5.

Poetry and Paintings: Teaching Mood, Metaphor, and Pattern Through a Comparative Study

Jane K. Marshall

"Poetry and Paintings: A Comparative Study" is the result of my first experience with the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. In retrospect, and two units later, I continue to regard this initial experience as a particularly memorable and important one.

The process of the seminar, and the seminar leader in particular, enabled me to define roles I was grappling with as a second-year teacher. There is an intangible growing period all beginning teachers must experience; at this point we test and, presumably, come to understand our roles as teachers, students, writers, and creators. I believe many teachers would agree that the profession demands that we function as leaders while we continue to explore our fields. It also becomes apparent that learning to articulate creative impulses generates an enthusiasm that ultimately ignites even the most passive of classes. In short, all of the roles are essential, and all must be learned.

Professor Jules Prown and the experience of our seminar on "Art, Artifacts, and Material Culture" allowed me to think through and practice all of the aforementioned facets of the teaching experience. At times, the members of the seminar became students and were able to enjoy the expertise of a master teacher, Prown. At other times, the roles were reversed, as the seminar leader encouraged us to teach our units to the seminar. Although the units were diverse, and our interests varied, the content of the seminar served all of its members. I, for example, learned a method of seeing and/or reading paintings. This method is invaluable in the teaching of my unit, and has been passed on to my students.

In thinking back to this first experience as a Fellow of the Teachers Institute, I particularly remember the development of a small idea into a viable teaching unit, emerging from conversations with Professor Prown and my colleagues; we regard Jules Prown as the consummate teacher.

The intangible process of the dialogue, which was very much alive in this seminar, brought forth an excitement that continues to encourage us all.

Poetry is perhaps the most difficult of all literary forms to teach. Primarily due to a lack of exposure, children often view poetry as a precocious, trumped-up, and, therefore, ingenuine form of writing. The teacher becomes aware all too quickly that poetry is, in fact, an alien mode of expression for many. Her primary objective in teaching the genre, then, is to make poetry somehow accessible to her students.

Traditionally the vocabulary of poetry has been taught in a vacuum. That is, alien words are presented in a didactic manner which inevitably destroys the student's spontaneous emotional reaction or discovery that is prerequisite to enjoying and understanding poetry. The teacher faces a dilemma. She cannot overlook the vocabulary of poetry. An awareness of the devices which define the genre is essential. Yet individual "discoveries" of poetic devices, given a class size of twenty, are difficult. Teachers of large groups cannot consistently and effectively engage students in a dialogue of sharing and discovery when introducing something new. Often teachers have no idea from what framework the individual student is starting. In engaging this new or alien form of writing, poetry, the class needs a unifying experience, a common denominator that will invite reaction, discussion, and, finally, discovery.

It stands to reason that poetry, which is generally ignored by today's visual and auditory oriented society, could be more easily approached, understood, and judged if it were introduced through a natural coupling with a visual or auditory mode of expression. Teachers often introduce poetry through popular song lyrics. This provides students with a familiar framework that facilitates an introduction to the genre of poetry.

This unit proposes that a visual mode of expression can also be employed effectively when approaching poetry. Poems and paintings lend themselves quite naturally to comparative study, for the artist in both cases "sees" the world; observation of detail, and the enjoyment of the meaning of detail, are inherent characteristics of the process of poet and artist alike.

Paintings, a familiar mode of expression, allow students an emotional reaction, where poetry often does not. Classroom experience indicates that individual responses to paintings are readily forthcoming and real; they are fresh, honest, and natural. This, then, is where the learning process can begin.

Once a student has reacted emotionally to a painting, the next level of understanding may be approached: the why or how of the artist. It is at this point that vocabulary, which is comparable to that used for poetry, is introduced. To put it simply, the teacher begins with paintings, and trans-

fers the beginnings of understanding of this familiar mode of expression to the alien expression, poetry.

This unit is created with a ninth-grade advanced English class in mind; it was in such a class that initial experiments were conducted, and met with some success. Presumably this method could be modified for use with other levels and grades.

A comparative vocabulary for poetry and paintings has been developed. Topics for lesson plans for the concurrent study of paintings and poetry deal with such terms as: mood, metaphor and symbol, pattern. Terms are introduced through the visual mode of expression, and then transferred to the written. Student understanding of each idea should be such that, as a final step, the student becomes artist-poet. That is, students can use these devices for the creation of their own forms of expression, visual and written. These art forms are the result of their intellectual and emotional involvement with ideas and discoveries associated with paintings and poetry.

Mood

The beginnings of my ideas for a curriculum unit comparing poetry and paintings occurred with preliminary classroom discussions focused on mood. Together, my students and I considered the impact of color and form as regards emotional reaction to visual experience. We learned to articulate the process through which the artist is able to convey feeling, and, later, were able to see a similar process at work in poetry. Much of this section of the unit is geared to individual reaction and discovery, as the summary of my lesson plans to follow indicates.

Initially, students were asked to list words which projected various feelings and to label colors as indicative of specific moods. This exercise served to introduce the analytical stance we would have to assume later in the unit. Students were then shown paintings and asked to articulate their emotional responses. Invariably, the question of color and form emerged. When poetry was introduced, students were able to see a similar process at work, and noted the impact of imagery and metaphor. Early on, a "hands on" project was assigned. Students were asked to depict a mood both visually and in writing. This creative and imitative process served to generate excitement, and led to a more provocative understanding of the idea of mood.

At this point, students were interested in considering one color, blue. We were able to discuss various connotations associated with the color blue which led quite naturally to analyses of paintings from Picasso's blue period as well as to discussions of "The Blues" in music. Once again,

students were asked to create visual and written projects; they easily wrote poetry and sketched drawings entitled "The Blues." Students appeared to have accepted the rhythm of the unit, and we were ready to take the next step.

Metaphor and Symbol

While considering the presentation of the comparative study of metaphor and symbol in poetry and paintings, I soon realized that some distinction would have to be made between what is meant by metaphor and what constitutes a symbol. In my mind, metaphor denotes an *ongoing* comparison between two unlike objects which have at least one characteristic in common. One object defines a quality of the other. Symbol, on the other hand, is that which *stands for* an emotion, thought, or even a philosophy. In a sense, metaphors become symbols, and yet they are not always symbols. Symbols are usually generated from metaphors, but the original meaning of the metaphor may be lost as the symbol begins to speak only for itself in the mind of readers or observers. I have endeavored to portray the process of this transition specifically in Tennyson's poem, "The Eagle," as compared with the American eagle as a visual symbol of the United States.

The next stumbling block I encountered was getting over the idea that symbols are more associated with paintings while metaphors are reserved for poetry. One quickly admits that poetry makes great use of symbols through allusions which make metaphors come alive in many instances. But how do metaphors work in art? The answer was to be found in E. H. Gombrich's discussion in *Art and Illusion** of Picasso's "Baboon and Young." Picasso created a bronze statue from a toy car; he was able to see a baboon's face in this toy car, and created a metaphor, or a new way of seeing the baboon, the car and the world around us. A formal delineation of the difference between metaphor and symbol is not included in the lessons which follow. Instead differences are implied through a study of the process of transition and/or the way metaphor and symbol work together.

Teaching this aspect of the unit is somewhat different from the previous one on "mood" in terms of strategy. Vocabulary is introduced earlier. The method remains intact, however, as symbol is quickly related to visual images for purposes of understanding. Students become artist-poets ear-

*E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 104.

lier, rather than as a culmination; active participation is an effective way to engage students in striving to grasp this very important and rather complicated concept. The following provides a brief summary of lessons and activities for this section.

Students are initially introduced to the concept of symbol through simple, readily understandable, familiar examples. Psychological, religious, and philosophical symbols are introduced. The Star of David, for example, is analyzed. Students are asked to think of symbols as well as to devise symbols or metaphors of their own. Two paintings, rich in symbolism, are then presented. Students, having already formulated a basic understanding of the term, symbol, are led through an informal analysis of each painting that leads to discovery of symbolism as it relates to theme. They are then ready to note symbols and metaphors in poetry. A poem is introduced along with a brief explanation of the terms simile and metaphor. Students are asked to comment on the mood and theme of the work informally, through questions. They are also expected to see symbols as they are often, in this particular work, related through comparisons or metaphors. An additional comparison of poetry and painting follows which emphasizes the transitions of metaphors and symbols. Finally, writing and artistic "exercises" are included which endeavor to enhance comprehension of these concepts and how they work, as well as to trigger creative impulses in students. These exercises need not come at the end of this section of the unit, but might be introduced at various points, depending on class needs.

A sample lesson plan is included here to provide the reader with a closer view of the strategy described above. As mentioned, I have chosen the comparison of Tennyson's poem, "The Eagle," with a painting of the American eagle. Together these works project the transitions of metaphors and symbols.

The Eagle
by Alfred Lord Tennyson

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Students are initially given an untitled version of the poem. They are expected to read closely to unravel clues and comprehend the metaphor

"crooked hands" and simile, "like a thunderbolt." They are then shown a painting of an eagle, and are encouraged to ascertain why the eagle was chosen as a symbol of the United States. They are asked to note metaphors that can be found within the symbol itself. This enables students to see qualities in the eagle that are comparable to qualities which the nation hopes to have. The discussion covers, for example, the strength of a nation as compared to the strength of an eagle's wings, the sharp eyes to a country with vision, and the largeness of the bird as compared with the largeness of the country, both physically and influentially. Students are then asked to return to the poem. They are encouraged to articulate Tennyson's vision of the eagle, as well as answer the question: how did Tennyson "paint his picture" of the eagle?

Pattern

The term, pattern, encompasses both structure and rhythm. The structure or symmetry of a tree produces a pattern; the rhythm of waves, too, is a pattern. It is pattern that enables us to comprehend the world outside of ourselves. Visual symmetry and rhythmic schema make us feel comfortable and in control. Pattern, in a sense, dominates our world.

This discussion of pattern in poetry and paintings is incomplete because I have been unable to capture all of the nuances of comparing structure and rhythm. In a sense, pattern cannot be tied down. Even in its repetitions of old themes, it always emerges in a different way; it is invariably connected with other components in each artistic expression, be it poetry or painting. Thus, Robert P. Tristam Coffin's use of the couplet scheme in "The Secret Heart" denotes completion, wholeness, and peace, qualities which are encompassed in the theme of the poem. W. H. Davies' use of the couplet scheme in "Leisure," on the other hand, denotes, in its repetitive quality, a sense of time passing; this is the central issue of that poem's theme. Just as rhythms and structures of nature never cease to be different given a different frame of reference, so, too, pattern in poetry and paintings is subject to the intention of the poet and artist, and, thereby, projects different meanings.

The following ideas for lesson plans can be divided into three parts. The first part seeks to define pattern in terms of the natural patterning of the world as we know it, or as we like to know it. At this point, balance, symmetry, and visual and auditory patterns are discussed. Students initially are asked to comment on a symmetrical and an asymmetrical shape. The response is expected to be on an emotional level. They are asked to consider the reason behind their responses. One shape denotes completion, stability; the other, incompleteness, instability. This leads to a discussion on patterns in nature.

Following a reading of poetry and prose in a foreign language, students are expected to connect the poet's artistic rhythms with the auditory rhythms of the ideal world around him. The first part of this section concludes with a comparison of two radically different views of the world in paintings. One painting is natural, symmetrical, somehow ordered. The other is chaotic, unstructured, and represents disorder. Students are asked to comment upon the meanings of each work as well as to express emotional reactions.

The second part of this section deals with shapes as part of structure in paintings and with comparable rhythmic schemes in poetry. Specific paintings and poems are compared with the intention of showing how shapes and rhythmic schema affect not only the mood but the meaning of each work. The first comparison is of the oval or circle motif in Renoir's "Madame Renoir" and the couplet verse of Coffin's "The Secret Heart." Both devices denote a sense of completeness or oneness which correlates directly with the underlying intention of each artist. Students are asked to discover this correlation through a series of discussion questions.

The second comparison is of Winslow Homer's "The Morning Bell" and Burgess' "Sestina of Youth and Age." Both works of art depict conflict. Once again shape, the triangle, and rhythmic schema, through their own innate characteristics, reveal meaning, complexity or conflict in this case, and help to define the mood and message of the artist. Again, students are expected to "discover" the comparison through questions.

The third part of the section on pattern harks back to the previous section on metaphor and symbol. Students learn that the structure of a painting may, in and of itself, express symbolically the meaning of the work. Concrete poetry is introduced as it, too, visually presents a symbol. Students are asked to consider whether or not the rhythm of the poem is somehow connected to its portrayal of symbol.

Finally, the section concludes with a return to ideas for student art and writing. As was the case in the second section, teachers are advised to use these exercises when they are deemed appropriate within the section as a whole.

Retrospection

"Poetry and Paintings: A Comparative Study" has been used with many classes at this writing. Students, for the most part, have responded more positively than might have been expected to this interdisciplinary approach to learning. I discovered that students became involved in an appreciation of visual art, and appeared to be "ripe" for such an experience. The method then is valuable in two ways. First, students who are primarily visually oriented are able to transfer knowledge of a visual mode of ex-

pression to the written; second, students can be encouraged to view visual expressions or art analytically.

The present curriculum unit led quite naturally to a sequel, "Past and Present New York Through a Comparative Study of Photography and Poetry." This second unit combines the study of history, poetry, and photography. Students are able to see the reflections of various moods and changes of an important city in the works of poets and photographers. They are also encouraged to consider differences between painting and photography through a study of photography.

I now firmly believe that the broad-based humanities approach to learning provides students with a more sophisticated and cohesive understanding of all art forms, and is notable for the enthusiasm that it generates. This teacher was ultimately rewarded with student creative writing that reflected intellectual and emotional involvement with the study of poetry, paintings, and photography.