

### **“What does the "power of the pen" mean in The Freedom Writers?”**

The 2007 film ‘Freedom Writers’ follows an enthusiastic Erin Gruwell as she inspires and unites a class full of ‘at-risk’ students. Despite the obvious differences between Erin and her students, she is able to connect her students through literature, encouraging them to speak out about their separate issues whilst teaching them the importance of education. The ‘power of the pen’ is a reoccurring theme in the film which can be seen in three scenes. It is first explored when Ms. Gruwell reads her class’s journals, then again throughout the ‘toast for change’ scene where Miguel shares an excerpt from his diary and finally, towards the end of the film, when the class puts together their book whilst reflecting on the impact writing and Ms. Gruwell had on them.

By encouraging her students to write about their personal experiences in a journal Ms. Gruwell creates an environment where students feel as if their words have power. The phrase ‘the power of the pen’ refers to the power of writing and reading, or literature as a whole, which is a recurring concept in the film. For example, during the beginning of the film Ms. Gruwell reads through her class’s journals and is able to visualize the different narratives told by her students. Students such as Jamal wrote about their personal experiences with death. He said, “At sixteen, I've seen more bodies than a mortician. Every time I step out my door, I face the risk of being shot. To the rest of the world, it's just another dead body on a street corner. They don't know that he was my friend.” The film retells the events in the journals in a dramatic way to show the audience the significance of what has been written, as students thought of as ‘misunderstood’, begin to reveal themselves. Spotlights and narrations are used to create an engaging scene to draw in viewers. This experience of sharing through journals played a vital role in demonstrating how writing can allow people the voice to speak out about their situations.

The students of class 203 empower themselves and each other through sharing their experiences. At the beginning of the student’s sophomore year the students are asked to ‘toasts for change’. During this scene a quiet student, Miguel asks to read an excerpt from his journal, he says, "I kept thinking I'd get laughed at. Instead, I'm greeted by a couple of friends who were in my English class last year. And it hits me, Mrs. Gruwell, my crazy English teacher from last year, is the only person that made me think of hope. Talking with friends about last year's English and our trips, I began to feel better. I receive my schedule and the first teacher is Mrs. Gruwell in Room 203. I walk into the room and feel as though all the problems in life are not so important anymore. I am home." This monologue shows the significance that Ms. Gruwell and her English class had on him and how he was able to bond with his peers through ‘last year’s English’ which consisted of reading novels that allowed them to connect through their shared experiences with different characters such as Anne Frank. This scene is evidence towards the fact that the power

of 'the pen' or in this case, literary studies is immense, with the ability to connect students who are wildly different.

Ms. Gruwell uses writing to inspire her students to challenge the environment surrounding them and to defy any preconceived notions that others held. It is towards the end of the film when the students are putting together their collection of journals into a singular book that the power of the pen is explored once more. Students such as Eva Benitez reflect on the two years they were in Ms. Gruwell's English class, it is then she says, "We weren't just kids in a class anymore. We were writers with our own voices, our own stories. And even if nobody else read it, the book would be something to leave behind that said we were here, this is what happened, we mattered. Even if it was just to each other. And we won't forget." Eva's recollection of the scene is a blatant example of how writing had given the class of 203 a voice alongside a newfound sense of self-worth. Many students changed significantly by the end of the film with characters such as Eva speaking the truth in court instead of saying what she thought people would want to hear. Despite being unsure of whether anyone would even read their book, writing had allowed them to make a statement and challenge the environments they lived in, something they would carry with them for the rest of their lives.

To conclude, Freedom Writers is the perfect example of how writing and reading have the power to change lives tremendously. With the right teacher the students of class 203 were able to excel and pursue higher education, a feat that was previously thought of as impossible. Combined with Ms. Gruwell's dedicated teaching and the use of the class journals, the students were given a voice, something they felt they had never before.