

So, Who Am I, Really?

Pat Lowe, Wasatch Range Writing Project

Summary:

Every individual struggles to develop a sense of personal identity. The three authors chosen for this lesson are no exception. In their writings, students will find themes and situations which may strike notes of familiarity. Students will choose a personal memory about which they will write in order to express their own thoughts and feelings.

Objectives:

- Students will become familiar with selections by a variety of authors.
- Students will identify themes in the writings which have a personal connection to their own life.
- Students will write a selection in the writing format of their choice about an important incident or situation in their life.

Context:

This lesson could be used during the study of narrative writing. The lesson would be appropriate for upper elementary and secondary students; it could be used within the context of health, in the study of maturation or personal identity.

Materials:

- Copies of books (optional).
- Individual student notebooks/journals.

Time Span:

The material can be presented in multiple sessions of 45 minutes each, with periods of several days between for student reflection and writing.

Procedures:

1. Read the chosen book or selection.
2. As a class, create a Venn diagram of items in the book(s) and the personal experiences of students. The contents of the diagram might be goals, locations, characteristics or experiences.
3. Have students jot down ideas and memories in their journal which were prompted by something in the book, selection, or discussion.
4. Present background information about the author(s). Allen Say wrote about memories of his family in Japan and America. The book Share Your Smile is a collection of Raina Telgemeier's recollections of her youth told in the format of graphic novel/guide to personal writing. Cisneros wrote a fictionalized account of her adolescence, and a later collection of stories from her life and travels.
5. Identify themes in the selections.
6. Allow students time to reflect and brainstorm ideas for the memory they want to capture and a writing format which would fit the subject.

7. Work through the writing process to help students complete a narrative memory. It need not be an essay, but could be a poem, monologue, rap, letter, graphic story or diary entry.
8. Have students reflect in their journals about why they selected a particular incident and format. How is theirs similar to or different from the books/selections studied?
9. As a class, orally share responses.

Extensions:

- Students could write several memory pieces and publish them as a collection. The format might vary from one selection to another.
- Investigate the geographic locations mentioned in the selections.
- Students might write a persuasive essay on the subject of independence. What might that look like in adolescents and adults? Which might be more difficult—physical or psychological freedom?

Rationale:

By being exposed to the works of diverse writers, students will be encouraged to explore ideas about the world in which they live, their own self-identity, and effective ways in which to communicate thoughts, feelings and ideas in written form.

Resources:

Cisneros, Sandra. *A House of My Own*. New York: Vintage Books, 2015. Print

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, 1984. Print

Say, Allen. *Drawing From Memory*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2011. Print.

Telgemeier, Raina. *Share Your Smile: Raina's Guide to Telling Your Own Story*. New York: Graphix, 2019. Print.

Selections

Allen Say, *Drawing from Memory*

Comic books kept me at home. I read them for hours and stared at the pictures. I decided to become a cartoonist when I grew up. So I drew. I drew what I saw and what I imagined, and I copied from comic books. When I was drawing, I was happy. I didn't need toys or friends or parents. My parents were not pleased, especially Father, who said, "I expect you to be a respectable citizen, not an artist, and that means you'll have to earn a living! Artists are lazy and scruffy people—they are not respectable." (pp. 8,9)

I was sent to the local grammar school and put in Mrs. Morita's class. I was in first grade. Mrs. Morita said that my ability to draw was a wonderful talent. No one had told me that before. She entered one of my drawings in a contest and it won first place. (p. 13)

I was going into the sixth grade, time to prepare for middle school, and all the good schools were in Tokyo. [He was sent to live with his mother's mother.] Grandmother had lived alone until I came, and I made her unhappy. "Drawing again!" she would say. "You'll never amount to anything!" She sounded just like my father, who believed artists were unrespectable. (pp. 14,15)

[Allen was allowed to live on his own at age twelve and had a famous cartoonist, Noro Shinpei as a sensei or mentor who made his apprentices into cartoon characters. He mispronounced the characters for the last name, Say, and called Allen Kiyoi-san. Later in life a reporter asked]

"What was Kiyoi-san like when he first came to you?" Sensei replied, "He came to me as a man wearing a mask of a boy." Looking back from where I am today, I see Sensei as a boy who wore a mask of a man. When I finished the illustrations for this book, I sent Chieko-san [Shinpei's younger daughter] the original drawing of her mother. She thanked me and wrote: "About one year before my father died at age eight-seven on February 20, 2002, I asked him if there was anything he wanted to do. He looked at me steadily and said, 'Kiyoi is the treasure of my life. I want to work on a book with him.'" This is that book. (p. 63)

Sandra Cisneros, *The House On Mango Street*

Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun from my school passed by and saw me playing out front. The laundromat downstairs had been boarded up because it had been robbed two days before... Where do you live? She asked. There, I said pointing up to the third floor. You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. *There*. I lived *there*. I nodded. I knew then I had to have a house... The house on Mango Street isn't it. (pp. 4,5)

The boys and girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours... Someday I will have a best friend all my own. One I can tell my secrets to. One who will understand my jokes without my having to explain them. Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor. (pp. 8,9)

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. ... It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. ... She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window. (pp. 10,11)

Cathy who is queen of cats ... You want a friend, she says. Okay I'll be your friend. But only until next Tuesday. That's when we move away. Got to. Then as if she forgot I just moved in, she said the neighborhood is getting bad. ...they'll just have to move a little farther away every time people like us keep moving in. (p. 13)

You know what you are Esperanza? You are like the Cream of Wheat cereal. You're like the lumps. (p. 37)

Everything is holding its breath inside me. Everything is waiting to explode like Christmas. I want to be all shiny and new. I want to sit out bad at night, a boy around my neck and the wind under my skirt. Not this way, every evening talking to the trees, leaning out my window, imagining what I can't see. (p. 73)

I am an ugly daughter. I am the one nobody comes for. ... I have decided not to grow up tame... I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate. (pp. 88, 89)

Sandra Cisneros, *A House of My Own*

A house for me has been a lifelong dream. ... A house for me is this freedom to be. ... A house is about the safety and privacy of doing what others might think odd, or eccentric, or wrong and as I live alone and there is no one to tell me "You can't do that!" it's the richest indulgence I know next to writing. (p.178)

You can tell I've been poor; I over-glamorize my body, my house. I take my house personally. I take my art collection personally, too. Overcompensation, perhaps. I recognize it in some houses, in some people who are like me. A house for me is a space to reinvent oneself, like putting on a new dress. (185)

Raina Telgemeier, *Share Your Smile: Raina's Guide to Telling Your Own Story*

When I was eleven years old, I fell on my way home from Girl Scouts and knocked out my two front teeth. The dentist was able to put them back in, but they wound up sitting higher than before—making me look like a vampire! I had to undergo root canals, headgear and braces. [The dentist eventually had to extract the two front teeth and do experimental dentistry.] ... Oh—did I mention all this was happening during middle school and high school? Fun times! (p. 12)

I created Smile entirely from memory, and really dug deep into my family photo albums for inspiration. ... I really did wear this outfit on my first day of high school. But I was wearing white Keds, not black shoes with cool fat laces as I drew in the book. I got the black shoes maybe a month into high school, and they quickly became part of my freshman year "look," so I cheated a little and drew them into the story. That's what we call artistic license! (pp. 24,25)

It's time to get writing! ... But don't worry if you don't have a great big idea like my dental drama to write about. It can be as simple as a retelling of a funny family mishap. Or an event that was meaningful to you and helped make you the person you are today. It could even be the tale of an accomplishment that made you really proud. All that matters is that your story is important to you. (p. 50)