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The Voices Within Theirs and Mine

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Each school year when I taught and discussed poetry with my students, I always encountered a student, or two, who would question the value of poetry. Then after we had analyzed and discussed the various elements of a poem, invariably another student would query whether or not the poet went to such great lengths to construct his or her poem so that there would be exact meter in each line or a rhyme scheme. This student would feel that the poem was like a divine inspiration and just “Happened.” Both students’ questions I would answer as completely as possible, but I always felt that I should be able to answer them still more completely. As a student and later as an educator, I have always enjoyed poetry. I never thought to question its validity and I knew the pains suffered by the poet in their attempts at poetic expression. I never questioned the relevance or the timeliness of poetry, but as a teacher of English each year I was faced with the task of helping another group of high school students acquire and/or expand their tastes for poetry. And as the years progressed I found increasing numbers of students less willing to accept the need and rewards of poetry based on my enthusiastic presentations, class discoveries and discussions. Therefore one of the objectives of this unit is to offer a more complete answer to the question: Why read poetry? Another is to offer concrete examples of the process of poetry writing as related by established poets.

A third question posed by students from time to time is: What makes a great work of art, whether it be a poem, a novel, a symphony, or a painting, great? In my readings for this unit I happened upon an article in the *English Journal* written by Darwin L. Hayes, a veteran high school and college teacher of English in response to this question. Rather than answer the question directly, the teacher asked the student to select her favorite popular song, and gave her a recording of an obscure Brahms symphony. The student was to listen to each recording each day for an indefinite period of time. After three months the teacher asked the student how the task was going. The student reported to the class that she had become bored with the popular song. She reported having no interest in listening to it and was wondering why she had selected that song. On the other hand her appreciation of the Brahms symphony had increased; the symphony had become more meaningful to her with the passage of time. She said further that when she listened to the symphony her imagination went in a new directions each time. This student’s “discovery” and discussion made the class formulate their own ideas about artistic worth. I would ask my students to select their favorite rap song and a poem currently being studied in class—perhaps a section of Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, or W.B. Yeats’ *Adam’s Curse*, or a poem by Emerson, or Emily Dickinson—ask them to listen to the song and read the poem aloud to themselves every night, and after a period of time, ask them how the task is progressing. Some interesting class discussions should result.

When students are not questioning the validity of poetry, they are often asking me to read examples of their own poetry. After reading their poems and offering as much praise as they warrant, I am faced with the problem of how to help these students write better poems. Another objective of this unit is to present to students experiences encountered by contemporary poets in their struggles to create their poems. The thought is that if students were more aware of the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in an art medium that attempts to explain human phenomena that are not readily explained in words by using words, rhythm, and sounds, they would be better able to strengthen their own poems.

A unit or a book on poetry most often begins with an attempt at defining the term “poetry”. Part of the beauty of poetry lies in the fact that it cannot be defined; it is elusive. Poetry cannot be defined according to its subject because the subject of a poem can be as insignificant as a speck of dust or as grandiose as the beauty captured on an ancient urn. Poetry cannot be defined by its form because of the infinite shapes and forms used in poems. Poetry cannot be defined by the human experiences it treats because the experiences that a reader finds in poems ranges from the most mundane to the esoteric. If these attempts to define poetry fail, perhaps the most obvious definition of poetry will have to suffice. Poetry is words-words carefully or delicately chosen by the poet in his or her attempt to transmit to readers the human relationship with a moment, an object, or an experience. The words chosen by the poet are carefully shaped into patterns of sound and form.

Good poetry contains words and word phrases which transcend the immediacy of the “now” and are able to communicate to many readers across the span of time and place some heightened idea of human experience.

Writing poetry involves the writer in a word game. The dilemma encountered in the writing of poetry is how to most effectively deal with the ambiguity of words. Words have multiple meanings and the more advanced and sophisticated a society becomes, the more ambiguities are assigned to its words. It appears that primitive societies did not suffer with ambiguous word meanings. There was a direct relationship between the word and what it represented. Modern poets, in trying to convey in words their consciousness of the human experience, must find ways to transmit their feelings so that the correct, accurate, and full impression is received by their readers.

Different modern poets achieve accurate communication through poetic expression using a variety of word games. For example, e.e.cummings creates new sensations and meanings for his readers by creating fresh, new words. His poems have such words or phrases as “perhaps hand” or “manunkind”. Cummings also experiments with words by changing their syntax, and altering the rules of punctuation or capitalization. It is as if he is saying to his readers that the expected rules of language and the use of ordinary words can be ignored or passed over as commonplace, but I’m going to assail you with a freshness, newness, and uniqueness that cannot be ignored. Therefore he forces his readers into experiencing new sensations never before encountered in reading poems. Cummings creates new vistas for the imagination and experience. Gilbert Highet in his book, *The Power of Poetry*, entitles his chapter on e.e. cummings “The Magic Maker”.

Students can try to create new words to convey their thoughts. Kenneth Koch in *Sleeping on the Wing* presents several cummings poems for study and then he suggests that the students experiment with changing the syntax, punctuation and capitalization of the words in poems they have already written. This modeling of the methods used by cummings to achieve a freshness and a more accurate communication through words can certainly lead students to some previously unexplored avenues of their own creative expression.

While poetry is elusive, the poet is not. Poetry is composed by flesh and blood humans who have as much in common with their readers as they do with each other. After reading interviews with several contemporary

poets, certain common characteristics seem to become evident. First of all, no matter how avant-garde a poet's poetry may be, he or she has read a great deal of classical poetry and readily admits to being influenced by great poets. Secondly, these poets admit to having written and rewritten their poems and have even altered a poem after it has been published. This tendency to work and rework the poem is the price of creativity. Very little creative work is ever "finished"; most often it is abandoned. With these common characteristics of contemporary poets in mind, this unit will be designed to expose the students to the poetry of the established poets. After discussing the poetry of a master poet, they will try their hands at "modeling" the form, expression, and mood of the poem. Once the students have discussed and observed the elements of poetry as manipulated by distinguished poets, and once they have "modeled" several poems, they will be encouraged to create their own poetry.

Before the students write their own poems, it would be helpful if they pondered the source of poetry. There is a third common aspect mentioned by the contemporary poets. Each poet interviewed mentioned or referred to "the voice within". This "voice" has not only compelled them to write but it initiated some element of the poem, if not the whole poem. And it prompts them to create at various times. Allen Ginsburg keeps a pad beside his bed because often an idea for a poem, or an entire poem, occurs to him in his sleep. Poets have been known to write a poem on a tablecloth in a restaurant or on a cocktail napkin at a party. Students need to become aware of the voices within them. They need to learn not only to be aware of that voice, but also to trust it and key into their own creative thoughts.

In putting together a unit on the appreciation and creation of poetry for average and above average high school sophomores and juniors, it is important to have them study both the past and present in poetry. When reading the poetry of the past, students get an anthologized dose of what is considered "good" poetry. By reading modern poetry, they will have a chance to become familiar with what is being considered the human condition of their world. Students will be able to see how the poets of today use the elements of poetry to describe such contemporary issues as abortion, Vietnam, or the possible destruction of the world by nuclear warfare.

The voices within today's poets are prompting them to use their poetic expressions to write poetry. This poetry will not necessarily change the world, but it will help us to endure life a little better or enjoy life a little more. If students can now become more attuned or trusting of their voices within, they should then be able to allow that voice to help them give form and shape to their innermost thoughts by writing poems.

One technique that can be used in this study of poetry which will help students combine the study of a poet of the past with their concern for the now and the future is to get them to write poems about the end of the world. After studying Robert Frost's poem "Fire and Ice", I asked my students to choose one of two possible writing assignments; either write about the possibilities of the destruction of the world suggested in Frost's poem or write about how they viewed the destruction of the world. The students chose to describe their views on the world's destruction. I was awed by the enthusiastic response to the assignment. Every student handed in a two-or three-page paper. Even the reluctant writers had a great deal to say about the end of the world. I read all the papers but didn't hand them back immediately. A week or so later, I reintroduced the topic of the destruction of the world and after a brief discussion, I handed back to the students their papers on the destruction of the world. I purposely wanted there to be a span of time between their initial responses to the topic and their use of that topic as the subject for a poem. I felt that the time between the assignments would allow the students to be more critical of what they had written and more selective and creative in their word choices for their poems. I instructed the students to reread their papers; circle "key" words in their prose writings and use those words as a basis for the poems they were now instructed to write. Of course the

students were encouraged to use “fresh” and more descriptive words and word phrases in their poetry. This series of assignments was very successful, judging from the written and verbal responses of the students. This series of poetry study, prose writing, and poetry writing can be used intermittently during a study of poetry using a variety of topics.

One poet said that poetry is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration. With that thought in mind, I encourage my students to write and rewrite, work and rework their poetry. The aim of their poetry should be to unite their thoughts and emotions through the use of words, meter, rhyme and form in poetic expression. And when they have successfully conveyed the fullness of their thoughts, emotions, and experiences in poems, what they have produced should have an impact upon their readers. Such is the magic of poetry.

With the readings and discussions of various poems and with students undertaking the various challenges to create their own poems, after a month or so each student will have accumulated quite a collection of poems. There are various ways to make further use of the students’ poems in helping them to strengthen their poetry writing abilities. The teacher could select a particularly good student poem and reproduce it so that each student has a copy. The teacher should not in any way identify the poem’s creator. Leave the choice of identification up to the student. As a class, discuss the poem. Elicit from the group what words or word phrases are effective; which images “work” and which do not “work”. Have the students offer suggestions of words that could support or strengthen the meaning of the poem. Perhaps the poem would read better if certain words or phrases were eliminated. This editing technique is beneficial in two ways. First, it is a positive way to give the creator some feedback on his poem in a nonthreatening manner, feedback that is coming from his peers and not the teacher. Secondly, it offers the other members of the class a variety of methods and techniques for altering their poems. The follow-up activity is for each student to select one of their poems and rework it.

After the student have spent time reworking several of their poems, have each submit what he believes to be his best poem. If the school has a literary magazine, the teacher could tell the students that these poems will be given to the staff of the school literary magazine. If a student does not wish his poem considered for publication, ask that he indicate that wish on the paper. The request not to forward a poem is always honored and that poem is returned with appropriate verbal or written praise for the creative attempt. For students whose papers are submitted for possible publication, many of their poems are printed in the school literary magazine. For them students the rewards of seeing their poems in print is gratifying.

I never give a evaluation grade for creative work. I always assign a fixed number of points for each poem submitted. The points merely indicate that the student has gone through a the creative process and written and submitted a poem worthy of comments. I also try to reward and encourage students to edit and rework their poems by assigning a fixed number for each rewritten or reworked poem. A student is most venerable when he has given written expression to his inner voice and rather than discourage that attempt with a negative or less than desirable response, I do everything possible to nurture and encourage each student’s creative written expression. Kenneth Koch in *Sleeping on the Wing* concurs with the suggestions for rewarding student’s work.

Three sample lessons that could be used in presenting a unit on poetry to sophomore and junior level students are contained in this unit. With each sample lesson, the titles and poets of poems which could be studied by the students are given. A copy of the suggested poems is available at The Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 53 Wall Street, New Haven, Connecticut 06520.

LESSON PLAN: 1

Objectives

1. Given a war poem, students will be able to find, list and discuss the poetic devices used by the poet in creating his or her war poem.
2. Students will create their own war poems

Background

There are certain concerns that take students of this generation out of their neighborhoods and to some degree out of their country. One of these concerns is the possibility of nuclear war. Another is the drought and resulting starvation in Ethiopia. And, more recently, there have been acts of terrorism that have occurred in various parts of the world. Students are not hesitant to discuss and reveal their feelings with regard to these concerns. However, many of the students are at a loss to understand the impact these issues have had on people in other parts of the world. What better way can students become familiar with the thoughts of other cultures except through the poetry written by the poets of that country? If you consider that modern poetry is anything written from World War I to the present time, there is a wealth of war poetry written by American, English, South American, and Russian poets. One characteristic of modern poetry that sets it apart from romantic poetry is the international thrust of its subject matter. Romantic poetry tends to focus on the individual and his singular experiences while the modern poet tends to want to write poems that identify and describe experiences outside of his or her own experiences. War was an international theme that concerned poets from all nations. Michael Hamburger, German poet, translator, and author, in his book *Truth of Poetry* devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of poems and their poets from numerous nations. These poems were written about World War I, World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Some of the poets were active participants in the war, some like T. S. Eliot had no war experiences, and some like Wilfred Owen died in battle. Regardless of the poets' involvement or noninvolvement in war, their poems reflect the inhumanity of war.

Strategy

1. Divide students in groups of four or five. Give each group a war poem.
2. Each group is to select a recorder and a student to give the group presentation. Make sure a different member of the group is assigned to each task.
3. Each group is then given a sheet of paper listing the specific items to be applied to the review of their poem. Such items as:
 - a. figures of speech
 - b. rhyme scheme
 - c. form
 - d. meter
 - e. background information on poet (ie. war correspondent, never fought, in active combat, killed in action, etc)

- f. overall group impression of the poem
- 4. allow one class period for the group to discuss and record its impression of the poem
- 5. Then ask each group to read its poem to the class and present its analysis of the poem to the class. Class discussion should follow each presentation.
- 6. Then ask each student to write a war poem which they can begin in class and complete at home.
- 7. The following day ask students to volunteer to read their poems. Class discussion should then focus on the similarities and differences in the focus, intent, and form of war poetry the students' poetry and the poems studied and presented by each group.

SUGGESTED FOR USE WITH LESSON: 1 WAR POEMS

"Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night"

by Dylan Thomas

"Do Not Weep"

by Stephen Crane

"Freedom to Kill" and "Flowers and Bullets" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko

LESSON PLAN: 2

Objective

Students will be able to use sensory perception words and memory in creating a poem.

Strategy

1. In groups of four or five send students to different areas of the school building (gym, art room, library, office, etc.) Ask the students to spend at least 15 to twenty minutes observing the environment.
2. While observing the environment ask the students to record their sensory perceptions of the room by filling out a chart of words to describe the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch sensations of the room. Students most often have trouble with the taste and touch sensations. I recommend class discussion on what items in a particular area elicit certain touch sensations. For an unimaginative student, for taste sensation I suggest that he or she chew gum and describe the taste feelings of chewing gum in that particular room.
3. When the students return to the room, have them meet in their groups and exchange sensory perception words. Each group is to hand in a chart of the most imaginative, creative, and original perception words selected by the group members in their environment observation.
4. The next day have the students reconvene in their groups. Hand back the group creative word lists and ask the students to write poems in which they incorporate some of the words from the group list or in remembering the experience words which upon reflection come to them. Encourage the students to share their poems with each other. Also encourage the students to assist each other in writing their poems.

POEMS WRITTEN BY ESTABLISHED POETS FOR USE WITH LESSON: 2.

"A Fire-Truck"

by Richard Wilbur

"Trees"

by Howard Nemerov

"The Whipping"

by Robert Hayden

"The Picnic"

by John Logan

"To Be In Love"

by Gwendolyn Brooks

"Constantly Risking Absurdity"

by Lawrence Ferlinghetti

LESSON PLAN: 3

OBJECTIVE

Each student will write a sestina

BACKGROUND

The sestina is a fixed form poem of thirty-nine lines divided into six stanzas of six lines each and a final three-line stanza. There is no rhyme, but all the lines end with one of the six words chosen by the poet.

The order in which the six words appear at the end of each stanza is prearranged, and it varies. The final three line stanza contains the six words, but two words must appear in each line in the same order as in the first stanza. This fixed form poem is demanding and a challenge for both the new and established poet. Most poems are written using ideas and feelings generated in the poet's mind, but the sestina forces the poet to write from the outside in. The sestina was believed to have been developed in the Twelfth Century. Since then the form has been used through the centuries by Spanish, French, English, and American Poets. Of the Twentieth Century poets, W.H. Auden and Ezra Pound are most noted poets who use the sestina form.

STRATEGY

1. Discuss the challenges inherent in some areas of the human experience especially challenges in sports. (ie. the pitcher pitching so many perfect innings in a row, or the basketball player who scores the most point in a game, or the handicapped person who walks from the west coast to the east coast). In sports, these challenges are imposed by arbitrary limitations. For example, in baseball the shape of the playing field and the size of the strike zone create challenges for the participants. Any sport asks you to perform your best within the limits set by the shape of the playing field and by the rules many of which are arbitrary. Relate those challenges to the challenge for poets-the sestina.
2. Only tell the students that the sestina is a fixed form poem and after they have read a couple of poems, they are to determine the form of the sestina.
3. Have the students read aloud several times Elizabeth Bishop's sestina entitled "A Miracle for Breakfast". Then have the students read Spenser's sestina.
4. Challenge the students to compare the two sestinas in terms of language, subject matter, and form. After discussion the students should realize that both poets used the same form, but Spenser's use of language is formal while Bishop's language is more contemporary.
5. Have each student copy the pattern of the sestina form using either letters or numbers to demonstrate the form.

THE SESTINA FORM

Stanza I. A,B,C,D,E,F, Stanza V. D,E,A,C,F,B,

II. F,A,E,B,D,C,

VI. B,D,F,E,C,A,

III. C,F,D,A,B,E,

VII. A,B, first line

C,D, second line

IV. E,F,
E,C,B,F,A,D, third
line

6. Next have the students read aloud George Draper's "Rink Keeper's Sestina". Discuss the variety of subjects that could be used in sestinas. It is essential that the student realize that the choice of subject is important in writing a sestina because the chosen subject must be broad enough to be discussed in a seven stanza poem.
7. Have the students consider the parts of speech that have been most frequent word choices of the poets. They should note the overabundance of nouns; a noun choices naming a place, a thing, an idea , or an emotion give the poet much latitude for development of a sestina. Words that can be both noun and verb, words like "state" or "rock" are also wise choices.
8. Tell the students that they are going to write sestinas. To insure that they choose subjects that they have a lot of background knowledge, direct them to write a two page composition on any topic of their choice. From their two page writing, they are to select six words for a sestina on the same subject.
9. Have the students write a stanza each night. They could begin the writing in class. Encourage the students to use each other as resource people for ideas whenever they get stuck. I also feel that it is important for the teacher, whenever possible, to participate in the creative process with his students. Students should see the struggle and challenge being taken on by their teacher in order to understand that poetry writing is not easy or only for "gifted" people.
10. Before the students begin to write their sestinas, make sure they realize that each stanza rearranges the previous stanza's end-words into the order 6,1,5,2,4,3, and that the seventh stanza matches the first.

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