



College
of
Humanities

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA,
Arizona's First University.

Understanding Emotions with Personification and Dialogue
The University of Arizona Poetry Center
Poetry Center Reading Series
By Cameron Conaway
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Grade Level: 9-12

Time Frame: 1-2 class periods (50 minute periods)

Material Requirements:

To teach this lesson, you will need:

~ 20-35 (depending on student #) emotions written on paper and placed into a hat
“The Falcon” by Taha Muhammad Ali which appears at the end of this lesson.

Learning Objectives:

In this lesson, students will have opportunities to use personification to boil down abstract emotions that they have experienced and express them in the writing of a poem.

Personification: Attributing personal characteristics to inanimate objects or abstractions.

Sequence of Activities:

- (1) Write the definition of personification on the board. Discuss how personification is more than bringing human characteristics to physical, material objects like desks. Discuss how hard-to-describe emotions can be brought to life and be better understood by creating relationships with them.
- (2) Read the first three sections from “The Falcon” by Taha Muhammad Ali:

- (3) Ask students to point out sections where they see personification being used. Reread several passages where the speaker in the poem directly addresses sadness. Reread how the speaker wants to abandon sadness “as the pirate abandons his ship,” and how he wants to leave sadness “to the foxes.” Tell the students this is their goal, to personify their emotion as though it were a real, tangible thing.
- (4) Provide several more examples: “If you choose guilt, you could begin with: ‘guilt sleeps in my back pocket,’ or with rage, ‘what does rage eat,’ or with nostalgia, ‘nostalgia burps at the dinner table.’ ”
- (5) Ask the students to select their emotion from the hat.
- (6) Provide the students time to free-write and encourage them to ask questions.

Reflections: I taught this exercise six times to sophomores, juniors, and seniors. In every case, the students initially felt awkward sitting quietly and thinking. So they ask questions on how to begin. With each emotion I’d ask, “When have you felt this way?” And if I felt the need to prod a little deeper I would. If students continued to struggle (and this was all within the first couple minutes) I would provide them a springboard to jump from, “Ok, INSERT NAME, you said you felt guilty when you said something you shouldn’t have to mom, so let’s begin with, ‘Guilt, you were the words spewed from my mouth that drilled into the ears of my mother like...’” After a starting point was provided, those students that were hesitant to start spent the rest of the period feverishly writing. Students really had fun with this assignment and I spent the class period floating around reading and helping where I could. I had a 100% success rate with this exercise; every student in all six classes was able to grasp the concept of personifying emotions and creating a dialogue. Many were able to finish their poem within one class period. I recommend a second period to allow the students to polish their work and present it to the class.

excerpt from
THE FALCON

1

If ever,
sadness, it might
be in my power
to free myself
from you one day,
then I would feel,
decidedly,
the suicide's delight as he's freed
from all responsibility!
And imagine that I
were suddenly
released from you,
like flocks of the *Sada'* -
the death-owl -
being released
from our fields and skulls...
What would happen then?
What would happen
were I to abandon you know?
Suppose I were, at this very moment,
to leave you behind,
as the drunkard leaves the tavern -
what would I lose?
For me it's sufficient to simply
not know sadness any longer -
not know it as winter approaches
and not when it departs,
not when summer arrives,
and not when the season moves on.
The rivers' vagrancy wouldn't sadden me
nor would the birds' being sent away.
Not even the flowers
themselves
would stir
the obscure shades of sorrow in me,
or the various sorts of melancholy
that always remain a mystery.

Birds,
flowers,
and you, O river -
after my sadness if freed from you,
rivers will no longer be rivers,
nor birds birds,
and even the flowers themselves
will cease being flowers!
For without my sorrow,
at the end of the day,
rivers will only be water,
and the flower
merely a plant -
without my grief.
Without me
the bird will be seized
by night and perish.
And those that remain
after my longing
and apart from my solitude -
a crow here,
a screech owl there -
won't be birds,
and not songbirds.
For...what is the bird
without my memories?
what is the songbird
without my longing,
and what is song?
What is the bird beyond my burning?
Without my sadness
the songbirds are only
a forest of beaks,
a thicket of claws!
The songbird without my sadness
is merely a mass of flesh;
it wouldn't be covered
by a single feather,
except...
for the adder's pursuit;

and no fine down would clothe it -
the sand's gown across the dune -
apart from the kestrel's enticement
and the hunters' lure!

3

And still,
it seems
I really will
be freed of you -
that I'll leave you
and find rest at last!
For the very first time,
I'll give up
and abandon you
as the pirate abandons his ship.
But I will not bury you
in the sands of the shore
as the thieves of the sea
bury their earrings and coins.
I'll leave you to the foxes -
and never return.

from So What: New and Selected Poems, 1971-2005 by Taha Muhammad Ali (Copper Canyon Press, 2006).
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