



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2024 Volume III: Poetry as Sound and Object

Transforming Poetry of Witness to Performance of Protest

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There are five things I know for certain as a high school English teacher: 1. My students are social creatures. 2. My students are always, ALWAYS filming themselves, uploading content to TikTok and Instagram. 3. My students are also opening their eyes to the injustices of our world and in history. 4. My students are rebellious and yearn for independence. 5. My students hate, no, LOATHE poetry. With this knowledge, I created a curriculum unit that is not only going to appeal to their rebellious, performative, inquisitive, social tendencies, but also turn fact number 5 on its head, by showing them how they can use poetry as a means to rebel and raise awareness. This will be a two-week long unit using Abel Meeropol’s “Strange Fruit” and Pablo Neruda’s “I’m Explaining a Few Things” as anchor texts for poetry of witness. Once students learn about the genre, they will analyze, watch, and conduct dramatic performances of these poems. Focusing on the poetry of witness, which brings in historical and social injustices, students will work together to turn these pieces into dramatic performances, while still doing the classic close reading, determining author’s purpose, and recognizing the function of literary devices.

(Developed for AP Language and Composition, grade 11; recommended for English II, grade 10; English III and AP Language and Composition, grade 11; and AP Literature and Composition, grade 12)

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