



## **Introduction**

by Langdon L. Hammer, Professor of English and of American Studies

Our seminar used a focus on sound as a way to approach poetry. In poetry, sound is a primary organizational principle: rhythm, rhyme, alliteration - these and a host of other "sound effects" structure poetry, and set it apart from other kinds of language use. Poetry can be a daunting subject in the classroom, because it is difficult to say what it means, and students shy away from it under the pressure to unlock its meaning. But a focus on sound postpones the question of meaning. It presents poetry as a medium of expression. It makes poetry available to anyone who can learn to listen, or to memorize and recite; and these skills can provide a basis for students to develop skills of writing and speaking — as well as interpretation.

To focus on sound is to focus on something essential about poetry, then. But we can turn this around and see poetry as a way to learn something about sound and the essential role it plays in communication generally. We de-materialize language when we look to it for a message. But language is always a material form. We apprehend it through our senses. Sound reminds us of the primacy of the material, of the sensory, in language. In poetry it is impossible to isolate content from form, or message from medium. This is true of communication generally, but poetry foregrounds it as a principle; and studying poetry helps students at every level of school to integrate these different dimensions of language.

Poetry is an archaic form, the most ancient of literary kinds; its patterns of sound, its structures of repetition, refer us to the earliest literary forms in culture, and to the basis of the literary and of literacy itself in orality. The primacy of sound in poetry also returns to the early history of the individual: to the experience of language acquisition, when we struggle out of infancy into speech, learning to form meaningful sounds with the muscles of our mouths, and to our first experiences of patterned language in nursery rhymes, schoolyard chants, song, or readings of scripture.

Our seminar explored these aspects of sound in poetry. We began by reading and discussing modern and contemporary poems written in Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter in order to learn to hear accent and alliteration. To the accentual scheme of Anglo-Saxon poetry, we added nursery rhymes — a prosody based on accent and rhyme — and some popular song forms. We explored basic principles of lineation and rhythm — in free verse poems by Whitman and Elizabeth Bishop — and moved from there to accentual-syllabic meter, with Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" as a model.

With Frost as a guide, but now as a theorist as much as a poet, we explored the concept of "tone" in poetry. We discussed Frost's notions of the "Vocal Imagination" and the "Imaginary Ear," and his definition of "the sound of sense." These topics lead us toward a working definition of "voice" in poetry, which we brought to the interpretation of contemporary dramatic monologues by Suzi Kwock-Kim and Louise Glück.

We studied the patterning of blues poems by Langston Hughes, and the use of rhyme — and ideas about rhyme — in Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" and Thom Gunn's "The Man with Night Sweats." Pope and Gunn both play with notions of "imitative form": rhymes — and more generally sounds — that imitate the sense of what is being said. We turned this idea on its head with poems by Sylvia Plath and Frederick Seidel and the lyrics of contemporary rappers like Microphone Rakim, in which we saw how sound sometimes takes the lead and generates sense. This led us to children's poetry and the pleasures of nonsense, with May Swenson's inventive poems as a model, including her poem made out of spoonerisms, "A Nosty Fright," and Wallace Stevens's "The Man on the Dump."

Throughout the seminar, we mixed discussion of these texts and concepts with reflection on classroom teaching. We also had time for reading aloud, individually and collectively, and hands-on, practical play with words. For example, we practiced turning prose into poetry by taking a passage of prose and introducing line breaks. We composed poems collectively. We got the hang of hearing metrical patterns by analyzing the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in our names.

In response, the Fellows produced the remarkable curriculum units that follow. They demonstrated the usefulness and interest of sound in poetry by bringing the ideas and exercises of our seminar to bear on a notably wide range of classroom subjects and situations: the teaching of reading in first grade, Spanish as a second language for high school students, English as a second language for Spanish-speaking students, a course on public speaking in business at a vocational-technical high school, inner-city high school English classes, a class for gifted eighth-graders, and AP English in several different settings.

Holly Banning was our first-grade teacher. Her unit draws on the oral roots of poetry as a way to help students move from an oral experience of language, focused on speaking and listening, to basic reading and writing skills, in the process heightening young children's sensitivity to sound and pattern in all verbal communication. Working with AP English students, Marva Hutchinson identifies a new, crucial problem in her classroom: the difficulty students have defining and describing tone in writing. She has designed a curriculum unit meant to redress this lack by helping students develop their auditory imagination through the study of poetry.

Bonnee Breese uses poetry's oral roots in another way: to draw her largely African-American student body into the study of literature and the refinement of verbal expression by focusing on oral traditions in African diaspora performance and writing, both in the United States and the Caribbean, emphasizing recitation and choral reading in the classroom. In her AP English classroom in Chicago, Andrea Kulas accomplishes something related: her unit uses the sounds of rap and new forms of hip-hop, such as the "mash-up," to develop students' sensitivity to sound in language, and to introduce them to sophisticated literary concepts such as tone and allusion, as well as questions of intellectual property, originality, and literary value.

Thelma Uzeta, who remembers first encountering poetry through the Spanish verses and songs of her mother, teaches Spanish as a second language in high school; she has designed a unit which uses memorization and recitation of poetry and song to help teach students Spanish pronunciation, something of the history of Spanish poetry, and with it, important lessons in cultural style and tradition. Martha Margarita Tamez, who is herself a poet, teaches English to Spanish-speaking middle-school students in a low-income urban environment. Her unit invites students to experience the excitement and pleasures of verbal expression, in literature and in the everyday life around them, and seeks to instill in them an interest in the literary devices through which writers create their effects.

Business students do not ordinarily encounter poetry in their studies, but Nicole Dobbs has designed an

exciting curriculum unit intended to enhance the confidence and verbal sophistication of her students by introducing them to poetry and poetic pattern through memorization and recitation, as a basis for effective public speaking. Cheree Charmello, working with gifted eighth-graders with a wide range of backgrounds, uses poetry as a bridge "from familiar sounds — such as those created in nursery rhymes — to the often inconspicuous pattern of sounds in free verse," drawing on students' "prior, and possibly untapped knowledge" of verbal pattern, to create a foundation for higher-level reading and interpretation of literature.

Jeanette Gibson foregrounds poetry in her teaching of American literature to high school students as a way to strengthen students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in all literary students, helping them, in particular, "to find the joy of language through poetry." Her concentration on Walt Whitman, Claude McKay, and Robert Frost gives focus to her curriculum, as well as exciting cultural and aesthetic diversity. Melissa Dailey makes the most of a special classroom setting at the Sound School, a high school on Long Island Sound, by introducing her AP students to the long tradition of the poetry of the sea, reaching back to Homer, including sea shanties and other forms of song, and contemporary poems. But the example of her unit invites all teachers to be attentive to the sounds in and outside their particular classrooms, and to integrate them in their teaching of language arts.

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