



Poetic Visions and Versions of America

Curriculum Unit 17.03.09, published September 2017
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Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.

--Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Introduction

Poetry is an important public venue. It is so often dismissed, ridiculed, overlooked, and underestimated. America, too, is controversial. It's overestimated, exaggerated, and hotly contested in our current social and political climate. Putting them next to each other, you have a very interesting conversation. By examining this juxtaposition, students and teachers alike can meditate on whether poetry can accurately describe what America is, and what it stands for; and, ultimately, they can explore whether poetry can adequately represent a multitude of American voices, different visions and versions.

The discovery of how one feels about their own country can be intensely personal. In order to work out those feelings, we often turn to the sphere of public discourse. Reading and discussing, by their very nature, represent a communal act. Personal feelings about America can be complex. Pair this complexity with the compact, often puzzle-like, world of poetry, and something very powerful can occur. *A Patriot's Handbook* recalls John F. Kennedy saying, "When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses."¹ Here, we have someone who truly believes that poetry is an important vehicle in which humans can explore powerful ideas about themselves and their world. If we replace Kennedy's "power" with "America," we can see why students need to have this conversation about their country.

In *What is Found There*, Adrienne Rich echoes this idea about the power of poetry when she writes, "In a history of spiritual rupture, a social compact built on fantasy and collective secrets, poetry becomes more necessary than ever; it keeps the underground aquifers flowing; it is the liquid voice that can wear through stone."² So when thinking about the issues that divide a (our) country, Rich asserts that poetry can give voice

to the underrepresented and can inspire change. So there we have it: Poetry and America. My students will explore people's visions and versions of America while discovering the power that poetry can have in what seems to be a private conversation, but ends up being a very public dialogue.

Teaching Situation and Rationale

I teach at a magnet school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It has a diverse student body, ranging from those students who take second jobs to support themselves and their families to those who are extremely wealthy. Specifically speaking, at Booker T. Washington High School, our current student body is comprised of 35% African American, 36% Caucasian, 3% Asian, 13% Hispanic, 9% Multi-Race, and 4% American Indian with 38% free and reduced lunch. My classroom reflects this diversity. Also, the class I teach, AP Language and Composition (focus on American Literature), has students with ranging abilities, so it is important that I differentiate and scaffold my instruction, as well as build in some flexibility for those students who need it. This unit is for my AP Language and Composition class, but the texts or pacing could be easily adapted for other grade levels.

One important factor to note is that most of my students hate studying poetry (99.9% to be exact). There is a distinct fear that appears in their eyes when I say, "Today, we are going to read a poem." Knowing this upfront, I want this unit to be very accessible to my students and to show them that understanding poetry is almost like putting together a puzzle. In Mary McVee et al.'s "Using Digital Media to Interpret Poetry: Spiderman Meets Walt Whitman," the writers note the importance of approaching "poems not as static texts that must be mined for correct meaning, but as texts with rich potential for multiple interpretations."³ This frames how I approach the teaching of poetry. I do not want to lead with "What does this poem mean?" but with "What do you believe the poet wants you to think, feel, and/or believe from these words?"⁴ McVee et al. also writes about how rarely students connect their own passions and interests to poetry that they (are forced to) read. This reminder is something that I intend to heed in this unit through the culminating activity.

Much of my AP Language and Composition class focuses on how American people are driven by or swallowed up by the idea of the American Dream - something that is idealized, envisioned, and recreated in songs, poems, plays, novels, movies, etc. We discuss how this notion of "America" is almost embedded, or seems to be, in our genetic code as we read essays and novels that implicitly or explicitly deal with the notion of the American Dream and what America ultimately stands for. Because there are so many differing visions and versions of our country, what makes it great or not so great, and because America and its values are so much of what we discuss when reading novels like *The Great Gatsby* or *Of Mice and Men*, plays like *The Death of a Salesman*, and essays or speeches like "I Have a Dream," "Paradox and Dreams," and "Self-Reliance," this conversation about what makes America "America" is something that naturally becomes a focal point in our classroom dialogue. In order to make this dialogue more dynamic, it is important to have students examine works that unveil visions of America's future, as well as expose versions of the present state of our country. This idea of looking at different visions and versions of America is also relevant to my classroom because of the divisive times we live in -- where the world looks very black and white, the issues seem to be very black and white -- but it is in the gray areas where my students need to find themselves, looking at all points of view and considering ideas that might be uncomfortable for them. This is a skill that I know my students will find valuable and useful for the rest of their lives.

Poetry is often ignored in an AP Language and Composition classroom because of its heavy focus on non-fiction. However, I would like to argue that poetry is a factor that can not only help students' close reading skills, skills needed to pass the AP exam, but it will also help them in all forms of writing. In defense of teaching poetry, Georgia Popoff and Quraysh Lansana write, "It is not necessary for each student to become an accomplished poet, but he will learn lessons that may inform future writing tasks in school and beyond. We also hope to create new audiences. Reading poetry and, even more, attempting to write a poem expands command of language, or at least it expands students' vocabularies."⁵ With this in mind, poetry is the perfect vehicle to study language and bring exciting enrichment to the AP Language and Composition classroom. Additionally, the study of poetry "leads to an aptitude for creative problem-solving and effective communication, as well as improved skill in drawing inference from content"⁶ -- again all skills that align with AP objectives and state standards.

Bringing more poetry to my AP Lang class will also help contribute to our conversation about America and the American Dream. I foresee this focus on poetry in my AP classroom to not only be beneficial in helping us piece together our own ideas about our country, but also in allowing my students to make greater, more complex connections among all of the essays, stories, speeches, and novels that they read.

As my students are trying to navigate their America — their version of America — it is more important than ever to have them look at other people's visions and versions, expanding and challenging their views of their present and their future. By examining various poems across different time periods, my students will look at how specific poets use language and figurative devices to convey their visions for or criticism of our country, and simultaneously, they can start constructing their own version of what America is for themselves and their generation.

The Unit

This curriculum unit is designed to be used throughout the school year in my class-- one to be pulled in and used when studying essays, speeches, novels, and plays, as the topic of diverse voices in American culture is the driving theme throughout the school year. I have divided the unit into four aspects of visions and versions of America that could easily be paired with other works teachers use in the classroom. I would use the unit subsections to guide your pairing with other texts you use in the classroom. For example, if your students are reading Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," you might pull poems from the subsection "American Visions of Race and Gender." If you are teaching Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" or Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, you might use poems from the subsection "American Visions of Conformity and Nonconformity." Teachers can benefit from this approach, as it does not confine poetry to the completely separate formal consideration that is often its fate in schools. This approach will intertwine poetry analysis with other literary work as year-long activities that will keep students working with critical thinking, close reading, and annotation skills. More importantly, this unit is designed to be flexible. I urge readers of this unit to take out, rearrange, or condense as they see fit.

Another note about the unit is that some poems and songs are assigned that involve some profanity and more adult topics. It is important to know your students, your parents, and administration before using works with questionable language or topics. My students are given a course outline with all the works we are using throughout the year, which parents must sign off on. The above will serve as a rationale for using the works I

have chosen. I always offer alternative works to be read if a parent or student objects. If this idea does not work for your situation, you can always use excerpts from the poems listed, excluding any language your students, parents, or administration may find controversial, or search for alternative poems to use.

This unit will challenge your students to examine the complex and often complicated idea of patriotism, as well as urge them to discuss some controversial issues. The poems chosen will prepare my students to tackle issues that they will perpetually face as citizens of the United States of America and to think critically about the America they find themselves in. By scrutinizing their American identity through different visions and versions, they then will be able to apply those questions and discussions to a globally-oriented mindset, seeing that they are “citizens of a world of human beings, and that while they happen to be situated in the United States, they have to share this world with the citizens of other countries.”⁷

Guiding Questions

How can we celebrate America in one breath and criticize it when we exhale? Whose America is this? What’s the point of view? Does this poem promote belonging? Does the poem leave anyone out? Does this poem incite change? How does it help us understand important social issues? Does it promote the American Dream or criticize it? These questions will be at the forefront of every poem we encounter during this unit.

Visions of America: Celebrations and Criticisms

In the preface of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman says “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.”⁸ I want the first week of this unit to focus on four very connected poets who definitely have to say something about their America and offer students four distinct visions for their country’s future. Students will focus on Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing,” Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” Bob Dylan’s “The Times They are A-Changin’,” and Allen Ginsberg’s “America” --- noticing connections between the four poets. Students will be given a list of literary devices, so not only will they be focusing on what these four poets are saying about America, they will also be familiarizing themselves with poetic devices and their effects on an author’s message.

Connections to make among Whitman, Guthrie, Dylan, and Ginsberg

It is important that students see how these authors’ poems are connected through style and purpose, ultimately noting how their particular use of language and syntax, even if they have different visions of America, has similar effects on their audience. Making connections among these poets and, hopefully, to other writers we study throughout the year is what will be the most meaningful achievement for my students -- to be able to compare and contrast and find a common thread that seems to be beautifully, albeit paradoxically, interwoven in works chosen. Beginning the unit with in-depth analysis of these four poems is intended to build a foundation that teachers can carry on throughout the year, especially since Whitman and Dylan are used in more than one section.

First, it is necessary to examine the subject of their poems and their audiences. In “Walt Whitman, Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, and the Anxiety of Influences,” Ron Klier says, “Whitman believed that the poet’s ‘spirit responds to his country’s spirit,’ that he or she to be ‘commensurate with the people.’”⁹ In “I Hear America Singing,” Whitman seems to be writing for the everyman -- the working class, championing some of the underrepresented, mentioning “mechanics,” “boatman,” “shoemaker,” just to name a few. He ends by celebrating “the mother,” “young wife,” and “the girl.” We can look at this as a way to include people who the poet felt were not normally celebrated in society. Andrew Vogel writes about this amalgamation of different

people, noting that this poem “indicates the joyousness and harmony of American life coming out of the confluence of individualism and mutual support that, Whitman insists, is the real engine of national progress.”¹⁰ While still celebrating the inclusiveness and expansiveness of his vision of America, he tells readers which persons we should not overlook anymore. Although he did incorporate the working class and women and his purpose was to celebrate all who make up America, it would be important to have students identify what traditional, stereotypical roles he seems to perpetuate. For example, you can point out how Whitman does include women, but shows them in their traditional roles “sewing or washing.” You might discuss with students how although Whitman mentions the working class, it’s not clear whether he means just white laborers or if he includes people of color. Looking at historical context and even Whitman’s own journalism, you could have students decide whether the voices singing include all races or if they are just white voices.

After an interesting study of Whitman and his poem, it is time to introduce Woody Guthrie. Like Whitman, Guthrie includes Americans who he felt needed to be represented in his famous “This Land is Your Land.” Though many people misrepresent his folk song as one of America’s most celebratory anthems, it truly is a communist manifesto, pointing out “the exclusiveness and unfairness of the distribution of wealth in America.”¹¹ He wrote this song in response to the popular “God Bless America” after traveling throughout America seeing everything from the “landless migrant laborers” in California to the homeless alcoholics in New York City. As for Whitman, “For Guthrie, understanding the bad and the good of the people and the country allows for personal transcendence and redemption.”¹² Guthrie, like the other poets, finds it necessary to include the ugly with the beautiful to truly represent his vision of America.

Following Guthrie, teachers should have students tackle Bob Dylan’s “The Times They are A-Changin’.” This skillfully crafted song includes those people typically ignored in art but also empowered by conformity to success standards when he focuses on those unwilling to welcome change. He invites people to his conversation by using the imperative command “Come.” This imperative command is not meant to scold, but gently to nag the people he urges to pay attention. With these commands, he sings out to all “people,” but then quickly narrows focus to “writers and critics,” “senators, congressmen,” and “mothers and fathers,” representing the media, politics, and the family unit and advises them to be aware that the world is changing and to not to get in the way. By focusing on stagnant keepers of the status quo, he forces the reader to think of young people who recognize that the “old road is rapidly agin’” and “The order is rapidly fadin’.”

Lastly, we should explore a poet who could be seen as a more pessimistic Whitman. Allen Ginsberg’s “America” constructs a darker national landscape, targeting “fear, militarism, and greed. In a word, ‘America’ is an elegy for the ‘lost America of love’ that Whitman had envisioned.”¹³ Ginsberg represents the counterculture of the late 1950s, darkly celebrating the nonconformists of his generation, while condemning mainstream values.

Another important connection to make between these four poets is their use of cataloguing and anaphora to paint their differing depictions of America. As Klier says, “Whitman was fond of catalogues, of sweeping, panoramic portraits of America” and then goes on to say that “Guthrie identified with these catalogues. Joe Klein even argues that he wrote with ‘the unspoken assumption that he could cram the whole country into his songs; the belief --like Whitman’s--that he could say what America was.’”¹⁴ And again, “Dylan (like Whitman and Guthrie) uses catalogues to capture the American experience in vivid images and sense impressions.”¹⁵ Although Ginsberg is not mentioned in Klier’s article, we can again see a darker use of cataloguing as he tries to characterize the mistakes he sees America making and whom America is excluding. Vogel writes, “In ‘America,’ Ginsberg marks the asininity of American values and simultaneously mocks himself for being

unable to fit in with mainstream society.”¹⁶

Versions of America: Celebrations and Criticisms

In Caroline Kennedy's introduction to her anthology *A Patriot's Handbook*, she notes that she has included many “different views of America --what is best, and what could be better -- because patriotism requires understanding our limitations as well as our strengths.”¹⁷ This concept will drive the second section of this unit. Kennedy argues that “there are many varied realities within our society, but as a nation, there is more that unites us than divides us.”¹⁸ In these very divisive times that we live in, I don't know if I completely buy that, and I don't know if my students will either. The optimist that I am wants to totally agree with Kennedy, but I still find it important to struggle with either agreeing or disagreeing with her, so that is what we are going to explore for this section of the unit-- different authors' versions of their present-day America. We will read Langston Hughes's “I, Too, Sing America,” “Let America be America Again,” Claude McCay's “America,” Abelardo Delgado's “Stupid America,” and Green Day's “American Idiot” juxtaposed with Thomas Paine's “Liberty Tree,” Emma Lazarus's “The New Colossus,” Samuel F. Smith's “America” (“My country tis of thee”), Katharine Lee Bates's “America, the Beautiful,” and Edna St. Vincent Millay's “I Like Americans.” If extra time is an option, I'll throw in Robert Frost's “The Gift Outright,” which on the surface looks like a celebration of Manifest Destiny and American autonomy, but when analyzed further really can be seen as a criticism, much like Guthrie's “This Land is Your Land.” At the end of this section of the unit, students will decide who wins the great debate. Is America great or not? Is there more that unites than divides? Using textual evidence, historical context, and their knowledge of literary devices and their effects, students will attempt to answer these questions.

American Visions of Conformity and Nonconformity

Using clips from *Dead Poets Society* and selected poems, students will look at whether or not America values conformity more than nonconformity. I want us to consider how America seems to pride itself on the individual and value the idea of nonconformity, but paradoxically champions rigidly shared standards and sameness. Kennedy asserts that Americans “celebrate the nonconformist.”¹⁹ Again, I believe this is a debatable and complex issue, so using Malvina Reynolds's “Little Boxes,” Emily Dickinson's “Much Madness is Divinest Sense” and/or “I'm Nobody who are you?” Gwendolyn Brooks's “We Real Cool,” Robert Frost's “The Road Not Taken,” and excerpts of Whitman's “Song of Myself,” we will explore whether it is conformity or nonconformity that truly represents and drives visions of America.

Concentrating on moments of championed nonconformity like Reynolds's resistance to “boxes,” Dickinson's “Madness” and “Nobody,” Brooks's “We,” Frost's “road less traveled,” and Whitman's “barbaric yawp,” students can examine the “individual[s need] to resist the pressures of conformity”²⁰ in relation to the “effort by various authorities and experts to codify, unify, and contain personal identities and activities provoked” by societal expectations.

At some point during this section, I will show a few scenes from the movie *Dead Poets Society* to help further my students' understanding of conformity and nonconformity. My students love when I throw in something to watch, even if it is only a few minutes long. Visuals help to engage my students and usually make for more dynamic class discussions. For example, in the scene where Mr. Keating takes his students outside, the boys start walking and after a short time, they eventually start marching and clapping in unison. He then stops them and talks to them about conformity and nonconformity. Mr. Keating explains, “Now we all have a great need for acceptance, but you must trust that your beliefs are unique, your own, even though others may think

them odd or unpopular, even though the herd may go, [imitating a goat] ‘that’s baaaaad.’ Robert Frost said, ‘Two roads diverged in the wood and I, I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.’” This would be a good scene to show before you have the class read “The Road Not Taken.”

American Versions of Race and Gender

“Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations.”—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*.

Not only will we focus on American versions of gender and race during this section of the unit, but we will also examine why authors make specific stylistic choices and how they are used to enhance their message. We read the following poems: Dylan’s “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” Quraysh Ali Lansana’s “statement on the killing of patrick desmond,” Reginald Harris’s “New Rules of the Road,” Huang Zunxian’s “Expulsion of the Immigrants,” Marge Piercy’s “Barbie Doll,” Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise,” and Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy.”

I would start with Dylan’s song first to model how to look at gender and race in a poem. In Dylan’s “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” it is important to comment on how Dylan never mentions that William Zanzinger is white and that Hattie Carroll is black. Christopher Ricks points out this use of restraint. Ricks says, “It’s a terrible thing that you know [their race] from the story, and from the perfunctory prison sentence, even while the song never says so. It’s white upon black, it’s man upon woman, it’s rich upon poor.”²¹ This song not only discusses the injustices of race, but of gender and social status as well. Teachers can also use this song as an opportunity to discuss the power of sound devices. Ricks points out that Hattie’s sound is the -l sound. ²² He discusses how that sound is found within the following words: “Carroll,” “table” (which is repeated several times to reinforce the monotony of her her work as a maid in a hotel), “level,” and “gentle.” Then juxtapose those soft sounds with the more cacophonous sounds used to describe Zanzinger: “Doomed and determined to destroy all the gentle.” Another interesting detail teachers can point out to students is the importance of stanza structure. Ricks explains how the stanzas increasingly get longer. They go from nine lines to ten lines, with the last two stanzas ending with 11 lines equally.²³ Ricks suggests that “The final verse, pronouncing the sentence of (and upon) this court, must not be allowed to trump the life of Hattie Carroll. The scales of justice must hold perfectly level the scale of the two verses, however disgracefully the court failed to be on the level.”²⁴ Students should try and figure out the author’s intended effect of stanza length, with a little nudging and guidance from the teacher.

After discussing and analyzing Dylan’s “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” as a whole class, I would introduce Quraysh Ali Lansana’s “statement on the killing of patrick desmond,” having students analyze the lack of capitalization and use of specific diction focusing on word pairs like “hoodlum (cop)” and “proven false (white lies)” and Reginald Harris’s “New Rules of the Road,” where students would specifically look at form, the effects of repetition, and imperative commands which seem more pressing than Dylan’s commands in “The Times They are A-Changin’.” When writing about the many murders of unarmed blacks in America, Michael Warr argues that “today’s terror [must] be opened to the world and portrayed in all its gut-wrenching layers, legal and extralegal, cultural and intellectual, in plain view of the national conscience.”²⁵ These two poems should spark some difficult, but necessary conversations about race in America. Warr continues, “We hope to expose and project poetic consciousness on the issue of police killing more broadly in the Public Square.”²⁶ That is exactly what these two poets will do in the classroom and I know my students (and countless others) will find this conversation relevant and valuable as they are evaluating their own feelings about their country.

Another poem on race worth teaching is Huang Zunxian's "Expulsion of the Immigrants." Chinese poet and diplomat, hurt by the anti-Chinese sentiments and the continuous renewal of the Chinese exclusion Act of 1882, which eventually made Chinese immigration permanently illegal, wrote this poem as a response.²⁷ Students should take note of the cataloguing, anaphora, and use of imagery and connect these to the author's purpose. Connections can also be made to modern day immigrants, the Muslim ban, etc.

Finally, we will focus on gender. Starting with Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll," students need to examine the imagery of "dolls," "GE stoves and irons," and "wee lipsticks," just to name a few, and how these images contribute to a stereotyped view of women in American society. Make sure to point out the use of situational irony at the end of the poem and have students explain how it contributes to theme.

With Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise," have students focus on imagery, simile, and metaphor. For example, she uses images of wealth to describe her self-esteem. She explains how she walks "like I've got oil wells / Pumping in my living room" and how she dances "like I've got diamonds / at the meeting of my thighs." Not only are these images ironically and poignantly connected to what is usually attributed to white man's success, but it celebrates her sexuality as an uncontrollable force that seems to slap patriarchy in the face. She ends the poem with a chant-like "I Rise / I Rise / I Rise," allowing readers to get a true sense of the power and confidence of a strong black woman.

When exploring Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," the teacher should ask who "Daddy" represents. Various answers could be her dad, her husband, the devil, Nazis, but eventually, your class should see that Plath intends for her audience to see "Daddy" as all men, clearly revolting against patriarchy. In this poem, it would be important to track the different types of imagery used and look at how they contribute to the overall theme. For example, students can track foot imagery or Nazi imagery and their specific impact on the poem's meaning. Other areas of potential interest when teaching this poem would be to concentrate on the repetitive rhyme and how every line ends on a strong note, creating the sensation of strong, compellingly hypnotic chant, just as in "Still I Rise."

Ultimately, the study of this section's poems should challenge my students to meditate on the idea that Carolyn Sorisio mentions in her book *Fleshing Out America: Race, Gender, and the Politics of the Body in American Literature* when she discusses Whitman's tendency to "merge" and "subsume" the identity of women, African Americans, and Native Americans "into the category of 'American,' a category that was implicitly white and male."²⁸ What she argues here is that although Whitman, with his heart in the right place, is trying to equalize and include all that make up our country into something that is uniquely American, that within this "merger" the marginalized lose what is unique and important to their struggle and fight for equality. You cannot sweep injustices and intolerance under the rug just by saying we are all the same. This idea of being American as part of a culture and community is important, but it also (as we discussed in the previous section) ignores many different perspectives of those too often marginalized in America. For example, students could take this idea and relate it to the Black Lives Matter movement to be contrasted with the All Lives Matter. "We are all equal and the same now" undermines the blatant racism and sexism we see in society. By using poetry, we can look beyond the single story of the American experience. In *Of Poetry and Protest*, poet Reginald Harris says, "For me, poetry bridges the gap between individuals by helping us to live inside the skin of others, and to recognize what we share with each other."²⁹

Teaching Strategies

Close Reading and Annotation

One strategy to use through the unit is close reading and annotation. When students read poems during this unit, they will always be required to annotate their poems. First each poem should be read multiple times. At the beginning of the unit, not only will they be given a list of figurative language, but I will model how to annotate a poem. We will do this together as a class using either a SmartBoard or Document camera. I will usually show my students my annotated copy of a poem scribbled over with many, many markings and I will tell them that I want their poem to bleed with annotations. One strategy I like to use is having their first reading strictly to focus on vocabulary they don't understand, looking up definitions and finding words and images that stand out to them. For the second reading, I will have students identify types of figurative language and literary techniques, to be labeled on their poem. The third time they read through, I want students to start to piece together meaning, paying particular attention to patterns that they notice. They can ask themselves: What does this metaphor mean? What sort of tone do these words and images convey? I remind students not to be fearful of wrong interpretations, but to write down ideas or words that might suggest the meaning they are arriving at.

Debate Circles

Another strategy to be used is structured argument in the form of debate circles. First, have students make a T-chart of pros and cons of the given argument. Students sit in groups of 5 and they number off 1-5. Then, the teacher would assign number 5 as the judge and 1-4 as the debaters. Student 1 gets to pick which side he or she will be arguing. Next, the teacher will give students one minute to prepare for their argument, and then one minute to argue. Apply to each round. Student 1 must use textual evidence to support their argument. Student 2 will automatically argue the opposite side, even if they don't agree with the side they are representing. Student 3 will reinforce Student 1's argument providing textual evidence. Subsequently, Student 4 will argue the other side. The judge takes notes on the arguments and decides which side wins. At the end of the 4th round, the judge indicates to the class which side wins and explains why.

Small Group Poetry Jigsaw

Small Group Poetry Jigsaw will be used quite a bit to accommodate the considerable amount of poetry the unit proposes. For example, in small groups, students will receive a poem and they will become experts on that particular poem by identifying figurative language, tone, and theme, using TPCASTT or careful annotation. Once students understand their poems, they then jigsaw into groups where they become the expert about their poem, and also listen and take notes about the other poems presented by other members in their jigsaw group.

Creative Writing

Creative Writing will be essential to this unit. As students study author's craft, I want them to use their creativity and imagination to play with language and to let their unique voice sing. Students, using the literary devices studied, will create an original poem that either celebrates or criticizes some aspect of America.

Imitation Writing

When asked about how he learned to write poetry in *Allen Verbatim*, Allen Ginsberg says, “Where do poets learn? Not in workshops like this; they learn from poets they’ve admired, trying to be like them.”³⁰ With this in mind, I want my students to stylistically imitate the poets we read through use of similar syntax and literary devices. Through this imitation, students will get a better command of language and better understanding of figurative language.

Digital Media Project Based Learning

Digital Media Project Based Learning is what I will use for my culminating activity. Students will use digital media to create a representation of the poem that they will be writing at the end of this unit. Adrienne Rich writes, “What kind of dialogue can exist between poets who are citizens of the United States and their countrypeople? What points of focus or connection exist? What could precipitate such a dialogue? The answers...are: Poetry needs to be better taught in the schools. There should be excellent, ‘exciting’ programs about poetry on television, radio. There should be poetry videos, like music videos, to bring poems to a mass audience.”³¹ Using digital media, the students’ own passion and focus of interest, and Rich’s insistence on making poetry more exciting by creating poetry videos, the resulting project will combine students’ fine-tuned analysis and writing skills with a visual product to be shared with other people.

Classroom Activities

Activities for Visions of America: Celebrations and Criticisms

Klier mentions in his article that Roy Harvey Pearce “believes that the history of American poetry could be written as the continuing discovery and rediscovery of Whitman.”³² With this idea in mind, I would want us to start with Whitman, characterizing his writing style, then as we read Guthrie, Dylan, and Ginsberg, we would compare and contrast each poet to Whitman. Using debate circles, we would end the week debating who is most Whitman-esque and why. With this activity, the key focus is on familiarizing students with the language to help analyze and characterize poetry and concentrating on using textual evidence to develop argumentation.

When teaching Whitman, I would focus on how his use of cataloguing, anaphora, imagery, diction, the length of lines, and even subject matter can be points of comparison for the other poets studied. I would have students— either for homework or classwork— make T-charts of how each poet, Guthrie, Dylan, and Ginsberg, are similar in style to Whitman and how they are different. These T-charts must have textual evidence with line numbers used. When they get to class the next day, students sit in groups of 5 and they number off 1-5. Then, the teacher would assign number 5 as the judge and 1-4 as the debaters.

Write the debatable question on the white board: “Who is most like Whitman: Guthrie, Dylan, or Ginsberg?” Student 1 gets to pick which poet is the most like Whitman. Using their T-charts and poem annotations, Student 1 will have one minute to prepare for their argument, and then one minute to argue. Student 1 must use textual evidence to support their argument. Student 2 will automatically argue for a different poet, even if they don’t agree with the side they are representing. Student 3 can must champion the one poet that hasn’t

been mentioned yet. Subsequently, Student 4 will help support student 1, 2, or 3's choice. The judge takes notes on the arguments and decides which poet comes closest to writing like Whitman. At the end of the 4th round, the judge indicates to the class which side wins and explains why. This activity not only will sharpen their argumentative skills, but will help familiarize students with literary devices which help in our year-long discussion about visions and versions of America.

Activities for Versions of America: Celebrations and Criticisms

Using giant post-it notes and their own post-it note annotations from the poems we study, we will hold a visual tug of war over America's greatness. I will create two giant post-notes using chart paper, labeled something like: "Yay America" and "Boo America" or "America's Great" and "America-- it's not perfect." Again, how you the teacher label these will be determined by your classroom environment and school community. I would post these on the wall -- somewhere easily accessible for students. As we read poems through this section of the unit, I will ask students to keep post-it annotations. I will have them write down passages from the poems they read that either sing America's praises or do not. On that post-it, along with the quotation with MLA citation, they will need to explain why it celebrates or criticizes America. When they find a quote, they will then stick the quote and explanation on the appropriate giant post-it note. You can even invite students to find poems or songs they find on their own to add to this visual tug of war. Remind them to cite their sources and use proper MLA formatting. At the end of this, I want students to see both why we celebrate and why we need also criticize our country, and ultimately reflect upon what these two actions do for our own understanding of America. Finally, students will write a reflection about the importance of celebrating and criticizing America and why we need to examine so many different visions and versions of our country.

Activities for American Visions of Conformity and Nonconformity

One activity found in *Poetry of the Place* would be to have students partner up and concentrate on the idea of American visions of conformity and nonconformity, maybe giving them a specific concept or idea to work with. One student would "write three questions along the lines of 'What is...,' or a phrase beginning with something like, 'If _____,' or 'When _____,' and the partner responds with an answer or corresponding phrase in the form of 'it is _____' or 'then _____,' however, neither knows what the other is writing."³³ For example, you might give the topic of conformity. A student might write, "What is being the same?" The student's partner might write, "It is sheep." Sometimes what they write will make sense and sometimes it will be a little nonsensical, but overall, the responses should share a common theme. This would be a fun introductory activity to get students thinking about these abstract concepts.

One last idea for a possible activity for this week would be to have students act out two poems, a technique that I was taught by Quraysh Ali Lansana during a workshop. I would block the poem for "We Real Cool," giving each student a specific line to deliver and enact. For example, if the student gets the line "We / Strike straight," I might have the student say this line while pretending to shoot pool. At the end of the poem, have students say the last line in unison with a very somber tone. After modeling how to create a performance of the poem and watching the performance of "We Real Cool," I would want students in groups to block and perform a poem from this particular week.

Activities for American Versions of Race and Gender

Have students write about a societal issue or American culture from 13 different perspectives,³⁴ using some of the stylistic choices we focused on. The goal of this activity would be to have students examine different versions of America and to have "Students [open] themselves to multiple perspectives and [find] their own

voice amongst them.”³⁵ This will really drive home the concept of why it is so important to look at different versions of America.

Culminating Activity

In McVee et al.’s study, the teachers asked themselves why not use digital media (something that teenagers are very familiar with) to help show the poet’s “use of sound, movement, spatial positioning, and images.”³⁶ With this idea in mind, I would love at the end of this unit to have my students create their version of a distinctly American poem -- either celebrating it or criticizing it -- using one of the poets we have studied and discussed during the unit as inspiration for their own creation. They must use language, literary devices, and form similar to those of poet they are inspired by. Along with composing their own poetic vision for or version of America, they will use PowerPoint, Google Slides, iMovie, or HitRecord to create a digital representation of their poem, concentrating on their own “use of sound, movement, spatial positioning, and images.”³⁷ They also need to consider the desired effect on their audience and how they want their poem to be experienced. For example, students can pick appropriate colors, fonts, music, images, etc. to help convey their desired effect on their audience and illustrate their true vision or version of America.

McVee et al.’s study concluded that through the use of digital media, students “focused on how to communicate the meaning that they wanted to experience. This moved them from fears that they would not produce a ‘correct’ interpretation.”³⁸ The authors also described how “Many students’ reflections captured a newfound sense of agency from owning a poem or from exploring language in new ways.”³⁹ This would be the desired outcome for my students. With this in mind, I would offer my students extra points on their project to post to social media or on HitRecord. This activity would not only strengthen their writing and analysis skills and add to our discussion of visions and versions of America, it would allow my students to bring in their own passions and interests and to express their unique and ever changing view of their country and their place in it.

Appendix

Standards -- Oklahoma Academic Standards for English Language Arts -- 11th grade. These standards can be easily cross-referenced to other standards.

11.1.R.3 Students will engage in collaborative discussions about appropriate topics and texts, expressing their own ideas by contributing to, building on, and questioning the ideas of others in pairs, diverse groups, and whole class settings

Throughout the many activities in this unit, one goal for my students is to master the art of group discussion and to show that through discussion we can give voice to our thoughts about America, while actively listening to other perspectives. It’s through discussion that we start forming our own thoughts and opinions.

11.1.W.2 Students will work effectively and respectfully within diverse groups, demonstrate willingness to make necessary compromises to accomplish a goal, share responsibility for collaborative work, and value individual contributions made by each group member.

This standard will be emphasized when students work in groups to analyze poems and then present to classmates. The goal is to have students take ownership and be invested in their group's analysis.

11.3.R.1 Students will evaluate the extent to which historical, cultural, and/or global perspectives affect authors' stylistic and organizational choices in grade-level literary and informational genres.

To really examine visions and versions of America, it is so important that my students look at many different perspectives as they are creating and understanding their version of America.

11.3.R.4 Students will evaluate literary devices to support interpretations of texts, including comparisons across texts: imagery tone symbolism irony

Through annotation and class discussion, students will always ask themselves how do these literary devices further author's purpose.

11.3.R.7 Students will make connections (*e.g., thematic links, literary analysis, authors' style*) between and across multiple texts and provide textual evidence to support their inferences.

This standard will be focused on when students are comparing and contrasting Whitman in style and subject matter to Guthrie, Dylan, and Ginsberg. Throughout the year, class discussions and activities will allow students to analyze different visions and versions of America and make connections among the various poems and literary works we read. This is truly the main focus of the unit.

11.7.W.2 Students will construct engaging visual and/or multimedia presentations using a variety of media forms to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence for diverse audiences.

The culminating project will allow students to create a multimedia presentation to convey the meaning and tone of the poem they write.

Resources

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