

Writing Like Sappho (Sapphic Modernism) For Grades Four Through Twelve

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This is a poetry lesson about the ancient Greek poet Sappho, who lived in the sixth century B.C. The lesson aims to teach young poets how to write like Sappho, who is famous for revising past poetic images and ideas in order to create a new poetry that allowed for the female voice.

1. Begin by introducing the poet Sappho: "How many of you like mysteries, or like things that come from unlikely sources? The poet Sappho is a bit of a mystery herself. She lived around 2,700 years ago on the isle of Lesbos in ancient Greece and was greatly admired during and after her lifetime (Plato hailed her as 'the tenth Muse'). Little is known about the facts of Sappho's life, yet many have speculated a history and perhaps even invented a mythology about her based loosely on what few 'facts' are found in her poetry. Believe it or not, Sappho was once one of the first rap stars. She sang her poems accompanied by a lyre at huge dinner parties. Does everyone know what a lyre is?" (Show picture on the worksheet.) "The word *lyre* is where the word *lyric* comes from. What remains are only tiny fragments of her work, and some of these were found in the most unlikely places, like garbage dumps!"
2. Pretend you are pulling a crumpled, dirty piece of paper out of the wastebasket in the room. "Oh my gosh! Look what I just found in the wastebasket! It's a fragment of a poem!"
3. Read the fragment to the class. Talk about how strange it is that Sappho's poems were found in garbage heaps.
4. "Fragment 96" is a translation taken from two sources and blended together by me. Read it to the students from the crumpled piece of paper or the worksheet and talk about its meaning. Talk about what Sappho could mean by the phrase "rosy-fingered moon." Sappho not only echoes a powerful Homeric phrase, "rosy-fingered dawn," but she transforms it for her own poetic purpose. She chooses to refer to a feminine symbol of the moon as a way of expressing a woman's longing.
5. Discuss the idea "Make it new." Ask the students if they have ever heard part of a song remixed into another. What Sappho does is the same as remixing. If time permits, with older kids, read one of Hilda Doolittle's Sapphic Expansion poems (which are examples of H.D. reinventing Sappho) or Amy Lowell's opening passage of "The Sisters" (where she also reinvents Sappho).
6. Introduce the lesson: "Today we are going to write like Sappho!" Pass the worksheet with Sappho's fragments. Ask the students to take out a pen and underline or circle any words or phrases they like as you read some of Sappho's other fragments aloud. Ask students to use these words or phrases as a jumping-off point: "Take a word, a phrase, or even an idea and (like H.D.) free associate about it. Feel free to bring in references to anything: your daily life, ancient Greece, a TV show you're reminded of—it doesn't matter where you pull your associations from. What matters is what these free associations mean to you. Use them as a means to tell your own story." Read some of the sample poems.
7. Write a class poem. Ask students if any phrase really draws them in (if they can't find one, use "rosy-fingered moon"). Ask the class to free-associate ideas or images that come to their minds when they hear this phrase. If they get stuck, find a new phrase and keep moving.
8. Let students begin writing.
9. Share.

Materials: A crumpled piece of paper with a fragment of a Sappho poem on it. For older students, you may want a copy of Amy Lowell's poem "The Sisters" (lines 13–34) to share with the class, or some of H.D.'s poems written to expand Sappho's fragments, including "Fragment Thirty-six," "Fragment Forty," "Fragment Forty-one," "Fragment Sixty-eight," and "Fragment 113," which can be found in H.D.'s *Hymen* (1921) and *Heliodora and Other Poems* (1924) or in her *Collected Poems, 1912-1944*.