

W.S. Merwin, Shoelaces, and the Subtleties of Story
The University of Arizona Poetry Center
Poetry Center Reading Series
By Cameron Conaway
Poet-in-Residence
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Grade Level: 9-12

Time Frame: 2-3 class periods depending on discussion

Material Requirements:

To teach this lesson, you will need:

- Copies of “The Ends” by W.S. Merwin’s from *The Book of Fables*
- Writing materials (paper and pens)

Learning Objectives:

In this lesson, students will have opportunities to:

- Individually read, react and discuss “The Ends.”
- Work in small groups (2-4) to discuss their reactions
- Share ideas and personal responses triggered by the text with the entire class
- Write an original short story, zooming in on an event in life rarely thought about.

Sequence of Activities:

1. Distribute a copy of “The Ends” to all the students. Ask them to jot down whatever personal mind-leaps were triggered by the text on a separate piece of paper as they are reading. Tell them to flip the paper over and provide time for every student to finish.
2. After the students have finished reading the story and fleshing out their thoughts, ask them to form a group within their row (usually 4 at most) and share their responses to the story. As the teacher, float around the room and pull interesting student quotes from the air to discuss when responses become open to the entire classroom.
3. Open the discussion up to the whole class. Ask each group to share out loud the responses they had. Ask questions and probe deeper into their responses. For example, if a student takes interest in the phrase “new-found liberty,” ask the student what their definition of new-found liberty means. One response may be, “to mean adult life after the age of 18.” Ask other students to join in with their suggestions. Ask if there are other examples in the text that could point to or suggest a similar theme. Other questions that may be explored during this discussion include:

- What personal experiences or thoughts came from the text? Did the shoelaces remind you of a time when...?
 - Why do you think Merwin wrote this story?
 - Does it present or touch on issues larger than the shoelaces?
 - What are some individual words that carry weight on these larger issues?
4. After a full discussion of the story and a sharing of personal student responses that are supported by the text, move into the writing activity.

Writing Activity

Our mission will simply be to write about something that occurs in life that we rarely meditate on. Our goal will be to think deeply about such topics and in the end have an original reflection about said topic without explicitly stating some overarching “meaning.” Chances are that “meaning” will come from the work after a close reading. Some possible topics to write about could include:

- ~Leaving Chap Stick in our pant pockets as we wash our clothes
- ~The last bit of milk that coats the cup when we are finished drinking
- ~The way frozen blueberries stain our lips
- ~How we feel after a new haircut

An attempt to feel, for instance, what it must be like to be the thin layer of milk that coats the cup is necessary for a story to develop. Merwin attempted to get into the “mind” of the shoelaces in his story.

Also, if a student has an idea prior to a story such as, “Blueberries stain my lips because when something or someone sweet happens or comes into my life it tends to stay with me until long after the moment is over,” let the student write a story *about* that idea, not necessarily the exact statement. What we want is to be subtle with our overall grand meaning, so that a potential reader will read our story as “the one about the way blueberries stain your lips” but walk away feeling as though it was deeper than that.