



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Center for Middle Eastern Studies

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Assignment Description (For Teachers)

Title: *Little Black Fish: An Iranian Story about Expanding Horizons*

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Purpose/Connection to the Curriculum: This lesson is for any English, ESL, or Social Studies teacher interested in multi-cultural literature, comparative cultures, and/or human geography. This beloved Iranian story (which is not at all political) reads like a fairy tale, but it is really an allegory, widely read by adults as well as secondary students. The story focuses on the importance of young people going outside their comfort zone and exploring more of the world around them, of journeying from innocence to experience, of thinking independently, even of rebelling against the constraints of society. A spoiler: Like any Iranian story, it doesn't hide the dangers of the situation or have a happily-ever-after ending! The reading level is not very high, so the story is good for students at different levels, even higher level ELL students; in fact, the author was a teacher of minority-language students in Iran.

Overview: The lesson includes pre-reading activities (a short "research" assignment and presentation notes/powerpoint pictures for the teacher to introduce the story), the short story (which can be photocopied and handed out to students), a list of comprehension questions that students can fill out as they read, some notes on the deeper meaning of the story, and student directions for three different creative responses to the story. (Each student chooses ONE of the three.)

Grade Level: Middle School

Time: 4-5 class periods (depending on if you assign some of it as homework)

Targeted Skills:

*** English Language Arts – Based on Common Core Standards:**

Reading: Literature – all aspects of the standards

- Social Studies – Based on Arizona State Standards:

Geography Strand – Concept 2: Places and Regions. 6th Grade, PO 5. Describe the physical and human characteristics of places and regions of a Middle Eastern country studied.

- Fine Arts – Based on Arizona State Standards:

Visual Arts – Middle School Concept #1: Creative Process, Artworlds, Art Issues and Values

Suggested Procedures:

Note: These activities should be done in order; however, there is no time frame attached to each one. The teacher determines what is done for homework and what is done in class, how much class time is allowed for each activity, etc.

Activity 1: Individual pre-reading assignment (**Document B**): This may be done as homework or as a computer lab assignment. The purpose is to give students the general background information they need to get the most out of the story.

Activity 2: Pre-reading class discussion (**Presentation Notes/Document C and Powerpoint/Document D**): This is a class discussion. The first part will review and expand on information the students learned in their pre-reading assignment. The second part introduces them to the idea of the story as an allegory (with a deeper meaning) and also gives them some cultural information on the Persian language that is helpful in understanding the way in which the story – and the artwork – are adapted when the story is translated into English.

Activity 3: Reading the story (**Document E**): Students can read the story individually, or (recommended) read the story aloud as a class. Discuss what the author is saying about independence, exploring the wider world, and even rebelling against autocracy. (**As they read, students should fill out the Reading Notes sheet – Document F as they go along.**)

To think about:

- What is the author's POINT? (What is Behrangi saying about getting to know the wider world outside your family, school, and community? Remember that the author taught children in a rural village where people spoke a minority language. In this story, he gives his philosophy about the need to understand what is going on in other areas; in other stories, he teaches them about specific problems/ conditions in other parts of Iran.)
- What are the benefits – and the dangers of getting outside of your comfort zone and participating in the wider world? Why did the Little Black Fish want to explore despite the dangers?

- The story is an allegory, so Behrangi is not just talking about fish. What is he saying about PEOPLE? Discuss:
 - the reaction of the fish's family and community when she announces her intention of leaving
 - the tadpoles who think they are more beautiful than everyone else because they don't know anyone else's ideas (Compare that to people who think they and their group are superior to others.)
 - the lizard who gives help and advice (Who can young people turn to for advice in navigating a world beyond what their parents understand?)
 - the incident in the pelican's pouch where the other fish are willing to turn on the Little Black Fish to try to save themselves (Do their efforts to save themselves at her expense benefit them? What is Behrangi saying about facing evil and adversity – opposing it together rather than giving in to save oneself?)
 - the school of fish where the progressive fish work together for their mutual benefit (How can a good group of friends support you? What is the difference between a good support system and a negative group?)
 - the incident with the heron and the Little Black Fish's sacrifice to save others
- At the end of the story, the Little Black Fish dies, but his/her life inspires others. Was the sacrifice worth it? Behrangi must have known that he was in danger because of his writing, but he continued to write anyway because he felt it was important work. After his untimely death (possibly murder at the hands of the government's secret police), some people compared him to the Little Black Fish. Do you agree/disagree with this comparison?

Activity 4: Creative response to the story: Students may work in pairs, groups, individually, or a combination according to their – and *your* – preferences on any **one** project.

- Art: Make a survival guide for fish and then a survival guide for people. **(Instructions - Document G-1)**
- Make and act out a play: a talk show host interviewing people who knew the Little Black Fish and share their tributes to her. **(instructions - Document G-2)**
- Creative writing – 2 options **(instructions - Document G-3):**
 - Write a short story/mystery investigation in which a police inspector interviews witnesses to find out what happened to the Little Black Fish.

OR

 - Rewrite the story with the main character a young adult instead of a fish and the other characters as people, rather than animals.

