Peeling Back the Layers – "Sister"
Grade Seven

Skill Focus

Levels of Thinking			
Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze

Close Reading	Grammar	Composition

Reading Strategies
  Annotation
  Determining Main Idea
  Generalization
  Inference
  Paraphrase
  Seminar/Discussion
Literary Elements
  Detail
  Diction
    connotation
  Purpose
  Rhetorical Shift (9)
  Structure
  Theme
  Tone
Figures of Speech
  Metaphor
  Simile
Sound Devices
  Alliteration
  Assonance
  Consonance
  Rhyme
  Rhythm
Literary Forms
  Verse
	Parts of speech
	Phrases
	  Infinitive
	  Participial (8)
	  Prepositional
	Clauses
	  Dependent/Subordinate
	  Independent
	Sentences
	  Structure
	    complex
	    compound
	    compound-complex
	    loose/cumulative
	    periodic
	    simple
	Syntax Techniques
	  Repetition
		Types (modes)
		  Expository
		    classification
		    illustration

Materials and Resources
- "Sister" by Leona Gom
- Clean and annotated copies of the poem follow the teacher overview.
- Close Reading Lesson: "Multiple Choice – 'Sister'"

Lesson Introduction
Many teachers learned poetry by studying it in a holistic manner. That is, they learned to discuss elements that involved the whole poem such as theme, tone, speaker, etc. Often they felt that they either "got it" or didn't "get it." And often they did not know how to systematically analyze a poem and "get at" the meaning. Many English teachers using Pre-AP strategies have taught themselves what they did not learn in school – how to study the different rhetorical elements of the poem – figurative language, diction, imagery, syntax, etc. – and construct meaning from patterns found in those elements. Because of what these teachers have learned, their students can benefit by making sense of a poem – any poem, no matter what the structure, the rhyme and

meter, the language, the time period in which it was written. As students learn to "peel back the layers" of a poem, they will come to embrace the genre rather than dread it – any poem will yield its treasure when students look carefully at each layer and then connect that layer to meaning.

What follows is a list of activities for "peeling back the layers" of the seventh grade annotated poem, "Sister," by Leona Gom. Teacher notes follow the questions.

Time needed: several class days

> The teacher will read the poem to the students, and then a student volunteer will read the poem again.

1. Students will paraphrase the poem.
   An adult is looking at a thirty-year-old photograph of the speaker and his or her sister, trying to remember why the two are holding hands. What is easier to remember are the times the two argued and fought with typical sibling rivalry. Each year that passes, the two find more reasons to draw further apart. But still the speaker remembers their shared childhood and wants to find a way to forgive both of them.

2. Students will peel back the first layer – <u>sound devices</u>.
   On a clean copy of the poem, as a class, mark all the sound devices by underlining and labeling: alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, rhyme, and rhythm. Obtain a soft ball such as a koosh ball. Call out the lines of the poem. Then call out "alliteration" after "line 1." A student who can identify alliteration (or lack thereof) raises his or her hand, and the teacher throws the koosh ball to him or her. Holding the ball, the student identifies that particular sound device in the poem. The student then throws the ball back to the teacher. Repeat for all the sound devices and all the lines of the poem. Students annotate their copy of the poem as the class works through the sound devices.
   Line 1 – "holding," "hand" – alliteration
   Line 4 – "like smiling" – assonance
   Line 9 – "pushed," "sled" – consonance
   Lines 11-12 – "stale," "still," "squashed" – alliteration
   Line 13 – "easier," "year" – assonance, consonance
   Line 14 – "to think," "too" – alliteration
   Line 19 – "glassy photographs" – alliteration
   Line 20 – "secrets sealed" – alliteration, assonance
   Line 21 – "fingertips find" – alliteration
   Line 22 – "forgive, find" – alliteration
   Line 23 – "holding," "hand" – alliteration
   Free verse – no regular meter or rhyme

3. Students will peel back the second layer – <u>figurative language</u>.
Using the same copy of the poem, use the koosh ball again to identify the figures of speech:
metaphor and simile. This time students should circle the figures of speech as they annotate
their copy. Write *literal* by each line containing no figurative language.
Lines 1-3 – literal
Line 4 – simile
Lines 5-10 – literal
Lines 11-12 – "stale history," "still squashed" – metaphors
Lines 13-18 – literal
Line 19 – "glassy photographs" – metaphor
Lines 20-23 – literal

4. Students will peel back the third layer – <u>diction</u>.
Annotate the passage for patterns in diction and connotation, using highlighters. Make notes
in the margin; draw lines and arrows to connect words that might form a pattern.
Line 3 – "automatic" – without thought or conscious decision; perhaps the speaker feels she
has to love her sister just because of blood ties
Line 4 – "camera" – connects to the "glassy photographs" in line 19
Line 8 – "hit"; line 9 – "pushed"; line 10 – "tattled" – typical rowdy childhood behavior
Line 16 – "Christmas," with all its positive connotations – the only time the two sisters
communicated
Line 19 – "glassy photographs" – cold, hard, brittle like glass, like their relationship?
Line 21 – "fingertips" – the lightest touch of longing

5. Students will peel back the fourth layer – <u>contrast</u>.
"holding my hand" in line 1 – as small children literally holding hands contrasted with
"holding my hand" in line 23 (figuratively trying to find a relationship with the sister again)
"hit" in line 8, "pushed" in line 9, "tattled" in line 10 – contrasted with "touch" in line 19,
"fingertips" in line 21
contrast of the past (as represented by the photograph) and the present

6. Students will peel back the fifth layer – <u>syntax</u>.
   • This poem is composed of five sentences. Highlight each complete sentence in a different color.
   • The poem contains seven dependent clauses. Underline them. Dependent clauses begin
     with either subordinating conjunctions or relative pronouns.
   • Write the two parallel dependent clauses in the first sentence: *"whether it was something*
     automatic"; *"whether our mother had to say…"* Add your own dependent clause as an
     extra line in the poem, beginning with the same introductory word ("whether"). Add your
     line after line 6. Make sure what you add fits in with the sense and tone of the whole
     poem. Example: "or whether we wanted to please our mother"
   • Write the three parallel dependent clauses in the second sentence: *"who hit who first"*;
     "who was pushed off the sled"; *"who tattled to father."* Add your own dependent clause as
     an extra line in the poem, beginning with the same introductory word ("who"). Add your
     line after line 10. Make sure what you add fits in with the sense and tone of the whole
     poem. Example: "who was punished unfairly"

180

- Line 14 contains a dependent clause with the introductory word omitted. Try to find it and add the needed subordinating conjunctions or relative pronouns. [that] "it is too late"
- Write the last dependent clause in the poem *("as there will ever be").*
- Write out the first line and the last two lines of the poem: *"She is holding my hand"* and *"I want to forgive, find/the sister holding my hand."* Underline the subject and verb of each sentence. Why isn't "holding" the verb in the last line? "Holding my hand" is describing the sister, therefore functioning as an adjective.

Note: Participles are not introduced in the skill progression chart until eighth grade.

- Challenge: Write two sentences with the word "pushing," using the word in one sentence as the verb and in one sentence as a participle.

7. After students have peeled back layer after layer of rhetorical devices, they should be able to come to an understanding of the poem on a deeper level. One key to meaning is to find a shift or shifts in a poem. Help students identify this place in the poem. The shift occurs where the speaker turns from the animosities and differences existing between the siblings to a hopeful anticipation of a reconciliation. This shift is signaled by the word "but." Help students to find this shift on their own and articulate in writing what is happening in the poem before the shift and after it.

Note: Rhetorical Shift does not appear in the Skill Progression charts until ninth grade.

Before shift	Signal word	After shift
The speaker remembers the arguments of childhood and thinks that maybe it is too late for the two to become close.	"But"	The speaker looks at the thirty-year-old photographs of the siblings and wants to find a way to forgive both herself and her sister.

Students should be able to determine the tone of the poem through peeling back the layers and finding the shift. They should be able to see that the last six lines represent a longing to find the sister again. These lines contain gentle images and the alliterative "forgive" and "find" as the speaker's ultimate desire. Careful readers will also notice that the speaker wants to forgive not only her sister but herself.

8. Students need to learn to write the theme of a literary work in a complete, declarative sentence, understanding that many works can have more than one theme. The phrase "forgiving my sister" is therefore not a theme; nor is "Can feuding sisters ever be reunited?" The students should write several sentences that represent the universal truths expressed in this poem, the comments about human motivation and behavior.

Examples:
No matter how much time has passed between angry people, forgiveness is always possible.
Siblings often fight with each other and tattle.
Photographs provide a link with a person's past.

"Sister"

She is holding my hand
but I can't remember it,
whether it was something automatic
like smiling for the camera
(5)   or whether our mother had to say
take her hand, come on.
Mostly we remember
who hit who first,
who was pushed off the sled,
(10)   who tattled to father,
all that stale history still
squashed between us 30 years later.
It becomes easier every year
to think it is too late,
(15)   we are too different now,
the letter at Christmas as much
as there will ever be.
But still I return to the old albums,
touch the glassy photographs
(20)   with their secrets sealed in.
My fingertips find the two small faces
I want to forgive, find
the sister holding my hand.

by Leona Gom

"Sister"

— could be anyone's sister

Leona Gom

The speaker is looking at an old picture but can't remember what it was like to be there

She is holding my hand
but I can't remember it,

pronouns, no names

whether it was something automatic

(a reflex/habit)

like (smiling for the camera)

or whether our mother had to say

take her hand, come on.

acting like you're happy even if you're not

Mostly we remember
who hit who first,
who was pushed off the sled,
who tattled to father,

details of their childhood — they only remember the times they hurt each other

repetition — they must have squabbled repeatedly —

all that stale history still

squashed between us 30 years later.

uncomfortable verb

makes their past sound like a piece of bread that's spoiled / sour resentment between siblings

baby word / immature behavior

It becomes easier every year
to think it is too late,
we are too different now,
the letter at Christmas as much
as there will ever be.

that's a long time to hold a grudge

tone of discouragement, maybe even despair

But still I return to the old albums,
touch the glassy photographs

contact only once a year in a form letter

the past preserved

with their (secrets sealed in.)

like her emotions — sealed in — she won't tell her sister how she feels

My fingertips find the two small faces
I want to forgive, find

yearning for lost closeness

the sister holding my hand.

tone shift to wistful regret

they must have been close at one time — she'd like to recapture this

183

Peeling Back the Layers – "Sister"
Grade Seven

This activity will help you to understand how authors use sound devices, figurative language, contrast, and syntax to develop a certain tone or theme in a poem. Read the poem "Sister" by Leona Gom.

1. Paraphrase the poem. Explain, in prose, exactly what is happening in the poem.
2. Look at the sound devices in the poem: alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhyme, and rhythm. Highlight and label all the sound devices.
3. Identify all the figures of speech in the poem. For lines that have a literal meaning (in other words, the line means exactly what it says: no more, no less) label with the word *literal*. In lines that have a figurative meaning, label *metaphor* or *simile*.
4. Annotate the poem for patterns in diction and connotation, using highlighters. Make notes in the margin; draw lines and arrows to connect words that might form a pattern.
5. Find all the patterns of contrast in the poem: any two opposite words or ideas.
6. Look at the syntax, or sentence structure, of the poem. You will do this in several stages:
   a. Identify all the complete sentences in the poem by drawing brackets.
   b. Underline the seven dependent clauses in the poem.
   c. Write the two parallel dependent clauses in the first sentence.
   d. Add your own dependent clause as an extra line in the poem, beginning with the same introductory word. Add your line after line 6. Make sure what you add fits in with the sense and tone of the whole poem.
   e. Write the three parallel dependent clauses in the second sentence. Add your own dependent clause as an extra line in the poem, beginning with the same introductory word. Add your line after line 10. Make sure what you add fits in with the sense and tone of the whole poem.
   f. Line 14 contains a dependent clause with the introductory word omitted. Try to find it and add the introductory word you need.
   g. Write the last dependent clause in the poem.
   h. Write out the first line and the last two lines of the poem. Underline the subject and verb of each sentence. Why isn't "holding" the verb in the last line? "Holding my hand" is describing the sister, therefore functioning as an adjective.

Challenge: Write two sentences with the word "pushing," using it in one sentence as the verb and in another sentence as an adjective.

7. With a partner, determine the shift – or change – in this poem. You should be able to find the exact line where the poem is moving in one direction and then abruptly changes direction. After you determine the shift, write out what is happening in the poem before and after the shift and the word that signals the shift. Then write out the tone of the poem in a sentence.

Before shift	Signal word	After shift

8. Determine two themes of the poem. A theme in literature is a truth about human behavior or motivation. What is typical behavior for human beings, and why do they do what they do? Theme should be expressed in a complete declarative sentence. Thus, "forgiving my sister" is not a theme; nor is "Can feuding sisters ever be reunited?" Write out your two themes in sentence form.