



World Words

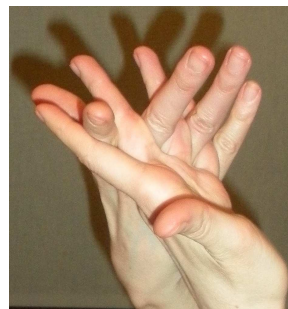
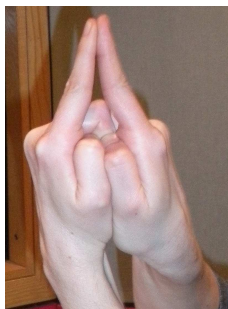
Genetics

Sinéad Morrissey

Teacher's Notes

The Poem

Sinéad Morrissey's poem, *Genetics'*, gives us a wistful recollection of the poet as a celebration of the coming together of her parents. The key line in the poem - repeated at the beginning and the end of the poem - *I know my parents made me by my hands* (which appears in the plural as the final line of the poem). From the poem we understand that her parents are no longer together - *repelled to separate lands* - but that she, the daughter, can celebrate their marriage by her existence. To emphasise this, the poet refers to a children's game where the hands are put together with the index fingertips touching, knuckles of the other fingers touching, and the thumbs bent inwards. The index fingers, children are told, represents the steeple or tower of the church, the knuckles the body of the church and the folded thumbs the door. When turned over so the palms and fingers are exposed, thus representing the contents of the church.



"Here is the church... here is the steeple... open the door... and here are all the people"

The poet makes the church refer to the act of marriage and the turning of the hands as evidence of her parents - the palm of her mother and the fingers of her father. Finally the poet seems to be talking about the future when she will 'donate' her fingers to a future child, and her partner 'donate' his palms; the cycle continues.

Method

It is important that the students do some creative thinking before they engage with the poem, either by listening or by reading. Use the Pre-listening 1 activity first. As the text will be heard as part of a longer broadcast, prepare students for the interview part as well before they listen to it – Pre-Listening Activity 2.

When they have had the opportunity to explore the theme of the text and have contributed some of their own ideas, then they are ready to listen. There is no 'best' way to do this, but the authors would suggest the following method:

1. Students listen to the whole broadcast, checking their activity 2 charts while doing so. Ask them to recall, orally, any words or phrases from the poem after the listening has finished. Write these on the board.
2. Use the words on the board to orally reconstruct the poem, as a class activity, as far as is possible. The important thing is to recreate the structure and content, not the exact words.
3. Hand out the text and read through. Interrupt with questions if appropriate.
4. Allow the students to listen again, this time with the text in front of them.

Now the students are ready to move onto the final part of the activities. These consist of following through ideas or themes.

Pre-Listening Activity 1

Hand out the pre- activities. Do NOT hand out the text of the poem.

A. This introductory task asks students to recall what features they share with their parents. It may be that some students are not in a position to do this, and so the work should therefore be transferred to the third person - 'someone who'. Most students will be aware of at least one or two characteristics - physical or behavioural - that they share with their parents. Let them recall this. Do not spend very long on this activity, but get them to share the information if they feel comfortable about it with others.

B. This activity sensitises students to the detail of the poem they have yet to hear or read. They can discuss similarities or differences between the hands shown as a free activity.

Pre-listening Activity 2

1. Give students the second pre-listening activity. Ask them to read through the quotations from the radio broadcast and decide who is saying what - writer or student. Then they must choose which category the quotation comes from and to write the appropriate letter in the appropriate square (see answer key below). They then listen to the broadcast to check their answers. The listening activity will have been made easier by this process of identification first.

- a. "I understand where she's coming from with this poem - the unity between the mum and the dad. But personally don't see my parents in my hands."
- b. "I think that gives the poem a lot more rhythm and the repetition of the last line ... gives the poem a bit of flow."
- c. "For me it a very optimistic poem. It's hopeful on two levels. It's hopeful because even though my parents are separated the fact of their togetherness continues in the existence of me and my brother."
- d. "A villanelle is structured around the repetition of two lines, all the way through the poem."
- e. "Physically they are separated but maybe on a spiritual level they are still together inside of her and I don't think that there is anything that can take that away from her."
- f. "When I was a child there was a street rhyme and children would do this with other children and say it, folding their hands together at the knuckles, with fingers interlacing together."
- g. "When I'd finished it and was thinking about why this poem had had to be a villanelle, I realised it was to do with the subject matter of genetic materials being repeated through generations."
- h. "I wanted to ask if what she's going through now is the result of her parents having a bumpy break up."
- i. "I looked down and noticed that I have my father's fingers, which are long and thin, and my mother's palm which is quite square."
- j. "She refers to her fingers connected to her palms as how her parents were when they were together."
- k. "This is the church and this is the steeple, Open the doors, and there are all the people."

	games	symbolism	relationships	form
The poet	f, k	i	c	d, g
The students		a, j	e, h	b

While Listening

1. Listen to the broadcast. Students to check their chart for Pre-listening activity 2 while they do so. .
2. Ask them to feed back any words or phrases from the poem they remember. It doesn't matter how disjointed they are. As a class activity try to rebuild the poem from collective memory. Some students will remember parts that others didn't. Write what they recall on the board in more or less the order in which they occur in the poem.
3. Divide the class into two. Hand out the following worksheets with one half of the class (for example, all those sitting on your left) with worksheet A and hand out worksheet B to those remaining (e.g. on your left). Together, within group A or within group B, they must try to reconstruct as much of the poem as possible. Group A has only verbs, and group B has only nouns. At this stage don't let the two groups communicate.
After a suitable period of time (not more than 10 minutes) pair up students, one from group A and one from group B and allow the completion process to continue with the additional information. Allow up to another 10 minutes. Then play the poem again and the students can check their attempts and write in extra information that is missing.
4. Hand out the text of the poem. Allow a few minutes for the students to check what they have recalled with what is on the page.
5. Read through the poem (this can be done individually). At appropriately timed spaces ask these questions:
 - What do they understand by the second verse? (*they were repelled - disliked each other - and moved away to opposite sides of the world, but she can still bring them together when she sees her hands*)
 - What does *quarry for their image by a river* mean? (*Quarry - dig - could mean looking for/finding in their memories, or in photos. Is the river a metaphor for time moving on?)*
 - Refer to the notes about the children's game using the hands in the introduction.
 - What is the significance of changing from the singular to the plural in the last line? (*A new couple - the poet and partner? Children are planned?*)
5. Play the recording again. This time the students have the text in front of them.

After Listening

In this activity students are being asked to look at family characteristics and shared features within a family group. Be sensitive to students whose family situation may not reflect the ideal family group being examined. Emphasise that the family being worked on in the second part of the activity needn't be one's own family.

- 1 mouth; shape of face
- 2 mischievous
- 3 nose; eye colour
- 4 cautious; introspective
- 5 sense of humour; generous; confident
- 6 nose; mouth; eyes

B. Encourage as much visual back up as possible to be brought by the students, especially in the form of illustrated photographs. These could be made as wall posters to be displayed in the classroom. As a homework activity the students could be asked to turn the visual representations into a written text, but make sure that behavioural aspects are well described and it is not simply a description of facial similarities. You might wish to ask them to write about things that are NOT similar between members of the family.

C. This is presented here for information only. Introducing students to the relationship between words is important, but make sure they understand that the not many of the words shown are direct synonyms and that the distance shown on the diagram also indicates the distance from the meaning of the word in the centre. If you have access to the internet this site is well worth looking at as it is dynamic and interactive. If not, and you can get access to a thesaurus book, allow students to consider the wealth of related meanings of words.

D Discussion

In the interview, the poet says that the poem is an optimistic poem. Do you agree? (*open ended*)

Appendix

Group A

Genetics

___ father's ___, ___ mother's ___.

I lift ___ look ___—

I know ___ made ___.

___ may have been repelled ___,

___, may sleep ___,

___ touch ___ link ___.

___ quarry ___,

___ I know ___.

___ shape ___ stands.

___ I turn ___,

___ father's ___, ___ mother's ___,

___ reciting ___.

___ is ___.

___ re-enact ___.

___ take ___, take up ___

___.

I'll bequeath ___, ___ bequeath ___.

We know ___ make ___.

Group B

Genetics

My father ___ my fingers, ___ my mother ___ my palms.

___ my parents ___ my hands.

___ lands,

___ hemispheres, ___ lovers,

___ fingers ___ palms.

___ their togetherness ___ friends

___ their image ___ a river,

___ their marriage ___ my hands.

___ a chapel ___ a steeple ___ -

___,

my father ___ my fingers, my mother ___ my palms,

___ a priest ___ psalms.

My body ___ their marriage register.

___ their wedding ___ my hands.

___, ___ the skin's ___

___ bodies ___ the future.

___ my fingers, ___ your palms.

___ our parents ___ our hands.

Genetics

My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms.
I lift them up and look at them with pleasure—
I know my parents made me by my hands.

They may have been repelled to separate lands,
to separate hemispheres, may sleep with other lovers,
but in me they touch where fingers link to palms.

With nothing left of their togetherness but friends
who quarry for their image by a river,
at least I know their marriage by my hands.

I shape a chapel where a steeple stands.
And when I turn it over,
my father's by my fingers, my mother's by my palms,

demure before a priest reciting psalms.
My body is their marriage register.
I re-enact their wedding with my hands.

So take me with you, take up the skin's demands
for mirroring in bodies of the future.
I'll bequeath my fingers, if you bequeath your palms.
We know our parents make us by our hands.

Sinéad Morrissey

From The State of the Prisons (Manchester: Carcanet Press), 2005.