

# Stirring it Up with Poetry: "Gossip" by Judith W. Steinbergh

by Terry Martin and Holly Stevens

When students get involved in thinking about and discussing a feminist poem, interesting things happen. Many high school students, especially reluctant or less-skilled readers, don't understand that reading poetry, like writing poetry, is an active process. It's interactive, too. In order to understand a poem, they have to add to what the poet has written on the page-- filling in gaps, visualizing settings, characters, and events in their heads, moving into and around the world created in the text.

How do we go about inviting kids to enter a poem? Researcher Judith Langer sees the teacher's role as helping students develop their own understandings or "envisionments" about a text, through reading, writing, and/or discussion. In *Exploring and Teaching the English Language Arts*, Stephen Tchudi and Diana Mitchell explain that "Such envisionments are subject to change at any time as ideas unfold and new ideas come to mind. It is sense-making, since meanings change and shift and grow as a mind creates its understanding of a work. Thus it is the total understanding a reader has at any point in time" (164). Langer suggests that sometimes while students are developing their own "envisionments," teachers distract them from their thinking about literature by sticking

to an "understanding first" line of questioning.

We agree, in part. Certainly there is danger inherent in any kind of lockstep questioning strategy (as there is in any pedagogical approach, rigidly applied). But sometimes we find it appropriate (even necessary!) to help high school students read poems by beginning with facts or literal understandings, and then moving to other kinds of literary considerations and activities. In our classes, we find it useful to work with poetry from the inside out, starting with what the poem says and moving toward what the poem means.

We'll show you what we mean. We have found the poem "Gossip" by Judith W. Steinbergh, which examines and questions traditional assumptions about motherhood, to be well worth sharing with high school students. This feminist text can serve as a springboard for thought-provoking discussion of such issues as gender roles in families, conformity and rebellion, and individual freedom vs. responsibility to others. What follows are teaching suggestions designed to invite students to move into and around the world created within this poem, including discussion questions, writing prompts, and ideas for exploring beyond the text.

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## Gossip

She was a mother you could count on. She was like the sun and the moon, the seasons, the constellations, the orbit of Saturn, the laws of gravity. She could cope. Everyone took it for granted. She did this for years and years and years until it was like breathing, like getting up, like blood in the veins, and the husband came and went on the train or the plane carrying a briefcase or a suitcase. He was a footnote to the thesis of their lives. So when he left for the West Coast for six weeks, everything seemed as it always seemed, but back in the suburbs, she mailed the ticket to his mother in Wales, painted the trim, took his shirts to the cleaner, cooked a week of meals and froze them, booked one passage on a freighter with no return, and four days after her mother-in-law arrived and six days before her husband was due home, she left it all behind, ruining in one act a reputation it took her years to create, scandalizing a community, stirring up worse than dust, leaving husbands and wives sweating in their king-sized beds,

Judith W. Steinbergh

### Discussion Questions

Though written according to "levels," the following questions planned to spark class discussion never, of course, play out in the classroom in a linear way. Students will move into and out of them at various times--with or without our help! The key here is flexibility.

#### Developing Literal Understandings

- What do the words *footnote*, *thesis*, *freighter*, and *scandalizing* mean?
- Are there any other words in the poem that are unfamiliar to you?
- Who are the "leading characters" in this poem?
- How is the mother described?
- How is the husband described?
- How long do you think the husband and wife in this poem have been married? What makes you think so?
- Where does this couple live? How do we know?

- What does the mother do that is so scandalous?
- Where is the mother going?
- What specific things does the mother take care of before leaving?
- Who comes to visit? From where? Why? -
- What does the poem say that the mother ruins "in one act"?

#### Interpreting

- Who do you imagine is speaking in this poem? How well do you think this person knows the woman? What makes you think so?
- What is the mother's most important quality? How do we know?
- Why is the mother described as being "like the sun/and the moon, the seasons, the constellations, the orbit/or Saturn, the laws of gravity" (1-3)? What does this contribute to our understanding of who she is, and what place she holds in her family?
- What does it mean for the husband to be "a footnote to the thesis of their lives"? To

whom does "their" refer here? if he was the footnote, who or what was the thesis?

--Why aren't the characters named in this poem?

--Why does Steinbergh refer to the woman as "a mother" and the man as "the husband," rather than referring to them as "mother and father" or "husband and wife"?

--Why does the mother leave?

--How could the woman's action scandalize a community? What did her action stir up "worse than dust"?

--Why is the mother's action at the end of the poem so scandalous? How did the beginning of the poem set that up for us? - How do you interpret the lines "leaving husbands and wives sweating in their king-sized beds"?

--Why do you think Steinbergh chose to write this as a prose poem, rather than as a formally structured poem? What does this choice of form contribute to the meaning? In what ways does form reinforce content here?

--Note the "column" shape of the piece. What do you know about gossip columns? -- Why is the poem so regular and uninterrupted? What does this suggest about the mother's experience in the marriage and family and suburbs?

--Why do you think the poem is titled "Gossip"?

--Read the poem silently again to yourself, and see if you can raise a question about it that you have now that you did not have about it at first.

### Relating

--How do you feel about what the mother did? Do you understand why she left?

--Do you feel differently about her leaving than you do about a father leaving a family? Explain.

--Do you agree that the mother "ruined" her reputation by leaving? Or does the poet mean that ironically? Look for evidence

near the end of the poem to support your view.

--With which character in the poem are you most sympathetic? Why?

--Identify some of the issues raised by the poem. Then think about and discuss whose issues they are.

### **Writing Prompts**

#### Relating

--Does the poet's description of the mother in this poem reflect qualities you see in your mother? Which qualities, exactly? Explain.

--In your family, does "everyone take it for granted" that Mom can "cope"? Think about times when everyone was sick (even your mom), or when lots of things had to get done all at once and your mom took care of everything.

--Are there any aspects of the poet's description of the husband in this poem that fit your dad? Which ones?

--Rewrite this poem in a different form and see what happens. Type it as a prose paragraph or draft it as a sonnet or haiku, for instance. Try rewriting it as a newspaper article. What happens to its meaning (and to your interpretation) when the form is altered? Why?

#### Analyzing

--Have you, or has anyone you know, experienced a parent walking out? What is your perspective on such an action?

--Have you ever felt like walking away from a relationship which had become routine or in which you felt you were being taken for granted? Did you stay or did you go? Why?

--Can you imagine that it would be possible for you to do something like the woman in the poem did? Under what circumstance? Why or why not?

--What do you think of "traditional" relationships in which a woman stays home to be a wife and mother while a man goes outside the home to work and support the

family? Is this what you want in your own future? Why or why not?

--Do you think the mother in this poem did "the right thing" by leaving? Why or why not? What do you think you would have done in her situation?

--What might be the husband's perspective on this relationship? Try to tell "This side" of the story using any clues you can find in the poem about his role in the family.

--Rewrite the poem from any one of the following points of view:

- The mother
- The mother-in-law
- The husband
- The children
- The neighbors
- The town gossip

--Can you think of someone you have known who took an action that went against the grain of his or her established reputation? What was the effect on that person? What was the effect on others?

Can you draw any parallels between that event and the occasion of this poem?

**Ideas for Exploring Beyond the Text**

Compose a Group Poem

Have students write a group poem on "Gossip," using the five sensory sentence-starters below. Divide the class into small groups of 3-5 students and have each group complete the following phrases:

- Gossip is like (and odor) \_\_\_\_\_
- Gossip is like (a flavor) \_\_\_\_\_
- Gossip is like (a sight) \_\_\_\_\_
- Gossip is like (a sound) \_\_\_\_\_
- Gossip is like (a texture) \_\_\_\_\_

Select the similes and group them according to the senses they address. Then distribute similes of a single sense to each group and have them pick the ones they'd like to become part of the class poem.

**Quotations Activity**

Hand out slips of paper with quotations that include the word "gossip." Ask students: Can you connect your quote with the poem? What ideas or insights come to mind that you can share with the whole class?

*Holla your name to the reverberate hills,  
And make the babbling gossip of the air  
Cry out, `Olivia!"*

William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, I, v, 293

*I had rather take my chance that some traitors will escape detection than spread abroad a spirit of general suspicion and distrust, which accepts rumor and gossip in place of undismayed and unintimidated inquiry.*

Learned Hand (1872-1961) in a speech to the Board of Regents of the University of New York, October 14, 1952

*Gossip is mischievous, light and easy to raise, but grievous to bear and hard to get rid of. No gossip ever dies away entirely, if many people voice it: it too is a land of divinity.*

Hesiod (c. 700 B.C.) in Works and Days 1.761

*That most knowing of persons -- gossip.*

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 B.C. to A.D. 65) in Epistles , 43, 1.

*There are two kinds of people who blow  
Through life like a breeze,  
And one kind is gossiper and the other kind  
Is gossipees*

Ogden Nash (1902-1971) "I'm a Stranger Here Myself" (1938)  
in I Have it on Good Authority

*Letters of thanks, letters from banks,  
Letters of joy from girl and boy.  
Receipted bills and invitations  
To inspect new stock or to visit relations,  
And applications for situations,  
And timid lovers' declaration,  
And gossip, gossip from all the nations.*

W.H. Auden (1907-1973) in Night Mail

*Gossip is a sort of smoke that comes from the dirty tobacco-pipes of those who diffuse it: it proves  
nothing but the bad taste of the smoker.*

George Eliot (1819-1880) in Daniel Deronda

These then, are just a few ideas for introducing secondary students to the poem, "Gossip." We think you and your students will enjoy "stirring it up" in the classroom with this poem. Give it a try, and see what you think !

#### **Works Cited**

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