

**“Choose Something Like a Star” Discussion—Applying Style to Content**  
(9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grade; 2 class periods) written by Virginia Dent Kahn

**Materials:** “Choose Something Like a Star” by Robert Frost  
“Bright Star” by John Keats  
Recording of “Choose Something Like a Star” from the song cycle *Frostiana*  
composed by Randall Thompson

**Learning Goals:**

1. Students apply their knowledge of poetic sound devices to discover why poets use sound to influence meaning.
2. Students apply their knowledge of connotations of words.
3. Students apply their knowledge of personification, simile, and symbolism to gain a better understanding of the meaning of the poem.
4. Students apply their knowledge of allusion by comparing the Frost poem to “Bright Star” by John Keats.
5. Students learn the term “rhetorical reinforcement” and apply it to the musical setting of “Choose Something Like a Star” from the song cycle *Frostiana*.
6. Students make conclusions about the effects of style on meaning in poetry.

**Vocabulary for “Choose Something Like a Star”:**

**loftiness** (noun) – rising to a great height; superiority, elevation in status; remote

**obscurity** (noun) – the state of being hidden by darkness, not clearly seen; mysterious, not easily understood

**taciturn** (adj.) – silent, temperamentally disinclined to talk

**comprehend** (verb) – to understand, to grasp the significance of

**steadfast** (adj.) – fixed in place; firm in belief or determination; loyal

**stoop(ing)** (verb) – to bend forward; yield, submit; to descend from a superior rank, dignity, or status; to lower oneself morally

**sphere** (noun) – the apparent surface of the heavens forming the dome of the visible sky; natural, normal, proper place, especially social order or rank

**staid** (adj.) – marked by settled sedateness and self-restraint; sober, grave, serious

**1<sup>st</sup> Class Lesson Overview (can split activities depending on class length)**

- Pass out the text of “Choose Something Like a Star” and the sheet of vocabulary to each student.
- Read the poem aloud with the students at least twice.
- Split the students into groups to discuss and report back on the four group questions below. If the groups are large, allow two smaller groups per question.
- After the groups have had time to prepare, allow each group to report their findings and discuss the four questions with the class as a whole.
- Discuss with the class the “big question” of the poem: What does the star ask of “us” instead? How does it ask? What do you think “something like a star” is supposed to be for “us”?
- For an in-class journal or for homework, ask the students to write a response to the following: What do you think the star is meant to symbolize for people looking up at it? Does it have to be

the same for everyone? Why is that “something” important for people to have? Why do you think Frost uses this simile as the focus of his poem?

### Group Questions for 1<sup>st</sup> class

- A. Find four sound devices in the poem. Write down the lines, which contain the devices, and explain how each device adds to the poem in some way (reinforces meaning, gives a musical quality, etc.)
- B. What words does Frost use to personify the star in the poem? What character traits does the star have? Use the text for support.
- C. What does the speaker/narrator in the poem want from the star? What does the dialogue accomplish? Why do you think the use of dialogue is an important device in the poem?
- D. Brainstorm the various connotations of the star’s reply, “I burn.” Why doesn’t the star say something straightforward for “use to learn by heart” and repeat? Use the text and your conclusions for support

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Lesson Overview

- Lead discussion of journal entries from previous class.
- Pass out “Bright Star” and read through with class at least twice.
- Go over any questions about vocabulary.
- Ask the class to try paraphrasing the meaning of poem; if this is difficult for them, try going through it line by line and explicate as necessary.
- Together, discuss the following questions about the central allusion: What does the allusion to Keats’ Eremite in the poem “Bright Star” add to the meaning of Frost’s poem? What does the narrator of “Bright Star” wish for? How is that wish similar to and different from the wish of the speaker in Frost’s poem? Turn this discussion into a group activity or journal if you wish.
- Introduce the idea of “rhetorical reinforcement”: the use of emphasis (can be duration, change, or use of extremes) to underscore or illuminate meaning or musical structure.
- Brainstorm what kinds of musical elements they are aware of when listening to music. (Make sure the resulting list includes use of different instruments and voices, extremes of melody, use of rhythm, and tempo.)
- Ask the students to listen to a recording of Randall Thompson’s musical setting of “Choose Something Like a Star” from the song cycle *Frostiana* while they follow along with the words of the poem.
- Play the song a second time, asking the students to write down any musical elements they notice that somehow reinforce the meaning of the poem.
- Give the students time to write in detail about one aspect of the music they noticed and how it affects the words of the poem for them.
- Discuss the students’ findings and make a list on the board. Ask them to make conclusions about how the poem has been interpreted musically. Do they think the added musical elements are effective in exploring the tone and meaning of the poem?
- Follow-up assignments could include writing in more detail about the effect of either “Bright Star” or of Randall Thompson’s music on the student’s understanding of the poem.