

LETTERS TO A YOUNG INMATE

LONGER WORKSHOP | LANGSTON HUGHES & TUPAC SHAKUR

Letters have a long history of being used in a variety of literary contexts. While the examples in Letters to a Young Inmate have an audience in mind, sometimes a creator writes a letter to a specific audience, but shares it with the wider world, making it both personal and universal.

Bring in copies of Langston Hughes poem Dear Mama (or Mother to Son) and the lyrics of Tupac Shakur's 1995 song, "Dear Mama."

Start with reading the Langston Hughes poem. *Have students take a letter from the booklet and revise it as a poem, using Hughes arrangement as inspiration, looking at the ways they'd break the lines and arrange the words, as well as what words they'd omit.*

Next, read and/or listen to Tupac Shakur's Dear Mama. An excerpt of the lyrics are printed below, but the song is widely available on YouTube.

Point out to students how the letter is autobiographical regarding Shakur's life, as well as epistolary in addressing his mother.

Have students try to write their own Dear Mama, inspired by Shakur's song and example. This can be written as a letter, lyrics or whatever form the students feel inspired to take on.

Dear Mama,

Time I pay rent and get my food
and laundry I don't have much left
but here is five dollars for you
to show you I still appreciate you.
My girl-friend send her love and say
she hopes to lay eyes on you sometime in life.
Mama, it has been raining cats and dogs up
here. Well, that is all so I will close.

Your son baby

Respectably as ever,

Joe

Langston Hughes

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DEAR MAMA

*I love you
I love you
You are appreciated
When I was young me and my mama had beef
Seventeen years old kicked out on the streets
Though back at the time, I never thought I'd see her face
Ain't a woman alive that could take my mama's place
Suspended from school, and scared to go home, I was a fool
With the big boys, breaking all the rules
I shed tears with my baby sister
Over the years we was poorer than the other little kids
And even though we had different daddy's, the same drama
When things went wrong we'd blame mama
I reminisce on the stress I caused, it was hell
Hugging on my mama from a jail cell
And who'd think in elementary?
Hey! I see the penitentiary, one day
And running from the police, that's right
Mama catch me, put a whooping to my backside
And even as a crack fiend, mama
You always was a black queen, mama
I finally understand
For a woman it ain't easy trying to raise a man
(I know it ain't easy)
You always was committed
A poor single mother on welfare, tell me how ya did it
There's no way I can pay you back
But the plan is to show you that I understand
You are appreciated
Dear mama
Don't you know I love you?
Dear mama
Place no one above you
(Dear mama) Oh mama, I appreciate you
Although my shadow's gone
I will never leave you*

Tupac Shakur

