

The Epistolary Poem

Age Group: undergraduate, graduate, community audience

Materials: “Master Suffering” CM Burroughs, 1 Epistolary Poem of your own, ***see reading list

Time: 45 - 60 minutes

Medium: in person or virtual

Lesson Objective: to gain an understanding of the epistolary form, what it can do, and imagine new possibilities for said. Through thinking, discussion, and creative work, students will leave the classroom, with a new understanding of the epistolary.

The Lesson

Before Class: come to class with the following.

1. A copy of a epistolary poem you have written
2. A copy of of a epistolary poem from the poetry world at large
3. Having read the “God Letter” series of “Master Suffering”

Discussion

1. What is an epistolary poem?
2. Whom do we usually think of epistolary poems being addressed to?
3. How does the framework of the epistolary poem heighten the work?

Read and Share

Select 2-3 of the poems that the poets have brought in (from the poetry world at large, not their own) and read them aloud. Following each poem discuss the following:

1. Whom is the poem addressed to?
2. How do we know this?
3. What is the situation of the poem?
4. How does this poem “follow” the epistolary form?
5. How is it challenging/subverting the form?

Reflecting

Now the poets turn to their own work, (the poem drafts that they brought to class) and answer these same sets of questions.

6. Whom is the poem addressed to?
7. How do we know this?
 - a. Make note if there is a name mentioned
 - b. Is there a “you” address? If so, how do we know who the “you” is.
8. What is the situation of the poem?
9. How does this poem “follow” the epistolary form?
10. How is it challenging/subverting the form?

Read and Discuss

Read “God Letter” 31pg - 32pg

1. How is this poem following the expected form?
2. How is it expanding the forms possibilities?
3. How is the title working with the poem:
 - a. Who is the poem addressed to?... who is the speaker addressing?
4. Who is the “He”, who is the “you”?
 - a. How does the poet masterfully present these “characters” so to speak with clarity?

Read “God Letter” 35pg - 36pg

1. How is this poem working differently from the rest of the sequence?
2. What is the effect of addressing “God” directly in the poem?
3. How is the poem in conversation with the rest of the sequence?

Write

The following are two prompts that can be done during the class period or on the poets’ own.

Prompt 1:

With your poem draft and the “God Letter” sequence as your guide, revise the work for clarity. Some guiding considerations: Is there a specific name addressed? Is there a “you”? Are they one in the same? Or is the “you” another version of the speaker? What would happen for the poem if it could not use the word “you”... what if it *had to*.

Prompt 2:

Write the next epistolary poem in your sequence. Some guiding considerations: is the poem addressed to the same addressee? What is there still left to say to that person/place or thing? What if it were addressed to someone, or *something* else? How can this next poem challenge the reader's assumptions on the form?

