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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2010 Volume I: Connecting the Visual to the Verbal in the Classroom

Examining Poems about Love and Loss

Curriculum Unit 10.01.10, published September 2010

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Overview

Leonardo da Vinci, the master of art and science, is said to have been asked the great secret of his creativity and brilliance. His answer? "Saper Vedere," or to know how to see. ¹ By studying poetry, with a focus on sonnets, elegies, and ecphrasis, my hope is to arm my students with the tools they will need to know how to "see" literature, poetry and art in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Unlike da Vinci, my AP English Literature students often struggle when they attempt to examine, no to mention articulate, what they see. As Deborah Samuel notes, students "resist understanding why they respond in the way that they do." ² This is particularly troubling for me because, despite the emphasis that is placed on metacognition (awareness of one's own strategies for learning or thinking) at my school, my students want to resist being metacognitive. Furthermore, when faced with the daunting task of studying poetry, many students are stopped in their tracks. "I hate poetry" is a phrase I hear often. Perhaps some students feel, as Richard Andrews (as quoted by Benton) says, that poetry is "an enclosed, self-referential world to which only an elite gain access" ³. Or, some students may resist poetry due to "its associations with the feminine for 'macho' boys, many of whom [resist] reading of any sort and [reserve] a special contempt for poetry". ⁴ Whatever the case may be, it seems to me that when studying poetry, my students are likely to be apathetic, if not downright resistant.

Thus, I will work to counteract these feelings about poetry in my unit, "Examining Poems about Love and Loss", which will take place in my Advanced Placement English Literature course. This class is comprised of thirty-two 11th graders. For many of these students, this will be their first high school course dedicated solely to literature, since we teach a Humanities-based curriculum in the 9th and 10th grade, focused more on history and literature about history than dedicated to the study of literature. This unit, devoted to sonnets, elegies, and ecphrasis, will take approximately four weeks, during which time I will meet with my students for two or three blocks a week (blocks are 100 minute class periods).

Rationale

As an AP English Literature teacher, one of my responsibilities is to foster an understanding of poetic form and its connection to meaning. Until I began teaching this course, I shied away from teaching poetry at all. Part of this was due to student resistance, as I indicated previously, but much of my hesitation was due to my own aversion to poetry. I had never studied it formally, and found it obscure and enigmatic. However, once I began to read essays on poetry, and discovered Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook*, I was converted.

Oliver's book expatiates on the value of teaching poetic writing, emphasizing the need to study poetry in order to write it. She states that "poetry is a river; many voices travel in it; poem after poem moves along in the exciting crests and falls of the river waves".⁵ For me, Oliver's words confirmed the importance of teaching poetry to my students. The poem itself is a conversation between the poet and the reader. If I could help my students learn the vocabulary to be a part of this conversation, then they would gain educational capital that could enhance their learning experience and potential for success on the AP exam.

Poetry also allows me to instill "sapere verere" in my students. According to Dinah Livingstone, poets were once thought to be "seers" and "the germ of a poem is a moment of intense seeing (which includes feeling), an *insight*, becoming a 'seeing how to say it', which both clarifies the seeing for the seer...and [helps] others see with you".⁶ I want to provide an entry point for my students to become part of this conversation regarding "seeing".

How do I open my students' eyes to truly see poetry? Initially, I will do this through a study of poetic forms. Generally, the form of a poem refers to its architectural makeup. For instance, does it fit into a commonly used structure, such as a fourteen-line sonnet, or even more specifically, three quatrains and a couplet? Or might it fit into the category of free verse, which, despite its description as "free", challenges poets to compensate for the lack of conventional form? These distinctions are crucial for my students, so that their opinions can become infused with the nomenclature surrounding poetry. Also, I want them to recognize aspects of meaning that are shaped by these forms. As Frances Mayes indicates, "The form of a good poem occurs simultaneously with the meaning, not as a separate phenomenon."⁷ The interplay between the form and the meaning will help my students know how to see.

In an ongoing effort to cull from the multitude of available materials, I wanted to narrow my unit to a theme that can be found both in poetry and in my students' lives. I looked no further than the themes dealing with love and loss. For my students, who are 16 or 17, love is omnipresent, whether they are in the throes of adolescent crushes and relationships themselves, or live vicariously through the portrayal of love in the media. All such relationships shape and impact teenagers' identity. And with love comes its crushing counterpart, loss. Students experience loss in a variety of ways, from the loss of innocence to the breakup of the traditional family unit or even the loss of a family member or loved one. In exploring poems that center on these two themes, my students will have a built-in frame of reference: their own lives.

Finally, I have needed to narrow down the poetic forms we will address in this unit. Naturally, sonnets and elegies lend themselves well to themes of love and loss. Sonnets, in their brevity and strict form, are likely to emphasize one central idea, and build on that idea as the poem continues. It forces the poet to focus on this one central idea, and thus will allow my students to grapple with that idea undistractedly. Elegies, though not as strict in form, are "most often a poem of meditation, usually on love or death",⁸ and are thus a natural

complement to my unit. Finally, ecphrasis will enhance our study of sonnets and elegies by providing visual images to accompany the poems and reveal the dialogue that exists not only between artists and viewers, but also between artists and writers. In some cases, these ecphrastics may pair with art that embodies love or loss. The layering of art and poetry will provide new entry points for my students, particularly those who are visual or spatial learners—versus my verbal or linguistic learners.

Objectives

Discussion Goals

One of my primary goals as a teacher is to help my students find, and then use, their voices in academic settings and beyond. In order to achieve that goal, I first need to lessen my students' affective filters. "Affective filter" is a term coined by Steven Krashen, based on his research in second language acquisition, and it is "a screen of emotion that can block language acquisition or learning if it [makes] the users...too self-conscious or too embarrassed to take risks during communicative exchanges".⁹ My AP students enter my classroom lacking the requisite vocabulary to speak about poetry. As we uncover basic terms and strategies for studying poetry, I believe that my students' affective filters will be reduced. My hope is that this will diminish the stress that students tend to feel when studying poetry, and will open their eyes to the underlying beauty and complexity of poetry. Also, since the language and structure of the poems may be foreign or challenging to my students, the subjects of love and loss provide entry points through which students can discuss the less verbally current poems in the unit. Once my students recognize that they can conquer the daunting task of analyzing poetry, they can apply this confidence to other areas of their lives in which they have felt silenced or subdued.

Writing Goals

By the end of this unit, I want my students to have gained momentum regarding academic writing. First of all, I want them to learn the language of analyzing poetry, such terms of vocabulary as stanza, couplet, and volta, as well as rhetorical devices like personification or metonymy. Once they gain more facility with this language, I would like my students to be able to develop written assertions about a particular poem in the form of a thesis, and be able to prove the validity of this thesis through the use of well-chosen evidence in an effectively written essay. I would also like my students to be able to draw comparisons between poems, as well as between a poem and a work of art.

Finally, my other objectives are all grounded in the California state standards and in the goals in the College Board's AP English Literature Course Descriptions. The standards being met by this unit can be found in Appendix 1. They focus on reading and writing skills.

Poetic Forms

Sonnets

Sonnets were originally created in Sicily in the thirteenth century, and were named after the Italian word for "little song": *sonnetto*. Sonnets, even in this earliest period, contained fourteen lines. The sonnet form made its way to Italy later in the century, and the most famous Italian writers of sonnets were Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarca (also known as Petrarch). According to Burt and Mikics, "Petrarch is the most influential sonnet writer in history."¹⁰ The Sicilian form was popularized by Petrarch and is now commonly referred to as the Petrarchan sonnet. This form contains an octave (an eight line section) and a sestet (a six line section). The rhyme scheme in a Petrarchan poem follows this pattern: *abbaabba cdecde* (or, in the sestet, it may be *cdcdcd*). Often, the octave "offers an admirably unified pattern and leads to the *volta* or "turn" of thought in the more varied sestet...the sestet, on the other hand, with its element of unpredictability...implies an acceleration of thought and feeling."¹¹

Petrarch and Dante both wrote extensively about love. Petrarch's poems often center on Laura, his beloved, who may or may not have existed. He wrote over three hundred poems (including many sonnets) about this unrequited love, typically discussing everything from her lovely features to metaphors comparing her beauty to precious objects and nature.

In the late 1500s, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard brought sonnets to England after their travels in Italy. William Shakespeare is perhaps the best known of the British sonnet writers in the early 1600s, having written 154 sonnets that were published in 1609. It was through Shakespeare's work that a new form of sonnet was popularized, and was thus known as the Shakespearean sonnet. This sonnet is marked by three quatrains (four line stanzas), ending with a couplet. The typical rhyme scheme for a Shakespearean sonnet is *abab cdcd efef gg*.

Shakespeare's sonnets, as with many poets who succeeded him, focused on secular love. The sonnet sequence was, in a sense, a journal for these poets to express their feelings, frustrations, and judgments about love. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, poets such as Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth took up the sonnet, extending it to be a form "into which poets could pour almost anything."¹² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, subsequently used sonnets to document her courtship with her eventual husband, Robert Browning, while Christina Rossetti used the form to expound on everything from erotic love to political issues. The twentieth century, in its embrace of modernism, was when some poets looked to sonnets to reclaim a poetic history of sorts. Edna St. Vincent Millay, for instance, rejected modernism in favor of the sonnet, as did Harlem Renaissance poets like Claude McKay. As poets continue to play with (and break) the form of the sonnet, this form provides an opportunity for poets to "remind us that the present is surprisingly like the past...that we do not differ so much from the people who love and fear and grieve in poems by Sidney and Shakespeare."¹³

One sonnet that I plan to use in my unit is "A Superscription" by Italian-British poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who wrote it in 1869, seven years after his wife committed suicide. It contains overtones of both love and loss. The poem reads:

SONNET XLVI. A SUPERScription. Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been; I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell; Unto thine ear I hold the dead-sea shell

Cast up thy Life's foam-fretted feet between; Unto thine eyes the glass where that is seen Which had Life's form and Love's, but by my spell Is now a shaken shadow intolerable, Of ultimate things unuttered the frail screen. Mark me, how still I am! But should there dart One moment through thy soul the soft surprise Of that winged Peace which lulls the breath of sighs,— Then shalt thou see me smile, and turn apart Thy visage to mine ambush at thy heart Sleepless with cold commemorative eyes.

After my students participate in small group work to analyze the poem, we will reconvene to unpack this work together. What do my students see? What poetic devices are being used? What are we learning about the complicated nature of love and loss?

The title gestures towards the possibility that this may, in fact, be an ecphrastic poem (which is explained in more detail below). A superscription is something written or engraved on the surface of, outside, or above something else. In this case, perhaps Rossetti is referring to the writing of an artist at the bottom of a finished canvas. Hence, Rossetti is beckoning us to imagine that the poem is a painting, with an allegorical figure (the "I" narrator) at its center. According to Burt and Mikics, this "I" is the poet's muse, "which also encompass(es) the poet in (her) relentless grip."¹⁴ She is described as "Might-have-been", "No-more", "Too-late" and "Farewell", as if to say that this figure is a lost love, or a grim reminder of what the reader could have had. With my students, I would look for evidence of who this speaker is. Is it Rossetti's wife, who slipped into alcoholism and killed herself after having a stillborn baby? This might be the case, since she is a "shaken shadow." Or is it one of his alleged mistresses, such as Jane Burden, the wife of his business partner? After all, he does describe her as "Might-have-been", which could be a clue that he wishes he had married Jane Burden before his partner had the chance. Next, we would examine the structure. How does the poem build momentum from the octave to the sestet? Does it change tone dramatically? I would push my students in the direction of the sestet, and particularly the last line, as it is the culmination of the sleepless terror of the sestet. Why did Rossetti use the term "sleepless"? It could be a description of the lack of emotion in the muse's eyes, but more likely, it is a reflection of the poet's own agony over these lost loves. The eyes are described as "commemorative", which is a meditation on this lost love. Further still, the "co- (meaning 'with') implies the lasting bondage of the poet to his muse, who ambushes his heart."¹⁵ This exploration of diction in the poem would enhance my students' ability to closely examine every turn of phrase in poetry. As Paul Fry suggests, these turns of phrase are the "tricks that only poetry can play."

One other area that I would encourage my students to examine is the use of symbolism in the poem. Rossetti mentions glass (to describe the muse's eyes) and a shell that she holds up to her ear (another ecphrastic reference to a Renaissance iconography of shells). It is crucial to remember that a shell creates echoes when placed next to one's ear, and "the sounds it makes are dead, a mere trace of the past, as is the vision in the glass in the second quatrain."¹⁶ Thus, these inanimate objects could speak to the belief that love is frail and fleeting, like a shell or glass, condemned to reflect the deathly echoes of a lost love.

Elegies

The term elegy derives from the Greek word, *elegos*, or mournful song.¹⁷ The form of an elegy is not standard; in other words, some poets wrote elegies in iambic couplets, but throughout the centuries, poets have experimented with many forms found under the umbrella of elegy. More commonly, the elegy is marked by a commonality in theme, rather than form. Elegies are meant to "lament, praise and console. All are responses to the experience of loss."¹⁸ The term elegy has been used to describe poetry and songs as far

back as 7th century BC. Most commonly, these poems were set to music and commemorated a particular event, such as the death of a loved one. These poems eventually became commemorations of the passing of a famous or influential person (also known as a funeral elegy).

By the twelfth and thirteenth century, elegies began to deal not just with death, but other topics as well. They could include political commentaries or allegories, for instance. These commentaries and allegories were still frequently related to death and grieving, but poets found it easier to shroud grief in these other topics. In the sixteenth century in England, the "connection between death and elegies may have been strengthened by Donne...[and] Milton, [who], in his pastoral *Lycidas* establish(ed) definitely the elegy as a separate genre in English, the concerns of which are lamenting for the dead and searching for consolation." ¹⁹ Often, poets used a three quatrain progression to elucidate the stages of coping with death—the first stage being the occasion of grief, then the expression of that grief, and finally the acceptance or transcendence of that grief. ²⁰

In the last one hundred years, elegies have become an important reminder of the power of mourning. According to Jahan Ramazani, mourning rites have been stripped of their power due to industrialization—with the upsurge of hospitals, hospices, and funeral homes, death has increasingly been relegated to these spaces or perceived as a "taboo" subject. ²¹ In contrast to the elegies of earlier periods, which provided a sense of consolation to those who mourn, Ramazani suggests that many modern elegies express a lack of resolution, often marked by a resistance to consolation or an outright anger at the dead, or at God, or even at elegies themselves. Modern elegies of this type that I will study with my students may include Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art", William Carlos Williams' "Death", and Anne Sexton's "A Curse Against Elegies."

Another poem I intend to use is "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" by John Crowe Ransom, which deals with the precarious nature of human life. The poem is about the death of a young, graceful girl. This poem will meet my need to look at how form influences the meaning of an elegy, because the poem is written in four quatrains, each rich with imagery ("noon apple dreams and scuttle goose-fashion"), hyperbole ("such speed in her little body"), symbolism (the geese, the bells), juxtaposition (her vivacity juxtaposed with her death) and paradox (life-death). This poem is also an ideal vehicle for teaching my students how to "see". Ransom never says that word "death" in the poem. Rather, he indicates her death through the euphemistic description of "her brown study", a repetition of his description of her in the beginning of the poem, when she was alive. This movement of thought is in fact reminiscent of the initial shock at a death, when mourners are awakened to their memories of the deceased being alive, and may feel an inability to articulate, much less accept, that their loved one is gone. Finally, this poem can serve as a meditation on death in general. No matter how much "lightness" one has, life will eventually be "stopped" by death.

Ecphrasis

Ecphrasis (ekphrasis) is the poetic description of a man-made object. The word is derived from the Greek, with the roots *ek* and *phrasis*, or 'out' and 'speak'. Ecphrastic poems, according to John Hollander, may be described as "those which involve descriptions or other sorts of verbal representation of works of art." ²² The first type is known as notional ecphrasis, or the description of purely fictional art. Early examples include Homer's description of the shield of Achilles in *The Iliad*, or Dante's description of the white marble bank full of carvings in Purgatory. On the other hand, actual ecphrasis is a poem that deals with a physical object that actually exists or has existed, such as Emma Lazarus describing the Statue of Liberty in her poem "The New Colossus". Finally, unassessable actual ecphrastics are poems that discuss an actual piece of art that is no longer in existence or unavailable to be seen, such as the clock in Gjertrud Schnackenberg's "Nightfishing."

Ecphrastic poetry deals with the interaction between the poet and the painter, or the poem and painting. At times, this relationship is tense. Poets may express their own beliefs in the poem, and imbue meaning in or make sense of what they are writing. The painter, though, may be free to luxuriate in the silence of art—the painting can simply "be" (or so the poet thinks). Additionally, poets may, at times, impose their own gaze on the painting, as in the very male point of view in XJ Kennedy's "Nude Descending a Staircase", written in response to Duchamp's painting of the same name.

In other poems about art, though, there is a reverence attached to the art's silence, conveyed by the poet's use of hushed language, with words like "stillness" or "silence." Poetry is, by nature, a conversation, and poets may admire painting for its ability to be still. However, another way of approaching ecphrasis is that it encourages an equal exchange and interdependency between the two forms of art. The process of writing about art allows both media to build on and supplement one another.

Strategies

Teaching Philosophy

Before diving into the strategies of this specific unit, I feel I must say a few words about my pedagogical approach. Essentially, my belief is that the optimal situation in which learning occurs is one where students are actively engaged. Paulo Freire, best known for his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, supports this belief. Among his many ideas, Freire places great emphasis on the use of dialogue in an educational setting. As M. K. Smith states:

Paulo Freire's...insistence [was] that dialogue involves respect. It should not involve one person acting on another, but rather people working with each other. Too much education, Paulo Freire argues, involves "banking" - the educator making "deposits" in the educatee. ²³

Thus, in my classroom, I encourage peer-to-peer dialogue, as well as small group discussion and whole class discussion, facilitated (but not led) by me. Rather than taking center stage, I encourage my students to make meaning together and become more autonomous in their thinking, rather than relying on me for the "right" answer. This, according to Freire, leads to a sense of community and social awareness. Freire also postulates that those who have been forced into voicelessness, in other words the oppressed, are thus given a voice in this mode of education. ²⁴ Since many students feel voiceless—owing to being raised to defer to adults' voices, or because of second language barriers, or general shyness—helping them find a voice in my classroom is a central goal. If they achieve this goal, my students may find a voice not only in class, but also in their communities and beyond.

Building on the Freirian model, I look towards the constructivist theory to guide my pedagogy. Jacqueline Grennon Brooks writes that "constructing knowledge talks about how we as the learners are reformulating, refiltering, relooking at...the way that we see our world, that the teacher can't give away explanations, the teacher can't give away knowledge, the student can't receive it passively from the teacher." ²⁵ In my classroom, this constructivist approach leads to a spiral of learning, where we often return to and deepen our knowledge of concepts, such as symbolism or imagery, rather than declare "we've learned that" and move on. Consequently, my unit will build on the notion that we are all learners in my classroom, and need to be

constantly revisiting and re-envisioning our ideas in order to gain a deep and authentic understanding of what we study.

Unit Plan

In this poetry unit, I plan to use a series of sonnets and elegies, some of which are ecphrastic, to build poetic vocabulary and writing skills in my AP English Literature class. This unit will take place over a four-week period. My school has a rotating block schedule, so I see my students every other day, either Monday–Wednesday–Friday or Tuesday–Thursday, depending on the week. Thus, in those four weeks, I will have ten class sessions to complete this unit.

In the first week, we will begin with introductory activities. I usually start with Seamus Heaney's "Sonnet #5" and show my students how to annotate it—noting the meaning of the poem by looking at its structure, speaker, tone, poetic devices, and deeper truths. We will then read an article about how to analyze poetry, and this session will end with a homework assignment in which students will be given an article on how to read Shakespeare's poems, as well as an illustrated version of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18." In the second session, I will conduct a mini-lesson on the history of the sonnet. Then, we will discuss our ideas about "Sonnet 18," which will segue into studying Shakespeare's "Sonnet 138" ("When my love swears that she is made of truth") as a classic example of a Shakespearean sonnet. Students will be given a homework assignment to read, annotate, and develop a thesis for "Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"). To end the first week, I will work with my students on how to build a strong compare/contrast essay, and will have them read "Sonnet 43" ("How Do I Love Thee") by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Their homework will be to read "Paradise Saved (Another Version of the Fall)" by A.D. Hope and complete a writing exercise in which they contrast the poem with the Bible version of the Adam and Eve story. Throughout these lessons, I will point my students towards new vocabulary, such as the terminology of the sonnet form and any new literary devices that appear in the poems. They will have a master list of literary vocabulary to reference as well.

The second week of class will begin with a fishbowl discussion based on the students' homework from the previous weekend. This fishbowl will conclude with a timed write in which I ask students to compare/contrast the poem to the Bible story. Following that session, I will introduce ecphrasis, and end this portion of the unit by giving a lesson on "Not My Best Side" by UA Fanthorpe, which is not only an ecphrastic poem but one that also provides a feminist perspective on classic notions of Arthurian romance.

In the third week, we will transition into elegies. To begin, we will read "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" by John Crowe Ransom, followed by activities regarding Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art", William Carlos Williams' "Death", and Anne Sexton's "A Curse Against Elegies." Throughout these lessons, students will be learning how to see, through pair work, small group work, and fishbowl discussions, as well as in-class timed writes. We will close out the section on elegies by doing a case study of Gjertrud Schnackenberg, in which we carefully read her ecphrastic poems "Nightfishing" and "Self Portrait of Ivan Generalic."

Finally, we will go to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. After a docent-led tour, I will ask my students to choose a piece of art in the museum that inspires feelings of love or loss for them. They will spend time in silent reflection with their chosen piece of art, and will begin to construct an ecphrastic poem, which they will revise and complete as their final project of the unit.

Throughout the unit, we will keep a class list of themes regarding love and loss, which we learn through the study of each of the poems. Additionally, students will write at least three in-class timed writes and one or two

practice multiple choice tests, modeled after the multiple choice portions of the AP English Literature exam.

Discussion Strategies

In keeping with my constructivist approach, I place great emphasis on discussion in my classroom. This takes on different forms, depending on the day and the poem we will be discussing. Generally, though, I use four discussion strategies: small group work, write-pair-share, jigsaws, and fishbowl discussions.

Small Group Work

When the unit begins, I split my class into eight poetry groups, with four students in each group. Whenever possible, I try to group students heterogeneously by skill level, gender, and, to some extent, personality and general speaking skills. These groups will meet three to four times during the course of the unit, within which time they will be given four copies of a poem that I have chosen, and will use the SOAPStone strategy, discussed below. My expectation, repeated often to the students, is that they will actively participate and take notes. Students will come to expect that I will call on them at random when we reconvene as a whole class, so they use their small group work notes to contribute to class discussions on the poem they have worked through in their small group. I have found that shy students gain confidence when they can look to their notes, which allows richer conversations overall.

Write-Pair-Share

Write-Pair-Share is a discussion strategy that was originally developed by Frank Lyman, and its goal is to foster discussion where many students feel empowered to participate. First, the teacher poses a question, or problem, or quotation. Students then silently write their responses. I typically give two to five minutes, depending on the complexity of my question. Next, students pair up (or I choose pairs for them) and they discuss their responses out loud. Finally, the class reconvenes as a whole, and I call on a number of students to share out what they discussed with their partner. At times, students may be asked to share their own ideas, but in other instances, students may be asked to share their partner's ideas.

I like this strategy for several reasons. It allows my students to gather their thoughts, particularly when I ask them an open-ended or provocative question. Additionally, it allows space for students to then "test" their answers out on one another. They may find, in the Pair portion of the activity, that they could rephrase their idea for clarity's sake. Or, they may find their partner's idea compelling, complementary, or contradictory to their own, which may force them to re-think or deepen their own response. Once the students have processed their own ideas, tested them out with a partner, and gained clarity on their ideas, they may have more confidence to speak during the whole class discussion.

Fishbowls

Throughout the year, I use the fishbowl technique in my AP Lit class. Since I have thirty-two students in my class, whole-class discussions tend to be dominated by eight to ten students. In order to quell these powerful voices, I provide space for my quieter students to take the stage.

The fishbowl strategy has three parts: preparation, discussion, and debrief. In the first part, students prepare for the fishbowl discussion in their aforementioned poetry groups. I provide students with a poem to study and a handout, such as the SOAPStone handout described below, for them to structure their conversation. Then, after a predetermined amount of time (usually about 40 minutes), we reorganize the room into two concentric

circles. The "inside" circle (or fishbowl) is populated by one third of my students, or roughly 11 students, whom I have chosen. The "outside" circle consists of the rest of the class. We complete this activity three times during the unit, so that each student participates in one fishbowl.

For the next 30 to 45 minutes, the fishbowl group participates in a discussion that is observed by the outside circle and by me. My general rule of thumb is that I say nothing during these discussions, but I do allow for an empty desk, which can be used by students from the outside circle who have something compelling and brief to contribute. Otherwise, the outside circle is taking notes. Once the discussion is over, the class reviews how the fishbowl went. I ask first for "warm" feedback (what went well) from the outside circle, then the inside circle. I then ask for "cool" feedback (what could have gone better) from the outside, then inside, circles. Finally, I give warm and cool feedback and explain what I would like to see in the next fishbowl, and afterwards, I grade the students on a fishbowl rubric (see Appendix 2).

Jigsaw

The Jigsaw strategy is a prime example of cooperative learning, or students actively learning from and engaging with one another. Simply put, jigsaw is a classroom-based team sport. No student can be successful unless all students work together as a team, or cooperate, and equally value all voices.

The basic structure of a Jigsaw is twofold. First, students shift into small groups, typically of four students (in my class, this would be their poetry group). These groups are given a task that is different from those of the rest of the groups in the class. In this unit, I would use a jigsaw if I wanted to address several poems in one class period, and would give a different poem to each group and ask them to do SOAPSTone with their poem. I would then give them an allotted amount of time to work together with their group to complete their task, making sure that every member of their group has written proof of the work they've done. When the allotted time is over, they shift into new groups, based on numbers I have handed out during their poetry group work time. Once they are in their new groups, I give them a new task (which usually involves sharing out what they did in their first group) to complete. Thus, each student becomes an expert on the work they did in their poetry group, and shares their knowledge with a new group of students.

Analysis and Writing Strategies

SOAPSTone

When students get into their poetry groups, the most common exercise that I ask them to complete is SOAPSTone. In brief, here are the guidelines for SOAPSTONE, which I either project on an overhead projector or distribute in handout form:

- **Subject**--elevator pitch. Describe what the poem is about in no more than 3-4 sentences.
- **Occasion**--did something happen to make the speaker want to express something?
- **Audience**--To whom is the speaker speaking? Why?
- **Purpose**--What will the speaker gain from this poem? What might the poet gain?
- **Speaker(s)**--Who is the speaker? Why did the poet choose this narrative style?
- **Tone**--what adjectives would you use to describe this poem? Why?

Each group is then expected to interact with the poem to figure out the answers to each element of SOAPSTone. They make annotations on the poems by underlining words that stand out to them, circling literary devices, and writing in the margins. They also take notes on their discoveries and support their ideas

with quotes (words or phrases) from the poem. An additional question that I always include with SOAPSTone is: What literary devices are used in the poem, and how do they add to the meaning of the overall poem? Students may use the literary devices they find to support their ideas on tone, speaker, or any other part of SOAPSTone. Finally, I ask students to discuss what they think the message of the poem is. I request that they steer clear of clichés and instead focus on the "truth" of the poem. When they are finished examining the poem in small groups, we share out ideas in a larger group discussion.

Thesis Drills

This strategy typically follows some of the previous strategies, but always occurs after students have been exposed to a poem and have arrived, as a class, at an understanding of the form and meaning of the poem.

In a thesis drill, I give my students an essay prompt, modeled after (or taken directly from) an AP English Literature essay question from a previous AP exam. Typically, the students then go home and write a thesis in response to the essay question, as their homework assignment. Their thesis should show their ability to exhibit clarity and sophistication in their writing. Below their thesis idea, I ask them to brainstorm evidence from the poem that they could use to support their thesis. Most students complete this task by creating a bullet point list, each bullet being one piece of evidence followed by brief ideas about how to use the evidence. When the class meets again, we begin the day by sharing out thesis ideas. I may ask a student to write their thesis on the board and then ask the others to assess it and brainstorm ideas about how to develop the thesis into an essay, or might do a Pair-Share activity to have students compare their thesis statements. At times, these thesis statements may be used in a timed write (a fifty minute in-class essay) that day, but often, the thesis drill is the culminating exercise of a lesson.

Timed Writes

On the AP English Literature exam, students are expected to write three essays in 120 minutes, which means that they should be able to write an effective and sophisticated essay in approximately forty minutes. In order to prepare my students to write under time constraints, I give them two or three in-class timed writes in each unit we complete. In the fall, I allow students up to sixty minutes to complete their timed writes, which usually take place in the second half of the class, after a discussion of thesis statements or immediately following a fishbowl discussion. I do this so that my students have had the chance to formulate their ideas in conversation with others. As the year progresses, I take off the training wheels, as it were, and ask students to write under pressure with less and less discussion and support. By the end of the year, they are given a poem or excerpt from a novel and asked to write on command for forty minutes, with no discussion.

Classroom Activities

Lesson 1: Introducing the Poetry Unit

On the first day of this poetry unit, I plan to start by projecting Seamus Heaney's "Sonnet 5", from *Clearances*, on the board. This poem, a variation on a sonnet, centers on two people in the act of folding laundry from an outdoor laundry line. After reading the poem aloud, I will ask for two students to get up and silently act out what has taken place in the poem. The class will analyze how well they performed the actions of the poem. This will be followed by a discussion of *how* we, as readers, can take a poem and act it out. What clues are we

given? Some discussion questions might include:

- What words resonate with you or seem rich with meaning?
- Do you recognize any literary devices? How do they add to the meaning of the poem? (students will likely mention onomatopoeia and perhaps syntax, imagery, and diction)
- Who is speaking in the poem? Is there anyone else in the poem?
- What is Heaney trying to say?

After this brief discussion, we will discuss the idea that reading poetry is like solving a puzzle. You need to look for many types of clues to fully understand it. For instance, the clues we just uncovered in "Sonnet 5" dealt with form, literary devices, speaker and theme. In other instances, we might look to rhyme, meter, historical context, or even other poems by the same author, to develop assertions about the poem. In order to keep track of these clues, we must annotate the poem. This would be the next step in this lesson.

Throughout the unit, I will expect my students to annotate any poem they receive from me, so this introductory exercise is crucial. I will pass out a handout with instructions and an example for how to annotate (See Appendix 3). We will then follow the instructions on the handout to begin to annotate "Sonnet 5." After we have completed a line or two together as a class, I will ask students to pair up and finish their annotations, and then we will share out the clues that students discovered through the annotation exercise.

I will finish the day by providing three handouts: a copy of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18", along with an article on how to read Shakespeare's writing, and a copy of a cartoon version of the same poem, taken from *Poetry Comics* by David Morice. Their assignment will be to read the article on understanding Shakespeare, then read and annotate the sonnet, and finally read the comic version of the poem. My hope is that they will not only begin to understand Shakespeare's language and themes, but will see that poetry can be playful as well.

Lesson 2: Ecphrastic Poetry

Once we have spent approximately one week studying love sonnets, my goal is to complicate my students' understanding of love. Traditional love, according to many of my students, could be defined by the Cinderella story—a man comes in and whisks a woman out of a difficult situation, and they live happily ever after. However, this is not reality. Thus, I want to read "Not My Best Side" by UA Fanthorpe, in order to discriminate reality from "Disney" romance.

The day will begin with a write-pair-share activity. On the board, I will write the following questions: What lessons do Disney movies typically teach us about love? According to these movies, what is the role of women in courtship, love and marriage? What about men? Finally, pick a Disney movie and discuss it—what lessons are being taught about love? After students have had roughly five to ten minutes to write, they will pair up with someone sitting near them and converse about their thoughts on these questions. We will then have a class conversation about these ideas.

We will transition from this discussion into "Not My Best Side." Fanthorpe's poem is structured in three parts. The first is from the point of view of a dragon, the second from a typically fairy tale princess, and the third from the knight in shining armor. I will split my students into three groups, and give each group one section of the poem. It will be their task to read their section, and then discuss who the speaker is and what the main concerns of this speaker are. I will ask each group to have a recorder, who takes notes on their discussion, and a reporter, who will share out their findings. After a brief discussion, we will reconvene as a whole class. I will ask one member of each group to read their section to the whole class, and discuss who their speaker is. As a

class, we will establish who the three voices are in the poem, and how their priorities differ. I will then ask for a volunteer to sketch the poem on the board in the form of a cartoon. What might a visual image of this poem look like? Other students may chime in with ideas for the artist. Once the visual has been completed, I will display Paolo Uccello's painting, "St. George and the Dragon" on my whiteboard.

We will review the term *ecphrasis*, having discussed it earlier in the unit, and I will ask my students to discuss Uccello's painting in comparison to Fanthorpe's poem. How are they similar? What are their differences, specifically regarding theme?

Subsequently, I will move students into their poetry groups, and ask them to complete two exercises. First, they will do SOAPSTone on this poem, annotating the poem on a handout that I will provide. Second, in framing the theme of the poem, I want them to discuss the following quote, from Hilary Crew in her article "Spinning New Tales from Traditional Texts": Feminists...have written of the importance of issues of giving voice, agency, and subjectivity to those who have been previously silenced and objectified." My hope is that students will dig beneath the surface humor of the poem to see the underlying feminist message.

The final piece of this lesson will be homework that the students will be expected to complete. I will give them a slip of paper with the following two essay prompts:

1. Read carefully the poem by U.A. Fanthorpe. Then write an essay analyzing how Fanthorpe employs dramatic voice to add meaning to the poem.
2. Write a well-organized essay in which you analyze the techniques the poet uses to convey her attitude towards traditional notions of love in fairy tales.

Their job will be to pick one of the prompts, write a thesis statement and brainstorm ways that they would develop that thesis statement. We will discuss their ideas when we meet in the next session.

Lesson 3: Analyzing Elegies

This final lesson will take place during the elegy portion of my unit. Prior to entering class for this lesson, students will have read "Death" by William Carlos Williams and "A Curse Against Elegies" by Anne Sexton, both of which are ruminations on death and rail against death, and even against elegies in general. For homework, they will annotate these poems, specifically looking for thematic clues regarding death.

To start the day, I will review the terms euphony and cacophony with my students. When words sound harmonious and create a soothing effect, it's known as euphony. Alternately, when words sound harsh or discordant, they are thought to be cacophonous. I will ask my students to identify which letters/sounds seem euphonic to them, and which sound cacophonous. Since "Death" and "A Curse Against Elegies" both have many cacophonous sounds, I wanted to raise their awareness of these terms so they can use them in their discussions.

For the next twenty minutes, I will ask my students to get into their poetry groups. In their groups, they will go over one of the poems they were given for homework (I will determine which groups will discuss which poems). During their discussion, their primary goal is to complete SOAPSTone, as well as identify literary devices found within their poem. When the twenty minutes are up, we will rearrange the room to get into the fishbowl configuration. The students who analyzed "A Curse Against Elegies" will join the middle circle. For the next twenty-five minutes, it will be their job to discuss the deeper truths of the poem. On the board, I would put these guiding questions:

- What aspects of SOAPStone stand out, and how do those aspects help you understand the deeper meaning of the poem?
- How does the form (elegy, use of stanzas, etc) impact the meaning of the poem?
- What is the overall theme of the poem, and how does it reflect the themes we've discussed regarding grief?
- How do the literary devices help to further develop this theme?

These are the questions that will guide the fishbowl discussion. When twenty-five minutes have passed, the groups will switch, and the second set of students will use the same guiding questions to discuss "Death."

To conclude this lesson, I will ask my students to complete an exit ticket, in which they write a thesis statement based on this essay prompt: Choose one of the poems we just discussed. Write an essay in which you describe the speaker's attitude toward death. Using specific references to the text, show how the use of language reveals the speaker's attitude.

Annotated Bibliography

Burt, Stephen, and David Mikics. *The Art of the Sonnet*. Cambridge: Belknap Press Of Harvard University Press, 2010. Excellent resource regarding the history of the sonnet, with many examples included.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000. This is a groundbreaking book, based on Freire's experiences with helping adult Brazilians achieve literacy. The book is a wonderful introduction to anti-oppressionist education, with an emphasis on dialogue and mutual respect.

Hollander, John. *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*. 1 ed. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1995. Hollander's book offers an expanded look at ekphrastic poetry.

Kennedy, David. *ELEGY (The New Critical Idiom)*. 1 ed. New York: Routledge, 2007. Part of the *New Critical Idiom* series, this book speaks of the origins of elegies, and also provides close reading and analysis of elegies.

Livingstone, Dinah. *Poetry Handbook: For Readers and Writers*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993. This is a good resource for teaching meter, rhythm, and poetic form.

Morice, Dave. *Poetry Comics*. T&W Books, 2002. I will use this book to show my students a comic version of "Sonnet 18". It also features comic versions of "The Raven", "Some Trees" and many more.

Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. 1 ed. New York: Harvest Books, 1994. This slim volume extols the value of studying poetry as a means towards writing poetry.

The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. 3 ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. This encyclopedia offers rich explanations of poetic terms, genres, and movements.

Appendix 1

California English Language Arts Standards met by this unit

Reading

1. Analyze the way in which clarity of meaning is affected by the patterns of organization, hierarchical structures, repetition of the main ideas, syntax, and word choice in the text.
2. Analyze characteristics of subgenres (e.g., satire, parody, allegory, pastoral) that are used in poetry, prose, plays, novels, short stories, essays, and other basic genres.
3. Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on life, using textual evidence to support the claim.
4. Analyze the ways in which irony, tone, mood, the author's style, and the "sound" of language achieve specific rhetorical or aesthetic purposes or both.
5. Analyze ways in which poets use imagery, personification, figures of speech, and sounds to evoke readers' emotions.
6. Analyze recognized works of world literature from a variety of authors.

Writing

1. Structure ideas and arguments in a sustained, persuasive, and sophisticated way and support them with precise and relevant examples.
2. Enhance meaning by employing rhetorical devices, including the extended use of parallelism, repetition, and analogy;
3. Use language in natural, fresh, and vivid ways to establish a specific tone.

College Board Course Description for AP English Literature

Writing: Writing instruction includes attention to developing and organizing ideas in clear, coherent and persuasive language. It includes study of the elements of style. And it attends to matters of precision and correctness as necessary.

Throughout the course, emphasis is placed on helping students develop stylistic maturity, which, for AP English, is characterized by the following:

- a wide-ranging vocabulary used with denotative accuracy and connotative resourcefulness;
- a variety of sentence structures, including appropriate use of subordinate and coordinate constructions;
- a logical organization, enhanced by specific techniques of coherence such as repetition, transitions and emphasis.

Appendix 2

Fishbowl Rubric

NAME	Asks a question	Adds a comment to a discussion	Helps group refer to the text or quotation (x2)	Draws other students into the conversation	Dominates the conversation, shuts out peers, moves off topic (subtract points)
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Scoring is somewhat dependent on the quality of comments, but as a general practice, I score on the following scale:

Comments more than 10 times, including several references to text, as well as analytical comments: A-A+

Comments more than 10 times, but lacks analysis or textual references: B+

Comments 7-10 times: B-/B

Comments 4-6 times: C/C+

Comments fewer than 4 times: C- or lower, depending on quality of comments

Appendix 3

Annotating a Poem

Annotation means to mark critically. When reading poetry, it is crucial to mark the poem, noting all kinds of details that will help you understand the poem better. In other words, it is using the method of close reading to further your understanding of poetry. Annotation can provide you with wonderful ideas to offer in small groups and whole class discussions.

What to annotate:

- Literary devices—note them and then try to figure out why they are used
- Form—look carefully at rhyme and meter. This may help you uncover the mood or tone, or establish that this is a particular type of poem, such as a sonnet. You can number the lines or mark the rhyme scheme using alphabetical notations.

- Binaries—these are ideas that are in opposition to each other, such as light/dark. Think about why the poet might create these binaries in the poem.
- Speaker—look for clues about who is speaking. What point of view is the poem written in? What do you learn about the speaker? Remember—the speaker is not the poet, in most cases!
- Word choice—do you notice use of dialect? Jargon? Big vocabulary words? Mark these words if they stand out to you.

How to annotate:

Use your instincts. You can circle or star words that stand out, or underline key phrases. Be sure to make lots of comments in the margins. Please use our annotation of "Sonnet 5" by Seamus Heaney as an example as you go forward in this unit.

Resources for Teachers

Modern American Poetry <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/>

This online journal and online companion to the *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* is valuable to teachers and students alike. The site offers analysis and commentary on a wide range of poems, mostly from the 20th and 21st centuries.

Poetry Foundation <http://www.poetryfoundation.org>

This website is another wonderful location for finding and understanding poetry. I particularly like their "Poetry Tool", where you can search for poems by title, author, occasion, glossary term, or most popular. Also, the "Learning Lab" offers annotations and analysis of many poems.

Poets.org <http://www.poets.org>

Created and maintained by the Academy of American Poets, this website is my first stop when looking for online versions of poems dating back to Shakespeare. The Academy also offers poetry writing contests for high school students.

Read Write Think <http://www.readwritethink.org>

Maintained by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), this website has a wealth of lesson plans on many subjects, including poetry.

Sonnet Central <http://www.sonnets.org/>

This website is also very helpful to all teachers and students studying the sonnet. Almost all of the sonnets referred to in this curriculum unit can be found at this website.

Resources for Students

Poetry Reading List

Sonnets

"Sonnet 18" Shakespeare

"Sonnet 130" Shakespeare

"Sonnet 138" Shakespeare

"How do I Love Thee" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

"A Superscription" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti*

"Paradise Saved (Another Version of the Fall)" by AD Hope*

"One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop

"Sonnet 5" by Seamus Heaney

Ecphrasis

"Not My Best Side" UA Fanthorpe*

Elegies

"Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" by John Crowe Ransom

"Death" by William Carlos Williams

"A Curse Against Elegies" by Anne Sexton

"Nightfishing" by Gjertrud Schnackenberg*

"Ivan Generalic" by Gjertrud Schnackenberg*

(Ecphrastic poems are noted with an asterisk. Most images that pair with these poems can be found online using a simple Google search)

Notes

1. Rutledge, John . "Saper Vedere." *Rutledge Capital*. 25 Mar. 2008. rutledgecapital.com/2008/03/25/saper-vedere/ >. (accessed 5 June 2010).
2. Samuel, Deborah. "Detecting Shakespeare's Sonnets." *Yale National Initiative*.

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3. Benton, Peter. "Unweaving the Rainbow: Poetry Teaching in the Secondary School ." *Oxford Review of Education* 25.4 (1999): 521-531.
4. Ibid.
5. Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook*. Harcourt Brace and Company: San Diego 1994.
6. Livingstone, 68.
7. Mayes, Frances. *The Discovery of Poetry: A Field Guide to Reading and Writing Poems*. New York: Harvest Books, 2001. 302.
8. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 322.
9. "Language Acquisition." *Earth Renewal*. 8 July 2010. earthrenewal.org/secondlang.htm>.
10. Burt and Mikics, 8
11. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1168.
12. Burt and Mikics, 18.
13. Ibid, 24.
14. Burt and Mikics 199
15. Burt and Mikics 201
16. Burt and Mikics, 200
17. Kennedy, 11.
18. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 324.
19. Ibid, 324.
20. "On "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter"." *Modern American Poetry*. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/ransom/bells.htm >. (accessed 10 July 2010).
21. Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. 1 ed. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1994. 1.
22. Hollander, 4.
23. Smith, M.K.. "Paulo Freire and informal education." *Informal Education*. 4 Nov. 2009. Web. <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-freir.htm>>. (accessed 7 July 2010).
24. ibid
25. "Constructivism as a Paradigm for Teaching and Learning." *THIRTEEN*. http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/constructivism/index_sub3.html>. (accessed 10 July 2010).

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

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