story is well-written, with careful attention to grammar, spelling and punctuation.	Comments: 				

Thanks to Lori Cohen of The Bay School, San Francisco, for rubric suggestions.