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Transforming Poetry of Witness to Performance of Protest

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“When they called him ‘rebel,’ the poet was not daunted. Poetry is rebellion.”--- Pablo Neruda

Introduction

There are five things I know for certain as a high school English teacher: 1. My students are social creatures. 2. My students are always, ALWAYS filming themselves, uploading content to TikTok and Instagram. 3. My students are also opening their eyes to the injustices of our world and in history. 4. My students are rebellious and yearn for independence. 5. My students hate, no, LOATHE poetry. With this knowledge, I created a curriculum unit that is not only going to appeal to their rebellious, performative, inquisitive, social tendencies, but also turn fact number 5 on its head, by showing them how they can use poetry as a means to rebel and raise awareness. Focusing on the poetry of witness, which brings in historical and social injustices, students will work together to turn these pieces into dramatic performances, while still doing the classic close reading, determining author’s purpose, and recognizing the function of literary devices.

Teaching Situation and Rationale

I teach at a magnet school in Tulsa, Oklahoma. It has a diverse student body, ranging from students who help support themselves and their families to those who are extremely wealthy. Specifically speaking, at Booker T. Washington High School, our current student body is 35% African American, 36% Caucasian, 3% Asian, 13% Hispanic, 9% Multi-Race, and 4% American Indian with 38% of our population on free and reduced lunch. My classroom reflects this diversity. Also, the two classes I teach, Pre-AP English II IB-MYP and AP Language and Composition and IBHL Literature I, have 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 will be written for my AP Language and Composition classes, but I feel like the information and texts will be useful for other grade levels as well.

At the beginning of the year, I need to have students learn to speak nerd – that is to know the terms and functions of literary devices. The quickest way to teach these terms and their effects is to use poetry, shorter pieces packed with imagery, sound devices, and figurative language. Although most groan when I say the word poem, starting with the genre they most dread allows me to build up their confidence quickly. To do this, when I say the word poem, I immediately follow up with the sentence: “There are no right answers with poetry.” When I first bring up the fact that we are going to analyze poetry together, I make sure that they know that there really isn’t one perfect reading of a poem. I tell them that poems are like puzzles and it is our job to piece meaning together by looking carefully at each word, image, or phrase. In *Our Difficult Sunlight*, Popoff and Lansana assert that “The point of a poem is to elicit response, not to demand a singular solution for interpretation and understanding.”¹ I agree with this statement and try to convey this to my students. I love that I can get 30 different interpretations of one poem in one class period (Now, the fact that I have 30 students in one classroom is another issue). Popoff and Lansana remind readers that “It is important to remember that a poem is first and foremost a creative work of art, not an equation.”² Students often come into my classroom scared of poetry because teachers have used a rigid way of teaching poetry – this “there is only one correct way to read this poem.” They are as scared of poetry as they are of math! Again, these authors remind us that “The need to be ‘right’ in interpreting the meaning of a poem is a learned behavior that relies on the myth that if you interpret a particular poem in some way other than the accepted or perceived meaning, it means you are just too dumb to ‘get’ poetry.”³ It is this learned behavior that I need to break at the very beginning to ensure their confidence moving forward in my class.

Students also think you just need to read a poem once and you are supposed to magically get the meaning. I remind students that this is not the case. Poems need to be read over and over again, aloud, in different voices, with others – poetry is social at its core, just like them. This is why this unit brings in collaboration and performance, whole class and small group, as well. In “Talking to, Talking about, Talking with: Language Arts Students in Conversation with Poetic Texts,” Toby Emert reminds us, “Activities that encourage a collaborative approach, both in terms of students working together in imaginative ways to deepen their understanding of the texts and in terms of interacting with the poems dialogically in an effort to deepen their relationships with the texts, offer unexpected learning rewards.”⁴ This is an important aim of my curriculum unit.

Transforming Poetry into Performance

Poetry should not be an act of isolation. It should not be read in a room, alone, silently, and kept there inside the pages of a book. Analysis of poetry should not just be the questions at the end of a textbook where, again, you are alone and silent. If it is explored this way, there are so many missed opportunities that poems have to offer. When read silently and alone, you miss out on the sound and power a poem can have. By bringing in performance, what some teachers call dramatic readings, reader’s theater, or choral reading, not only are you assuring your students are actually reading the assigned text, but bringing in a level of engagement that pairs poetry with excitement. This technique of performance will also allow students to hone in on the author’s purpose and the effects literary devices have on readers in a very hands-on way, every English teacher’s dream and aligns with standards and the AP Language and Composition goals.

Regarding using drama while teaching poetry, Ferguson notes “Research shows that, compared with other activities, dramatic activities can be more effective for exploring poetry and can result in higher comprehension.”⁵ Because students are thinking about poems as dramatic expression, they will stop and really think about the words and images used rather than rushing through their annotations. Ferguson also makes the point that “to perform a poem, a student must use critical thinking and comprehension skills such

as activating prior knowledge, questioning, visualizing, inferencing, summarizing and synthesizing to explore both the literal and the unsaid within a poem”⁶ By using dramatic performance to transform poetry, students are hitting major standards in the ELA classroom. Research also supports “that readers who can apply their understanding of what they read by reinventing it in alternative formats signal their command of the material.”⁷ Performance offers an opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding of the poem in a novel way compared to, say, writing an essay about it. This alone should excite students.

In a world of cell phones and social media, it is imperative that teachers approach poetry in different ways. Poetry as embodied performance affects our aesthetic response. This performance creates its own experience and completes the human expression of poetry. Teachers should use performance to show how it helps the creator make meaning, bringing their own life experience. Performance creates community. Performance is play. This ability to play with and dramatize poetry will create a sense of freedom from the humdrum of the conventional high school English classroom.

Unit Content

This will be a two-week long unit that will emphasize close reading of poetry of witness through annotation and performance. I will use the information about “Strange Fruit” as an introductory activity about poetry and performance. After that, I will give students information about poetry of witness. Then, using Pablo Neruda’s “I’m Explaining a Few Things” as an anchor text for poetry of witness, we will analyze and conduct a dramatic reading as a class before students choose their own poem of witness and create their own performances.

The History of “Strange Fruit” as Poem and Performance

Before introducing students to poetry of witness and dramatic performance, I want to hook my high schoolers by showing them how poetry can be enhanced by performance. Without telling students what this unit is about, I will pass out the poem “Strange Fruit” by Abel Meeropol. This poem was written by a white Jewish man from the Bronx in 1937. Meeropol was a high school teacher, a communist, and a civil rights activist.⁸ According to *Biography.com*, “Meeropol came across a 1930 photo that captured the lynching of two Black men in Indiana. The visceral image haunted him for days and prompted him to put pen to paper.”⁹

After our initial analysis of the poem, I will give students the connection of this poem to famous singer Billie Holiday. Meeropol set his poem to music and gave it to a New York City nightclub owner who then passed the song on to Billie Holiday. She was intrigued by the piece “not only because she was a Black American but also because the song reminded her of her father, who died at 39 from a fatal lung disorder, after being turned away from a hospital because he was a Black man.”¹⁰ While many people loved the song, it angered others. Holiday sang this song to inform and protest against the injustices that were happening in the South. She said, “I have to keep singing it, not only because people ask for it, but because 20 years after Pop died, the things that killed him are still happening in the South.”¹¹ Her performance as protest angered one person in particular - Harry Anslinger, the commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. He made it his personal mission to stop Holiday, and “Knowing that Holiday was a drug user, he had some of his men frame her by selling her heroin. When she was caught using the drug, she was thrown into prison for the next year and a half.”¹² After she was released, she continued to sing in sold out venues like Carnegie Hall, although she

continued to struggle with drug use. The video that I plan on showing students is of a 1959 performance. You might tell students that soon after this performance, Holiday checked herself into a New York hospital, and “still bent on ruining the singer, Anslinger had his men go to the hospital and handcuff her to her bed. Although Holiday had been showing gradual signs of recovery, Anslinger's men forbid doctors to offer her further treatment. She died within days.”¹³

Using Poetry of Witness

For this unit, students will focus on the poetry of witness. Poetry of witness was first defined by Carolyn Forché in 1993 in her introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. According to “The Poet’s Toolbox: What is Poetry of Witness?,” Forché “ defines the poetry of witness as inhabiting the social sphere, a space between the personal and political”¹⁴ and which describes firsthand accounts of extreme violence, like torture and warfare. Williams goes on to argue that poetry of witness can now include secondhand accounts such as those witnessed from a distance through channels such as “news reports, images, interviews, or other documents.”¹⁵ I would like to add on to this definition of poetry of witness as well by including witnessing a time, place, and culture, not in an extremity like war, but in an extremity like poverty or other hardships. In “Poetry, Poetic Inquiry and Rwanda Engaging with the Lives of Others Self, Audience, and Activism: Poetry of Witness,” Laura Apol refers to Nadine Gordimer’s definition of witness literature: “As Gordimer puts it, writers of witness literature provide ‘continuing witness to the state of existence of those who suffered, so that it becomes part of [the reader’s] consciousness for all time.’”¹⁶

By bringing poetry of witness into the high school English classroom, we are setting students up for empathy for cultural and world events and showing students the power of language. Apol describes that “by deconstructing the boundary between personal and political, poetry of witness speaks with excruciating emotional resonance and, in the process, makes the reader or listener a witness as well.”¹⁷ Poetry of witness is essentially created to make people aware, to invite empathy, and ultimately, “invokes an ethical stance, a way of entering and learning the world of another with honor and respect.”¹⁸ These ideas are cornerstones for my classroom – a place to learn, listen to, and respect different perspectives and points of view – to feel for and relate to others. Although Popoff and Lansana are writing about the importance of bringing in diverse voices/ poets in the classroom and not of poetry of witness specifically, they write, “the ultimate goal is that young people will strengthen their sense of oneness and community, rather than fearing differences” and will “ honor[] the voices of others.”¹⁹ This is what focusing on poetry of witness can do for students.

Visually or kinesthetically dramatizing these poems of witness will not only bring poems off the page of a book but allow students to understand and creatively showcase the awareness the poet wants to bring to society. As Martin and Zox-Weaver end their essay, they argue that “Poetry is a way of transforming the world, of integrating shards and mapping meaning, of making things happen.”²⁰ So, why not show students the true power of words when bearing witness? By doing this, teachers carve a path for students that show how they can turn words into pieces of activism and awareness, which will hopefully create change. Popoff and Lansana echo this idea when they write about the importance of teachers “challenging [students] to find ways to create change. It is in our hands to create this imperative, to open young eyes to their own relevance and cast concrete steps to take in building the kind of world in which they and their children wish to live.”²¹

Historical Context of Neruda's “I’m Explaining a Few Things”

After explaining the definition and importance of poetry of witness, I will present my students with Pablo

Neruda's "I'm Explaining a Few Things." As I pass out the poem, I will give students the historical context. A Chilean poet, Neruda moved to a small suburb called Guernica outside of Madrid. This poem "speaks of the dilemmas that its author faced when posted as Consul to Madrid in the mid-1930s. Neruda had not been particularly political until then but, with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, he abandoned his diplomatic neutrality and sided with the Republicans."²² In the context of the Spanish Civil War, Republicans were the left-wing group of communists, socialists, and anarchists.²³ The Republicans were against the Nationalists. According to a Pablo Neruda teaching guide, "Nationalists were made up of military leaders, segments of the Roman Catholic Church, groups that wanted Spain to become a monarchy again, and fascists."²⁴ In 1936, Generalissimo Francisco Franco staged a right-winged, fascist revolt and began the onset of the Spanish Civil War.

During this time, Hitler was rising in power. Most students at this age have a basic understanding of Hitler wanting to exterminate the Jewish race, among other "race poisoners." However, depending on your students, you might review this piece of information. Adding to that knowledge, teachers should point to the history of Moors in Spain. Angela Chamblee notes that "The Moors were an African people who invaded and conquered Spain. They stayed in Spain for 800 years and left a lot of African DNA there too."²⁵ Because of this history and the potential of the contamination of Hitler's Aryan race, Hitler wanted to do an experiment called "saturation bombing" on Spain. Franco agreed to this attack on Guernica, this bombing of his own people, "to break the spirited Basque resistance to Nationalist forces."²⁶ Chamblee describes how in 1937 "Guernica was bombed non-stop from 4:30 p.m. until approximately 6:45 p.m. on April 26. Guernica was just a small little town. There was no military importance or advantage to be gained by bombing it."²⁷ Approximately 1500 people were killed in this small market town that was used as a "testing ground for a new Nazi military tactic - blanket-bombing a civilian population to demoralize the enemy."²⁸ The destruction shocked Europe. It was this horrific event that Neruda was responding to in his poem "I'm Explaining a Few Things."

As one can see, this particular poem is one of witness and "fulfills the function of a historical memory."²⁹ Neruda's poem of witness "hold[s] on to faint voices and perspectives that may otherwise have vanished into the dark holes of historical narratives."³⁰ This idea shows the importance of this poem of witness, first, as an act of resistance and protest to the horrendous actions of Franco and his saturation bombing and, second, as a preservation of cultural and historical memory. What I am particularly interested in pointing out to students is how students can use poems of witness and protest from the past to make commentary about modern society or point out injustices that are still happening in our world. As a poet turned activist, Neruda believed that poetry "had 'to go out into the street, to take part in this or that combat'. The poet did not shy away from this task, did not mind being branded as subversive."³¹ Poetry of witness does this - it informs, it feels, it rebels.

Analysis of Neruda's "I'm Explaining a Few Things"

Again, Neruda wrote "I'm Explaining a Few Things" in response to the saturation bombing of a town he used to live in. At the beginning of the poem, Neruda muses why he does not write poetry about nature anymore, and then he declares to readers that he will tell us why. Ironically, he begins describing the beauty of the bustling market town of Guernica that Neruda paints. He uses the imagery of "bells / and clocks and trees,"³² grounding us in a time and place. In an act of foreshadowing, Neruda begins by juxtaposing the innocent imagery of his "house of flowers,"³³ noting "its dogs and children"³⁴ with the allusions to "Neruda's close friend Federico Garcia Lorca, one of Spain's foremost poets, [who] was assassinated by Franco's forces. Two

others, Rafael Alberti and Miguel Hernandez, were members of the Communist Party.”³⁵ He first calls on Rafael and Hernandez as witnesses to the Federico who is “from under the ground / where the light of June drowned flowers in your mouth,”³⁶ alluding to Lorca’s untimely death at the hands of the Nationalists. This reference to Lorca’s grave highlighted by the image of “drowned flowers in your mouth” foreshadows the many deaths to come from Franco’s saturation bombing of innocent people. These allusions most likely will be overlooked by students, but are important to point out as they continue piece together meaning from this poem of witness.

Neruda then paints an image of a bustling marketplace by using such words and phrases as “merchandises,”³⁷ “palpitating bread,”³⁸ “hake,”³⁹ “stacked-up fish,”⁴⁰ “frenzied ivory of potatoes,”⁴¹ and “wave on wave of tomatoes.”⁴² Readers get a sense of the liveliness of this town in the beautiful chaos of the exchanging of goods.

The big shift of the poem begins when Neruda writes, “And one morning all that was burning.”⁴³ Here, the imagery of the innocent town changes abruptly to the catastrophic and tragic imagery of the bombing. The use of the word “devouring”⁴⁴ to describe what the bombs and guns are doing to the innocent people of Guernica is an example of weighty personification. Neruda writes, “and from then on fire, / gunpowder from then on, / and from then on blood.”⁴⁵ The repetition and placement of “from then on” in these three consecutive lines mirror the continuous, non-stop bombing that Franco inflicted on this market town and the use of polysyndeton highlights the relentless effects of this attack: fire, gunpowder, blood.

After those lines, students should point out the anaphora of “Bandits with.”⁴⁶ First, have students look up the meaning of “bandit.” They should see three definitions as someone who robs, who lives by plunder, and also an enemy plane. In this scenario, the word bandit makes sense with all three meanings. This use of anaphora calls our attention to the end of these three consecutive lines: “planes and Moors,”⁴⁷ referring to the Germans, Italians, and North African Colonial soldiers flying those planes, “finger-rings and duchesses,”⁴⁸ referring to monarchist aristocracy, and then “black friars spattering blessings,”⁴⁹ referring to the Catholic church. All of these images are defining the enemy. Neruda then juxtaposes the images of enemy with what the enemy is doing – killing children, the vilest deed and the saddest consequence of this “experiment.” This juxtaposition is jolting after the use of the lull of the anaphora when he writes that these bandits “came through the sky to kill children.”⁵⁰ Neruda uses three more images to discuss the people who created this destruction, calling them “Jackals,”⁵¹ “stones,”⁵² and “vipers.”⁵³ Readers should come to the conclusion that jackals represent cunning and treachery, stones embody unemotional coldness, and that vipers connote spitefulness and disloyalty.

After the condemnation of the horrible actions and calling out the enemy using metaphor, Neruda finally calls them by name, not metaphor: “Traacherous / generals.”⁵⁴ Then he threatens them with haunting images and alarming personification, telling them that their actions will have consequences: “and from every dead child a rifle with eyes, / and from every crime bullets are born / which will one day find /the bull's eye of your hearts.”⁵⁵

When we get towards the end of the poem, Neruda references his “dead house”⁵⁶ and that “from every house burning metal flows / instead of flowers.”⁵⁷ This makes the reader remember the beginning beauty of houses and flowers which is a stark contrast to what he shows now - complete and utter destruction of that beautiful suburban town. He ends the poem the same way he started it- by repeating the phrase “And you will ask,”⁵⁸ questioning why does he not write pretty little poetry anymore. His repeated answer: “Come and see the

blood on the streets.”⁵⁹ The monosyllabic use of words and imagery of blood make a powerful statement of the nonsensical destruction of innocent people. As readers, you cannot turn your head away from this image. We are witness to this violence.

Teaching Strategies

Annotations

When having students read a poem, I always give them a physical copy of the poem that they can mark-up. Because my students always side-eye me when I ask for annotations, I have learned to provide them with specific guidelines to do this. First, I have students circle words they don't know and then define them off to the margins. Next, I have them underline or highlight words or images that interest them for any reason. Off to the side of those unique words and images, write a feeling or vibe you get from it. This does not have to be academic and often can be as simple as writing down if the word or image is positive or negative. I have them box any patterns or repetition they see. Again out to the side, have them guess as to why that pattern is there or why something is being repeated. Then I have students put stars next to anything that confuses them or they don't understand. And, no, they can't star the whole poem. Finally, I have students write down three connections to their own lives – this really can be anything– and three questions they have specifically about the poem or text. This strategy, although commonly used in English classrooms, will be necessary for navigating our whole-class dramatic reading of “I’m Explaining a Few Things,” and their final project.

Text Connections: Author, Self, and World

This strategy is a new twist on a tried-and-true strategy. The change I am making to this is small, but will be important in terms of connection to poems of witness. So instead of a text-to-text connection where students draw parallels between two texts, I want students to connect the text- to-author, doing a little informal research about the author and what they are writing about and why, getting students to think about the author's purpose. Then, they will move on to the classic text-to-self concept which is where this “connection ties the ideas in a text to a student’s own life, ideas, and experiences.”⁶⁰ Finally, students then move on to text-to-world. This is where students make larger connections from the text to world events – past, present, and future. Connecting the text to these three deeper levels will not only help with comprehension, but will be a means for understanding the author's purpose and historical context. This strategy will also create a pathway for students to identify with a text personally and then explore the impact a text has on the world.

Dramatic Reading Script Notations

This strategy can be used as a whole-class activity or a small-group activity. Either giving students a choice in a poem or providing them with just one, have students figure out how to dramatically read this poem. Students should first read the poem silently, marking any interesting imagery or particular feelings they are getting from the poem which could be combined with the annotation strategy mentioned above. Next, they should read it aloud, taking turns reading lines. Finally, students should feel like directors of a play, reading it for a third time and thinking about assigning voices or parts. When dividing up the poem in voices, students should pay attention to the punctuation of the poem and which lines make sense to be read by one voice. According to “Easy Ways to Use Performance Poetry in ELA,” you should have students look to add these

directives: volume change, indicated by arrows up ↑ or down ↓, pace change- fast forward >>/ rewind symbols <

Classroom Activities

Introduction Activity: Enhancing Poetry Through Performance

As a hook for this unit and before I delve into the subject matter, I will use the poem and song of “Strange Fruit” to show my students how performance can enhance poetry and be used as a form of protest. I will give students the background information on Abel Meeropol mentioned earlier in this unit and pass out a copy of the poem. Together, we will read and I will model the annotation strategy I want my students to use. While reading and discussing, I will make sure students note a few important elements in this poem. Obviously, students will know that this poem is an extended metaphor about lynching, comparing bodies hanging from a tree to strange fruit. To help students get more familiar with literary devices, teachers may want to point out the more unfamiliar ones, while also highlighting meaning and effect. Teachers should call students’ attention to the use of juxtaposition with the horrific next to the beautiful. To do this, teachers should have students create a T-chart of positive and negative imagery. Once they do this, students should visually see that each couplet in the poem has a tension of the positive and negative created by this juxtaposition, images placed side-by-side. For example, in the second stanza, the author has the image of a sweet smelling magnolia tree placed next to the “smell of burnin’ flesh.”⁶² This juxtaposition comments on how the South is masking these horrible events and racism with its “Southern charm.” Since this is an opening activity, I will not spend a ton of time on analysis. I am using this primarily as a way to draw students into the concept of poetry and the power of performance.

After you have spent a little with the poem, it is time to introduce students to Billie Holiday and her performance. It is important that you give students the background information mentioned earlier in this unit. As students watch this 1959 performance, have them write down notes about what Holiday brings to the poem’s meaning. Write down these questions on the board and have students answer them after watching the video: Is there something about Billie Holiday’s performance that changes our aesthetic response? How does Holiday improve our understanding of the poem? What are some words or bodily/ facial expressions that stood out to you?

Holiday’s facial expressions and intonations and prosody take this from a powerful poem to an obvious form of protest by showing her disgust with the imagery of lynching and racism, the audience feeling her pain. I foresee students commenting on the juxtaposition of the softly and sadly spoken “gallant South” next to the drawn out “bulgin’” and the way she looks like she is struggling to get the image of “twisted mouth” out. Students might also point out the way Holiday enunciates the end of the words “pluck” and “suck” and viewers and listeners can get a sense of her anger. She ends the song with her voice mimicking the word “drop” and uses the last word of the poem “crop” which sounds like a cry, bringing out the anguish of the imagery. Her sadness and anger are palpable in this performance. Students will experience what performance can do for poetry- make its message louder, and unearth meanings latent in the text.

Annotation of Neruda’s “I’m Explaining a Few Things”

After explaining the historical context and students taking notes on this, next students will annotate the poem, using the annotation strategy above. If that strategy proves too much or if your students are not at that level, I have students highlight or underline words, phrases, and images that interest them and write their reaction out to the side. Most importantly, I have them define words that they don't know in the margins of the page. After they annotate and in our next class period, we will discuss what students found. As you navigate this poem and start to piece together meaning with students, there are a few points I would make with your students if they do not come up through their own observations which can be found in the analysis section of this unit. This poem is replete with figurative language, repetition, powerful imagery, and emotional diction and will yield a wealth of analysis with the aid of careful annotation. As we discuss this poem, students will add to their annotations what we discuss as a class, adding to their examples of literary devices and effects. Students will be able to use this poem's annotations as a guide for when they are doing their own analysis for their chosen poem of witness in the final project for this unit.

Dramatic Reading of Neruda's "I'm Explaining a Few Things"

After exploring the words, images, and figurative language in "I'm Explaining a Few Things," I will offer a dramatic reading of the poem. In honor of Neruda and his views of poetry as rebellion, it should be mentioned that "Political poetry, Neruda stresses, has to be oral poetry, poetry that is read aloud in town squares, trenches and at the dinner tables, poetry that sticks to the mind and carries with it the force of language to convince and convert."⁶³ This dramatic reading will serve as one of the possibilities for this unit's culminating activity and model for students how to turn words on a page into an impactful performance which will enhance the poem's meaning, turning it into a form of protest.

First, I will pass out another copy of the poem and put them into groups of approximately 5. There are six clear sections of the poem. Group one will have lines 1-9, Group two will have lines 10-23, group three will have lines 24-38, group four will have lines 39-51 and group five will have lines 52-62, and group six will have lines 63-78. They should still have their annotated copy of their poems as well to use as notes to create their script. Each person in the group will have to read or read in unison. Giving them the instructions from the dramatic reading notation script strategy, I will have students follow that protocol explained above. It may be a good example to write down possibilities on what the notations could look like. They can have the right half of the class read a line in unison or the left half, only girls read, only boys read, or all read. They can give directions such as how to read using words like quietly, slowly, loudly. Once they have finalized their script, groups should choose one person to be their main director.

While the groups are now practicing their lines, all group directors should bring their scripts and put the poem together while making any changes to make all parts cohesive. Teachers can also make suggestions if it looks like they need a little direction. For example, the following lines are powerful when read in certain ways: "**ALL:** Brother, my brother! - line 23, **ALL:** and from then on blood. / **ALL QUIETLY:** Bandits with planes and Moors, / **ALL SLIGHTLY LOUDER:** bandits with finger-rings and duchesses, / **ALL EVEN LOUDER:** bandits with black friars spattering blessings / **ALL LOUD:** came through the sky to kill children- lines 45-49, **ALL:** look at broken Spain:- line 62, and finally **ALL (SLOWER BUT POWERFUL):** Come and see /The blood in the streets - lines 75-76."⁶⁴

After the six groups make their script for their part of the poem, teachers then can help put it all together in one document and make copies for the class. Their homework will be to practice their lines and to make sure they know how to pronounce all the words. For the next class period, you will conduct their dramatic reading. It would be fun for teachers to record each class's reading and then post all of the readings so other classes

can see the different interpretations.

Poetic Parados

After students use the curated list or Google, should they so choose, students will create a Poetic Parados. Inform students that parados is a word used in Greek Theater. Parados is the first song performed by the Chorus to provide commentary and background information in order to understand the play. So essentially I want students to write an opening statement to provide a rationale for their poem of witness and their performance. This will be read aloud before they present their final project.

Using the author, self, world text connection strategy, students will connect to their poem on these three levels. For the author connection, have students answer this question: How is this a poem of witness, who wrote it, and what is it witnessing? To connect to self, students should answer: What specifically drew you to this particular poem and why? Have students explain how their performance intends to enhance the original work; what is it trying to do that the words on the page cannot and why should the world care? This will provide a world connection. This can be written as a short paragraph and read before the performance.

Culminating Activity: Poem of Witness Transformed

At the end of this unit and after studying and dramatizing Neruda's poem of witness, I want my students to choose a poem of witness and transform it into a performance of protest. The poems they choose will be ones that speak to them and ones that witness an event or comment on a time and place in a social way. By giving students choice, they will take ownership of the social commentary and ultimately, give them ownership of creating awareness on the cause or event being witnessed. Because we will have creatively read and performed a poem of witness as a class, they will now be charged with creating their own interpretation of a poem of witness of their choice. Students should be in groups of 2-4 for this final project. Teachers can be flexible if a student wants to work alone.

Teachers may want to provide examples. In the article, "Easy Ways to Use Performance Poetry in ELA," there are videos of dramatic performances of performers such as Sarah Kay and Phil Kaye and William Nu'utupu Giles and Travis T.⁶⁵ Teachers may want to show Claudia Rankine's "Stop and Frisk," or "Multitudes," a video poem that brings an interesting read to Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Teachers can find these resources through a simple Google search. This will show students different ways they can be creative. I plan on posting these examples on Canvas, noting these are examples of dramatic performances, not examples of poetry of witness. However, each example shows the power of performance.

After they have chosen their poem, they will write a rationale as to why they chose to interpret this poem in particular, as seen in the Poetic Parados activity. They will either perform (live or recorded) or create an artistic video interpretation, combining sound and image. Teachers may even just accept an audio recording. These performances will empower my students to give voice to the things they care about in a way that uses their strengths and feeds their rebellious, passionate, independent, social spirits. In Neruda's words, poetry is rebellion. Performance poetry is a rebellious, revolutionary act that can galvanize change.

Appendix

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

11.1.S.1 Students will work effectively and respectfully in diverse groups by showing willingness to make necessary compromises to accomplish a goal, sharing responsibility for collaborative work, and recognizing individual contributions. Within their small groups for both our class dramatic reading of “I’m Explaining a Few Things” and their chosen poem of witness, they will have to work together to create a powerful performance.

11.1.S.2 Students will follow agreed-upon rules as they engage in collaborative discussions about what they are reading and writing, expressing their own ideas clearly, building on the ideas of others, and respectfully disagreeing when necessary in pairs, diverse groups, and whole-class settings. While in small groups, students will discuss the dramatic reading of their section of “I’m Explaining a Few Things” and their chosen poem. They will also use the dramatic reading script notation protocol to successfully navigate a small group setting.

11.1.S.3 Students will conduct formal and informal presentations in a variety of contexts supporting their message with evidence and using verbal and nonverbal cues. Students are doing a whole class presentation with “I’m Explaining a Few Things” and a group presentation with their chosen poem of witness performance.

11.3.R.1 Students will analyze the extent to which historical, cultural, and/or global perspectives affect authors’ stylistic choices in grade-level literary and informational texts. For every poem we read in class and with the poem they choose for their project, students will have to research and analyze the historical context as that helps determine the author’s purpose.

11.3.R.4 Students will evaluate how literary devices impact theme, mood, and/or tone, using textual evidence. Students will use annotations and class discussion in order to analyze the literary devices within “Strange Fruit” and “I’m Explaining a Few Things”

11.4.R.2 Students will use context clues, connotation, and denotation to determine or clarify the meaning of words or distinguish among multiple-meaning words. When students read “Strange Fruit” and “I’m Explaining a Few Things,” they will be using context clues, connotation and denotation to examine how words contribute to a poem’s overall meaning.

11.7.R Students will analyze and evaluate the techniques used in a variety of multimodal content and how they contribute to meaning. This will be met during our introductory activity where students will compare the poem of “Strange Fruit” with Billie Holiday’s performance, focusing on the question of how her performance enhances the poem’s meaning.

11.7.W Students will create engaging multimodal content that intentionally enhances understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence for diverse audiences. The culmination activity will meet this standard as they are creating dramatic performances of poetry of witness.

Resources

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Notes

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7. Emert, Toby. "Talking to, Talking about, Talking with: Language Arts Students in Conversation with Poetic Texts," 68.
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42. Ibid., 38.
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