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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2011 Volume II: Love and Politics in the Sonnet

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## **The American Sonnet: Barometer of Change in American History**

Curriculum Unit 11.02.03, published September 2011

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### **Background**

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I teach at a culturally diverse high school in Northern California, a high-performing yet crowded school whose population is primarily Asian, Filipino, and Hispanic. A large number of our students are the children of immigrants and many are English Language Learners (ELL). The challenge this poses is that of cross-curricular focus on the background necessary to establish the beginnings of American literature—including basic Christian theology and enlightenment ideals of the Renaissance.

Teaching both English and American History for the past 8 years, I have continually recognized the striking duality that comprises them both: both contain their prosaic and poetic moments. We are the nation of Abraham Lincoln who can still startle with the symmetry and wonder of a line such as "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away" <sup>1</sup> that categorically cements a pivotal moral imperative in the heads of successive generations of Americans. We aspire to lyricism in our ambitions and our enterprises and yet still do not entirely take to a consistent diet comprised of lyric or ballad. While Lincoln might interject a rhyme or rhythmic pattern in his prose, we are not populated by Lincolns, nor Kennedys or Reagans for that matter. I bring up presidential examples because I have doggedly straddled between disciplines for so much of my career, with moments like a Lincoln speech illuminating for me what is revelatory and reassuring: facility and precision with language (be it prose or verse) can emerge from nearly any corner of our country and from any background. Likewise teaching history has demonstrated that the contrast in backgrounds of three such men (dire poverty, working class, and elite) helped define the diversity and opportunity of America.

Lincoln stands astride another tradition of relevancy: he is a self-made man and autodidact extraordinaire whose bookshelf was comprised of Blackwell's Law, the Bible, and Shakespeare—cobbling his intellect and articulation from a sparse wellspring and supplementing it with voracious observation (within a diverse environment) and a healthy auditory appetite. While I wouldn't recommend autodidactic pursuit (via the internet or television) the latter elements of Lincoln remain the goal and mean towards spring-boarding my students to proficiency—training their skills of visual and audial observations. Though they are not (or scant few of them) Lincolns—where their experience correlates is in their capacity (from any background and environment) to produce novelty, nuance, and qualitative lyric expression in both their prose and verse. I find their present facility can, like Lincoln, benefit from effective exposure and skill instruction with a relatively

finite set of curricular materials. The more discrete the materials, however, the greater the intensity of practice and rigor necessary to fully develop their talents.

I find three principal factors can hamper my students' progress in English: lack of verbal dexterity, lack of interest in American literature, and inability to apply their study of English to their larger extra-curricular environment. Teaching history has highlighted a key distinction that can sometimes make it frustrating to teach across disciplines: US history possesses a narrative thread they can follow—one that supersedes mere chronology. Though sometimes it can seem like one damned thing after another, students generally comprehend the impact of prior ideas upon later ideas. At the end of a school year students recognize the terminus of US history in their own lives; hopefully considering themselves as an evolutionary advance, inheritor of cumulative wealth and or effort.

Junior English can leave them quizzical as to the value or meaning of their course from August to May—wondering "what did it all mean?" I believe that English consequently suffers from not establishing a similar thread and narrative that can be traced throughout the school year. Though students have gained vocabulary and greater verbal potential, they don't always recognize it. Though they may not see American literature has having a set identity—its character can be established through the works encompassed in their texts and associated materials. Lastly, the relevance of American English to enable students to actively and creatively engage their world is continually modeled in the literature of the last three hundred years—what can testify to that fact is its most succinct expression: verse.

## Content Objectives

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### Close Reading

I would first and foremost like to instruct my students on the skill of close reading of text. Students, by this point in their academic career are well versed in looking for plot, for setting, and for some elements of characterization in all varieties of works of literature. For middle school students, I still think this unit could be valuable in that regard; good sonnets (like good stories) though shorter still often tell a story in an octave and quatrain. The figurative story of a sonnet being so short, I believe that close readings for transitions will serve students in their reading of longer works—where their attentiveness and awareness of conjunctions, of unusual punctuation such as a dash or semicolon will become transferrable skills. Specifically with high school juniors, I can reinforce instruction on the importance of diction, tone, and mood.

These three elements are critical to reading of the sonnet and literature in general. In a sonnet such as "To an American Painter Departing for Europe," William Cullen Bryant goes into extensive detail in a poetic conversation with the painter Thomas Cole as to the landscape he (Cole) should not forget when traveling through Europe. Bryant's listing of "savannahs where the bison roves" <sup>2</sup> should stand out in their reading. Savannahs smack of the exotic, of Africa, or some far flung geography—but hardly something that Bryant himself, living in Massachusetts, would have personal experience of. This type of encounter and questioning by students can both reveal the personality of the poet (pointing out when they exaggerate to benefit from the lovely meter of "savannah") and also what is important in the imagery the poet is trying to convey.

No less important, juniors should gain facility with describing tone—the field of play within a sonnet being

discrete enough where they can make an argument that stands up to the scrutiny of their peers and instructor, and lends them confidence that they can recognize relationships when they are clearly signaled by specific language. The adulatory tone of Whitman comes through in his essay on the assassination of Lincoln (which my students will cover earlier in the early in the year) but more muted there than what readily appears most famously in "O Captain my captain." The exclamation and use of "captain," together with its repetition and alteration with the "my" added to it serve precisely as the basis for a meaningful conversation on tone. That phrase's repetition multiple times will also serve to emphasize the power of Whitman's emotional response to Lincoln's death. Students can also see that they are licensed to critique Whitman through the tone they discover; more stoic types can blanch at the excess of emotion while their converse can embrace it.

### **Genre recognition**

My second objective is to instruct students how to read, recognize, and categorize works within a single genre. As I [suggested] in my introduction, students often [careen] from genre to genre and back and forth between fiction and non-fiction until they are buffeted into incoherence as to the meaning and motive for writing in a genre. Students are often accustomed to insensibility to genre because the most prominent genres covered (the novel and the short story) can be so lengthy that five weeks' reading can be cumbersome to compare to a similar stretch later in the year. But because the sonnet part of the syllabus is compressed into two to three weeks, students can gain familiarity and adroitness with a Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet. Covering multiple sonnets by an author like Claude McKay and Edna Vincent St. Millay will also demonstrate that an author versed in the form will develop and demonstrate their own way of playing with the form. Once grounded in over a dozen sonnets, students (at the end of the unit) will be able to conjecture why Gwendolyn Brooks will introduce additional syllables (exceeding the pentameter of her lines) into a sonnet like "The Rites for Cousin Vit" to demonstrate when, in an otherwise tightly formatted sonnet, eleven syllables are necessary: "In parks or alleys, comes haply on the verge" <sup>3</sup> Some characters, like cousin Vit, through sheer excess spill over the 10 syllable line—ironically cascading down at the word "verge." Similarly, they will come, at the end of the unit, to appreciate the decision by Robert Lowell to write his sonnets of 1968 in blank verse. That kind of mastery with one genre will serve students in many facets of their later reading—perhaps determining for them why a work like *Huckleberry Finn*, while a novel, can also now additionally gain the identity of a sub-genre such as bildungsroman or perhaps a picaresque.

### **Contextualization**

My central objective for giving students a wide array of sonnets across the span of nearly three centuries of American letters is to improve their skill in contextualizing their reading, applying their close reading of diction and tone as well as characterization to identify differences that emerge not only in the style of the sonnet itself, but the content, and beginning to ask critical question as to why. As Paula Bernat Bennett explains in *Teaching 19<sup>th</sup> Century Poetry*, "Having such a diverse audience, poets were encouraged to speak diversely. One only need compare Dickinson's and Whitman's poetry to that of their peers (e.g. Tennyson and Browning) to realize the extensive and deliberate mixing of popular and high culture poetic strategies." <sup>4</sup> Students will have to leverage their close reading of the poems into explicit explanations of characterization and setting to address speaker and audience, identifying the values and perspectives that are unique to America and its transparently vibrant diversity—how Edwin Arlington Robinson may seem to suffer by comparison with Whitman or Langston Hughes, but can be seen to be perfectly responsive to his era, to his audience, and to the ambitions germane to poetic artists of his time. Whitman, by contrast might harbor heroic ambitions for himself and his verse; Harold Bloom remarks of Whitman: "For Whitman, as later for Mallarmé, the world exists in order to end up in a book; and the book is one written by a single lyric poet." <sup>5</sup> Students will be able

to reflect why Whitman—writing his great celebrations of America in the 1850's—might have written differently when the leading social challenge was abolition and secession. For a poet like Edwin Arlington Robinson, the foes had become more internalized (industrialization, modernity, and dehumanization of progress). Both are assured to stand apart from our earliest example, that of Royall Tyler. All of them wrote sonnets, and yet the themes and characters, and the approach towards those two elements within the sonnets, will reflect the changes students learn about when studying history. Students will then be able to reasonably and reliably state some of the threads of continuity and difference between eras. They will form their own judgments or questions about each era: are some more abundant in talent, cultural wealth, aspiration and inspiration? Do some poets supersede the limitations, frustrations, and challenges of their eras?

The introduction of poets of color with such sonneteers as Paul Dunbar and Claude McKay will add an important dimension. Immediately, students will be able to recognize a different set of protagonists and antagonists—and find surprise in the fact that McKay will interject as many classical allusions as will Longfellow, that though a century may separate them McKay and Whitman share a passionate intensity and voracity that sets them apart from other American poets. Equally important, students will recognize in the contrast of "O Captain my Captain" by Whitman and "Douglass" by Dunbar, that two contemporaries (Lincoln and Douglass) can prompt the same intensity of emotion, evoke a similar tone, and address two such different social contexts—all at the same time. Students will also learn, however, that significant cultural differences will mark the tone and perspective of Whitman and Dunbar—that common topic will not necessarily correlate to common statement of theme or conclusions.

Equally important, as well, will be the introduction of women and minority poets with the onset of the Twentieth Century. Emma Lazarus will virtually usher them in with her maiden and goddess standing by the golden door to welcome the "wretched refuse" of "teeming shores" <sup>6</sup> The addition of female voices will provide students a compelling contrast to what has come before and we can discuss the difference in details poets focus on, the descriptive cast they lend to those details, and even the differences between women across eras as well. While Alice Dunbar Nelson and Edna St. Vincent Millay both speak to male-female relationships in their sonnets, Dunbar-Nelson's protagonist seems nowhere near ready to jettison a lover as will St. Vincent Millay in "Before this Cigarette is ended." Students will, consequently, be able to discern diversity in multiple dimensions—across race, gender, and time. The facts and events that characterize Modernism will lead them to conclude how and why Dunbar-Nelson and St. Vincent Millay cannot likely treat with love in the same manner.

### **Improve Composition**

Jacques Barzun once said, "Convince yourself that you are working in clay, not marble, on paper not eternal bronze: Let that first sentence be as stupid as it wishes." <sup>7</sup> The virtue of reading a large number of sonnets will, ultimately, be to prompt students to produce their own. Gwendolyn Brooks, when asked why she continued to teach the sonnet even after she herself renounced it as a genre for herself, responded "There are certain hard specifics that can be taught. Sonnet rules. Guards against free verse imperiling. Iambic pentameter." <sup>8</sup> While she may renounce it herself, she does so only after mastery. There are fruits to be had from the labor of sonnet-writing, and Brooks learned them from authors such as Robert Hillyard, who characterized the sonnet as "statement, a development of the statement by metaphor, contrast, or comparison, a secondary development, and finally a restatement that paradoxically may be anticipation of a main idea." <sup>9</sup> Students will finish their unit by following the example of Brooks the teacher—they will imitate and then innovate. The process of writing their own sonnet will begin with structured imitation of an existing sonnet. This will force them to analyze the choices in diction, meter, rhyme, and subject matter of the sonnet.

Subsequent to that, students will realize that, in reproducing the meter, they cannot help but revise and revisit the poem multiple times. The shortness of the genre will allow three things to occur as a consequence—sustained effort on the part of the author because the work is so palpably manageable, close reading and critique by the student's classmates, who will be engaged in the same work as they, and the quick and focused feedback by the instructor that will necessarily start first and finally with content rather than formatting and style (though those still factor in). Students will have gleaned from their prior reading: a firm sense of what the form is or can be, a wide array of topics, a variety of speakers' personae to adopt in their writing, sufficient time and space to revise several times, and ownership (in the end) of their own diction and rhyme schemes. They will grow comfortable with the clay of their own language, their own objects and subjects, and set it to paper.

## Poets and Poetry

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I would propose, in the following sequence describing poets, to characterize the role of poets (good poets) in embodying the society they inhabit through recording, preserving, and advancing the language of their time, with its foibles and its triumphs. Students should quickly realize that not every generation of poets is pioneering in its spirit; some poet are preservationists and conservative, as befits their time and age, while others deliberately stand apart and in the forefront of their era—distinguishing and isolating themselves (at times) from their contemporaries and (by extension, sometimes) us. At all times, however, regardless of the similarities in themes and some of the tropes or devices, students should recognize that each successive generation inevitably reflected their circumstances and opportunities.

### Early American Poets

One of the foremost challenges of early American poetry can be allusions and diction which appear arcane or senseless to students. But the sonnet uniquely encapsulates a teachable number of thoughts and ideas and transparently attempts a comprehensive expression of authorial intent or interests. Students can recognize the form, or at least perceive a sense of *déjà-vu* somewhere between the first and fourteenth lines. My hope is to craft a concluding unit in American Literature that focuses on the sonnet as a reflection of the ways in which American artists express the changing face and focus of America and Americans, politically and socially. When the form allows, as this one does, for reading and re-reading, the difficulties of proper nouns, allusions to past literature, and archaisms even in these early sonnets can be opportunities for study rather than insuperable obstacles.

#### *Royall Tyler*

I include Royall Tyler's "Sonnet to an Old Mouser" as an early example of the American sonnet. It is a good starting point as a very conventional sonnet that adheres to ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Royal Tyler very capably imitates a Shakespearean sonnet using Elizabethan form. Tyler is a gentleman of letters and prospective son-in-law to President John Adams. One of the first literary figures, Tyler established his name in drama and dabbled in verse—all while serving in a variety of governmental roles ranging from attorney at law to State Attorney General of Vermont. American letters in this era were imitative of neo-classical Britain and were a secondary pursuit for many of the poets who produced them. I will remind students that the most popular works of the early American era were political pamphlets and speeches. Historians such as Thomas Bailey

observe that perhaps no other popular culture ever subsumed itself so thoroughly in a wave of pamphlets and political writings as did the early Americans of the eighteenth century. As a consequence, a modest sonnet like this particular one would reflect democratic ideals and [celebrate] non-aristocratic subject matter. For contrast and complement, I will also refer students back to a contemporary, Phyllis Wheatley, whose ode to George Washington likewise shows a backward glance towards British form while focusing on people who break the mold as subjects for Pindaric Odes. Royall Tyler will ground students in a sense of verse as pastime, secondary to the business and ideals which dominated the age of the Revolutionary War and its aftermath.

## Edgar Allan Poe

Students will know Poe extremely well through prior exposure in English 3 to "Annabel Lee," "The Raven," "Fall of the House of Usher," and his "Philosophy of Composition." Poe's sonnets "Enigmas" and "Sonnet to Silence" show a very familiar poet in another guise, that of parody. Critical in this reading of Poe's sarcasm is the sonnet's subject, which is a joke name: "there is no Solomon Don Dunce" any more than there is a Keyser Soize in *The Usual Suspects* or George Kaplan in *North by Northwest*. Poe makes him (Solomon Don Dunce) up, but critiques the critic of sonnets. What the students will likely remark is the play on names that fills out the meter and the verse, as well as the hidden name in "Enigmas." Likewise, Poe plays with the trope of sonnets immortalizing their subjects. In being preserved this way, Solomon (as a character) might meet the same fate as Fortunato in *Cask of Amontillado*.

Poe was a poet of the imagination and one who saw himself (and was characterized by others) as a belletrist. Poe self-consciously cultivated cultural preciousness because he reacted against the anti-poetic nature of America, though he sometimes took his reaction to extremes. Students should observe [that] his foreign phrases and his allusions to Italian and French history are things that set him apart from his contemporaries as much as they set him apart from themselves (the students). As Roy Harvey Pearce observed, Poe belonged to a group of up and coming poets who saw themselves as "above the run-of-the-mill reader, men of taste and high opinion...they declared that they were not afraid of the literary life and its adventures into the world of the imagination." <sup>10</sup>

## The American Renaissance

This provides the first major transition between earlier and later forms of poetry and also the beginning of the divide between formalists and rebels in American letters. On the one hand stand Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, who will embrace non-conformity, the desire to establish a new agenda for a national culture that is separate and distinct from old world forms, and who freely sought to break through boundaries rather than operate within them. As Roy Harvey Pearce remarks in *The Continuity of American Poetry* when talking about Lowell and Longfellow, "They could not avoid seeing that Poe, Emerson, and Whitman were as much rejected by American culture as they—to a degree, in spite of themselves—rejected it." <sup>11</sup> And now, distinctly, students can see contemporaries begin to diverge in both form and content.

### Whitman

In the shorter verse of "Captain my Captain" the simultaneous operation within a more formal verse form of adherence to and experimentation with form both emerge. Although it is not truly a sonnet, "O Captain My Captain" shows Whitman detaching himself from the self-reflective mode of "Song of Myself" and [turning his focus through the discipline of form] onto the figure of Abraham Lincoln. This poem offers a two-fold alternative glance at Whitman: he still retains the strong current of passion and emotion that animate his magnum opus, but is now able to constrain an emotion, unrelieved sorrow over the death of Lincoln. As in



another Whitman poem they will cover earlier in the year, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," they will also see the contrast between a sense of crossing as eternal and restorative versus the crossing that has been achieved through the [leadership] of Lincoln. There are sharply different elements here, and a sense of limits or (at very least) uncertainty they will not have witnessed before in Whitman.

What they will additionally be able to witness is Whitman's ability to achieve the Romantic goal of transforming the natural and everyday into something elevated, as a Hegelian synthesis. His poetry indicates neither the denial nor abjuring of the everyday that Poe might prefer nor a colossus of self-involvement; they will see a Transcendentalist at work. As Pearce observes about Whitman, "he would create other persons like himself—in effect, save them from that anti-poetic world to which the demands of their workaday life commit them,"<sup>12</sup> In a poem such as "Captain my Captain" Whitman elevates himself through focus on the common man (Lincoln) who elevated himself as well

## **Bryant**

William Cullen Bryant, together with James Russell Lowell, James Greenleaf Whittier, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, comprise the "fireside poets." Much is made of their divergence from Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Dickinson. Though they were not stylistic revolutionaries like the others, I include them to serve as counterbalance and contrast to the luminaries among the Transcendentalists. "Ordinary American readers needed poets who would speak to them in their own language."<sup>13</sup> They further spoke to ordinary Americans with a resounding optimism about home, hearth, country, and future prosperity. Contrasted with writers such as Dickinson, Whitman, and Emerson, however, the fireside poets understood how the literary giants of the American Renaissance set themselves apart from mainstream American culture, of which they themselves were to some extent a part. Pearce comments that James Russell Lowell, in writing on Whitman and Emerson, "could not avoid seeing that (they) were as much rejected by American culture as they—to a degree, in spite of themselves—rejected it."<sup>14</sup> The fireside poets figuratively cut the scale of American letters down to the size of the American audience they served; they comforted Americans with a sense of their own ability and merit as they were—not as they might aspire to be in transcending boundaries.

Bryant embodies this with his sonnet "To an American Painter Departing for Europe" where he engages his friend Thomas Cole in an argument over the supposed superiorities and greater purity of American landscapes than those he will find. He lapses, however, into hyperbole—being at once someone echoing Emerson's national cultural pride while departing from Thoreau's skepticism (as seen in "Civil Disobedience") and Emerson's open-mindedness. Bryant also concludes his poem with a deeper plunge into unabashed sentimentalism than even Whitman will normally allow himself: "Gaze on them, till the tears shall dim thy sight."<sup>15</sup> Bryant assumes that, while Cole witnesses Alpine sights and a European landscape, the memory of American grandeur will automatically restrain Cole's preference for anything but American vistas. The close friendship between the painter and the poet was also a dialogue, with Cole's painting "The Oxbow" depicting his view of American landscape—one which acknowledged beauty but also the incursion and progress of civilization, a natural setting that could be corrupted or changed by human progress as readily and effectively as anything depicted in his allegorical works "The Course of Empire: the Savage State" or "The Course of Empire: Destruction." At work in Bryant's sonnet to Cole, consequently, is a degree of self-satisfaction and of self-delusion—an aspect of the American political character which students can witness in other literary products as well.

*Longfellow*

As the most popular poet of his time, Longfellow provides an interesting counterpoint to Whitman. While both write about nature in their poetry, Longfellow's sonnet "Nature" can stand as a contrast to Emerson's conception of it, Thoreau's conception of it, and especially Whitman's. Contrast his concluding lines "As a fond mother when the day is o'er/ Leads by the hand her little child to bed, /Half willing, half reluctant to be led," <sup>16</sup> with those of Whitman in "Leaves of Grass": "All goes onward and outward—nothing collapses; / and to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier." <sup>17</sup> Longfellow requires a discussion about the place of domesticity, because two such divergent views reflect the breadth of American thought on a primal subject and theme. Longfellow also reflects a different sensibility on another basic and elemental topic, that of love, in "The Cross of Snow," which reflects on his wife who died when her dress caught on fire and she was irretrievably burned in the process.

### *Robinson*

Edward Arlington Robinson helps bring the transition from American Renaissance and the Romantic and Transcendentalist tradition through the Gilded Age to the turn of the century. What the "fireside" poets saw as the reasonable desire of the public to be comforted and reassured now finds frays and cracks in Edwin Arlington Robinson's sonnets, "Modernities" and "Afterthoughts." Robinson attempted to carry on the tradition of Whitman and Longfellow and to speak—as a true Romantic—the language of the people he knew that lived everyday life. My students will have read "Richard Cory" and "Luke Havergal," and gained a sense of his small town associations which are increasingly fragmenting and showing the dissolution of community in the face of progress, technology, modernity, Modernities factor in the poem like a very real nemesis: "With infinite unseen enemies in the way." <sup>18</sup> Robinson alerts his audience to a new threat—"the intangible." Though he keeps perfect sonnet form, the subject itself begins to lose stability.

### *Lazarus*

Transition to Emma Lazarus, especially from Edward Arlington Robinson, would mark the transition and impact of the Civil War as well as the transformation of American and modern life from a natural and agrarian setting to one more urban and at odds with classical leanings and allusions—the example of Robinson's "Modernities" and "Afterthoughts" witnessing tension between the learned and the everyday and the aspiration for a golden age which the prior era of American poet might have dismissed as imitative shackles. Lazarus's "New Colossus" offsets these cultural feelings] with decidedly new perspectives and personae, and introduces the use of sonnet as historical and sociological commentary on contemporary events and personages. Whereas Robinson looks backwards into the small towns and villages of the Midwest, Lazarus emerges from over the Atlantic and bears with her a new spirit of optimism and new capacity for seeing grandeur in the familiar—the city of New York, the West, and the experience of an urban landscape that older poets consider emblems of self-destruction or corruption.

From Lazarus we get: "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!...Give me your tired, your poor" <sup>19</sup> Lazarus splays out the function of the sonnet and the voice of America like an accordion after compression and shows how poetry can once again adopt and address public topics. Helen Vendler comments on the perpetual difficulty in melding public and private purpose in poetry when describing lyric poetry: "No single description fits all lyrics but I will proceed on the assumption that the purpose of the lyric, as a genre, is to represent an inner life in such a manner that is assumable by others." <sup>20</sup> Vendler addresses a topic that Lazarus clearly takes on: how to combine private reflection with a larger idealistic testament. Lazarus had been that tired and weary member of the huddled mass while simultaneously speaking for America, lending America a voice as a protagonist who counters the voice of Europe.



### *Paul Dunbar*

Born to two ex-slaves, Dunbar almost stands a companion to the growing ranks of immigrants in his unique status as one of the first generations of African American males born free. As a consequence, he assumes a different role than prior African American poets. As critic John Lowney remarks, he "grew away from the stature of the exotic, the accidentally unusual Negro, the talented tenth." Dunbar forcefully employs the Petrarchan sonnet to critique history, specifically and surprisingly that of the divided African American leadership in the wake of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, as well as taking on a white abolitionist icon in Robert Gould Shaw, who led the 55<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts infantry (in which Dunbar's father served). Akin to Milton and Wordsworth before him, he can use the sonnet to laud as well as lament the role of historical figures (Douglass figures as a virtual Lincoln to the African-American people—his departure depriving them of the stature they need) whereas he takes a far different tack with Shaw, blasting him for mishandling his talents and his opportunity for elevating the African-American people. Dunbar uses the concision of the sonnet to highlight the contrast between "hot terror of this hopeless fight" and the "slow steady blaze of learning's light." The sonnet allows him to display this contrast to his readers—alliterating both options to show their lyric equity but measuring as far more valuable the educational opportunity that Shaw sacrificed for glory and certain death.

### *Edna St. Vincent Millay*

Born in Maine, she stands as an inheritor of the New England tradition, but represents a departure; she uses the sonnet—perhaps better than most poets of her generation—while simultaneously subverting it; she turns Petrarchan conventions to her own ends with the sonnet, much as did Shakespeare and in a Shakespearean way. Poems such as "Only until this cigarette is ended" and "Love is blind" play freely with the conceits of Shakespearean sonnets—touching on themes of love and the permanence afforded lovers and objects through the sonnet. Only this time, what she immortalizes is love's impermanence or, if it is permanent—the obvious impermanence of any one object of that love. She brings to bear some of the same ironies as Shakespeare with lines like that within "Only until this cigarette is ended" when she tells her lover she can forget his face "The colour and the features, every one, / The words not ever..."<sup>21</sup> The physical, as in Elizabethan tradition, remains ephemeral but the words (hallmark of her talent and utility as a poet) never fade—as though her description of him is that of which (in a divorce) she would sue for custody.

### *Gwendolyn Brooks*

Like Dunbar, Brooks represents a new generation of African American poets that has always known freedom—though seldom equality. Like Lazarus, she hails from an urban environment, one now centered in the heart of the country: Chicago. What she brings to the sonnet is dialect and vivid imagery communicating the heat, the play, and the life of the city. Rather than abhorring of the creep of modernity, many sonnets like "The Rites for Cousin Vit" celebrate the dance, the music, the alcoholic smear of 'bad wine across her shantung."<sup>22</sup> The city and urban life no longer figure as the express enemy.

Strangely enough, Brooks brings in an unexpectedly political enemy: World War II. In her poems "The Sonnet-Ballad" and "Gay Chaps at the Bar" she uses the Shakespearean sonnet in a sort of reverse St. Crispian's Day speech. Her heroines clearly understand the paradox of young African-American men going off to fight a war to rid the war of fascism abroad while Jim Crow rages at home. The protagonist in "Sonnet Ballad" shows how the war becomes personified as the mistress who—even if she doesn't steal the protagonist's man, will certainly emasculate him, so that he will "now hesitate—and change" and he will be the one to "stammer"

yes. Brooks foresees the terrible emasculating power of war.

## **Robert Lowell**

The final poet offered to students would be Robert Lowell. In some senses he fits perfectly because (à la Nathaniel Hawthorne) his family is steeped in a multi-century historical association with Massachusetts, and he himself, in this history-capping unit on the American sonnet, was more conscious of history than almost any poet of his generation. Lowell's sense of history lies imbedded in a dual identity—that of one of the founding families of Massachusetts (colonial and industrial revolutionaries) as well as one of the most venerable literary families (including James Russell Lowell and Amy Lowell).

Robert Lowell demonstrates in his life, however, that a poet can oscillate between two extremes of historical memory—too much and not enough. Critic Richard Terdiman claimed that many peoples' reaction to the French Revolution had correlatively witnessed a profound sense of estrangement from the past, "a sense that their past had somehow evaded memory [and] that recollection had ceased to integrate with consciousness."<sup>23</sup> Lowell often despised his family's past, considering them (his forefathers) to be Indian-killers. Nevertheless, in his own life, that selfsame righteousness could absent itself. He ranged from activism to apathy—both marching with Eugene McCarthy and (famously) not voting in the 1968 elections. What two of his political poems from this era ("The Restoration" and "RFK") show is the variety of responses by Lowell to events of 1968—on the one hand ambivalence and a degree of dismay at the Columbia protest/takeover and elegiac tones that lend national tragic character to his mourning for Robert F. Kennedy.

## **Strategies**

Incorporating academic literacy skills into each lesson is essential to my students' success. This is especially true for my ELL students as well as those mainstreamed students who may need additional accommodations according to their IEP. The use of these strategies will be essential for students to understand the reading and writing assignments. Central to my teaching of this unit will be, first, establishing the academic vocabulary requisite for close study of poetry as detailed below.

## **Vocabulary Development**

Vocabulary development activities help to highlight the most important words for covering the study of the sonnet. These activities will help students to internalize the terms essential to analyze poetry at a basic level as well as helping in the pursuit of their own verse production. I will be following the prescription of Robert Marzano's research as indicated in his book *Building Academic Vocabulary* by:

- Identifying essential vocabulary for this unit (likely terms pertaining to form, rhyme scheme and literary devices) and teaching those terms explicitly. This will include narrowing the terms to those which are critical to understanding the form of the sonnet and the variations that characterize most sonnets (Elizabethan, Petrarchan, and Spenserian). For each of the critical terms I will provide multiple examples.
- I will have students paraphrase those same terms so that they can begin to show their proficiency with the language of the sonnet and the devices that give it potency and nuance. The students will exchange their own paraphrases so that the entire class can establish the technical language solidly within their own explanations and conversations.
- Have students provide a meaningful visual interpretation and written explanation for what the poetic terms

related to the sonnet mean to them. I will include a number of non-representational images or media that will force the students to provide an explanation that demonstrates their understanding of terms like enjambment, trochee, spondee, slant rhyme, etc.

- The students will then perform focused study on discrete numbers of terms with a number of poems so that they can share their observations on the effectiveness of poets' use of particular literary devices and manipulation of the sonnet form. They will likely have to establish a range of performance among multiple poets (who use some of the same devices or utilize particular forms of the sonnet) in order to establish the student's sense of their own (now better informed) taste in poetry.

- The students will conclude their assimilation of poetic terms by describing their preference among the sonnet writers we cover through exercises such as parodies or sample lyrics of praise or critique. In the vein of Billy Collin's self-referential sonnet on the sonnet form, students will be encouraged to write playfully about their understanding of the form, giving notable examples and taking the opportunity to reveal to their classmates (and themselves) what attracts them as readers to a piece of verse.

### **Identifying similarities and differences**

I will stress throughout the unit, the continuous need to identify similarity in the topics and themes of different sonneteers in American Literature. Students will use graphic organizers to systemically group various sonnets by those commonalities and then distinguish how those sonnets still differ as a function of different eras. Using the selfsame organizers, they will mark out the differences in both historical contexts of similarly themed sonnets as well as the evidence of different authorial tone and perspective due to authorial background and ideology. I will also ask students to include important precursors and influences on each sonneteer to inform their analysis as to the source and variety of difference.

### **Cooperative Learning**

Most of the students' mastery of poetic terminology will come through peer-editing and sharing of notes on the various types of sonnets and what devices and strategies poets use to communicate their ideas through the sonnet. Students will also peer-edit and review extensively in exercises such as imitation sonnet-writing and literary analysis of contemporary sonnets. I intend to mix and match students who have complementary strengths and interests in dealing with textual and non-linguistic representation so that all students can develop depth and breadth in their comprehension and analysis of poetry within a cultural context. Some students will more readily make instructive associations between music and poetry, imagery and poetry, while others will more rapidly and adroitly highlight elements of syntax and diction within the sonnets themselves.

### **Imitation**

Working in pairs, the students will have to produce an imitation of at least two of the sonnets covered in the unit. They will perform the imitation by writing it in no fewer than three drafts—each of which will require a requisite number of changes (they don't have to lead off with an entirely replicated sonnet) in the first draft.

### **Connection with contextual media**

Students will pore over and sort through the contextual media that was used as a background lesson and they will select items that match up most precisely with individual sonnets. They will have to make a case for their selections through a short written characterization of their media item as a museum artifact or as captioned

photo, painting or illustration "designed" to accompany the sonnet.

This type of work will require students to perform focused research or investigation through historical background material and databases. Using the prior strategies for connecting imagery and music to verse, they will now have to demonstrate close familiarity with a small number of poems and make deliberate choices for connection based on the author's stated purpose, established diction and choice of subjects for their sonnets, biographical information and geographical and historical context to establish relevance that can be substantiated to their peers and to their instructor.

## Classroom Activities

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### Lesson Plan One: Genre and Era Review

#### Objectives

Before covering all the sonnets in the unit, I will take them through the entire syllabus of literature we have covered throughout the course—together with the genre each occupies, the value we derived from each one, and the unique utility of those other genres, so that we have a comparative basis for working with verse forms. Students will also organize and rank their favorite works

#### Materials

Students will need their course notebooks, a list of the major works that we have covered, and a listing of genres and their conventions.

#### Initiation

I will ask students to start by examining the list of works that we have covered in our English 3 survey of American literature and to identify their three favorite works of literature—regardless of era or genre. For each of the three works, they will establish what historical era those works belonged to, what genre they belong to, and one key detail about the author who produced the work. They will enter this information into a graphic organizer.

#### Procedure

For each of the three favorite works of literature the students select from their list, they will have to identify two works of literature that belong to the same genre but which belong to a different era of American literature. Their choice will be contingent on whether they choose (as their favorite) an early, middle, or modern work of literature. If modern, they will have to choose two preceding works, whereas if early American literature, two succeeding works—so they can view a chronology of three works within a particular genre. If the students choose more than one favorite work from a single genre, I will allow overlapping items—so long as they have three separate graphic organizers.

#### Closure

I will ask the students, upon completing their graphic organizers, whether they can identify the principal

reason they chose a "favorite" of literature was primarily genre, time period, or particularity of the author. I would intend for this same type of critical distinction to carry over to their coverage and analysis of the American sonnet.

## **Lesson 2: Historical background and inference guide**

### Objectives

Have the students anticipate what types of subjects a poet will choose and what type of diction and tone they will adopt based on their historical and cultural context.

### Materials

Students will use their notebooks, computer lab resources, and relevant music selections and art selections obtained through the Smithsonian Museum website and the National Archives.

### Initiation

I will have the students work with beginning biographical background at discrete intervals. Accompanying this will be artwork and/or music contemporaneous with each set of poems so that students can be exposed to the artistic context into which the sonnets they will be covering fall. They will receive graphic organizers to channel their impressions about both the visual and the audio. Following these exercises, they will anticipate the subject(s) and the tone of the poems they will be reading based on their exposure to each poem's context

### Procedure

Much as several of the sonnets perform ecphrasis in writing their sonnets, students will perform reverse-ecphrasis: they will start with a historically contemporary piece of visual art and then attempt to match one of several sonnets to that visual. In this case, I call it reverse-ecphrasis because the visual will have no known nor established connection to the poem assigned; it will simply require the inferential skill and effort of students to make connections between the visual and the verse.

In addition, I will provide songs or music of the era contemporary with the sonnets I provide and ask the students to make connections based on some shared sense of diction and cultural reference. James Baldwin once wrote that literature, "It is devoutly to be hoped, will rob us of our myths and give us our history, which will destroy our attitudes and give us back our personalities."<sup>24</sup> In looking at contemporary lyrics and music, the students will see that different historical periods, though displaying a variety of faces, will still reflect different guises of the same general character. The America of the 1880s, for example, will begin to project a personality resembling yet distinct from the America of the 1850s and the 1950s, and by the end of the unit of study students should gain a capability to pinpoint elements of diction, allusion, and association that prove that to be so.

### Closure

Students will produce brief encapsulations of the key distinctions of each historical era—the hallmarks which make those eras unmistakable from any other, and the cues and clues that other students should look for to identify each era.

### Lesson 3: Close reading arguments and defense

#### Objectives

Students will learn to use rhetorical strategies and peer-editing skills to refine their ideas and analysis of poetry.

#### Materials

Selection of American Sonnets from handouts and the textbook, student notebooks, and a graphic organizer charting their choices for most effective rhyme, plot of the poem, inferences about the speaker and most effective use of diction.

#### Initiation

I will perform an analysis, using the graphic organizer, of a sonnet by Shakespeare (likely sonnet 18) whereby I will present contrasting views of the meaning of the poem and demonstrate the breadth of possible interpretation.

#### Procedure

The students will read through poems at least twice, with one reading occurring aloud before the entire class. The students will proceed to produce multiple inferences about the speaker, the plot of the poem, the most effective rhyme, the most effective three pieces of diction and their explanation why. They will then have to exchange with neighbors and disagree with at least one of the choices made by another student, after first highlighting a point of agreement with their own opinion.

This technique follows the pattern of Rogerian Argument, which I teach to my AP students, but which can be readily adapted to multiple levels. The students will be compelled to accurately describe what their colleagues agree to be observable or true about examples of poetry. They will characterize another person's argument about a common subject of study (in this case American sonnets), establish common ground, and then mark the distinction where they feel differently or uniquely about a work of verse. In some cases this process will highlight sharp disagreement while in other cases dispute will turn on nuance. In either case, they will mimic in class what poets of each era produced as their artistic output—multiple perspectives in a common period of time as expressed through a shared form.

#### Closure

The students will write a brief reflection on the difference between their reading and analysis of one of the sonnets covered before and after the process of reading, and collaborative "argument" over the authorial choices within the poem relating to diction, rhyme, plot, etc.



## Notes

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1. Lincoln, Abraham. "2nd Inaugural Address"
2. Bryant, William Cullen. "To An American Poet Departing For Europe"
3. Brooks, Gwendolyn. "Rites for Cousin Vit"
4. Bennet, Paula. *Teaching 19th Century American Poetry*, 6
5. Bloom, Harold. *Robert Lowell*, 3.
6. Lazarus, Emma. "The New Colossus"
7. Barzun, Jacques. *Simple and Direct*
8. Jackson-Ford, Karen. "The Sonnets of Satin-Legs Brooks," 349
9. Jackson-Ford. 348.
10. Pearce, Roy Harvey. *The Continuity of American Poetry*.146
11. Pearce. 193
12. Pearce. 170
13. Pearce, 195
14. Pearce, 193
15. Bryant, William Cullen. "To An American Poet Departing for Europe"
16. Longfellow, William Wadsworth. "Nature"
17. Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself"
18. Robinson, Edward Arlington. "Modernities"
19. Lazarus, Emma. "The New Colossus"
20. Vendler, Helen. *The Given and the Made*, xi.
21. Saint-Vincent Millay, Edna. "Only Until this Cigarette"
22. Brooks, Gwendolyn. "Rites for Cousin Vit"
23. Lowney, John. *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American, 1935-1968*, 4.
24. 24 Pearce, 6

## Resources for Teachers

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Bennett, Paula, Karen L. Kilcup, and Philipp Schweighauser. *Teaching nineteenth-century American poetry* . . New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2007. A Good Overview of the challenges in teaching 19th century poetry, especially contrasting the Gilded Age with the American Renaissance.

Bloom, Harold. *Robert Lowell*. New York: Chelsea House, 1987. Provides chronological critical essays which convey the shifting opinions towards Lowell—from his initial elevated position to his reassessment as a major—not preeminent—figure.

Ellmann, Richard, Robert Clair, and Jahan Ramazani. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, vol.2 . New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003. Extensive collection of later 20th century works and instructive historical background information.

Jackson-Ford, Karen. "'The Sonnets of Satin-Legs Brooks'." *Contemporary Literature*, 2007: 345-373. Critical analysis of the reason for Brooks' shift from formalist to anti-formalist poet in the late 1960s; this provides valuable insights to her poetic philosophy.

Lowney, John. *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American, 1935-1968*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006. This

work indicates the change in political poetry in the wake of the Great Depression through to the Great Society and its deflating effect on activist poetry.

Marzano, Robert, Debra J. Pickering. *Building Academic Vocabulary: Teacher's Manual*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005. An excellent resource for planning instruction of terms and terminology.

Pearce, Roy Harvey. *The Continuity of American Poetry*. Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1987. Pearce provides a compelling thesis as to the arc of American Poetry and focuses on seminal poets and their impact.

Vendler, Helen. *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995. Interesting insights as to the division between the inner and the public views and lives of poets.

## Resources for Students

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Baym, Nina, Wayne Franklin, Phillip Gura, Arnold Krupat, and Robert Levine. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Volumes A&B*. New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. A good comprehensive source for American poetry across its entire history, with useful historical and literary background.

Fry, Stephen. *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking The Poet Within*. New York, New York: Gotham, 2005. A good light-hearted primer for writing poetry regardless one's experience.

Hollander, Jon. *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1981. A good primer for conventions of verse.

Preminger, Alex, Terry Brogan, and Frank Warnke. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton, New Jersey: University of Princeton Press, 1993. Comprehensive

Guide to poetical terminology and devices.

## Appendix: Standards Implemented with this Unit

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Common Core RL.11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.) Students will demonstrate this through close study of diction and contextual study.

Common Core RL.11-12.7. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry); evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.) Students will focus on sonnets that deal with historical events or trends and stand as a contrast to non-fiction treatments of the same events.

Common Core RL.11-12.9. Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of

American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics. Students will perform close readings on early American verse as two-thirds of their unit subject matter.

Common Core RL.11-12.10. By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. Students will perform multiple readings which require description of complexity of several sonnets.

Common Core W.11-12.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1–3 above.) Students will produce sonnets of their own imitating historical examples—requiring adherence to form.

Common Core W.11-12.5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience. Students will analyze, compare analyses, and rewrite their analyses of poems.

Common Core W.11-12.9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. Students will perform historical research correlative to the sonnets covered and make inferences about the connection between the two.

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