



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2005 Volume I: The Uses of Poetry in the Classroom

Introduction

by Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English

My Yale National Initiative seminar of 2005, "Poetry of All Kinds: Pictures, Places and Things, People," was an inspiring and wonderfully diverse experience. At our first meetings in May, teachers' responses to the famous minimalist Williams poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow," were so sensitive and original—and so well-informed—that I knew we were in for good times. We had them.

My aim was not so much to reconsider pedagogical approaches to poems that teachers already know (I'm in no way qualified to teach them their own business), as to reintroduce them to the whole history of lyric poetry, to its origins, its place in human life across cultures, and the variety of its formal characteristics. They happily embraced this agenda, while choosing by and large to write curriculum units on topics suitable to their classrooms. Many of them wanted to encourage their students to write poetry as well as read it, and while the writing of poetry could not enter into the syllabus of our seminar, it did hover around the edges—especially because several of the Fellows were accomplished poets and organized an evening poetry reading by and for the Fellows of all the '05 seminars.

Because many of our fourteen Fellows teach in environments that call for curricula fostering self-esteem and a sense of identity, quite a few chose to organize units around these themes. Variants on this topic came from teachers working, respectively, with vocational students, with adolescents in need of an outlet for the feelings afforded by poetry, and with students, many of them ESL students, in a state of exile from their homelands. All of these topics I group together alphabetically.

Two units were likewise concerned with social issues, but less directly with students' immediate concerns—one on the poetic responses to war and the life and death of soldiers, the other on crimes against humanity. These come next, alphabetically.

Three units were concerned with aspects of poetry treated primarily for their own sake—though one unit in this group presents a particular tradition of poetry as a tradition of dissent and questioning. The latter topic is alphabetically the first of these three, so it naturally provides a transition from the previous emphases. The third of these units, alphabetically, is oriented toward contemporary interests, but despite carrying an obvious social freight they are still contemporary *poetic* interests, so I've placed the unit where it is.

The last unit, unique in the seminar, is written by a kindergarten teacher interested in using the rhythmic and repetitive aspects of verse to introduce children to reading and language recognition. This teacher was unique also in being the only Fellow teaching below the level of grade six. Everyone else was a middle or high school teacher. This surprised me, as when I taught the same seminar for New Haven teachers the participants ranged chiefly from grades three through seven or eight, leaving the very few high school teachers in

isolation. I have no explanation for this difference, and mention it only as a curiosity.

To turn then to the first group: Carolyn Clark's unit concerns poems that address identity under three headings: social identity, individuality, and the realization of one's potential, taken up in that order. Monica Jackson focuses on poems written by persons of color on the themes of youth, family, and society. Maureen Lynch stresses the vulnerability of feeling in her adolescent students, and the ways in which poetry—both reading and writing it—can make contact with those feelings and make them more intelligible. Mary Moran teaches high school students, the majority of whom are displaced from various native lands and many of whom are learning English as a second language; she focuses on poems about leaving home, remembering home, and adjusting to a new home, themes clearly of interest likewise to students less uprooted than hers. Jacqueline Porter-Clinton offers a unit on poems illustrating important moments in African-American history. Ray Theilacker, who teaches in a vocational school stressing everything from computer programming to cosmetology, proposes to teach poems on the theme of work—both specific vocations and labor in general. Mnikesa Whitaker rounds out this group with a unit on poems about fathers, broadly focused with the understanding that a father may be just anyone who is a father figure.

Cary Brandenberger's unit is about poems on crimes against humanity, organized around the comparison and contrast of the Holocaust with the indignities and lynchings of the Jim Crow era. Kinta Flemming, whose classroom reflects the proximity of the military bases in the Jacksonville area, writes a unit on poems concerned with war, with the patriotism and protest it inspires, and with the fate of soldiers and their families in wartime.

Clary Carleton's unit is on the legacy of Walt Whitman—the "American strain," as Williams called it—that results in poetry as diverse as that of Ginsberg or Ferlinghetti and many of the poets (Baca, Komunyakaa) now featured in anthologies for teachers. Lynn Marsico's unit introduces the technical aspects of poetry by focusing on the history and varieties of the sonnet. Kimberlee Penn Erazo teaches "poetry and voice" by introducing the student to the contemporary poetry scene: performance poetry, spoken word poetry, and hip hop.

Stephanie Johnson is the kindergarten teacher whose unit I described above. All these units taken together show how much can be done with poetry in the classroom at many levels, and, as most teachers emphasize, the units are adaptable to other grade levels. Many of the units might be of interest, with modification, to somewhat younger students, while on the other hand the principles involved in Johnson's approach could surely be used up to grades two and three or even four. In short, this thoughtful and inspiring group of units will be of interest to teachers at all levels.

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