

TITLE

Silent Conversations to Discover the Significance of a Novel's Title

TIME

One class period that is 50 minutes long.

SETTING

Standard Academic Literature Class for 10th Grade

The class consists of twenty-four students, ten girls and fourteen boys. This high school is located in a rural town, middle socioeconomic status. There are three students who receive free or reduced lunch. Most students are on track for their grade level reading, however two students read at above average and five students read two years below grade level. Twenty of the students are Caucasian and speak English. Three students are African American and speak in the African American English Vernacular. One student is fluent in Spanish but has limited English proficiency. He has difficulty writing in English but is working on it. One student has an emotional behavior disorder that makes it difficult for him to stay on task and concentrate in class. One student is diagnosed as legally blind, however still has the ability to read large print text.

The district is composed of 97.6% white students, 0.6% Black students, 0% Hispanic students, 1% Asian students, and 0.4% Native American students. 7.1% of the school population is low income, the attendance rate is 94% and the high school graduation rate is 91.5%. The average ACT composite score is 21.0. The average size of a high school class is 16.6.

THEORY INTO PRACTICE BACKGROUND

In *The English Teacher's Companion*, Jim Burke expresses the importance of using writing as a vehicle to drive student's thought processes. He explains how "writing is an activity that forces thought", and additionally that "to arrange language into meaningful units...is to use the mind" (245). So far over the course of reading *In the Skin of a Lion*, we have been doing a lot of classroom discussion so I thought that a writing activity would be a good way to break up our day to day activities. By incorporating the "Silent Conversation" activity into my lesson plan students will be able to use their minds to fully construct their ideas through writing. Because the writing process is daunting to many people, I am using a great activity that I was exposed to through Professor Willis in our Curriculum and Instruction course. The activity incorporates writing by having students read a text and then write back and forth to each other about their thoughts, questions, comments, etc. that they experienced while reading the text. This is a much more approachable way for students to start writing because it is presented in the format of having a "Silent Conversation" with a fellow peer, yet still focuses on textual analysis and writing.

In this lesson plan students also have the ability to discuss with each other after they have completed their "Silent Conversation". The lesson plan also brings together two very different texts for students to analyze and pull connections from together. I am implementing these practices into my lesson plan because of Burke's promoting for "text-based collaborative learning", which he describes as "students interacting with one another around a variety of texts" (33). In this lesson plan students first silently read, then they silently write, and finally they

actively discuss. This incorporates reading and writing in a collaborative fashion to improve student learning.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will take a closer look at the title of the novel they are reading and analyze its importance by reading a supplemental text.
- Students will be exposed to a new text and “discuss” its important with a peer through the “Silent Conversation” activity.
- Students will practice a new method of partner work that prohibits talking and promotes students to practice and develop their explanation skills through writing.
- Students will analyze significant events from the novel to support their reasoning of why the author chose the title that he did.

MATERIALS

- 24 copies of *In the Skin of a Lion*
- 24 copies of the summary of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*
- 24 copies of the “Silent Conversation Sheet”

PREPARATION

In order to prepare for this lesson, the previous class period I will tell students that they need to come prepared to class with their novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*. Students should also be on track with their reading schedule, therefore students should have read through Book Two by now. For class to run smoothly I need to have made enough copies of handouts on the summary of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and copies made of the “Silent Conversation Sheet”.

PROCEDURE

Opening

I will ask students to take out their novels, *In the Skin of the Lion*. I will explain to students that Michael Ondaatje got the name of his book from the famous epic poem, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is one of the earliest surviving works of literature. I will ask students to turn to the page just before the Contents Page. On this page is a quote from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which includes the phrase that is the title of Michael Ondaatje’s novel. I will ask for a student to volunteer to read this excerpt to the class. At this point I will pass out a handout to each student called “Silent Conversation Sheet”. I will read the directions for PART 1 aloud to the class. The text that students will be responding to is the summary of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. I will walk around the classroom and pair off students to work together, while asking each group to take out a piece of paper. Then I will pass out a handout of the summary of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to each student and ask each pair of students to tell me who will be Partner #1 and who will be Partner #2. I will ask students if they have any questions before I let them get started on PART 1 of the silent conversation activity. I will tell students that they will have about 20 minutes to read the summary silently and complete the activity with their partners. I will inform students to NOT start Part 2 until I directly ask them to. (7-9 minutes)

Body

I will occasionally circulate the room while students are reading and completing the activity, making sure that students are on task. I will also observe whether or not it looks like students will need more time to complete the activity. (25 minutes)

After the 20 minutes have elapsed I will ask students to talk generally with their about the silent conversation that they have just written. Then I will ask students to take out some type of highlighting utensil and have each partner highlight or mark their 4 substantive opinions/comments that they made throughout the silent conversation. Once I have observed that all students have completed this, I will read PART 2 of the handout aloud to students. I will then tell students that they will have about 10 minutes or the remainder of the class period to complete PART 2. (15 minutes)

Closing

Once students are beginning to finish up, I will ask that students turn in their papers to the front of the classroom. Students will be dismissed at the bell. (~1 minutes)

DISCUSSION IDEAS

Leading questions for during the lesson:

- What are some questions or thoughts you had about last night's reading that you want to clarify or discuss before we begin class?
- How important is the title of a novel to you when selecting a new book to read?
- What was your initial reaction to the title of this novel?

Concluding questions for after the lesson:

- Did you enjoy completing the "Silent Conversation" activity or would you have preferred a group discussion? Why or why not?
- Has your initial impression of the title of novels changed after today's class? Why or why not?
- What is the significance of authors borrowing quotes from other famous works of literature?

LANGUAGE/S ACCOMMODATIONS

In order to accommodate for the students who speak African American English I will tell them to write this "Silent Conversation" in standard English as best that they can in order for their partner to understand what they are writing. I will be a little bit more lenient when grading their papers for grammar and spelling.

For the student whose first language is Spanish I will have a translated copy of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* summary for the student to read in Spanish. I will also provide this student and the student's partner with a laptop for them to write their student conversation. The Spanish speaker will be allowed to type his response in Spanish and then use Google translator to translate it into English for his partner to read. Although I recognize that this does not promote the student's understanding and practice of English in the best way possible my goal for this lesson is for the student to be included and be able to participate in the conversation with a classmate and this

will be the most effective way for the students to communicate without hindering the learning of the Spanish speaker's partner. I will have each student bold face their main points and send the document to me electronically so that I can grade it. I will also be more lenient when grading their "Silent Conversation" because I will factor in the excess time that it took to translate the responses back and forth from Spanish to English and English to Spanish. I will also be more lenient when grading spelling and grammar.

SPECIAL EDUCATION ACCOMMODATIONS

In order to accommodate for the student with the emotional disability I will make sure that I remind the class of how much time students have to complete each task so that the student is not surprised when I expect the class to be finished with particular components of the assignment. This will maintain a safe and comfortable environment for the student. I will also be pairing students up so that this student will not have to worry about having to find a partner or if anyone does not pick the student to be partners. This will lessen the stress of the assignment for this student.

In order to accommodate for the student who is diagnosed as legally blind, I will enlarge the text for her copies of the "Silent Conversation" handout and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* summary. For this student and her partner I will provide laptops for them to use instead of writing out their silent conversation. They will be allowed to type it so that the student with the eyesight impairment will be able to enlarge the text of her partner's typing in order for her to read it and respond. I also realize that this process may take a little bit longer for them to each hit four main points, so I will be a little bit more lenient when I grade their work. The two students will bold face their main points and then email me the file electronically so that I can grade it.

ASSESSMENT

In order to assess students' performance on this lesson plan I will collect students' handouts from the silent conversation activity. I will look at each pair's handout to make sure it is fully completed. I will give each student a separate grade, which is why I asked students to highlight the work that they completed so I know who did what and can grade fairly. This form of assessment will show that students were on task during the class period and that students were able to connect and understand the importance of the title of the novel in relation to themes in the novel. This assessment will also show whether or not students were able to find comparisons between the use of the phrase in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and in *In the Skin of a Lion*. Attached is the rubric I will be grading their handouts of off.

EXTENSION IDEAS

- If extra time allowed in the class period I would have students leave their papers at their desks and then have each group of partners shift two seats to the left. Each partner pair would now be sitting in front of a different group's worksheet. The pairs of students would read the group's answer to the last question and then respond with their initial thoughts below the group's answer and sign their names next to it. This would continue for a few rounds until students have had the opportunity to read a few different responses to the final question. When I decide I will ask students to return to their original desks with their partner and read over the responses that other groups left them.

- Another extension idea could be to have a large class discussion about the last question on the “Silent Conversation” handout. I will ask one group to start with their answer and inform all groups that they must talk at some point. The next group that volunteers to go will have to say whether their answer agrees or disagrees with the previous answer and this will continue on until all groups have presented their responses.
- Another activity would be to group two pairs together so that the class was divided into groups of 4 students each. Students would then pick one of the three examples that they wrote in response to the final question on the “Silent Conversation” handout and have to act out their example in front of the class and explain why they chose it to back up their response. Each pair will perform in front of the class.

SOURCE OF ACTIVITY

I created this lesson plan because I thought it was extremely interesting where Michael Ondaatje got the idea for the title of his novel. I also think that a lot of the time students do not pay much attention to the significance of the title of a novel or they view it as the sole reason to read or not read a novel. I wanted to give students a new perspective on the title of novels and I thought it would be interesting for students to see that *In the Skin of a Lion* has a lot of deeper level thinking to be uncovered and can also be connected to events within the novel.

The idea for the “Silent Conversation” handout came from my Curriculum and Instruction course with Professor Willis this past semester. She implemented this type of activity and I really enjoyed the idea of collaborating with a peer but doing it in a way that focused on analyzing a text and writing about it instead of usually just talking about it.

RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

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ILLINOIS STATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS GOALS

Standard 6 – Reading, Writing, and Oral Communication

Knowledge Indicators—The competent teacher:

6F) recognizes the relationships among reading, writing, and oral communication and understands how to integrate these components to increase content learning;

This indicator is successfully represented in my lesson plan because I incorporate an activity into my lesson plan that combines, reading, writing, and oral communication in order to successfully promote and increase student learning. Students first begin the lesson by reading silently to themselves, then they write about some of their ideas, questions, and comments from what they just read. The writing is structured like a conversation because two students write back to each other, while reading what each other wrote. Oral communication is also included when students discuss the “Silent Conversation” that they just had. This varied and differentiated approach to instruction will keep students engaged and motivated to learn.

Standard 4 – Learning Environment

Performance Indicators—The competent teacher:

4J) creates clear expectations and procedures for communication and behavior and a physical setting conducive to achieving classroom goals;

I am able to meet this indicator in my lesson plan because in this particular lesson plan we are carrying out an activity that is new to students. Because I expect appropriate classroom behavior during this new activity I will clearly go over the directions with students out loud and ask students if they have any questions before we get started on the activity. I will also tell students the appropriate behaviors that I expect of them during this activity, such as the fact that students MAY NOT speak while carrying out PART 1 of the “Silent Conversation” activity. In order to achieve these classroom goals I will monitor the classroom, walking around to make sure that students are on task and that they are keeping a silent atmosphere for all students to successfully complete the activity.

COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

I am able to meet this Common Core Standard because in PART 2 of the “Silent Conversation” activity students are asked to analyze why the author chose the particular phrase that he did as the title of his novel. This supports students’ learning by having them determine the meaning of the title (“a phrase”) and its significance throughout events within the novel. Students are also analyzing the cumulative impact of the title by reading a supplementary text, which is the author’s source for the title of his novel. They are asked to make connections about why the author would choose this phrase from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and whether or not it affects our interpretation of themes throughout *In the Skin of a Lion*.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

I am able to meet this Common Core Standard because in my lesson plan students will be reading a summary of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and using this informational text to support their analysis of why the author chose the title he did for *In the Skin of a Lion*. They will also be using this informational text to help them uncover the meaning of the title and its relevance to

important events within the novel. This analysis will also call for students to reflect on why an author might chose a quote from another work to use as the title of the book and additionally for students to reflect on why reading the title of a novel is so important and that it should not just be read once and then forgotten.

Silent Conversation Handout

Partner #1's name: _____

Partner #2's name: _____

PART 1

Partner #1 will begin the conversation by looking at the text and raising a question about it, stating an opinion on some aspect of it, making an observation about it, or drawing some connection to it. Partner #2 should respond to the question, observation, or connection, or react to the opinion. Then, Partner #2 should raise a new question, make a new observation or connection, or state an opinion on a different aspect of the text and exchange papers for a response. Each partner must write at least 4 substantive portions of the "silent conversation".

****All of this activity should be done without speaking. If you do not understand what your partner is asking or saying, then include that into your conversation and get a response that you understand before moving on with the conversation.****

PART 2

First discuss the following question with your partner. Next, below your "silent conversation" write your responses to the following question on your piece of paper.

Why do you think Michael Ondaatje used this particular phrase from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* as the title of his novel? Support your answer using at least 3 examples from his novel. Please use complete sentences and correct grammar and spelling.

You will only need to turn in one piece of paper between you and your partner.

Rubric for Silent Conversation Handout

The most possible points that students can receive for each category are three points each for a total of a 40 point assignment. (Shhh..everyone gets an extra point!)

Each student will be evaluated separately.

Student name: _____

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| First substantive point made by author is identified. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Second substantive point made by author is identified. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Third substantive point made by author is identified. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Fourth substantive point made by author is identified. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| First substantive point made by author is meaningful and thoughtful. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Second substantive point made by author is meaningful and thoughtful. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Third substantive point made by author is meaningful and thoughtful. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Fourth substantive point made by author is meaningful and thoughtful. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| The final question has been answered. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Example 1 is apparent. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Example 2 is apparent. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Example 3 is apparent. | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Correct grammar, spelling, and mechanics are used in the response to the final question. | 3 | 2 | 1 |

TOTAL POINTS: _____ Context

Context for *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Unlike the heroes of Greek or Celtic mythology, the hero of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was an actual historical figure, a king who reigned over the Sumerian city-state of Uruk around 2700 b.c. Long after his death, people worshipped Gilgamesh, renowned as a warrior and builder and widely celebrated for his wisdom and judiciousness. One prayer invokes him as “Gilgamesh, supreme king, judge of the Anunnaki” (the gods of the underworld). Called Erech in the Bible, Uruk was one of the great cities of ancient Mesopotamia. The historical King Gilgamesh probably raised its walls, which archaeologists have determined had a perimeter of six miles. Today its ruins rest near the town of Warka, in southern Iraq, about a third of the way from Basra to Baghdad. A team of German archaeologists recently announced that they’d detected a buried structure there that might be Gilgamesh’s tomb. Though the military actions of 2003 stopped their work before excavations could begin, their claim has aroused considerable interest. Dozens of stories about Gilgamesh circulated throughout the ancient Middle East. Archaeologists have discovered the earliest ones, inscribed on clay tablets in the Sumerian language before 2000 b.c. Other tablets tell stories about him in the Elamite, Hurrian, and Hittite tongues. Over time, many of those stories were consolidated into a large, epic work. The most complete known version of this long poem was found in Nineveh, in the ruins of the library of Assurbanipal, the last great king of the Assyrian empire. Assurbanipal was undoubtedly a despot and a warmonger, but he was also a tireless archivist and collector—we owe much of our knowledge about ancient Mesopotamia to his efforts.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is written in Akkadian, the Babylonians’ language, on eleven tablets, with a fragmentary appendix on a twelfth. The tablets actually name their author, Sin-Leqi-Unninni, whose name translates to “Moon god, accept my plea.” This poet/editor must have completed his work sometime before 612 b.c., when the Persians conquered the Assyrian Empire and destroyed Nineveh.

Gilgamesh’s fame did not survive Assyria’s collapse. Although he had been a ubiquitous literary, religious, and historical figure for two millennia, he would be completely forgotten until Victorian times, more than 2,000 years later. In 1839, an English traveler named Austen Henry Layard excavated some 25,000 broken clay tablets from the ruins of Nineveh. Henry Rawlinson, an expert on Assyria able to decipher cuneiform, began the painstaking, difficult work of translating them, first in Baghdad and then later at the British Museum. Rawlinson had discovered the Stone of Darius, also known as the Persian Rosetta Stone, a monument celebrating the Persian emperor’s conquests in several languages. This structure provided the key to translating cuneiform’s wedge-shaped alphabet. When Rawlinson’s student George Smith rendered the eleventh tablet of the *Gilgamesh* epic into English in 1872, it set off an immediate sensation. This tablet contains the Sumerian story of the deluge, which has so many parallels with the story of Noah’s ark that many people surmise the author of the biblical account was familiar with *Gilgamesh*. Possibly, both versions hearken back to an even older source. Some scientists have recently speculated that the basic story reflects a folk memory of events in 5000 b.c., when melting glaciers caused the Mediterranean to overflow, inundating a vast, densely settled area around the Black Sea and scattering its survivors around the world. Their interest roused, Victorian archaeologists dug up and translated more and more tablets. Within a few years, the broad outlines of the epic had been reestablished, and many more tablets have been discovered since. Even so, the poem is still as much as twenty percent incomplete, and a good part of what does exist is fragmentary to the point of unintelligibility. The different translations of *Gilgamesh* vary widely in terms of details included and their interpretation, but most of them follow Sin-Leqi-Unninni.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is more than just an archaeological curiosity. Despite its innumerable omissions and obscurities, its strange cast of gods, and its unfamiliar theory about the creation of the universe, the story of Gilgamesh is powerful and gripping. An exciting adventure that celebrates kinship between men, it asks what price people pay to be civilized and questions the proper role of a king, and it both acknowledges and scrutinizes the attractions of earthly fame. Most of all, *Gilgamesh* describes the existential struggles of a superlatively strong man who must reconcile himself to his mortality and find meaning in his life despite the inevitability of death.

Plot Overview of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

The epic’s prelude offers a general introduction to Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, who was two-thirds god and one-third man. He built magnificent ziggurats, or temple towers, surrounded his city with high walls, and laid out its orchards and fields. He was physically beautiful, immensely strong, and very wise. Although Gilgamesh was godlike in body and mind, he began his kingship as a cruel despot. He lorded over his subjects, raping any woman who struck his fancy, whether she was the wife of one of his warriors or the daughter of a nobleman. He accomplished his building projects with forced labor, and his exhausted subjects groaned under his oppression. The gods heard his subjects’

pleas and decided to keep Gilgamesh in check by creating a wild man named Enkidu, who was as magnificent as Gilgamesh. Enkidu became Gilgamesh's great friend, and Gilgamesh's heart was shattered when Enkidu died of an illness inflicted by the gods. Gilgamesh then traveled to the edge of the world and learned about the days before the deluge and other secrets of the gods, and he recorded them on stone tablets.

The epic begins with Enkidu. He lives with the animals, suckling at their breasts, grazing in the meadows, and drinking at their watering places. A hunter discovers him and sends a temple prostitute into the wilderness to tame him. In that time, people considered women and sex calming forces that could domesticate wild men like Enkidu and bring them into the civilized world. When Enkidu sleeps with the woman, the animals reject him since he is no longer one of them. Now, he is part of the human world. Then the harlot teaches him everything he needs to know to be a man. Enkidu is outraged by what he hears about Gilgamesh's excesses, so he travels to Uruk to challenge him. When he arrives, Gilgamesh is about to force his way into a bride's wedding chamber. Enkidu steps into the doorway and blocks his passage. The two men wrestle fiercely for a long time, and Gilgamesh finally prevails. After that, they become friends and set about looking for an adventure to share.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu decide to steal trees from a distant cedar forest forbidden to mortals. A terrifying demon named Humbaba, the devoted servant of Enlil, the god of earth, wind, and air, guards it. The two heroes make the perilous journey to the forest, and, standing side by side, fight with the monster. With assistance from Shamash the sun god, they kill him. Then they cut down the forbidden trees, fashion the tallest into an enormous gate, make the rest into a raft, and float on it back to Uruk. Upon their return, Ishtar, the goddess of love, is overcome with lust for Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh spurns her. Enraged, the goddess asks her father, Anu, the god of the sky, to send the Bull of Heaven to punish him. The bull comes down from the sky, bringing with him seven years of famine. Gilgamesh and Enkidu wrestle with the bull and kill it. The gods meet in council and agree that one of the two friends must be punished for their transgression, and they decide Enkidu is going to die. He takes ill, suffers immensely, and shares his visions of the underworld with Gilgamesh. When he finally dies, Gilgamesh is heartbroken.

Gilgamesh can't stop grieving for Enkidu, and he can't stop brooding about the prospect of his own death. Exchanging his kingly garments for animal skins as a way of mourning Enkidu, he sets off into the wilderness, determined to find Utnapishtim, the Mesopotamian Noah. After the flood, the gods had granted Utnapishtim eternal life, and Gilgamesh hopes that Utnapishtim can tell him how he might avoid death too. Gilgamesh's journey takes him to the twin-peaked mountain called Mashu, where the sun sets into one side of the mountain at night and rises out of the other side in the morning. Utnapishtim lives beyond the mountain, but the two scorpion monsters that guard its entrance refuse to allow Gilgamesh into the tunnel that passes through it. Gilgamesh pleads with them, and they relent.

After a harrowing passage through total darkness, Gilgamesh emerges into a beautiful garden by the sea. There he meets Siduri, a veiled tavern keeper, and tells her about his quest. She warns him that seeking immortality is futile and that he should be satisfied with the pleasures of this world. However, when she can't turn him away from his purpose, she directs him to Urshanabi, the ferryman. Urshanabi takes Gilgamesh on the boat journey across the sea and through the Waters of Death to Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood—how the gods met in council and decided to destroy humankind. Ea, the god of wisdom, warned Utnapishtim about the gods' plans and told him how to fashion a gigantic boat in which his family and the seed of every living creature might escape. When the waters finally receded, the gods regretted what they'd done and agreed that they would never try to destroy humankind again. Utnapishtim was rewarded with eternal life. Men would die, but humankind would continue.

When Gilgamesh insists that he be allowed to live forever, Utnapishtim gives him a test. If you think you can stay alive for eternity, he says, surely you can stay awake for a week. Gilgamesh tries and immediately fails. So Utnapishtim orders him to clean himself up, put on his royal garments again, and return to Uruk where he belongs. Just as Gilgamesh is departing, however, Utnapishtim's wife convinces him to tell Gilgamesh about a miraculous plant that restores youth. Gilgamesh finds the plant and takes it with him, planning to share it with the elders of Uruk. But a snake steals the plant one night while they are camping. As the serpent slithers away, it sheds its skin and becomes young again.

When Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, he is empty-handed but reconciled at last to his mortality. He knows that he can't live forever but that humankind will. Now he sees that the city he had repudiated in his grief and terror is a magnificent, enduring achievement—the closest thing to immortality to which a mortal can aspire.