

Son2Mother

Grades

8+

Author

Kevin Powell

Illustrator

J. Michael Walker



Author Bio

Kevin Powell (born April 24, 1966) is an American political activist, poet, writer, and entrepreneur. Powell is also an activist who speaks against violence against girls and women, appearing on The Oprah Winfrey Show in March 2009.

Illustrator Bio

An exhibiting artist since 1984, J. Michael Walker has participated in more than 100 exhibitions; received a dozen grants, fellowships and residencies; and enjoyed solo shows at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard; el Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, Mexico City; the National Museum of Catholic Art and History, East Harlem, New York City; and the Arkansas Arts Center; among others. As a writer, J Michael is author-illustrator of *All the Saints of the City of the Angels: Seeking the Soul of L.A. on Its Streets* (Heyday 2008), which was awarded Art Book of the Year and Best Non-fiction on the Pacific West; and is co-editor of *Waiting for Foreign: LA Writers on (and in) Guadalajara* (Peregrino Press 2010).

Summary

The poet writes an epistle poem to his mother where he reflects intimately on their turbulent family history. Ultimately he forgives her for her mistreatment of him, nonetheless he does confess, “I am that little boy/cowering beneath the power of/that slap, the swing of that belt.” Powell spells out his frustrations out but even more so extolls his mother’s strength, “someone who fought landlords/and crooked police officers.” The long poem is about family loyalty and forgiveness. He closes the poem by telling his mother that in spite of everything that has transpired over the years between them, she is “the greatest love I’ve ever had in my life.”

Common Core Anchor Standards Addressed

Writing Anchor Standards-Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

Research for Building and Presenting Knowledge

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

READING Standards

Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.
3. Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

Craft and Structure

1. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

2. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.
3. Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Academic Vocabulary to Explore

(See vocabulary approach in Appendix A of CCSS.)

Tier Two

Cowering
Submission
Fusillade
Traumatized
Tranquil
Embittered
Schizophrenic
Exploited
Pre-ordained
Sacrificed
Pilgrimage
Ritual
Myth makers
Doomsayers
Plasma
Stunted
Birthright
Belittle
Mule whip
Gnarled
Walloped
Titanic

Prophet
Slumlord
Number runner
Cringe
Pimp
Aspire
Plantation
Droplet
Shuffling
Welfare
Aggravation

Complementary Poem to Introduce **AFTER** Reading the Text

The Fist

by Derek Walcott

The fist clenched round my heart
loosens a little, and I gasp
brightness; but it tightens
again. When have I ever not loved
the pain of love? But this has moved

past love to mania. This has the strong
clench of the madman, this is
gripping the ledge of unreason, before
plunging howling into the abyss.

Hold hard then, heart. This way at least you live.

Warm-up Questions

(To introduce the story, should be used as a quick write or a journal/reflection piece.)

1. Why is forgiveness one of the most difficult acts a person can do?
2. Have you ever felt two ways about someone at the same time? Perhaps both loved them and felt angry with them?
3. Do you know someone who has held on to anger or hate in their lives? What does this affect their relationships with others? Their actions?

4. What are some ways that people in your life show you love without actually saying, “I love you”?

Main Idea for Study

We must make peace with our past in order to find peace in the present.

Possible Themes for Study

- Loyalty means many things to many people.
- Forgiveness is freedom.
- Love triumphs through all.
- Your family will always be a part of you and your identity.
- It takes courage to find your voice.
- Strength in surviving hardship.
- Life and people are often too complex for simple judgements like good or bad to apply.

Focus Questions

1. The poem shifts in tone and register as it goes on, is there a turning point in the narrative?
2. How did the mother feel about the son when he was born? Do you think she loved him as a child? Why or why not?
3. Was the mother responsible for her abuse of her son? Why or why not?

(The focus questions can be used for a Socratic Seminar and/or a writing assignment.)

Comprehension Questions

1. What does Powell say his mother taught him how to do?
2. What does Powell say he was traumatized by?
3. What is the role of Powell’s grandfather in the poem?
4. How has his mother defied the mythmakers?
5. Why does Powell write the poem?
6. What does he specifically say about his reasoning?
7. What does “too headstrong” refer to?

8. What was Powell's mother's childhood like?
9. How does Powell describe his parents' relationship?
10. How does Powell's mother show her love now?

Text-dependent Questions

These questions may be used for Response to Literature writing pieces. They should not be used as comprehension questions.

1. What is Powell's tone in the poem towards his mother?
2. Why does he bring up specific incidents from his childhood?
3. What does Powell mean when he writes, "our destinies were frozen in those days?"
4. Has Powell forgiven his mother?
5. What does Powell mean by damaged?
6. Is Powell like his mom?
7. What is the role of fear in the poem?
8. How does Powell speculate in the poem? What does he speculate about? What is the role of his speculation in how he chooses to conclude the poem?
9. Why won't Powell's mother ever say that she loves him?

Types of Writing – Exercises & Activities

Narrative

Write this poem from the mother's point of view—write an epistle to the son.

Descriptive

When was the last time you ate dinner with a family member/s? Describe that dinner in vivid detail. Describe your meal—how it tasted, looked and smelled. Describe the people you ate with. How did they act? What were your interactions like? Describe your conversations at the table. Describe how the room looked. Describe how you felt at that dinner. What were you like? What did you wear?

Expository/Analytic

1. Powell's poem is an epistle, a letter, a poem of address. Have students write their own epistle, their own poem of address, addressed to whoever they want.

Is there anyone you want to forgive or write a heartfelt message to?

2. Write about a negative experience you've had that's helped to inform who you are now. What did you learn from the experience? How did it shape you—or, how did you not let it shape you?
3. Read the poem *The Fist* by Derek Walcott. How does Walcott's discussion of love compare and contrast to Powell's discussion of love? Did Powell's love have "the strong clench of a madman" or was it something else?

Possible Instructional Approaches

Activity

Have students investigate their family history and create a family history together with an illustrated family tree.. Students should conduct interviews with their parents and relatives to not only trace their ancestry, but to learn where their parents, grandparents, great grandparents, great great grandparents came from and why and some of the stories from their family's history. Students should record the stories and information they hear in a journal (and, if possible, as audio recordings, as well).

Ask students to then write an essay about their family's history, chronicling the stories they learned. The essay should be illustrated with a family tree.

Field Trip

Visit a regional library with an excellent collection of archived historic materials for your region. With the help of librarians, have students work in groups to research the history of the general area where students live and the families that lived there. Have students collect photographs, letters and articles and work in their groups to piece together and create written illustrations of the past and to answer the questions: How has the past influenced what their area is like today? and What evidence have you found of the difficulties these families faced and their accomplishments? How do you think these may have influenced future generations?