

The Poetry of Mirabai

Into:

Read "Mirabai"

"We all want a Mirabai;
we all want to thrill
like the Dark One.

She holds with ash-caked arms
her human skull
begging bowl.

She dances barefoot
at twilight
with the Sudras
playing hand cymbals.
Tattered orange saris
spinning, braids bouncing.

She drinks the venom,
plucks the black stone
from the basket
wails sonorous bhakti
songs...

She hears a flute note
on the river
leading into Banares."

As you read the poem, have students sketch what they "see" in the words of the poem. When they do the "Through" they can use this as a starting point for their work.

Through:

In groups of four have the students read the following account of the life of Mirabai. As the groups read this account have them create "Moment In Time Posters" to share with each other after they have finished. When the students are finished have them display their posters and do a gallery walk through to view each others work.

Mirabai's life

Early Life:

Mira was born in 1498 in the village of Kudki into the house of Rathore. Her family were Vaisnava, worshipers of Vishnyu (Vishnu is an incarnation of Krishna). Mira's people were Rajputs, Hindus, whose culture was a strict feudal patriarchy which stressed honor in both sexes. For men this meant bravery in battle. For women it meant obedience and chastity.

All we know of Mira's early life comes from legends. Some of these legends tell how she got a statuette of Krishna, and how she learned of her future devotional relationship to him.

This first legend tells how a wandering ascetic visited her home when Mira was a very young girl. She was deeply attracted to a small figure of Krishna belonging to the ascetic. After the ascetic left, she pined for the statuette, even refusing to eat and drink. During this same time, the ascetic had a dream telling him to return and leave the figure with her, which he did to Mira's delight. Another legend says that once during a wedding celebration, Mira asked her mother who she would marry. Her mother pointed to the statue of Krishna and exclaimed, "There he is!"

After her mother's unfortunate early death, and the fact that her father was occupied in battle and unable to care for her, Mira was sent to live at her grand parents' palace in Medta.

Marriage:

In 1516 at 18 years old, Mira was given in marriage to the heir apparent of the Sisodiya clan. This marriage was arranged in hopes of strengthening the political alliance between the two clans, also to strengthen the Rajput stand against increasing Muslim power.

Legends tell us that Mira did the marriage rituals with her beloved statuette of Krishna before performing the same rites with her new husband, Bhorjraj. She refused to perform a puja, ceremonial worship of the family deity, Durga or Shakti the consort of Shiva. Mira also refused to consummate her

marriage causing her husband to be suspicious and jealous. Once he heard laughter and talking behind the closed doors of her room. When he broke in, he found her worshipping at the altar of her Lord. Mira's marriage only lasted for three years. ¹ Her husband was killed in battle. Mirabai refused to accept suttee² on the death of her husband, explaining that her true spouse was forever Krishna.

Persecution:

Though she was indifferent to her husband, his death left her open to persecution. The Sisodiyas had many reasons to fear Mirabai. She did not follow any of the customs that the Rajputs valued. She visited the temple and danced and sang in public, clearly against the exclusiveness which should be an attribute of a Rajput princess. She also mixed with other worshipers with no concern for gender or caste. It is also believed that she accepted Raidas who was a leather worker (leather workers were untouchables), as her guru. Stories are related concerning several attempts on her life, they include poisoning, snake bite, and a bed of nails. Mira credits her salvation to her beloved Krishna

Travels:

Perhaps in 1527, after her father's death, Mira left the palace permanently and began a wanderer's life. She returned to her original home for refuge after the attempts on her life. She began to worship in the temple at Chaterbhuj. It is still associated with her today.

After resting a bit, Mirabai traveled to Vrindaban, site of Krishna's youth. Here she encountered Jiva Goswami, a guru of Gaudiya Vaisnava Sect. Mira was refused an audience with Jiva on the grounds that she was a woman. Mira corrected Jiva by reminding him that as worshipers of Krishna, the only male is Krishna. All others were "gopis" or cowherd girls, who adore him. Jiva Goswami then realized he was wrong and recanted.

Dwarka:

Mira did not stay in Vrindaban for a long time. Next she moved to the city of Dwarka on the coast of the Arabian sea in what is now Gujarat. Dwarka is where we believe that Krishna spent the end of his life as king. Mira spent her time there worshipping at the Ranachor temple.

Mira's life was still not free of the influence of the Rajput courts. The Rajputs were still involved in their doomed attempt to defend against the Muslims. In 1535, Chittor was defeated when Bahadur, Shah of Gujarat, wiped out the army. Hearing news of the defeat, and to escape capture, the royal women

committed jauhar. Jauhar is mass suicide by burning in the flames of the communal altar.

Perhaps attempting to regain divine grace by atoning for their mistreatment of Mirabai, the Mewar³ family sent an envoy of priests to Dwarka to beg Mira to return home. When Mirabai refused, they vowed to fast until she changed her mind. Mira was now in a no win situation. If the delegation died of starvation, she would be blamed. Mira went into the inner sanctum to seek a solution from her beloved lord Krishna. According to legend Krishna solved this dilemma by allowing Mira to merge with him completely. Legend says that she disappeared into the idol within the temple, leaving only her sari wrapped around it. This is dated to be around 1547.



Beyond:

As a homework assignment, have the students read the paragraph on Mirabai's beliefs, then read the two poems by Mirabai. After this they will choose phrases in each of the poems which show Mirabai's beliefs outlined in the paragraph. Example:

"Krishna's arrow pierced my heart,
took away my reason"

This excerpt from the poem shows the devotion to Krishna by Mirabai, and how she feels it has affected her.

Mirabai's Beliefs

Mirabai was devoted to Krishna (as earlier explained Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu). She felt that the best way to worship him was to love him as a romantic lover. She believed that Krishna was her only true husband and her poetry refers to him as "My Dark Lord." Although this idea seems rather unusual to western society, it is not at all uncommon in other cultures. It is not even that foreign in our own culture, it is a common Catholic belief that nuns are the brides of Christ. In Mirabai's beliefs are a desire to be one with God through love, practice of poverty, poetry, chanting the name of God, "wandering," necessity of losing the self, relinquishing control.

"Oh King, I know you gave me poison.
But I emerged as gold burned in fire
comes out bright as a dozen suns.
Family pride, fear of the world's opinion
I threw away as water,
You should hide yourself, O King.
I am a woman, powerless and mad.
Krishna's arrow pierced my heart,
took away my reason.
Body and soul I give to the holy men;
I cling to their lotus feet.
Mira's Lord acknowledges
her as his servant.

Wake up, dear boy that holds the flute!
Wake up my dear, wake up my child.
The night has passed, the dawn has come,
each house has opened up its doors.

We hear, as milkmaids churn the curd,
their bracelets' jingle-jangle sound.
Ge up, dear child, the dawn has come,
outside the door wait gods and men.
The cowherd lads all raise a noise,
they shout the greeting, "Jai! Jai!"⁴
The men who watch the cattle hold
their bread and butter in their hands.
The comely Girdhar,⁵ Mira's Lord,
saves those who for salvation come.⁶

¹Some sources say ten.

² Ritual suicide by entering her husband's funeral pyre

³Mewar is possibly a reference to her in-laws.

⁴Hail! Hail!" Also implies "Victory."

⁵Girdhar is a name of the Hindu deity

⁶Translated from the Hindi by Usha Nilsson