

LESSON PLAN #7: Abigail and Childbirth

[1] **Curriculum framework(s):** 8.33 Analyze patterns of imagery or symbolism and connect them to themes and/or tone and mood. 9.6 Relate a literary work to primary source documents of its literary period or historical setting.

[2] **Goal of the lesson:** To illustrate the difficulties of childbirth through prose and poetry and to compare the emotions exhibited in the two literary forms.

[3] **Expected student outcomes:** Students will be able to complete a Poetry Analysis handout as well as a chart comparing Abigail Adams and Mrs. Jane Turell.

[4] **Assessment of expected student outcomes:** Successful completion of class assignment.

[5] **Instructional procedures:** 45 minutes

Vocabulary: sublinary (sublunary); travail.

Activities: Share the quote Abigail wrote to John on 10 July 1777 while in labor and experiencing contractions: “I must lay my pen down this moment, to bear what I cannot fly from—and now I have endured it I reassume my pen and will lay by all my own feelings and thank you for your obligeing Letters.”

After discussing the Epistolary Analysis, introduce students to Jane Turell’s poem. Have them complete a Poetry Analysis and then the Childbirth handout. Discuss findings as a whole class.

Homework: Read the next letters in the unit and complete an Epistolary Analysis handout for them.

[6] **Material and resources:**

- 1) Poem by Mrs. Jane Turell
- 2) Poetry Analysis handout
- 3) Childbirth in Literature handout
- 4) Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 9 July 1777
- 5) Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 16 July 1777
- 6) Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 23 July 1777
- 7) Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 28 July 1777

Poem by Mrs. Jane Turell

Published by Rev. Ebenezer Turell

In *Memoirs of the Life and Death of the Pious and Ingenious Mrs. Jane Turell...*(103-104)

Phæbus has thrice his Yearly Circuit run,
The Winter's over, and the Summer's done;
Since that bright Day on which our Hands were join'd,
And to *Philander* I my All resign'd.

Thrice in my Womb I've found the pleasing Strife,
In the first Struggles of my Infant's Life:
But O how soon by Heaven I'm call'd to mourn,
While from my Womb a lifeless Babe is torn?
Born to the Grave 'ere it had seen the Light,
Or with one Smile had cheer'd my longing Sight.

Again in Travail Pains my Nerves are wreck'd,
My Eye balls start, my Heart-strings almost crack'd;
Now I forget my Pains, and now I press
Philander's image to my panting Breast.
Ten Days I hold him in my joyful Arms,
And feast my Eyes upon his Infant Charms,
But then the King of Terrors does advance,
To pierce its Bosom with his iron Lance.
Its Sould releas'd, upward it takes its Flight,
Oh never more below to bless my Sight!
Farewell, Sweet babes, I hope to met above,
And there with you sing the Redeemer's Love.

And now, O gracious Saviour, lend thine Ear,
To this my earnest Cry and humble Prayer,
That when the Hour arrives with painful Throws,
Which shall my Burden to the World disclose;
I may Deliverance have, and joy to see
A living Child, to Dedicate to Thee.

N.B. *Phæbus*: refers to Apollo. *Philander*: means "lover" according to the frequent error of 17th century poets ("Philander").

Jane Colman Turell (1708-1735) was born in Massachusetts and married Rev. Ebenezer Turell in 1726. She gave birth to four children, only one of whom outlived her, but who never saw adulthood. Her poem makes reference to her first pregnancy - a stillbirth - and her second pregnancy, after which her ten-day-old baby died. She wrote this poem when she was pregnant for the third time (Howard Adams 1491-1492).

Poetry Analysis

Title of Poem	Author	Structure
Diction		
Images: 1) 2) 3)		
Sound Devices: 1) 2) 3)		
Sense Devices: 1) 2) 3)		
Mood:	Tone:	
Topic of Theme:		
Theme:		

Childbirth in Literature

In the letters of both Abigail and John Adams, as well as the poem by Jane Turell, we see haunting examples of this experience in literature. During the 18th century, maternal mortality in New England was decreasing, and, in fact, was lower than the maternal death rates in England. However, there still were numerous infant deaths, and many went unrecorded. In fact, some scholars surmise that there was a 10 percent infant mortality rate in this time period (Wertz 19).

Answer the following questions on the poem and letters.

1) What similarities in tone and theme appear in the Adamses' letters and in Turell's poem?
2) What are the differences expressed by the two women? How might their family life have contributed to this?
3) Even though both of these women are writing about hauntingly tragic events, their writing styles still maintain composure and eloquence. Find evidence of strong written expression in the letters and poem. Why might the authors have maintained such literary attention despite their sorrows? What does this reveal about these women?
4) How does John Adams react to the stillbirth of his daughter? What does his letter reveal about him?

5) Women had little remedy for the difficulties of childbirth in the 18th century. How might this experience have shaped the words of Abigail and Jane?

6) What is the effect of the baby's death on Nabby?

7) How might we react in the 21st century to infant mortality? Have some things changed? Or have they stayed the same?

Student Name _____ Date _____

Epistolary Analysis

Date of letter(s)	Location of letter writer
Sender	Recipient

Topic of letter(s)	
Theme(s) of the letter(s)	
Significant quotes	
Historical details in the letter(s)	

Allusions, metaphors, similes and other figures of speech (give examples)	
Tone	
Images	
Diction	
Evidence of sarcasm or satire	
Vocabulary words	

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 9 July 1777

July 9 1777

I sit down to write you this post, and from my present feelings tis the last I shall be able to write for some time if I should do well. I have been very unwell for this week past, with some complaints that have been new to me, tho I hope not dangerous.

I was last night taken with a shaking fit, and am very apprehensive that a life was lost. As I have no reason to day to think otherways; what may be the consequences to me, Heaven only knows. I know not of any injury to myself, nor any thing which could occasion what I fear.

I would not Have you too much allarmd. I keep up some Spirits yet,tho I would have you prepaired for any Event that may happen.

I can add no more than that I am in every Situation unfeignedly Yours, Yours.

A scanned image of the original letter is available at the following site:

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17770709aa>

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 9 July 1777 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 16 July 1777

July 16 1777

Join with me my dearest Friend in Gratitude to Heaven, that a life I know you value, has been spaired and carried thro Distress and danger altho the dear Infant is numberd with its ancestors.

My apprehensions with regard to it were well founded. Tho my Friends would have fain perswaded me that the Spleen [or] the Vapours had taken hold of me I was as perfectly sensible of its discease as I ever before was of its existance. I was also aware of the danger which awaited me; and which tho my sufferings were great thanks be to Heaven I have been supported through, and would silently submit to its dispensations in the loss of a sweet daughter; it appeared to be a very fine Babe, and as it never opened its Eyes in this world it lookd as tho they were only closed for sleep. The circumstance which put an end to its existance, ~~were~~ was evident upon its birth, but at this distance and in a Letter which may possibly fall into the Hands of some unfeeling Ruffian I must omit particulars. Suffice it to say that it was not oweing to any injury which I had sustaind, nor could any care of mine have prevented it.

My Heart was much set upon a Daughter. I had had a strong perswasion that my desire would be granted me. It was -- but to shew me the uncertanty of all sublinary enjoyments cut of e'er I could call it mine.

No one was so much affected with the loss of it as its Sister who mourn'd in tears for Hours. I have so much cause for thankfulness amidst my sorrow, that I would not entertain a repineing thought. So short sighted and so little a way can we look into futurity that we ought patiently to submit to the dispensation of Heaven.

I am so comfortable that I am amaizd at myself, after what I have sufferd I did not expect to rise from my Bed for many days. This is but the 5th day and I have set up some Hours.

I However feel myself weakend by this exertion, yet I could not refrain [from] the temptation of writing with my own Hand to you.

Adieu dearest of Friends adieu -- Yours most affectionately.

A scanned image of the original letter is available at the following site:

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17770716aa>

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 16 July 1777 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 23 July 1777

July 23 1777

My dearest Friend

Notwithstanding my confinement I think I have not omitted writing you by every post. I have recoverd Health and strength beyond expectation; and never was so well in so short a time before. Could I see my Friend in reality as I often do in immagination I think I should feel a happiness beyond expression; I had pleasd myself with the Idea of presenting him a fine son or daughter upon his return, and had figurd to myself the smiles of joy and pleasure with which he would receive it, but [those] dreams are buried in the Grave, transitory as the morning Cloud, short lived as the Dew Drops.

Heaven ~~grant~~ continue to us those we already have and make them blessings. I think I feel more solicitious for their welfare than ever, and more anxious if possible for the life and Health of their parent. I fear the extreem Heat of the season, and the different temperament of the climate and the continual application to Buisness will finish a constitution naturally feeble.

I know not in what manner you will be affected at the loss, Evacuation, sale, giving up -- which of the terms befits the late conduct at Tycondoroga. You may know more of the reasons for this conduct (as I hear the commanding officer went immediately to Congress) than we can devine this way; but this I can truly say no Event since the commencement of the War has appeard so allarming to me, or given me eaquel uneasiness. Had the Enemy fought and conquerd the fort, I could have borne it, but to leave it with all the stores before it was even attackd, has exited a thousand Suspicions, and gives room for more wrath than despondency.

We every day look for an attack upon us this way. The reports of this week are that a number of Transports with Troops have [arrived] at Newport. Some expresses went through this Town yesterday.

Yours of June 30 [John to Abigail, 30 June 1777] reach'd me last week. I am not a little surprizd that you have not received Letters from me later than the 9 of June. I have never faild for this two months writing you once a week. Tho they contain matters of no great importance I should be glad to know when you receive them.

We have had a remarkable fine Season here, no drought this summer. The Corn looks well, and english Grain promiseing. We cannot be sufficently thankfull to a Bountifull providence that the Horrors of famine are not added to those of war, and that so much more Health prevails in our Camps than in the year past.

Many of your Friends desire to be rememberd to you. Some complain that you do not write them. Adieu. Master Tom stands by and sends duty -- he often recollects How par used to put him to jail as he calls it. They are all very Healthy this summer, and are in expectation of a Letter every packet that arrives. Yours, ever yours,

Portia

PS Price Current!! This day I gave 4 dollors a peice for Sythes and a Guiney a Gallon for New england Rum. We come on here finely. What do you think will become of us. If you will come Home and turn Farmer, I will be dairiy woman. You will make more than is allowd you, and we shall grow wealthy. Our Boys shall go into the Feild and work with you, and my Girl shall stay in the House and assist me.

A scanned image of the original letter is available at the following site:

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17770723aa>

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 23 July 1777 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 28 July 1777

Philadelphia July 28, 1777

My dearest Friend

Never in my whole Life, was my Heart affected with such Emotions and Sensations, as were this Day occasioned by your Letters of the 9. [Abigail to John, 09 July 1777] 10 [Abigail to John, 10 July 1777]. 11 [Abigail to John, 10 July 1777]. and 16 of July [Abigail to John, 16 July 1777]. Devoutly do I return Thanks to God, whose kind Providence has preserved to me a Life that is dearer to me than all other Blessings in this World. Most fervently do I pray, for a Continuance of his Goodness in the compleat Restoration of my best Friend to perfect Health.

Is it not unaccountable, that one should feel so strong an Affection for an Infant, that one has never seen, nor shall see? Yet I must confess to you, the Loss of this sweet little Girl, has most tenderly and sensibly affected me. I feel a Grief and Mortification, that is heightened the it is not wholly occasioned, by my Sympathy with the Mother. My dear little Nabbys Tears are sweetly becoming her generous Tenderness and sensibility of Nature. They are Arguments too of her good sense and Discretion.

A scanned image of the original letter is available at the following site:

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17770728ja>

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 28 July 1777 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society