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The Sound of Poetry

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by Melissa Dailey

Introduction

Students chattering, feet clunking up the stairwell, chairs scraping along the floor, bags hitting the floor, desk, chair, the bell rings, my voice announces, voices cease, the wind blows, the ding of metal against the mast of a boat, and class begins. The sounds of the Sound School are similar to that of most schools. One distinguishing factor is the sounds of the water. We are located on the Long Island Sound and we are a vocational aquaculture school. Therefore, the sound of the sea is a guiding force in this unit on poetry. The sounds of the sea are central to many poems and you will find such poetry in this unit.

The Sound of Poetry explores songs of the sea, sounds of poetry and sounds of the sea. Through sea shanties and sea poetry, students study the elements of poetry with sound as the guiding force. In twelfth grade AP Literature, poetry constitutes a significant portion of the curriculum. The challenge of the unit is to guide students in prosodic analysis as well as evaluating the meaning, diction and syntax of the poetry. In addition to a variety of engaging exercises, students write a final essay analyzing a poem of their choice.

As an aquaculture and agriculture vocational magnet school, the Sound School attracts students that want educational material that relates to real life. Not all of the students are inclined toward agriculture and aquaculture, but a significant number of them are extremely interested, especially by the time they reach their senior year. It is frequently a problem at the end of the year when students are out on the water and conducting independent projects during your class time. I teach twelfth grade AP Literature. Although I do not teach to tests the AP test is something for which I must prepare them. In addition, the College Board requires that each AP teacher write a curriculum that follows certain guidelines and is approved by the Board. The exam has a heavy focus on poetry. Although I infuse poetry throughout the year it is important to have a single unit dedicated to it. One reason I place poetry at the front of the year is because of the exam's focus on poetry. Another emerging reason why I will place poetry toward the beginning of the year is because of this unit. As an aquaculture school that is on the Long Island Sound, it makes sense to focus the unit on the sound of poetry and on sea poetry. In order to utilize all of the resources at the sound school, like the Quinnipiack sailboat or Island Rover, I need to schedule trips on the water in the beginning of the year while the weather is still warm and the AP exam is still in the future. Poetry is a good starting point because it introduces students to the how of literature. Students are introduced to questioning literary forms more so than other genres. The succinct nature of poetry, and the use of literary devices and conventions creates a microcosm of literature for

students to explore. In this unit there is a broad spectrum of styles of poetry for students to read, hear, compare, and analyze.

Using sound and sea as a focus for the unit, I believe the problem of having material that relates to real life may be solved. For career-minded, kinesthetic learners such as the Sound School students, poetry may seem frivolous or dull on their first encounter. Using the sea and how poetry speaks to them, students will hopefully find engagement. Most of them attend the school for a reason, and that reason usually relates to a love for water. Although I focus here on the students of my school in particular, there are students in all schools with an affinity for the sea. The material is accessible to all. Students make connections on the level of content, but also one of the level of form making it a kinesthetic experience.

I require students to analyze the meaning, prosody, diction, and syntax of poetry, but they do not find it easy to draw connections between the sound of the poetry and the meaning. They usually grasp that initial feeling a poem evokes, but they struggle with identifying the actual elements of sound and have even more difficulty linking the elements of sound to the meaning of the poem. This is the exact problem my unit will analyze and solve with the guiding question of: "How does poetry speak to me?" This guiding question puts the focus once again on the student. What is it about the poetry that the students find alluring? They explore what they like. In addition, it focuses on the sound of the poetry. I have the students listen to one another reading poetry, listen to recordings of poetry and focus on what they hear. First, they focus on what they hear going on. Students listen for tone, rhythm, voice, alliteration, rhyme, repetition and accent. Only after they have done this do they delve into meaning.

Background

Sea shanties will introduce this unit. Sea shanties were work songs from sailing ships. The first documented type of shanty that was really a type of chant or yell was established in the 1400s. The men yelled as they pulled rope. This is similar to an activity that students do while aboard the Quinipiack. The Quinipiack is a sailboat, or floating classroom, that the Sound School has access to during the school year. Students pull ropes while aboard the Quinipiack and yell in unison as they do so. The Quinipiack has its own curriculum, but I incorporate poetry and shanties while aboard the vessel. Shanties were songs for each type of work on the ship. For example, there were anchor, hauling and hoisting songs. The shanties from Europe, America and Scandinavia told a story or had a theme. In contrast, the African American shanty had a couple of repetitive verses and then there would be improvisation.

We begin with a shanty "A-Rovin'." This type of shanty should be sung slowly as a person would be making the downward motion of pumping a pump-wheel. The songs accompany arduous and often monotonous tasks. Because they are in part entertainment, they cover a variety of topics such as "A-Rovin'" which deals with the amorous encounter between a sailor and woman. "I took this fair maid after dark,/ An' took her to her favourite park." Apparently the shanties could even be vulgar at times.

Ezra Pound's "The Seafarer" and "Canto I", Richard Wilbur's "Junk", and May Swenson's "Come In Go Out" make up the second section of this unit. "The Seafarer" and "Canto I" address the Anglo-Saxon. We listen for the alliteration and the mid-line pause, caesura. "The Seafarer" even seems to sway with the sea water. After listening carefully to the sound of the poetry, we may delve into the meaning of the poems. "The Seafarer"

explores the inner conflict of a man on a ship and a cold one at that. "Canto I" is a translation from the Odyssey, a theme that may carry through to the end of the unit with other poetry that deals with material from that epic. "Junk" is an excellent break from the sea theme to reinforce the sounds of the Anglo-Saxon accentual meter. Wilbur uses four accents on each line and links them with alliteration. Visually one can see how he split the poem up. There is a literal, visual break that makes one line flush left and the other spaced to the right. As a result the reader pauses between the spaces or lines of poetry. The poem can be interpreted to mean that Wilbur is referring to the Anglo-Saxon as junk or the modern reader may see it as junk. Nevertheless, Wilbur gives life to this junk, the Anglo-Saxon and the actual material junk of the poem's content, through his poetry. Finally, May Swenson's "Come In Go Out" plays with some of the same ideas. She uses the aquatic theme, the line split and a little alliteration to convey her ideas. The above poetry focuses on strong, easy-to-hear sounds, and a sense of poetry's ancient connection to the sea, and of how poetic form and motifs are carried across history.

The following poems are paired for a variety of reasons. Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" and Elizabeth Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" are paired because they both take place at Key West, but have different messages. Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" and Robert Hayden's "Diver" are both about diving, obviously, into the ocean and exploring a wreck beneath the water as well as exploring history. "Once By the Pacific" and "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" are both by Frost so that's a nice pairing. Margaret Atwood's "Siren Song" and Louise Gluck's "Penelope's Song" are both songs that refer to the Odyssey. By readdressing the Odyssey in a different light while continuing to work with sound, students can make connections as well as make evaluations about perspective.

Objectives

In the words of Billy Collins in his poem "Introduction to Poetry," I don't want the students to feel as if we are, "beating it with a hose/ to find out what it really means." The sound of poetry should be a pleasurable experience. The sound is the first aspect of poetry that we absorb. Even if we read the poem to ourselves, it is the sound we hear internally that is part of the allure and first step toward understanding. I want students to walk away from the course with the ability to hear the elements of poetry and hear beyond the surface. Even if it seems as if we are beating the poetry to find meaning at times, I want students to leave the course with an appreciation for poetry. I hope it is an eye-opening experience rather than an arduous one. That said, I continue with the dry objectives that might lead some to believe we attempt to "torture a confession out of it (the poetry)." The second most important thing I want students to accomplish is writing an interpretation/analysis of a poem. This essay must evaluate structure, style and themes. We delve into prosodic analysis. It is necessary for students to use detailed support from the texts when writing an interpretation or analysis. Students make judgments about a work's artistry and quality as well as its social and cultural values. I want them to utilize their own voices and explore tone and voice in their own writing as well as identify it in the writing of others. We develop student vocabulary throughout the year. Students must utilize a strong vocabulary on the essay portion of the AP exam as well as understand the multiple choice questions.

Strategies

As mentioned earlier, we begin with sea shanties. There are a number of things I like to do in this part of the unit. There are resources at the Sound School and outside the Sound School that I can draw on to make this an engaging experience. Initially a simple introduction to shanties suffices. I get on the Quinipiack as soon as possible because on the ship the students engage in the chanting as they pull rope. Because this is the first form of the shanty, I like them to experience it early on. While on the Quinipiack, we read shanties and listen to the sounds of the surroundings, the water, the voices, the wind, the flap of the sails, etc. The students are introduced to the guiding question, "How does poetry speak to me?" In this setting students are asked, "How does the sea speak to me?" Students are informed that they will be required to write their own shanty once we are back in the classroom. Before engaging in such a writing task, we make use of the musical group on campus called the Chanteens. Needless to say, they sing shanties. If there isn't a student already in the class that is part of the Chanteens, I recruit the group to sing shanties in my class. We might even go on a field trip to see them perform. The Chanteens travel throughout the state singing at various venues on the water. The final way I encourage students to be attentive to the sound of the shanty will be to expose them to modern renditions of shanties, performed by artists like Sting, Lucinda Williams, Bono and Nick Cave with the cd, *Rogue's Gallery: Pirate Ballads, Sea Songs and Chanteys*. Although the artists are not going to appeal to all of the students, they may simply appreciate the fact that they are modern renditions sung by modern artists. This is a great opportunity to discuss voice and tone. The modern renditions can be compared to the traditional shanties sung by the Chanteens where the voices of the singers are the sole sound, because the cd has instruments. Does this ruin the whole concept of the shanty? Each different artist brings a different sound to the shanties. For example, Nick Cave brings a harder, almost evil sound to the song "Fire Down Below" while Lucinda Williams offers a sadder, sweeter sound to "Bonnie Portmore." The repetition, the rhyme, and the rhythm should be obvious to the students, and we discuss how this applies to the purpose of the songs and their meaning.

I transition into poetry with the question, "How does poetry speak to me?" Students can share their own feelings about poetry and what poetry they like and why. As I mentioned earlier we will begin with the sound of poetry in the poem, "The Seafarer" by Ezra Pound. We will essentially read part of the poem out loud and discuss what we hear. We will proceed with "Canto I", "Junk", and "Come In Go Out" as I stated earlier. Alliteration, consonance, caesura, accent and syntax will be terms and concepts that we introduce and explore. Once students read the above poetry, students will read "Listening and Making" by Robert Hass. Although this piece has a rough beginning to it, if you are dealing with mature students like the AP students should be, it should be fine. This piece gives students solid, practical information about prosodic analysis. It provides insight into how to read metrical poetry. Finally, it also provides insight into the meter and rhythm of free verse.

Throughout the unit I introduce literary terms and other vocabulary. I reinforce this vocabulary simply by discussing poems, but also with vocabulary activities. I encourage students to write the definition in their own words, create a visual representation of the word and share their ideas with a partner to see if they have any new insight about the term. This is ongoing. Other ongoing activities that I encourage the students to engage in are annotating text and keeping a journal where they can collect vocabulary as well. There are specific activities I use for teaching and encouraging annotation. The journals of course should be a reflection of the students' thoughts and new information provided by the course.

I discuss meter a bit with the introduction of Frost. We discuss "Once By the Pacific" and "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep". "Once By the Pacific" is a great opportunity to introduce students to iambic pentameter. As a kind of sonnet, Frost uses iambic pentameter loosely. Nevertheless the point can be made to students. Vocabulary including iamb, trochee, spondee, dactyl and anapest is discussed at this juncture. In addition, we read "The Imagining Ear" and "The Last Refinement of Subject Matter: Vocal Imagination." These two pieces prompt a discussion of tone.

Adrienne Rich and Robert Hayden help the students explore the metaphor with an analytical eye in their poems, "Diving into the Wreck" and "Diver." The discussion of tone continues with these two poems. In addition, Adrienne Rich brings a feminist perspective to light. Much of the sea poetry is centered around males. Adrienne Rich is not the only female in this unit, but she paves the way for the final discussion of poetry in this unit.

We use Robert Hayden's poem "The Middle Passage" to explore sound and African American history. The Amistad is a ship that is currently stationed in New Haven for educational purposes. The ship travels the country to educate people about the Amistad, the slave ships, and the rebellion of Africans. This is yet another excellent resource that we have in Connecticut.

With the poems, "The Idea of Order at Key West" by Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" I take the students out on a different boat called the Island Rover. This is a motorized boat and therefore a little more contemporary, like the poetry. Because Wallace Stevens's poem is more about sound, the water is a good place to read it. The students listen to the water themselves and hear what is going on around them. While on the boat we read and discuss the sound of the poetry both the actual sound of the poetry and the sound Wallace Stevens is describing. It is a good opportunity to explore the differences in the two writers as well. After the discussion, I direct students to listen to all of the sounds around them. I ask them to write down all of the sounds that they hear. Once we have spent some time simply listening, I ask the class to write a poem of their own. By this point we have discussed a variety of poems and sounds and terms that they can utilize although I do not dictate what they must write or include.

William Carlos Williams's "The Yachts" and May Swenson's "Overboard" are contrasted in their use of sound. May Swenson experiments with the visual as well as the auditory in "Overboard." She creates a rhythm and experiments with sound by repeating the same words in different order, but also merging two words into one. Williams tells a story in his poem with sound elements such as alliteration and "they cry out, failing, failing! their cries rising/ in waves still as the skillful yachts pass over."

Margaret Atwood's "Siren Song" and Louise Gluck's "Penelope's Song" are a good way to wrap up the study of poetry. With these two poems we further explore the sounds of the sea and the contemporary take on the Odyssey. In what ways are these two poems taking a different kind of stance on the theme of Odysseus as presented in the beginning of the unit? For one thing, they are from the female perspective which is left out of the earlier poetry. What sounds do you hear in the poems? How does the writer convey their message? These are just a couple of the questions we discuss.

Finally, the students write an essay on a poem of their choice. The students select a poem from a list of authors I provide them. They primarily choose from the authors we have read in class. They are also free to select from a poem we have read in class. In this essay they analyze the meaning, sound structure, tone, and diction. Although there are elements they must address, we come up with a rubric together.

Lesson 1

Location: The Quinipiack

Initiation: Students engage in working tasks aboard the Quinipiack. As they pull rope, they yell with each pull.

Background: Once the students finish their task on the boat, I will provide them with background information on the origins of the shanty. Of course, there may be students that can explain the origins to the class themselves. In addition, I share with the students that they will be writing their own shanty at the conclusion of the lesson.

Guided Practice: I pass out a copy of "A Rovin'" to each of the students. We read the shanty aloud a couple of times. If the class is adventurous we can sing the song. As we read, we note the rhyming structure and rhythm of the song.

Individual Practice: Students are asked, "How does the sea speak to you?" As we sit on the boat students spend ten minutes silently listening to their environment. After the ten minutes, the students write down their responses to the question. They are not limited to the sounds they hear at that time, but it is up to them what they choose to write.

Closure: Students share their responses to the question and reiterate the elements of the shanty.

Homework: Students begin writing a draft of their own shanty.

Lesson 2

Initiation: Prompt on the board: Write a sentence about the sea. Turn that sentence into a poem by repeating and manipulating the sentence. You may only use that one sentence.

Background: Today we will be reading a poem by May Swenson and a poem by William Carlos Williams. May Swenson experiments with poetry in the same way you did at the beginning of class. William Carlos Williams experiments with imagery as well as sound.

Guided Practice: We read each poem, "The Yachts" and "Overboard" out loud. Through discussion we compare the use of sound in each of the poems. We evaluate how Swenson manipulates the rhythm with repetition and sentence structure. We also look at how Williams creates sound with the alliteration and words that conjure the image of sounds.

Closure: How is sound in each poem different?

Lesson 3

Initiation: Writing prompt on the board when students enter the room: What do you remember about the Odyssey? What do you remember from the poetry we read at the beginning of the unit with "The Seafarer" and "Canto 1"?

Background/Model: If students do not remember the Odyssey, I refresh their memories about who Penelope is and who the sirens are. We then read "Penelope's Song" and "Siren Song" out loud.

Guided/Individual Practice: I ask the students to respond to the following questions in their journals. In what ways are these two poems taking a different kind of stance on the theme of Odysseus as presented in the beginning of the unit? How is the perspective different? What sounds do you hear in the poems? How do the writers convey their messages? Once the students have had time to mull over the questions we have a discussion.

Closure: Students write an exit slip explaining what they learned today.

Bibliography for Teachers

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Swenson, May. "Overboard," *Nature: Poems Old and New*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000.

Wilbur, Richard. "Junk," *The Poems of Richard Wilbur*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963.

Williams, William Carlos. "The Yachts," *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Volume I (1909-1939)* New York: New Directions, 1986.

District Standards

1.2b Interpret information that is implied in a text

2.1d Analyze literary conventions and devices an author uses and how they contribute meaning and appeal

2.2b Develop a critical stance and cite evidence to support the stance

3.1c Use the appropriate features of persuasive, narrative, expository or poetic writing

3.2c Revise texts for organization, elaboration, fluency and clarity

Endnotes

1. Stan Hugel, comp., *Shanties from the Seven Seas* (Mystic, CT : Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc., 1994) 2.

2. Stan Hugel, comp., *Shanties from the Seven Seas* (Mystic, CT : Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc., 1994) 3-4.

3. Stan Hugel, comp., *Shanties from the Seven Seas* (Mystic, CT : Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc., 1994) 32.

4. Stan Hugel, comp., *Shanties from the Seven Seas* (Mystic, CT : Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc., 1994) 43.

5. Stan Hugel, comp., Shanties from the Seven Seas (Mystic, CT : Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc., 1994) 46.
6. Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry," The Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/001.html>
7. William Carlos Williams "The Yachts," The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Volume I (1909-1939) (New York: New Directions, 1986) 388.

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