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Poetry as a Dialectic in the Public Sphere

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Introduction

To create art, in my opinion, is by its very nature a social act. It is the action of a person who has an agenda, however ethereal it may seem to the consumer of the content. Oftentimes, in high school English classes, there is a focus on a specific type of art within literature. For example, during the past 20 years there has been a clear shift from delivering fiction to delivering non-fiction with a focus on the understanding of factual details within the text. Yes, there are clearly factual details that can be found in both broad genres just as there can be factual details drawn out of all types of art. In my estimation, the challenge lies in the delivery of the content and the choices educators make in choosing their focus on the type of art being studied in the class. There are lots of directions that one can take with a text. Each will lead to a variety of different outcomes and it is the responsibility of the educator to outline a path.

This unit will tie together all the texts covered in an Advanced Placement (AP) Literature class. It will use poetry as the method for better understanding fictional literature. The AP test covers many types of literature, and it does so in a variety of ways. The students will need a firm understanding of literary terms as well as a digested and thoughtful understanding of authorial intent when examining a text. This unit will not stand alone within a set four to six-week time frame. It will rather extend from the first week of the class through the last week of the class. We will study poetry every week as commentary, to better understand the complex themes in each novel or play. This will provide a nuanced and hopefully well-rounded understanding of the themes presented over the course of the year. It will also serve to solidify all AP requirements for the studying of both prose and poetry. Lastly, and most importantly, the point at which both the poetry and the prose meet will be an important jumping off point for studying the art and the intent of both works. These works, unquestionably, have been placed within the purview of the reader for some specific reason, and hopefully through analysis we will have an understanding of why. We will constantly be striving to understand why these singular works of art were created. We will study fiction, specifically in relation to these poems, as we constantly question why they were created and look for the intent of each work.

Classroom Context

Back of the Yards College Preparatory High School is an International Baccalaureate (IB) High School on the southside of Chicago. It is located within the former Chicago Stockyards neighborhood made famous by Upton Sinclair's exposé, *The Jungle*. The building is four years old and is the product of strong neighborhood activism combined with the desire of the school district to provide a safe and nurturing school for the students of this community. It has obtained a level 1+ rating by Chicago Public Schools, the highest possible school rating. Demographically, it is comprised of population that is 89.4% Hispanic, 5.7% Asian, 3.2 % Black, 1.5% White, and 0.2% listed as "other". Other pertinent statistics are that the student body is 96.6% low income, 9.3% speak limited English, 8.6% of the students are diverse learners, and they have a 6.1% transitory or mobility rate.¹

Students seeking enrollment must maintain a 24 on both the reading and math portion of the NWEA MAP assessment and maintain a minimum of a 2.5 GPA through their 7th grade year. Students with an IEP or who are ELL must receive a combined 48 on the reading and math portion of the NWEA MAP assessment and also maintain a 2.5 GPA through their 7th grade year.²

All students who have obtained admission are engaged in the IB Middle Years Programme (MYP) and work to receive that diploma through grades 9 and 10. After that all students have the opportunity to apply to the Diploma Programme (DP) or the Career Programme (CP) offerings. The school also a variety of Advanced Placement (AP) courses in English, Social Science, Math, Language, and Science.

While the students have the opportunity to engage in a wide variety of IB class offerings, they also have access to art classes that provide them with multiple outlets for artistic expression ranging across pottery, graphic design, the visual arts, drama, and dance.

Content Objectives

The framework of this unit is to offer help to students in terms of three major areas of need. The poems chosen offer the students a closer look at either a specific archetype, a specific theme, or a specific time period. The deepening of these three areas of study will allow for greater access to novels studied in the class. The idea that these poems have been written for public consumption and have the ability to offer guidance to my students is evidence of the positive role poetry can play in public life.

To fully understand an author's work, it is necessary to grasp the role of each character in the text. Students will need to be able to explore the reasons why a character makes the decisions they do in a situation. It is also important to explore the mental status of a character, as that can change multiple times over the course of a given text. In "King Lear in Respite Care" Margaret Atwood presents the students with a challenge. The poem is devised in order to allow for various reading of the character and each leaves you with a different perspective on the text. This ability of a character to drive multiple readings of a text will be explored in great deal when we arrive at poems that explore characterization.

The challenge of multiple interpretations is again explored in poetry centered upon complex thematic issues.

In Kanye West’s exploration of religion as a vehicle to save a people from damnation, various issues arise surrounding exactly what religion is being referred to in the work. On the surface, the text employs a style often associated with Gospel-inspired spirituals, but a closer analysis of the text points to a continued belief in the importance of Africa as a center of faith. As an example of the importance of theme, the students will need to explicate the text to see these intertwined narratives. This public exploration of faith by West will be paired with Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, as he is also exploring this struggle with belief structures. The students will be tasked with synthesizing both the historical significance of colonialism in Nigeria and its continued impact on modern American religion.

There are many different interpretations or ways to read a poem. Still, there are points in certain poems where the reader is able to understand a specific personal account of a time and a place. This can be helpful in allowing students to better understand major historical events as referenced in a poem like “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen. Through the analysis of this poem the students will be able to better understand a personal account of World War I and its effect on the soldiers who returned from there. The explication of this poem will allow the students to better wrestle with the narrative of Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and in turn better understand his relationship with Clarissa Dalloway the main character. Just as Clarissa never meets Warren, the readers of “Dulce et Decorum Est” will not have met the dying soldier. This should not inhibit the students’ ability to draw meaning from an analysis of both texts.

The Unit

This unit will set out to accomplish two major goals. First, it will outline a group of poems that complement a specific novel. This list is meant to offer options to any educator who wants to follow this plan. It will consist of 6-10 poems that, for a variety of reasons, can be introduced into a course of study to achieve a specific goal.

The second goal of this unit is to take a closer look at one poem for each novel being studied. The reason for choosing a particular poem will not be the same for each novel. Some poems will help clarify a challenging character, some will be presented to enhance the student understanding of a poignant theme, while others will be offered to illuminate the historical period of the text. This unit will cover almost the entirety of the school year. It is important to note here that all poems and novels must be covered by May 9th, 2018. This is the date that has been set for the AP Literature exam. In any case, though, for the purposes of this unit (and to allow time for a full review), April 2nd will serve as our completion date to provide an opportunity for the students to review prior to the exam.

Optional Text Set

Each of these poems provides a specific lens with which to view its associated novel. It will be imperative for teachers to have these options so that this unit can be malleable enough to not simply work one way. Each teacher may have different needs when teaching these works, which can be successfully taught using a variety of methods.

Novel

Associated Poems

	Robert Frost- "Good Hours"
	B.H. Fairchild- "The Book of Hours"
	John Peale Bishop- "The Hours"
	Hazel Hall- "Hours"
	John Keats- "To Autumn"
<i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>	Samuel Taylor Coleridge- "Time, Real, and Imaginary"
	William Shakespeare- "Sonnet 49"
	Elizabeth Bishop- "A Cold Spring" (A response to Hopkins)
	Gerard Manley Hopkins- "Spring"
	Amy Nawrocki- "Mrs. Dalloway"
	Philip Larkin- "The Trees"
	Esther Belin- "Night Travel"
	Santee Frazier- "Mangled, Letters, and the Target Girl"
	Langston Hughes- "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"
<i>Heart of Darkness</i>	Joy Harjo- "Ah Ah"
	Simon Ortiz- "Culture and the Universe"
	Ramon Faaole Pele- "Human Speech- Poem #1"
	James K. Zimmerman- "The Emptiness of Thought"
	Gerard Manley Hopkins- "The Loss of the Eurydice"
	Adrian C. Louis- "The Sacred Circle"
	Joy Harjo- "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings"
<i>Things Fall Apart</i>	Anne Bradstreet- "A Dialogue between Old England and New"
	Juan Felipe Herrera- "Exiles"
	Emily Dickinson- "A Loss of Something Ever I Felt" (959)
	Kanye West- "Ultralight Beam"
	James Welch- "Dreaming Winter"
	Adam Soldofsky- "Fog Machine"
	Walt Whitman- "Song of Myself" (verses 1-5)
<i>Purple Hibiscus</i>	Bai Juyi- "Illness and Idleness"
	Joshua Iosafo- "Brown Brother"
	Phillis Wheatley- "On Virtue"
	Sylvia Plath- "Daddy"
	Herman Melville- "The New Zealot to the Sun"
	Juan Felipe Herrera- "Almost Livin' Almost Dyin'"
	Amanda Bickett- "Streetcar Named Desire Found Poem"
	Tennessee Williams- "Life Story"
	Lord Byron- "And Thou art Dead, as Young and Fair"
<i>Streetcar Named Desire</i>	W.H. Auden- "He watched with all his organs of concern"
	Henry Wadsworth Longfellow- "The Bridge"
	Samuel Taylor Coleridge- "Love's Apparition and Evanishment: An Allegoric Romance"
	Gabriel Garcia Lorca- "The Unfaithful Housewife"
	Dylan Thomas- "I see the boys of summer"
	Shin Yu Pai- "Burning Monk"
	Jennifer Michael Hecht- "Chicken Pig"
	Robert Frost- "Acquainted with the Night"
<i>The Stranger</i>	Pablo Neruda- "A Dog Has Died"
	Alfred, Lord Tennyson- "The Charge of the Light Brigade"
	E.E. Cummings- "[As Freedom is a Breakfast Food]"
	Maya Angelou- "Caged Bird"
	Rudyard Kipling- "The Stranger"

<i>Waiting for Godot</i>	Zachary Schomburg- "The Fire Cycle"
	Lawrence Ferlinghetti- "Autobiography"
	Thomas Nashe- "In Time of Plague [Adieu, farewell, earth's bliss]"
	Wisława Szymborska- "Clouds"
	Amiri Baraka- "Dope or The Liar"
	Adrienne Rich- "Dreamwood"
	Paul Laurence Dunbar- "We Wear the Mask"
	Samuel Beckett- "Morte de A.D."
	John Keats- "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again"
	Lisa Sewall- "King Lear"
<i>King Lear</i>	Emily Dickinson- "Nature, Poem 37: A Thunder-storm"
	Edgar Allan Poe- "Alone"
	Robert Frost- "Storm Fear"
	Margaret Atwood- "King Lear in Respite Care"
	Matthew Arnold- "Growing Old"
	Ralph Waldo Emerson- "Terminus"
	Dylan Thomas- "Do not go gentle into that good night"
	Anne Sexton- "Admonitions To A Special Person"

Primary Text Set

Below is the list of poems and the associated novels and plays that will be dissected in depth over the course of study. Each will be explored in greater depth over the course of the completed unit as a whole class. The other poems from the optional text set will serve as poems that can be studied in smaller groups and presented out to the class at large.

Novel/Play	Author	pages/date covered/weeks need to cover text	Poem	Author
<i>King Lear</i>	William Shakespeare	144/(9/11-9/29)/3	"King Lear in Respite Care"	Margaret Atwood
<i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>	Virginia Woolf	216 (10/2-10/27)/4	"Dulce et Decorum Est"	Wilfred Owen
<i>Heart of Darkness</i>	Joseph Conrad	62 (10/30- 11/10)/2	"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"	Langston Hughes
<i>Things Fall Apart</i>	Chinua Achebe	148 (11/13-12/1)/3	"Ultralight Beam"	Kanye West
<i>Purple Hibiscus</i>	Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie	336 (12/4-1/12)/6	"Daddy"	Sylvia Plath
<i>Streetcar Named Desire</i>	Tennessee Williams	72 (1/15-2/2)/3	"The Unfaithful Housewife"	Federico Garcia Lorca
<i>The Stranger</i>	Albert Camus	154 (2/5-3/2)/4	"Acquainted with the Night"	Robert Frost
<i>Waiting for Godot</i>	Samuel Beckett	96 (3/5-3/23)/3	"Dreamwood"	Adrienne Rich

Content

Overview of the role of each primary text

The class will begin with Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. It is a preeminent AP text that explores the depth of friendship, power and their impact on familial relationships. Margaret Atwood’s “King Lear in Respite Care”

has been chosen here to help the students understand the challenges Lear faces with the inevitable act of aging. While the time period and setting are much different from the plays the hopelessness that Atwood's Lear feels is clearly emphasized and will hopefully serve to help the students' understanding of this character's march toward madness.

We will stay in England with our next novel, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. It will be imperative for the students to understand the importance of post-World War 1 as the setting for this novel. The importance Woolf ascribed to this time necessitates a clear understanding of the state in which many soldiers returned from the horror of war. "Dulce et Decorum Est" has been chosen here because it mirrors the struggle of Septimus Warren Smith as he attempts to reintegrate into a society he once knew, or in any case anticipates a struggle the speaker might have. This poem will also outline the human struggle to cope with past events that have personal significance.

Heart of Darkness, the next novel, shares the importance of the passage of time in a text. It will be paired with Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers". Both texts focus a great deal on the symbolism of the river in their work. Both also deal with the issues inherent in slavery. It is the river, in both texts, that is able to symbolize both history and life at the same time. This poem should give the students the chance to see how an author can use nature to represent various occurrences over the passage of time.

The next novel will contain many of the same themes as *Heart of Darkness* but will move from The Congo to Nigeria. *Things Fall Apart* will be paired with a text set to music that employs aspects of Gospel, spoken word, and rap in its poetic structure. Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" considers the role of God in the lives of modern people in the United States. It will allow students to access the struggle presented when a colonizer's religion stands in contrast to the previously held beliefs of the people.

The work of Achebe had a direct influence on the next novel, which is *Purple Hibiscus*. This novel is, much like *King Lear*, a study of power and family- specifically the relationship between a father and daughter. To understand some of these challenges we will consider Sylvia Plath's "Daddy". This poem captures the challenges arising from familial struggle, a daughter who at one and the same time loves and hates her father as she struggles to understand the complexity of parenting. It can also be read to be about her lover. In Adichie's novel the protagonist, Kambili, has grown up under the control of a religious zealot who is also her father. He has also given her a tremendous education and has also given her sanctuary from the outside world.

Our next prose text will maintain the gender struggle we saw in the last and will blend it with modern love relationships. We will be pairing *Streetcar Named Desire* with "The Unfaithful Housewife" by Federico Garcia Lorca. This poem will allow my students to better understand the complexity of love and sex. Lorca also sounds the same alarm as Williams concerning the threateningly dominant male archetype. The use of figurative language will allow the students to better understand the male chauvinism underscored in both texts.

Passion can come in many different guises, and it will be studied next in Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night". Working with both of these texts will allow the class to compare the desire of two characters who experience loneliness in very different ways. The point of comparison is not just loneliness, however: Frost's poem will help us consider how value and happiness are individually defined. Nihilism and Existentialism can be a challenge for many high school readers to understand, and it is my hope that this pairing will help students consider the more nuanced differences. The nameless speaker of the poem drifts aimlessly through his city, challenged to communicate his thoughts to any person and quite possibly

himself. To compare this character with that of Meursault will allow students to tease out subtle yet important distinctions surrounding one's belief in their place in the universe.

As we walk away from Camus, we will dance directly into the theater of the absurd for our last work. We will consider the supremely entertaining, if totally confusing, *Waiting for Godot* with the supremely childlike, yet incredibly complex "Dreamwood" by Adrienne Rich. The Rich poem exposes the students to the symbolism that will be incredibly important in working with Beckett. It will allow for multiple interpretations, but it will also serve as a vehicle to understand overarching themes. As the students begin to extract meaning from Vladimir and Estragon's conversation there will be disagreement among the students surrounding exactly what Beckett is trying to get across to his readers. The poem's speaker will provide them with a simplified version of the issues surrounding Beckett's meaning. Can the simple piece of wood provide a map for life? How do we as thinkers ascribe meaning to things in our world? These are the questions we will discuss with the help of this poem.

Extended Analysis of "Dulce et Decorum Est"

Below is an example of how a poem can help the reader better understand both a specific time period and a character. The speaker of the poem will be compared to Septimus Warren Smith, The poem outlines an aspect of World War I that is helpful for understanding the novel it is paired with during this unit.

This work of Wilfred Owen can be read as a denunciation World War I. It is a movement away from the celebration of dying for one's country to the understanding that death is a painful and sometimes accidental horror that befalls men. This poem offers a similar time period to that of Woolf. It will also clarify the role of Septimus Warren Smith, a returning war soldier.

"Once you fall, Septimus repeated to himself, human nature is on you. Holmes and Bradshaw are on you. They scour the desert. They fly screaming into the wilderness. The rack and the thumbscrew are applied. Human nature is remorseless".³ It is in this quote the character of "Dulce et Decorum Est" is most fully realized. Owen, in stark terms, presents the "rack" and "thumbscrew" as the young man in his poem fails the task of slipping on his mask. The screw continues to turn as the man dies a gruesome death. Many soldiers returned from war burdened down with their memories. This is a point that Ms. Woolf is attempting to get across to her readers. Owen, though, was not just writing down a fictional story, he was responding to what he saw as on the battlefields of France.

This war was brought the doorstep of England and it took a toll on the highest levels of the social order to an extent that was that was shocking to the people. As Guy Keleny points out, "for the first time, the respectable classes saw their sons swept up into the a British mass army of volunteers and conscripts, and killed in large numbers. For the first time, any household in the land, even the kind that breed poets, might receive the terrible telegram".⁴ It is in this way that both Owen and Woolf's works are what might today be called a Public Service Announcement. Owen furthers his announcement with a beautiful last four lines of apostrophe that are a plea for sense:

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

This is a call to action. This is in plain terms the author recounting a horror from war and attempting to converse with the public about it. This resort to apostrophe makes poetry a dialectic in the public sphere. Owen is speaking directly to all of us about the death that gets the last word in this text. The ascription of honor to the giving of one's life for the good of the country is a problem for Owen, one that he believes needs to be considered and rectified.

Extended Analysis of "Ultralight Beam"

Making use of this song allows students to understand the challenges posed by colonization over a course of time. While it does not focus on the specific time period of the colonization of Nigeria, it does provide a thoughtful correlative to its paired novel, specifically regarding the taking on of the colonizer's religion even if it is at odds with the personal beliefs of the colonized people in question.

Things Fall Apart is a classic novel of Nigerian colonization that was published by Chinua Achebe in 1958. This novel explores the ramifications of English Christianity usurping power from traditional religions in the region. It takes its title from a line in W.B. Yeats' poem entitled "The Second Coming" which has apocalyptic overtones. For Achebe this applies to the religions of Nigeria coming into direct conflict with Christianity.

The tension that is presented in *Things Fall Apart* is brought to us in the modern day by the work of artist Kanye West. West's Gospel-inspired search for redemption is brought into contrast with visions of a return to Africa, and it ends with apocalyptic overtones about war.

The song begins heavily rooted in the Gospel tradition of the Baptist south with expressions like "We want the lord (Yes Jesus)" and "Hand over Satan (Yes, Jesus)" and at this point it seems have a devout Christian message. Quickly though, there is a prayer for "Paris" in reference to the Paris attacks and the modern challenge of war brought on by religious differences. This verse is followed with another delivered by fellow musician "The Dream". In it he begins to question the religions that he has evoked thus far. He states:

I'm tryna keep my faith

But I am looking for more

Somewhere I can feel safe

And end my holy war

The artist is making a statement here; he is made uncomfortable by something. He is pointing to a holy war that is within him. This challenge is furthered in the next stanza where Kelly Price questions her God with lines like "why, oh why'd you do me wrong? More you persecute the weak because it makes you feel so strong to save". This is a God that seemingly persecutes and not the God of the above stanza. This is clarified in the next verse where Chance the Rapper plays the role of Earthly savior. He states, "I will field your questions, I will feel your pain", and this is the role of a Christ figure, except he is not positing himself to be that because he goes on to state that, "I'm moving all my family from Chatham to Zambia". He is a leader and in that role he is challenging the Christian God and questioning, quite profoundly, whether or not it would be prudent to

move back to Africa.⁶

This is the challenge presented to us by Achebe. He recounts living with dueling faiths in an autobiographical journal entry in the publication *Guernica*. In it he states, “Those two- my father and his uncle- formed the dialectic that I inherited. Udoh stood fast in what he knew, but he also left room for my father to seek other answers. The answer my father found in the Christian faith solved many problems but by no means all”.⁷ Achebe rightly sees God as powerful and capable of changing lives. His family was educated by Christian missionaries and those that became Christian went on to hold powerful roles in the government when the British passed control, tacitly, back to Nigeria. Achebe also, like Chance the Rapper, questions the role of Christianity. a major player in the transatlantic slave trade. The challenges of colonization are complex and varied and I believe this song begins to point to some of those root issues.

Assessments

The students will access poems on a weekly basis. There will be one day a week that is solely reserved for the explication and analysis of poetic works. The students will keep a running poem “database” of sorts that will be the basis for their review before the AP Literature exam. It will be invaluable for them to have access to a minimum of 30 poems that are already annotated and internalized through the use of TPCASTT (Title, Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude, Shift, Title again, and finally Theme)- a very common and useful AP Literature strategy. This will also serve as a formative assessment for me as I follow their individual progression. Before the use of TPCASTT it is sometimes valuable for the students to explore the poems through the use of the *Question Paper* as outlined by the AP Collegeboard.⁸ These are all models for possible formative assessments I would incorporate into the study of poetry.

Along with the use of various formative assessments the students will also be tested at regular intervals with multiple diagnostics, one of which is the Socratic Seminar. This will allow students the opportunity to consider, as a large group, the importance of literary devices, figurative language, time periods, authorial intent, and various themes that appear repeatedly throughout literature. The Socratic Seminar is a focal point in my class as it necessitates the conversations that are the engine of my classroom. While I do encourage expression of thought through various modalities, I place specific importance on the ability to read and speak.

I will be ending the year by giving the students the opportunity to explore a new poet and offer a critical analysis of three of their poems. This will allow them to apply their newly acquired skills with new content. In reality though, the final assessment for this class is the A.P. Literature exam.

Strategies

TPCASTT

(Title, Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude, Shift, Title, Theme) offers the students the ability to know what to analyze in a poem--which is oftentimes a challenge for students. Aside from the dense language we come

across the best path to take can offer considerable challenges. The joy of this strategy is that it offers students that road map. It organizes important information and allows that knowledge to help the reader understand more complex sections of a poem. The expectations for each piece of the acronym are as follows: Title- the students will work to understand the meaning of each word in the title and the way they work together to offer meaning; this is commonly their first step in understanding a poem. Paraphrase- it is here that the students will work through the text in small sections to find meaning. They will look up words they do not know and put the poem into words they understand. This is most useful for poems of substantial length. Connotation- This section allows time for the student to find multiple meanings of words and motifs running through the text. It is a place for them to think past the surface level and dig for possible symbolic meaning the author may have intended the reader to notice. Attitude- This section of the strategy is about the speaker and the poet. It asks the students to consider the mood and tone as the poem. Shift- This section is typically the most challenging for the students. It asks the students to notice any changes in speaker or any rhetorical moves the poet makes. An example of this is the use of the dash mark by Emily Dickinson. Title- After all of this work the students are brought again back to the title of the poem. It is here that they can apply their analysis to look for new meaning in the title of the work. Theme- This is where the students have a chance to wrap up their study of the poem by outlining the point the author means to address. What was the point of the poem? (In the activities section of this curriculum unit you will find an example of the type of answers I would like to see from students using this strategy along with an explanation of the strategy's implementation).

Space and time

This is the most important strategy that I have come across in my decade of teaching. My classroom dynamic is built around these two words, and they appear in nearly all aspects of my teaching. This strategy necessitates a strong understanding of the appropriateness of a given activity correlated with the skill level of each individual student. The space aspect references the need to allow for free thought. A student needs room to maneuver and think without an adult rescuing them with the "right" answer. Carnegie Mellon's Eberly Center for Teacher Excellence explores this concept at great length.⁹ At various points they speak to the importance of student input and student created thought. Whether it is student's ability to approach the teacher with feedback or with questions about content, the importance of student generated feedback cannot be understated. When a student has the space to consider a text they will find value and importance on a personal level and that is the jumping off point for the deeper dissection of a thought.

The ability to properly dissect a text is also aided by the students' ability to have time to work. This is most accurately discussed by The Teaching Center at Washington University in St. Louis.¹⁰ They point to the importance of learning happening outside of the prescribed classroom time. While this point may be challenging to adhere to, and of course needs to be qualified with the type of assignment, the point is firm in my classroom. My classes are given the opportunity to not have the right answer in one minute. The work we do needs to build on each other and the students need to feel the ability to think deeply about content of great importance to both the class and to them as individuals. In addition to time for thought, it is also crucially important to not interrupt them as they articulate a response. While this concept may seem basic in its premise, I have found it to be a major issue in the structure of classes that I have observed. Again, students need time to produce quality work.

Socratic Seminar

My classroom, filled with seventeen and eighteen-year-old students, is a forum. Debate and free thought are actively encouraged and students have the ability to move the conversation down paths that they seem to

find valuable. The product of this environment leads to incredibly fruitful debate and dialogue during a Summative Assessment that I use called the Socratic Seminar. As Lewis Campbell, an Oxford classicist, points out in his translation of *The Theaetetus of Plato*, the alliteratively named process of encouraging students to ask questions requires the mentor/teacher to have the necessary answers.¹¹ This is where there is deviation in my class. While I do take on the role of Socrates during class discussion, when the seminar begins my students are prompted to deliver their conceptual understanding of a text to the class. The other students then add to or rebut the argument with evidence. Thus, during a seminar in my class, there is no mentor to guide the conversation unless the teacher feels it necessary for any one of many reasons such as off-topic conversations, a severe misreading, or additional historical facts that may provide fodder for deeper analysis. This further enhances the meaning of poetry as a dialectic in the public sphere as the poem is the driving force behind the discussion. It is the medium of information delivery, thus further cementing the text as a mode of intellectual exploration.

Activities

TPCASTT

This is a method used by teachers to afford students access to challenging poems.

The following is an analysis of “King Lear in Respite Care” by Margaret Atwood and it will be done using the TPCASTT method of poetry analysis as an example of what you may want to see from your students. For this to work, I ask that students work in small groups of three to four teammates. They will begin with each taking a turn reading the poem. This can be modified with poems of substantial length by chunking the poem into smaller sections, but that will cut down on their ability to notice intricate patterns that are often missed on initial readings. After the reading is complete the students will work to find consensus on the meaning of each stanza or section. This is usually timed by the teacher. I suggest a minimum of 5 minutes per section, but that is, of course, dependent on the amount of time you have with your students and their ability to thoughtfully work through the specific poem in question. After this is done, I usually ask each group to present and follow up each presentation with time for questions or additional comments about what may have been missed.

Title- The title of the poem immediately furnishes crucial information. It allows the reader to know that the poem is tied in some way to the famed *King Lear* of Shakespeare’s creation, and it is tied to some form of needed environment of calm. “Respite Care” is typically viewed as needed when someone is infirm. This can and should lead to the character of King Lear, who loses a sense of self in the play, undergoes intense fatigue, and descends into the deranged anger of what could be considered early-stage senility. The students should be able to grasp all of these points.

Paraphrase- This poem is about a man who is in a nursing facility and is not happy about it. He is being visited by his youngest daughter. Below is a brief paraphrase of each stanza.

The opening stanza gives us the image of a man confined to a facility and he is confused. This can be deduced by his confusion about being controlled by “snow” or “wallpaper.” That he still attempting to hide something is clear from his need to be “sly and stubborn”.

Stanza two leaves us with an image of the man as without control of his hand, either from a stroke or because

he is not lucid enough to control it.

In stanza three, we are made aware of a man who has knowledge but it is dispersed for an unknown reason. It may have been caused by the nursing facility but it also may have been caused by some sort of mental illness. The reference to a “cave” brings to mind images of Plato’s cave and its effect on the man who leaves, and the “hovel” brings to mind living conditions that are squalid. It also brings to mind the cave that offered shelter to Lear, Edgar, and the Fool during the storm.

In stanza four the character bemoans the loss of time, ceilings, and air. The reader considers why he thinks these things that are around him are gone. This could be a man who has lost control or power he once had, or it could be a man who is in the throes of dementia.

Stanza five is a meditation on the early death of men as well as a reference again to a man who has lost control over his way of life.

Stanza six refers back to the rage of the weather that is so powerful in the play *King Lear*. Tellingly this scene is tied together with a loss of a common human attribute- the ability to taste food.

Stanza seven gives us the return of his youngest daughter who sits with him and holds his hand. She asks basic questions about nutrition and he only asks to leave.

The last stanza leaves off with his youngest daughter telling her father that she “loves him like salt”. At this point the students should have a question. It would be my expectation that the majority come to the same conclusions I did, and I would answer the rest of the questions. First among others will be a question about the last line, “I love you like salt”.

Connotation- The last line is a wonderful case in point for this section. At this point, I would need to outline the various fairy tales that surround this quote. While they appear in many countries they all seem to have the same meaning, as documented by University of Pittsburgh Press.¹² The salt is necessary to eat food and the sugar that is offered by the other sisters only makes one sick if consumed in high quantities. With this groundwork, I would ask the students to reference the play in ways that are subtler and more nuanced, specifically looking at the role of the daughters in relation to the salt and the sugar. References to the storm and the snow have value too, as will a consideration of how Atwood understands Lear’s state of mind.

Attitude- This section asks the students to consider the speakers and the poet. They should understand that “Lear” is frustrated and his youngest daughter is attempting to offer comfort to him. The speaker will be more challenging to decipher for the students. As noted by Sara Jamieson in volume 48 of *Canadian Poetry*, “Her inability to cope with her father’s illness causes her to compare herself to the elder daughters...Similarly, the Cordelia-like figure who appears at the end of the poem is an idealized vision of herself”.¹³ With this in mind, it is important for them to see the two roles taken on by the speaker.

Shift- At this point, I would like the students to note the challenges inherent in dissecting a character of questionable mental lucidity. So much is hinging on that key point. Also, there are shifts after the mention of the “daughters” as well as another shift with the arrival of the youngest daughter.

Title (Again)- Traditionally, the title is referred back to for a more nuanced offering after critical analysis. Here I would hope that my students could see that this poem could easily be considered an elegy. The father, while alive in the poem, is dead in real life. This presents an interesting chance to dialogue about the challenge of

committing to a poetic style in full, as we suppose elegy to impose certain thematic constraints.

Theme- This poem carries with it the theme of the two stories that it references. There is a savage brutality in the institutionalization of an elderly adult against their will. There is also the theme of love--the love a child can have for a parent and vice versa: a love that in universal terms is timeless.

Question Paper

The question paper is an Advanced Placement¹⁴ activity that has been used for many years. It asks the students to write a paragraph that is completely made up of questions. The idea is that each question will probe deeper into the one before, thus allowing the students a micro view of the poem. So often the students begin with a macro assessment of what they “feel” the poem is about without examples of how they got there. This activity seeks to remedy that issue. You can find various examples of how to setup a handout for this online with a search of the topic. I suggest not using a handout and allowing students to go through this process in a poetic journal that they keep. This way all of their notes are kept together for future reference.

The use of this activity can get messy if it is not properly implemented. The students can go down many paths with this type of analysis and sometimes they lose track of the intent of the activity. The intent therefore must be made clear to them- a deeper understanding of the themes of the poem with evidence to support that belief is the goal. The activity must continually revolve around the poem and not deviate into something other than that. A caveat here is that the students do need some latitude to intellectually wander, and that is why I recommend implementing questions categories. They can choose to ask questions centering around the speaker, subject matter, punctuation, or even the use of nouns and verbs. This is a list of the types of question categories I have had good luck with, but it is by no means comprehensive. One of the joys of this activity is that it can be manipulated to fit your unit of study. It also lends itself as a great jumping off point for the strategy of the Socratic Seminar as the students are busy asking questions that they feel will help them better understand the text. It is therefore recommended to use these questions to begin the strategy of the Socratic Seminar.

Not So New Criticism

The lens of New Criticism that was developed by John Crowe Ransom and other southern poets during the mid-20th Century is enduring and incredibly useful, especially to a student taking the A.P. Literature exam. This movement while important to teach our students sometimes misses the mark when reading poems that have specific historical references that they simply do not know. While they will not have the ability to research on the AP exam, the classroom needs to function as a place where they can learn information so they can bring it to bear on the day of the test. The AP exam is a mix of having literary knowledge, but also being able to know about literary movements and important historical events that have shaped our poetry and literature.

Yes, you could read Yeats’ classic *Easter Sunday, 1916* without any knowledge of The Easter Uprising and still understand aspects of the work, but it would be wholly more interesting and meaningful to have a basic understanding of a few different pieces of information. The “Not So New Criticism” uses aspects of the strategy of space and time to allow students access to poems in meaningful ways. This work, as its name evokes, requires the students to provide as much background information as possible on a poem. During the activity, the students are generally given about 15-20 minutes to research an aspect of the poem. It could be the author, the time period, the title, or any other piece of information that would allow them to bring into more clear focus an aspect of the poem. If this was done with *Ultralight Beam*, I would ask the students to

research either Chinua Achebe, Igbo, Christian colonization of Nigeria, or Gospel music. In this way, each person will have some piece of unique information that they can use to solve the puzzle of the text in question. Instead of feeling like they have nothing to bring to the table when accessing a poem like this, they have information to contribute, and the teacher is now, after the activity, comfortable calling on any student and knowing they have some type of information to bring to bear on the class's understanding of the text. This is a gift, especially in classrooms where students are reticent to initially participate in class discussion.

Appendix

Common Core State Standards- Key Ideas and Details

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

Common Core State Standards- Craft and Structure

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.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.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6: Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

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