



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2001 Volume III: Reading and Writing Poetry

Introduction

This seminar was mainly a workshop in the reading and writing of poetry. We aimed to enrich and deepen our understanding of many kinds of poems; and we explored ways in which we can express our own experiences, dreams, frustrations, desires, and responses to the world in the languages of poetry. We approached the reading and writing of poetry as aspects of a single process, which may provide an important key to the teaching of poetry and indeed to the teaching of literacy. We asked how poems work, how they marshal their strategies and impress themselves upon us and how we can open a bit wider the gates of our own conscious and unconscious creativity.

For our common reading, we used Robert Pinsky and Maggie Dietz, eds., *Americans' Favorite Poems: The Favorite Poem Project Anthology* ; Pablo Neruda, *Full Woman, Fleshly Apple, Hot Moon: Selected Poems* , translated by Stephen Mitchell; and two books by Kenneth Koch *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* and a book for adults, *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry* . Some of us also consulted another book by Koch that was recommended: *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?: Teaching Great Poetry to Children* . In various ways, these books kept us close to the passion and the craft of poetry as readers and writers of any age can discover them. We also brought to the seminar our own favorite poems for discussion and emulation. We began by writing a "New Haven poem" in response to a Senegalese poet's evocation of Dakar. We experimented with the haiku and other forms. We examined love poems, elegies, and poems about nature with an eye always for the distinctive impulse, the fresh emotion, the astonishing expression. And we spent much time thinking and talking about how the students in our classrooms may be led to appreciate the delights of capturing their most intense experience in a word, a line, a poem.

Our reading and writing proceeded variously, in accord with our talents and our previous experience. Some of us, regardless of our age, were novice readers of poetry and were writing poetry for the first time. Others were experienced teachers of both the reading and writing of poetry. All of us had much to learn from our common reading, from our struggles with writing, and from each other. And the curriculum units applied some of our discoveries to a variety of classroom situations.

Geraldine Martin and Jean Sutherland have developed correlated units on African American Poetry, to be taught in the first and fourth grades, focusing on the family and on a history of struggle. Pamela Tonge has written a unit for sixth grade on using poetic expression to enhance reading and writing.

Two teachers have developed units for use in after-school or Saturday programs. Rebecca Hickey has planned a workshop for students from the sixth to eighth grades in which the writing of poetry will provide practice in thinking and learning. And Julie Reinshagen has planned a writing workshop for students from the ninth to the

twelfth grades, emphasizing development of the students' social and emotional responses and their literacy skills, and culminating with the reading and writing of poetry. Its resources will be of especial interest to teachers of bilingual courses.

Two teachers have developed units for senior English courses, both focusing to some extent on the links between music and poetry. Susan Santovasi will lead the students in a Women's Literature course from popular songs to more traditional poetry by women. Deborah Hare will incorporate rap music and twentieth-century poetry in a more widely ranging senior course that also includes journals, drama, and film.

Finally, two teachers have developed units for high-school creative writing courses. Judith Katz will immerse her students in the reading and writing of Haiku, as a controlled form that may focus a range of observation and emotion. In a course with a variety of philosophical implications, Yel Hannon Brayton will emphasize the poet's eye, the sense of wonder, and the craft through which vision may be distilled in a variety of forms.

Each unit has its own immediate objectives, but the approaches are often closely related or overlapping. Indeed, as the teachers make clear, each unit contains some strategies or material that might be used at almost any grade-level. All of us in the seminar have sought to bring the resources and the opportunities provided by poetry to bear upon the teaching of literacy in its broadest sense. We have asked: How may the meaning and music of words help us to understand both ourselves and others in our various and changing communities and in the larger community that includes them?

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