NCTE 2023 in Columbus!

Teach This Poem: “Perfect Pitch”

Taken from the collection *A Place So Deep Inside America It Can’t Be Seen* by Kari Gunter-Seymour, Poet Laureate of Ohio

A Framework for Teachers and Students

**Warm-up:** What does “feminist” mean to you? Is it a description you would want for yourself? Who do you think of as being a “feminist”?

**Before Reading the Poem:** Listen to the song “9 to 5” by Dolly Parton. Which lyrics stand out to you? How does the song’s refrain — “Workin’ 9 to 5 / What a way to make a livin’ / Barely getting by / It’s all takin’ and no givin’” — connect to your warm-up answers?

**Reading the Poem:** Silently read the poem “Perfect Pitch” by Kari Gunter-Seymour. What words or phrases from the poem stand out most to you? What questions do you have about the poem and/or its speaker?

**Listening to the Poem:** Listen to two different volunteers from your class read the poem aloud. As you listen, write down any additional words or phrases that stand out to them with each reading.

**Small Group Discussion:** Share what you noticed about the poem with a small group of students. Based on the details you just shared with your small group and the resources from the beginning of class, how does the poem connect to the song? What do you think the title means?

**Whole Class Discussion:**

1. What is the setting of the poem, and why is it important?
2. Who are the three main characters in the poem? What qualities or values do they all have in common?
3. Would the speaker consider herself a “feminist”? How do you know?
4. What shifts from more formal to colloquial language do you notice? Why do you think Gunter-Seymour chose to do this? How does it affect your interpretation of the poem?

**Interpreting the Poem:** In “Perfect Pitch,” poet Kari Gunter-Seymour depicts the relationship between two generations of women. How are they both similar and different? What does the older generation want for the younger one? What qualities will the younger generation need to fulfill those wishes?

**Extension for Grades 9-12:** Still immensely popular, Dolly Parton has a career spanning fifty years as an entertainer, philanthropist, educator, and successful business woman. In an interview for *Time* magazine in 2020, she explained that she was still hesitant to label herself a *feminist*. Although she’s “not ashamed” of the label, she said that it’s kind of a tricky question. I suppose I am a feminist if I believe that women should be able to do anything they want to. . . . I don’t have to, for myself, get out and carry signs. . . . It’s just that there’s a group of people that kind of fit into that category more than me. I just always say I don’t really go for titles or this or that. But I’m all for all our gals. I think everybody has the right to be who they are.

What do you think being a “feminist” means to this legendary figure? How does her view reflect or conflict with yours?

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More Context for Teachers

Exploring Dolly Parton’s recent comments about why she has come to believe she is a feminist is one avenue for additional context. Several recent articles follow:

- **Is There Anything We Can All Agree on? Yes, Dolly Parton.** New York Times, 2021
- **Why Dolly Parton Is an Example of Female Empowerment**. Baylor Lariat, 2021
- **Dolly Parton Explains Her Unique Stance on Feminism**. InStyle, 2020
- **TIME100 Talks with Dolly Parton**. Time Magazine, 2020 (includes video interview)
- **Dolly Parton on style, stardom and sexists**. The Guardian, 2023

For more on the Appalachian community that Kari Gunter-Seymour writes about, consider *I Thought I Heard a Cardinal Sing: Ohio’s Appalachian Voices* (2022), her edited collection sponsored by the Academy of American Poets and the Mellon Foundation.

Other Authors Whose Work Centers on Appalachia

- Neema Avashia
- Bobbie Ann Mason
- bell hooks
- Silas House
- Barbara Kingsolver
- Ann Pancake
- Breece D’J Pancake
- Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle
- Lee Smith
- Frank X Walker
- Crystal Wilkinson

Notes About the Framework of this Lesson

This approach is adapted from the “Teach This Poem” series sponsored by the Academy of American Poets. These creative classroom ready lesson plans are available free of charge at poets.org. Read more about the framework upon which these activities are based online at poets.org/text/using-teach-poem-classroom.