

Where or What Is Home?

Pat Lowe, Wasatch Range Writing Project

Summary:

Each person longs for home. The two authors chosen for this lesson are no exception. In the selections of their writings, students will find themes and situations which may seem familiar. Students will identify a personal memory of home and write about it in order to express their own thoughts and feelings.

Objectives:

- Students will become familiar with selections by two 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 use in the study social studies, geography or cultural and ethnic anthropology.

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 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). Cisneros wrote a fictionalized account of her adolescence, and a later collection of stories from her life and travels. Lee relates his years living on the streets of North Korea seeking to survive and fin his family.
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 home. Is it a place, a person, a feeling or emotion?
- Students with differing points of view could be allowed to debate about the meaning of home.

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 concept of home, 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

Lee, Sungju. *Every Falling Star: how I survived and escaped North Korea*. New York: Amulet Books, 2016. Print

Contact Information: pjhlowe@gmail.com

Selections

Sungju Lee, *Every Falling Star*

Lee tells of the years he spent living on the streets in North Korea. When he was twelve years old his family had been sent “on vacation” from their comfortable apartment in Pyongyang to an impoverished city in the north of the country. When their food was gone, first his father and, later his mother, left to find nourishment for the family. Neither returned.

Sungju joined forces with other boys he knew from school, earning the name Chang and leadership of their gang. All of them were trying to merely survive, stealing food in the market and fighting other boys who were doing the same. They searched family, called themselves brothers, and slept in the train station or whatever shelter they could find. After more than four years, his grandfather found him in the market and took him to live with him and his wife. A photograph of his parents’ wedding picture in their home convinced him of who they were. His grandparents provided good food, clothing and safe shelter.

One day a man, claiming to be his father’s friend brought a letter which could only have been written by his father. In it, he was asked to join his father in China. Sungju and his grandparents were expected to believe the word of a stranger, who would arrange for him to join his father. After several incidents which stretched his trust and knowledge of his own country and South Korea, he was able to meet his father.

“Home, I whispered in my father’s ear when we finally stopped crying, is not a place but people. I came to realize that as a street boy. You are one of my homes. And this time, I am never letting you leave again.” (p. 299)

Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*

In her novel, Cisneros relates vignettes in the life of Esperanza Cordero. The many short stories reveal Cisneros’ own hopes and dreams of a place of her own.

“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*? *There*. I had to look where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn’t fall out. 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. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn’t it. The house on Mango Street isn’t it.” (pp. 4,5)

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)
... A house for me is a space to reinvent oneself, like putting on a new dress. (185)

“Once there was a girl who was me. ... Every week when I was a still a girl, my family and I would spend Sunday afternoon at a museum. ... Father delivered us ... [and] would dutifully wait for us on a bench or outside under a tree. I was especially fond of the Field Museum ... In my head I would pretend the Field Museum was my house and that Grant Park was my private garden. I pretended I was disguised as an ordinary citizen and that all the visitors to my home walked right past me without recognizing me as me... And when it was time to leave and return to my real neighborhood of crowded buildings and crowded lives, to the little red bungalow on North Campbell Street that would later become the model for the house in *The House on Mango Street*, I pretended I was a girl in a fairy tale disguised since birth as a *tapicero*’s [upholsterer’s] daughter. My museum house was just a fantasy...I never told my parents... How could I explain what I was hungry for? (pp.142-144)

I no longer make Chicago my home, but Chicago still makes its home in me. I have Chicago stories I’ve yet to write. So long as these stories kick inside me, Chicago will still be home. (p. 285)

Eventually I took a job in San Antonio. Left. Came back. And left again. I kept coming back lured by cheap rent. Affordable housing is essential to an artist. I could, in time, even buy my own first house, a hundred-year-old home, once periwinkle, but now painted a Mexican pink. (p. 285)

On Saturdays I walked with Mother to the library. For me, the library was a wonderful house. A house of ideas, a house of silence. (p. 295)

Is home the place where you feel safe? What about those whose home isn’t safe? Are they homeless, or is home an ideal just out of reach, like heaven? Is home something you move toward instead of going back? Homesickness, then, would be a malaise not for a place left behind, but one remembered in the future. (p, 335)

My first crush was over a book, and not just any book, but a book about a house. Virginia Lee Burton’s *The Little House*. My brother Kiki and I were wild about this picture book as kids ... *The Little House* book arrived at a time when my life wobbled. ... I knew what it was like to feel like the Little House when it was sad, afraid, and run-down. I needed to know that, though the world around me was often frightening, I would be all right in the end, especially in my family... (pp. 341, 343)

The story of *The Little House* gave me courage. ... *The Little House* sparked a lifelong hunger for a house of my own, a place to restore yourself from the world that might rough you up a bit now and then. (pp. 344, 346)

And now I am searching for my last house. I imagine one with a high wall. ... I want a house to take care of me. *The Little House* planted a seed without me knowing it all these years. What I’ve longed for is a refuge...a house as solid as the Little House, a fortress for the creative self. (p. 349)