“Tony Steinberg: Brave Seventh Grade Viking Warrior”

1 Have you ever seen a Viking ship made out of popsicle sticks  
and balsa wood? Coils of brown thread for ropes,  
sixteen oars made out of chopsticks, and a red and yellow sail  
made from a ripped piece of a little baby brother’s footie pajamas?

5 I have.

He died with his sword in his hand and so went straight to heaven.

The Vikings often buried their bravest warriors in ships.  
Or set them adrift and on fire, a floating island of flames,  
the soul of the brave warrior rising slowly with the smoke.

10 In order to understand life in Scandinavia in the Middle Ages,  
you must understand the construction of the Viking ship.

So here’s what I want the class to do:

I want you to build me a miniature Viking ship.  
You have a month to complete this assignment.

15 You can use whatever materials you want,  
but you must all work together.  
Like warriors.

These are the projects that I’m known for as a history teacher.  
Like the Greek Shield Project.

20 Or the Marshmallow Catapult Project.  
Or the Medieval Castle of Chocolate Cake  
(actually, that one was a disaster).

But there was the Egyptian Pyramid Project.  
Have you ever seen a family of four

25 standing around a card table after dinner,  
each one holding one triangular side  
of a miniature cardboard Egyptian pyramid  
until the glue finally dried?

I haven’t either, but Mrs. Steinberg said it took 90 minutes,

30 and even with Tony’s little brother on one side saying,

This is a stupid pyramid, Tony!If I get Mr. Mali next year, my pyramidwill be designed in such a way that it will not necessitateus standing here for 90 minutes while the glue dries

35 And then Tony on the other side saying,Shut up! Shut up, you idiot!If you let go before the glue driesI will disembowel you with your Sony PlayStation!

It was the best family time they’d spent together since Hanukkah.

40 He died with his sword in his hand and so went straight to heaven.

Mr. Mali, if that’s true,that if you died with your sword in your handyou would go straight to Valhalla,then if you were, like, an old Viking

45and you were about to die of old age,could you keep your sword right by your bedso if you ever felt, like, “I think I might die of old age!”you could reach out and grab it?

If I were a Viking God, I don’t think I would fall for that.

50 But if I were an old Viking about to die of old age,  
that’s exactly what I would do. *You’re a genius.*

He died with his sword in his hand and so went straight to heaven.

Tony Steinberg had been missing from school for six weeks  
before we finally found out what was wrong.

55 And the 12 boys left whispered the name of the disease  
as if you could catch it from saying it too loud.

We’d been warned. The Middle School Head had come to class  
and said Tony was coming to school on Friday.  
But he’s had a rough time.

60 The medication he’s taking has made all his hair fall out.So nobody stare, nobody point, nobody laugh.

I always said I liked teaching in a private school  
because I could talk about God  
and not be breaking the law.

65 And I sure talk about God a lot.  
Yes, in history, of course, that’s easy:  
Even the Egyptian Pyramid Project  
is essentially a spiritual exercise.

But how can you teach math and not believe in a God?

70 A God of perfect points and planes,  
surrounded by right angles and arch angels of varying degrees.  
Such a God would not give cancer to a seventh grade boy;  
wouldn’t make his hair fall out from the chemotherapy.  
Totally bald in a jacket and tie on Friday morning—

75 and I don’t just mean Tony Steinberg—  
not one single boy in my class had hair that day;  
the other 12 had all shaved their heads in solidarity.

Have you ever seen 13 bald-headed seventh grade boys,  
all pointing at each other, all staring, all laughing?

80 I have.

And it’s a beautiful sight.  
And almost as striking as 12 boys  
six weeks later—now with crew cuts—  
on a Saturday morning

85 standing outside the synagogue

after the memorial service  
with heads bowed, holding hands  
and standing in a circle  
around the smoldering remains

90 of a miniature Viking ship,  
which they have set on fire,  
the soul of the brave warrior  
rising slowly with the smoke.

Mali. Taylor. “Tony Steinberg: Brave Seventh Grade Viking Warrior.”

**Assignment**: Read this poem again. Highlight and make 8 comments/questions on a variety of lines in the poem that would be relevant for a Socratic circle. In English class, we can—and should—respond to a literary work by asking any of four general questions:

1. What does the poem make you ***experience***?
2. What does the poem make you ***feel*** (as a result of that experience)?
3. What does the poem make you ***think***?
4. What does the poem make you ***question****?*

Since these may be too broad, here are some more specific ways to answer these questions as you comment on the poem:

When you **experience** a work of literature, it’s a sense of “being there” the author creates. What description or imagery (taste, touch, smell, sight, sound) is particularly compelling because you imagined it in your mind? Why does the poet focus on some image in particular? Does this experience connect to something similar that you once experienced yourself? If so, what was it, and how? This **experience** often results in a feeling or emotional response to the work.

When you **feel** something from a work of literature, you have an emotional reaction because you empathize with the poet, characters or situation. What do you feel in this poem? Where do you feel it? Did your emotional reaction shift at a certain spot? Did the poem feel the same the second time you read it? What experiences (see category above) triggered how you feel right now? What is the tone of the poem? Is it the same throughout or does it shift?

When you **think** about a poem, the analytical part of your brain analyzes the poem for figurative language devices, literary devices, theme, or how the poem provides social commentary on our way of life. What devices is the poet using? How does the poet use these devices to create experiences and influence your feelings? Is there a directly stated theme or an implied one, or none at all? What does it make you think about the society in which we live (critical of it? celebratory?) How do you know?

When you have **questions**, there may be information lacking about the situation that makes you wonder about the text when you’re done. Is there something confusing to you? Is there an ambiguous line or word that may have multiple meanings? Are there words you had to look up? More broadly, what does the work make you wonder about what it means to be human? What does it make you question about the world or about yourself or the topic it focuses on?