

Oakland Unified School District ♦ Process Writing Assessment
8th Grade Response to Literature:
“Geraldine Moore the Poet” by Toni Cade Bambara

Introduction

Much of the writing we do in school requires us to read and respond to a reading selection. If the reading is good, we can relate to it even when the subject and characters come from a different place or a different time. This assignment asks you to carefully read a short story and then write an essay about an important idea or *theme* from the reading. Your essay needs to include a thesis statement where you **make a claim about an important idea or theme** you think the reading is trying to communicate. It is also important to **support your thesis with details and evidence from the reading selection.**

The selection you will read is called “Geraldine Moore the Poet” by Toni Cade Bambara. In this selection, we follow a character as she struggles with events in her life.

Getting Started

To begin, think about how you would answer these questions:

- What do you usually do when you have problems at home?
- How can problems at home affect your school work?
- Have you ever been surprised to discover a gift or talent you didn’t know you had? Explain what happened.
- What kind of experiences at school make you feel confident about yourself?

Vocabulary

You’ll appreciate Toni Cade Bambara’s story more if you review the meanings of these words before you begin. Match the words on the right with their synonyms on the left. A synonym is a word that means the same or almost the same thing as another word.

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. muttering (v.) | a. cleanliness; staying clean |
| 2. superintendent (n.) | b. moan |
| 3. hygiene (n.) | c. delightful |
| 4. glorious (adj.) | d. grumbling |
| 5. whimper (v.) | e. director |

Reading

Next, your teacher will read “Geraldine Moore the Poet” By Toni Cade Bambara. Listen and read along silently. After your teacher has read the story aloud, please re-read the story by yourself. As you read the story a second time, think about a *theme*, or important idea about life, that you think the author wants to communicate. Underline words and phrases in the story that show the theme you think the author is trying to communicate.

Geraldine Moore the Poet

by Toni Cade Bambara



Geraldine paused at the corner to pull up her knee socks. The rubber bands she was using to hold them up made her legs itch. She dropped her books on the sidewalk while she gave a good scratch. But when she pulled the socks up again, two fingers poked right through the top of her left one.

“That stupid dog,” she muttered to herself, grabbing her books and crossing against traffic. “First he chews up my gym suit and gets me into trouble, and now my socks.”

Geraldine shifted her books to the other hand and kept muttering angrily to herself about Mrs. Watson’s dog, which she minded two days a week for a dollar. She passed the hot-dog man on the corner and waved. He shrugged as if to say business was very bad.

Must be, she thought to herself. Three guys before you had to pack up and forget it. Nobody’s got hot-dog money around here.

Geraldine turned down her street, wondering what her sister Anita would have for her lunch. She was glad she didn’t have to eat the free lunches in high school any more. She was sick of the funny-looking tomato soup and the dried-out cheese sandwiches and those oranges that were more green than orange.

When Geraldine’s mother first took sick and went away, Geraldine had been on her own except when Miss Gladys next door came in on Thursdays and cleaned the apartment and made a meat loaf so Geraldine could have dinner. But in those days Geraldine never quite managed to get breakfast for herself. So she’d sit through social studies class, scraping her feet to cover up the noise of her stomach growling.

Now Anita, Geraldine’s older sister, was living at home waiting for her husband to get out of the Army. She usually had something good for lunch—chicken and dumplings if she managed to get up in time, or baked ham from the night before and sweet-potato bread. But even if there was only a hot dog and some baked beans—sometimes just a TV dinner if those soap operas kept Anita glued to the TV set—anything was better than the noisy school lunchroom where monitors kept pushing you into a straight line or rushing you to the tables. Anything was better than that.

Geraldine was almost home when she stopped dead. Right outside her building was a pile of furniture and some boxes. That wasn’t anything new. She had seen people get put out in the street before, but this time the ironing board looked familiar. And she recognized the big, ugly sofa standing on its arm, its underbelly showing the hole where Mrs. Watson’s dog had gotten to it.

Miss Gladys was sitting on the stoop, and she looked up and took off her glasses. “Well, Gerry,” she said slowly, wiping her glasses on the hem of her dress, “looks like you’ll be staying with me for a while.” She looked at the men carrying out a big box with an old doll sticking up over the edge. “Anita’s upstairs. Go on up and get your lunch.”

Geraldine stepped past the old woman and almost bumped into the superintendent. He took off his cap to wipe away the sweat.

"Darn shame," he said to no one in particular. "Poor people sure got a hard row to hoe."

"That's the truth," said Miss Gladys, standing up with her hands on her hips to watch the men set things on the sidewalk.

Upstairs, Geraldine went into the apartment and found Anita in the kitchen.

"I dunno, Gerry," Anita said. "I just don't know what we're going to do, but everything's going to be all right soon as Ma gets well." Anita's voice cracked as she set a bowl of soup before Geraldine.

"What's this?" Geraldine said.

"It's tomato soup, Gerry."

Geraldine was about to say something. But when she looked up at her big sister, she saw how Anita's face was getting all twisted as she began to cry.

That afternoon, Mr. Stern, the geometry teacher, started drawing cubes and cylinders on the board. Geraldine sat at her desk adding up a column of figures in the notebook—the rent, the light and gas bills, a new gym suit, some socks. Maybe they would move somewhere else, and she could have her own room. Geraldine turned the squares and triangles into little houses in the country.

"For your homework," Mr. Stern was saying with his back to the class, "set up your problems this way." He wrote GIVEN: in the large letters, and then gave the formula for the first problem. Then he wrote TO FIND: and listed three items they were to include in their answers.

Geraldine started to raise her hand to ask what all these squares and angles had to do with solving real problems, like the ones she had. *Better not*, she warned herself, and sat on her hands. *Your big mouth got you in trouble last term.*

In hygiene class, Mrs. Potter kept saying that the body was a wonderful machine. Every time Geraldine looked up from her notebook, she would hear the same thing. "Right now your body is manufacturing all the proteins and tissues and energy you will need to get through tomorrow."

And Geraldine kept wondering, *How? How does my body know what it will need, when I don't even know what I'll need to get through tomorrow?*

As she headed down the hall to her next class, Geraldine remembered that she hadn't done the homework for English. Mrs. Scott had said to write a poem, and Geraldine had meant to do it at lunchtime. After all, there was nothing to it—a flower here, a raindrop there, moon, June, rose, nose. But the men carrying off the furniture had made her forget.

"And now put away your books," Mrs. Scott was saying as Geraldine tried to scribble a poem quickly. "Today we can give King Arthur's knights a rest. Let's talk about poetry."

Mrs. Scott moved up and down the aisles, talking about her favorite poems and reciting a line now and then. She got very excited whenever she passed a desk and could pick up the homework from a student who had remembered to do the assignment.

"A poem is your own special way of saying what you feel and what you see," Mrs. Scott went on, her lips moist. It was her favorite subject.

"Some poets write about the light that...that...makes the world sunny," she said, passing Geraldine's desk. "Sometimes an idea takes the form of a picture—an image."

For almost half an hour, Mrs. Scott stood at the front of the room, reading poems and talking about the lives of the great poets. Geraldine drew more houses, and designs for curtains.

"So for those who haven't done their homework, try it now," Mrs. Scott said. "Try expressing what it is like to be...to be alive in this...this glorious world."

"Oh, brother," Geraldine muttered to herself as Mrs. Scott moved up and down the aisles again, waving her hands and leaning over the students' shoulders and saying, "That's nice," or "Keep trying." Finally she came to Geraldine's desk and stopped, looking down at her.

"I can't write a poem," Geraldine said flatly, before she even realized she was going to speak at all. She said it very loudly, and the whole class looked up.

"And why not?" Mrs. Scott asked, looking hurt.

"I can't write a poem, Mrs. Scott, because nothing lovely's been happening in my life. I haven't seen a flower since Mother's Day, and the sun don't even shine on my side of the street. No robins come sing on my window sill."

Geraldine swallowed hard. She thought about saying that her father doesn't even come to visit any more, but changed her mind. "Just the rain comes," she went on, "and the bills come, and the men to move out our furniture. I'm sorry, but I can't write no pretty poem."

Teddy Johnson leaned over and was about to giggle and crack the whole class up, but Mrs. Scott looked so serious that he changed his mind.

“You have just said the most...the most poetic thing, Geraldine Moore,” said Mrs. Scott. Her hands flew up to touch the silk scarf around her neck. “Nothing lovely’s been happening in my life.” She repeated it so quietly that everyone had to lean forward to hear.

“Class,” Mrs. Scott said very sadly, clearing her throat, “you have just heard the best poem you will ever hear. She went to the board and stood there for a long time staring at the chalk in her hand.

“I’d like you to copy it down,” she said. She wrote it just as Geraldine had said it, bad grammar and all.

*Nothing lovely’s been happening in my life.
I haven’t seen a flower since Mother’s Day,
And the sun don’t even shine on my side of the street.
No robins come sing on my window sill.
Just the rain comes, and the bills come,
And the men to move out our furniture.
I’m sorry, but I can’t write no pretty poem.*

Mrs. Scott stopped writing, but she kept her back to the class for a longtime—long after Geraldine had closed her notebook.

And even when the bell rang, and everyone came over to smile at Geraldine or to tap her on the shoulder or to kid her about being the school poet, Geraldine waited for Mrs. Scott to put the chalk down and turn around. Finally Geraldine stacked up her books and started to leave. Then she thought she heard a whimper—the way Mrs. Watson’s dog whimpered sometimes—and she saw Mrs. Scott’s shoulders shake a little.

Thinking, Talking and Planning

1. What do you think is the most memorable part of the story?

2. In writing this story about Geraldine Moore’s experiences, what do you think the author, Toni Cade Bambara, is trying to say about life? What do you think is an important idea or theme of the story? *A theme is an idea or insight about life that is revealed in a story.* Write your idea below:

3. Discuss your idea with a partner. Your partner may have a different idea than you. Write your partner's idea below:

4. Now, your teacher will conduct a conversation with the whole class. As you listen to your classmates' ideas about the theme of the story, please write them in the space below.

5. Which theme is most interesting to you? Select a theme and write it on the lines below:

6. Next, you will look for evidence in the text that supports the theme you have chosen to write about. Evidence can be:

- a paraphrase of what happened in the story
- a direct quotation from the story
- a comparison to your own experience or the experience of someone else.

NOTE: *For a stronger essay, MOST of the evidence should be from the text.* Skim over the story again and select **three** lines or passages that support the theme you have chosen to write about.

Thesis Statement: This is your interpretation of the theme of the story.

Text evidence: quotation/excerpt from the story	Commentary: explain how the evidence supports the theme
<p><i>Example:</i> “...in those days Geraldine never quite managed to get breakfast for herself. So she’d sit through social studies class, scraping her feet to cover up the noise of her stomach growling.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Poverty affected Geraldine Moore’s academic experience. ❖ Geraldine could not focus well because she was hungry.
1.	
2.	
3.	
Evidence: Your own life experience (or that of someone you know)	Commentary: Explain how this supports the theme
4.	

Here’s the prompt:

Response to “Geraldine Moore the Poet”

Teachers want to know how 8th grade students interpret the main ideas in the story “Geraldine Moore the Poet” by Toni Cade Bambara. Write an essay in response to the story. Choose a theme (important idea) that the writer communicates through the events of the story or the feelings of the character, and explain how the story illustrates this theme.

Support your idea through quotations from the reading selection, paraphrases of passages from the reading selection, and personal experiences that connect to the important idea. Use your notes from any of the previous sections to develop and support the ideas in your essay.

Writing Reminders:

As you write, keep the following points in mind since you won't have time to rewrite.

- ___ Begin in an interesting way that leads to the thesis of your essay.
- ___ In your introductory paragraph, include a formal introduction to the story and author
- ___ Support your thesis by including specific references to the reading selection (quotations, paraphrased passages, etc.) and personal experience.
- ___ Use language and vocabulary that is precise and lively.
- ___ Organize the main sections of your essay into paragraphs so that the reader can follow your ideas.
- ___ End with a confident conclusion that restates your thesis.

After You Write (Editing)

After you write, take time to review the items below. You may make changes right on your paper.

- ___ Give the essay a title. (You can choose your title before or after you write the essay.)
- ___ Check your punctuation. Use capital letters, commas, periods, quotation marks where they belong.
- ___ Check your spelling.

Five Features in Response to Literature Writing

- **Interpretation:** Addresses an Important Idea about the Reading
- **Organization:** Organization and Development of Ideas
- **Evidence:** Support for Claim
- **Language:** Sentences & Vocabulary
- **Conventions:** Spelling, Grammar, & Punctuation

4 • ADVANCED

- Interpretation is perceptive and convincing; writing reflects a careful reading of the text and may connect personally to one or more ideas
- Writing has an engaging beginning, elaborated middle and effective ending organized around clear ideas that support the interpretation and revisit the interpretation in a fresh, original way
- Writing includes references to specific quotes or passages in text, and relevant evidence that support the interpretation
- Language is vivid and lively; sentences are varied and vocabulary is specific
- Writing shows clear control of writing conventions though there may be a few errors that are “first-draft” in nature

3 • PROFICIENT

- Interpretation is clear; writing reflects one or more important ideas in the text and may connect personally to ideas from the reading
- Writing has a beginning, middle and end, and is organized around one or more ideas that support the interpretation
- Specific text references are used to support a clearly presented interpretation
- Language is clear; sentence types are varied; vocabulary may be general
- Writing shows control of writing conventions; errors do not interfere with meaning

2 • DEVELOPING

- Interpretation may be presented, but may be simplistic, only literal, unclear, too brief, disconnected from the reading, or only a summary
- Writing may not have clear beginning, middle or end; may not be organized around ideas that connect to text
- Writing may or may not include quotes or passages from the text that support a claim; evidence may be brief or irrelevant
- Language is simple; sentence types are mostly the same; vocabulary may be limited
- Errors may interfere with meaning

1 • EMERGING

- Interpretation is difficult to determine; extremely brief, unclear or incomplete
- Organization may be unclear; support for interpretation is brief, incomplete or irrelevant
- Writing may include quotes or passages from the text that do not support the interpretation; evidence is brief or irrelevant
- Language is general and vague and there may be incomplete or run-on sentences
- Errors in conventions interfere with meaning or make writing difficult to understand

OT • Off Topic

NR • No Response