



Using the Poetry of Shel Silverstein to Further Develop the Narrative, Expository, and Poetic Writing Skills of Elementary Students

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Introduction

Developing adequate, if not superior, writing skills in elementary grade students is essential if the New Haven School System is going to produce individuals who can handle the competition that will face them in the years to come. Hence, the elementary level curriculum places considerable emphasis on the development of all types of writing. Naturally this emphasis continues in increasingly sophisticated form as the student moves toward graduation. Achieving success in writing at an early level will lay the foundation for future mastery. The fourth grade Connecticut Mastery test requires students to write a narrative piece, while in sixth grade they must produce an expository essay. During the years leading up to these Mastery tests, the student's curriculum concentrates on each test's area of focus. Second and third grade develop an understanding of narrative writing, while fourth and fifth grade are primarily concerned with the traditional five paragraph expository essay. In each of these segments of the curriculum, students are given numerous opportunities to become proficient in each type of writing. At every grade level in New Haven's curriculum expectations, requirements for the teacher's writing program are clearly spelled out. Besides the need to achieve these primary academic goals, becoming literate in all forms of writing will enrich and facilitate the lives of all students in their future pursuits. This unit aims to further those objectives.

The Students I Teach

Before I progress further with my unit, I think it is important to include a brief picture of my school and classroom, including a very general appraisal of the circumstances surrounding my students' lives. This in no way should limit another teacher in using my unit's suggestion. My comments are included primarily to explain my motivation and goals.

Though I plan to teach my unit in a third grade classroom, I am presently teaching fourth grade. Having taught third grade for a number of years, I feel that the material in this unit is adaptable to either grade and perhaps,

with appropriate adaptation, could be used on an even higher grade level, especially fourth, fifth, and sixth grade. A middle school group of low achievers could be a target for this unit's material. In fact, since much of Silverstein's material may be interpreted on an adult level, even a high school teacher might find some of the material to be appropriate. Explaining that students will be taking a deeper look into a "children's" poet might overcome any reluctance on the part of those who think the poems might be "beneath" them.

I work in an elementary school where about 90%-95% of the students are African American. My classes have always reflected this percentage. Of the remaining members, most are Hispanic/Latino and there are a few white students. The ages of most third graders in our school vary from those who have just turned eight to a few who are close to eleven. In fourth grade, each of these ages would advance a year. The students come from a variety of social-economic backgrounds and home situations. A number have a relative other than their mother as primary caregiver. Their academic ability and the level of their general knowledge vary considerably. Some are members of families with multiple problems. Few of their lives are without difficulties. Most, though not all, parents or guardians are supportive of school. Most want to be helpful but often are not sure of the best way to go about it. Often the struggles of everyday life interfere with their efforts.

At this point most students still enjoy school but not just for the academics. They are starting to understand that their school career will have some bearing on their lives beyond the present, though their actions often are influenced negatively by peer pressure, their lack of basic skills and general knowledge, difficulty in establishing long-term goals, and the lack of positive image, especially regarding their academic abilities. Nevertheless, at least on the surface, they still have high aspirations regarding their futures.

General Objectives

It is with all of these factors in mind that I have developed a curriculum unit in which I use the poetry of Shel Silverstein to motivate students to write poems, create narrative pieces, and develop expository essays. Along with his works of prose, which are praised by many, Silverstein has written a number of books containing his poetry. These books include *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *A Light in the Attic*, and *Falling Up*. His collections are quite popular with young readers. He creates his own illustrations to accompany most poems. These intriguing sketches serve to attract and delight the reader while giving them additional insight into the poem's contents and message. Though his poems may be silly or nonsensical, they often contain a deeper message to which most students can easily relate. They provide elementary students with enjoyable pieces to read and often to interpret creatively. After reading Silverstein's "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out," all of us should be able to tell our own story of the consequences we have faced by avoiding unpleasant tasks.

Meeting New Haven's Literacy Standards

As mentioned in my introduction, my primary goal of developing student literacy in writing is well aligned with the goals of the New Haven School System. In addition, there are other more specific areas of curriculum that this unit targets.

Throughout my unit, students will be reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The New Haven school district's emphasis on literacy is targeted in all aspects of this unit. Material has been integrated with our social development, art, music, and language arts lessons. The development of confident dramatic speakers is also a key goal. In everything that is presented, vocabulary development will be stressed through the discussion of words unfamiliar to most students. Examination of rhyming lines and internal rhyme will strengthen phonic skills. The discussion of syllabification in achieving rhythm will do the same. The understanding and identification of metaphors and similes will help to illustrate their importance in the elaboration of basic ideas in both poetry and prose. Poetry is a thread that finds its way into both the reading and writing curriculum of all grade levels. Rhyming, which is an essential building block of reading, attracts the interest of most elementary students whether they listen to it or produce their own. Poems of all types, but especially those that rhyme, continue the development of basic reading skills while also providing elementary students with enjoyable pieces to read and often interpret at a much deeper level. These poems provide interesting motivation for discussion, imitation, and even written description and analysis. Hopefully, as this poetry is being read, there also will be some reinforcement of students' previously mastered reading skills, especially for those students who are lacking proficiency in some areas of phonetic awareness.

Although developing the ability to write literate poetry is not as clearly defined as are the areas of narrative and expository writing, poetry is recognized by the New Haven curriculum as an integral part of a child's literacy development.

The Beecher Team

This unit is part of the L.W. Beecher School Institute team. The team involves the units of first grade teacher Geraldine Martin and music teacher Thomas Sullivan, along with my own. Though each of these units can be taught independently, we will work to integrate some of our material as we teach it at Beecher. All of these units are located in this volume. We hope that others who use any of these units might choose to broaden the scope of their involvement by working together with other teachers and classrooms. At Beecher we have found this approach to be quite productive. The team will attempt to use the skills of other teachers and staff members. Parents will be recruited to assist with our activities, especially our culminating activity, where they will be asked to coordinate refreshments, help in other areas which may present themselves-such as fundraising to finance the culminating activity-and even to participate in the team's final program.

The team has already met periodically while in the meantime we have developed our individual units. While we all aim to develop student appreciation of poetry and to use this as a vehicle to increase student-writing skills, each of us has a particular poet or area of focus. Along side my use of Shel Silverstein poems, Geraldine will target the works of Jack Prelutsky and Thomas will investigate poetry in relationship to music. During the school year in which we teach the units, we will continue meeting on a regular basis to arrange the specific integration of each classroom's activities. Some possibilities are mentioned in this unit, while others should develop as we actually teach our material. The team will also be planning our culminating activity, scheduled for April, and will attempt to develop strategies for including other staff members, administration and parents as the final event nears.

Shel Silverstein

To begin, I will give some of the basic information about the poet himself. I was a bit surprised to discover his many and varied talents, some that might not immediately be expected from an author of children's poetry. The age and nature of your students may influence which information is relevant to them.

Silverstein was born on September 25, 1932 in Chicago, Illinois and died of a heart attack on May 10, 1999. His full name was Sheldon Allan Silverstein, and he refers to himself as Uncle Shelby in *The Story of Lafcadio, the Lion Who Shot Back*. Though he is best known as a writer of children's poetry, he had careers as a cartoonist, playwright, singer, and songwriter. He served with the armed forces in Japan and Korea where he began drawing cartoons for Stars and Stripes, the American military publication. He also drew cartoons for Playboy magazine. He wrote a number of songs. Two of them, "A Boy Named Sue," sung by Johnny Cash and "The Unicorn Song," recorded by the Irish Rovers, achieved some popular music fame. He wrote nine plays for adults. Two were produced in New York and received positive reviews. He composed music for the movies, including music for the film, *Postcards from the Edge*. More detail on Silverstein's career outside of his children's poetry success is available on the Internet, but not a great deal is available about him as a person, except for what we can infer from his works.

His greatest success came as a writer of poetry for children, poetry also enjoyed by adults. His three collections, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1974), *Light in the Attic* (1981), and *Falling Up* (1996), received many awards and have sold millions. His books for children include *The Giving Tree*, *A Giraffe and a Half*, *The Missing Piece*, and *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O*. Though they clearly narrate a story, most of these works contain many elements of poetry.

Getting Started

As I will not be teaching full time, the classroom I will be working in will not be my own. Maryellen Hellyar, with whom I once co-taught, has agreed to work with me in her third grade. This situation will not alter my approach.

Beginning sometime in October, I will start introducing some of the Shel Silverstein poems I have selected. My unit contains a list of his poems that I feel will fit well with my overall objectives, but the individual teacher is the best judge of what will work with a particular group. The students will be given some biographical information on Silverstein and they will make or be given folders in which to hold the poems they read and write. I will attempt to purchase folders with pockets in both sides for easy separation of their poetry and that written by Silverstein. Later, as they begin to write prose material, they will have another related folder. At first, they will be asked not to illustrate their folders. This task will be postponed until students become more familiar with the wonderfully expressive drawings that the poet creates to accompany his poetry. When this has happened, the class will be encouraged to decorate their folders with drawings that either imitate Silverstein's work or represent their own ideas relative to the poems they have written. A combination of both types might be ideal. Throughout, students will be urged to include illustrations with both their poetry and prose but not at the expense of their written work.

At first, I will present one or two poems a week. We will talk about the poem's content, some of the basic elements employed by Silverstein, and any message they feel the poem is trying to present. If there is an illustration included, we will talk about its connection to the poem, whether students like it, and other ways in which he could have illustrated the poem. Students will be encouraged to write their own poem on subjects related to the Silverstein poem. After the first two or three weeks, poetry assignments will become required rather than optional. Hopefully, by that time students will feel secure enough with poetry to feel at ease writing their own. Discussing the elements of poetry present in the Silverstein poems should provide some of the tools they need in writing their own. During this phase, they will not yet be asked to develop any material related to narrative or expository writing.

Introducing Some Elements of Poetry

While presenting poems during this introductory phase we will begin to examine some of the elements of poetry that make it distinctive from prose. Again, I feel the choice of specific poems should be left to the individual teacher. The poems should be fun, with topics students can relate to easily. After appropriate explanation and examples, students should be able to identify ending rhyme, some internal rhyme, alliteration, metaphors, similes, repetition, rhythm, and descriptive language in these and other poems they might read in the future. The texts of Kenneth Koch listed in my bibliography, especially *Making Your Own Days*, clearly present the basic elements of poetry, which the teacher will need to convey to students. I will stress only those listed above. Though I want them to look for more than rhyming lines in a poem, I don't want an overemphasis on poetic elements to discourage natural interest and spontaneity.

Students will also begin to write poems based upon the suggestions made by Koch in his books, especially in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*. Approaches will include developing the following structures presented by Koch: "I wish _____," "I used to _____," "A _____ is like _____, and it was _____." Gradually they will be encouraged to expand these initial creations through the inclusion of more poetic elements or further development of those that they have already used. As their skills develop, they will be encouraged to write poems similar to those pieces by Silverstein that they have read and discussed in class.

Branching Out

Once the introductory elements of my unit are completed, each poem will be examined in generally the same manner. Though much of this approach has been mentioned before, I will list the general sequence of steps I will take with each.

1. Any difficult vocabulary will be discussed.
2. The poem will be read silently.
3. I will read the poem orally.
4. Pupils will take turns reading parts or the entire poem.

5. Elements of poetry in the poem will be discussed. "Is there any rhyming at the end of lines? Where? Is there any rhyming within lines? Are there any sounds, words or phrases that are repeated? Where are they? What two things is the poet comparing there? Can ____ really be ____? Why does the poet say it is? How many syllables do you hear in that line? What word describes the sound? Name some descriptive words in the poem."
6. The content of the poem will be examined. "Is the poem telling a story? What do you think the story says? Is the poem giving us a message or trying to teach us something? What do you think that message or story is? Does it remind you of anything you have experienced? Would you add anything to the poem?"
7. The illustration will now be examined. Attempt to show the link between poem and illustration. Discuss the advantages and limitations of each.
8. Students will be encouraged to write their own poem inspired by the Silverstein poem, which they have just read. They will be urged to include an illustration related to their poem.
9. Original poems and illustrations will be saved in their Poetry Folders.
10. Poems may be shared with students from their own and other classes.

Once the students are able to complete these steps, we will now be ready to begin using selected poems to develop their writing skills. Once more, the choice of poem used to develop these writing skills should depend on the abilities and interests of the students involved. Silverstein gives the teacher many appropriate poems to choose from. Since the next steps are rather lengthy, not all poems will go beyond the ten steps listed above. To illustrate my general approach to the next phase of this unit, I will use the poem "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not take the Garbage Out," the tale of a little girl who refuses to accept her responsibility to take the garbage out. Though she is willing to perform other tasks, she allows the garbage, presented by Silverstein in vivid detail, to pile up "From New York to the Golden Gate," until she meets a horrible fate in the very garbage she hated so much. Children are left with a warning to remember Sarah when they are asked to take the garbage out or to do anything else that adults ask children to do on a regular basis.

Developing the Elements of Narrative Writing

Students previously will have learned the basic elements of a narrative composition. They include: setting, characters, problem, main events, or plot, resolution, and conclusion. Students will be given forms on which they will explain how each of these elements applies to the poem about Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout. "What

was the setting? Who were the characters? What was the problem? What happened to Sarah and the garbage as the plot unfolds? What happens in the end? What thought does the poet leave us with in his conclusion? What are your personal reactions?"

When that has been completed and discussed, students will write out their interpretation of the tale. The need to include proper elaboration will be stressed and students will be urged to include feelings relating to the content. ("That really was a disgusting sight. It makes my stomach churn just to think about the putrid stench all of that gunk must have created.") When students have finished their narratives they will share them in pairs and with the class, offering one another constructive criticism. An opportunity will be given to improve upon their original. Completed stories will be put in their writing folder. They may include their rendition of Silverstein's picture or create their own.

At the next session, students will review Sarah's story. They then will be asked to create their own story about someone like Sarah who tried to avoid responsibility. Again, they will be given an initial planning sheet on which they will outline the elements of their story. When that outline has been completed, they will write out their own story with the same detail that was required when they wrote the story of Sarah. Again, students will share their final stories with each other and with the class as a whole. Opportunity will be provided for constructive criticism. They also will be given a chance to improve upon their original and copy it over. Some stories may be shared with students in other classrooms, especially those in the other classroom participating on the team. They will be encouraged to include a picture related to the content of their story.

Other possible activities which may be used in conjunction with student writing could include: selecting your favorite disgusting description from the poem, drawing a picture of your favorite disgusting description from the poem, writing your own disgusting description of something that might be rotting in the pile of garbage, and drawing a picture of your own disgusting description. They should love doing these.

I plan to follow this procedure about four times with four different poems. I will wait until I am familiar with the class I will be teaching before selecting all of these particular poems, but I have included a group of poems, which I feel lend themselves well to the procedures I have set up. They are listed at the end of my unit narrative. Teachers may find others that are more appropriate for their situations.

Developing the Elements of Expository Writing

As soon as the Connecticut Mastery test is completed in early fourth grade, the writing focus shifts to developing expository writing skills. This continues until the next Mastery Test is given in sixth grade. Naturally both narrative and expository skills continue to be used by most people for a lifetime. Since I feel that this unit is relevant to a fourth grade and higher classroom, I am including a section on using poetry to develop expository writing skills. The procedure is quite similar, but the structure of the writing changes. Again, I will use "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout" to illustrate my approach.

After reading about Sarah's adamant refusal to take the garbage out and the resulting catastrophe, students will discuss the consequences one must face when one avoids fulfilling certain responsibilities such as doing your homework, not cleaning your desk or room, not bathing, not being civil to others, not brushing your teeth, and any others they bring up for consideration. They then will be asked to select three of these

responsibilities that they actually refuse to do or wish they could refuse to do. They will then take those three responsibilities and write a five-paragraph essay on "Three tasks I really don't want to do!"

The elements they are taught to include in their expository essays are: an introduction of their topic, three paragraphs, one each on the three main elements of their topic, followed by a conclusion which relates back to their introduction and includes a forceful concluding sentence. They are urged to have a strong, original, clear introduction, to elaborate on their three main points with personal recollections, which may or may not be entirely true, to continue the use of descriptive language that was stressed in expository writing, and, as always, to finish off with a strong conclusion.

As with narrative writing, they will be given a form on which they will sketch the basic outline of their essay: introduction, three main points, conclusion. They will then proceed to complete their piece, which will be shared as their narrative work was shared. Constructive criticism and rewriting will follow. Appropriate illustrations may also be included. A variation on the suggested topic might be to select one task that you hate and then elaborate on three reasons why you hate to complete it or perhaps three reasons why you think you shouldn't be doing it in the first place.

A more general expository essay may be developed at the unit's conclusion in which the student examines three characteristics found in the poetry of Shel Silverstein referring to specific examples to support their choices. Another might focus on the student's three favorite poems by Shel Silverstein.

If a teacher desires more information and general suggestions for relating text to written response, I refer that teacher to the New Haven School System's reading department that has distributed considerable material on the topic.

Shel Silverstein's Books for Children

Silverstein has written a number of children's books that may easily be favorites among adult readers as well. Each presents us with a simple story with an underlying message. Young students will probably not go much farther than understanding the basic story, but with a background in interpreting Silverstein's poems, a deeper reading is possible. In some of his stories, there are elements of poetry within the narrative, especially in *A Giraffe and a Half*, *Lafcadio*, *the Lion Who Shot Back*, the longest of the group, could be examined for its narrative elements as well as its message. *The Missing Piece* and *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O* appear to be simple little picture books, but they both contain messages about fulfillment and the importance of the search in life. *The Giving Tree*, probably his most popular book, tells the tale of a tree that will do anything to meet the requests of a small boy whose demands continue into old age. The tree feels joy only when she has met the needs of the boy.

I plan to read and discuss these five books with my students, somewhat along the lines of the discussion that revolved around Silverstein's poetry, but I don't have any plans to use them as motivation for student writing. If, however, they show a particular interest in pursuing any of these stories further, that interest will be encouraged.

When the *Giving Tree* was published, there was some criticism regarding the story's depiction of the all-giving female tree sacrificing everything, even herself, to the demanding male. She was happy only when she had

fulfilled his wishes. In an attempt to approach this issue, I will read the story without showing any illustrations and substituting the words "the tree" for the pronoun "she" and using "the child" every time the story says "boy" or "he." Upon completion of the story students will discuss their feelings about the story. "What is your opinion of the tree and the child? Do you agree with what each of them did? Explain. How would you have acted if you were the tree and/or the child? Do you know any people who are like the tree and/or the child?" Students will then be asked what they think regarding the gender of the tree and the child and why they have made their particular choice. They will then explore whether they believe this situation exists in real life. Reference will be made to the comments they made regarding people they might know who are similar to the characters. Finally, we will explore the topic of whether they believe the relationship between female and male as it exists in *The Giving Tree* is appropriate and should be accepted as inevitable.

The Unicorn Song

"The Unicorn," a poem by Silverstein, tells the tale of the lovely unicorns that existed "long time ago, when the Earth was green." When the Lord commanded Noah to build his ark and it was time to set sail, the unicorns were off frolicking in the water enjoying themselves, ignoring Noah's calls. As we know, the unicorns never made it on board, so we don't see them around anymore. The poem was put to music by the Irish Rovers and became a relatively popular song. An audio recording and the poem's text can be found on the Internet at "Zelonis Home Page." I will present the poem first for the familiar discussion format. Our music teacher, Tom Sullivan, who is part of our team, will then teach the song to them. A student presentation of this song will become part of our team's culminating activity.

The Team's Culminating Activity

Though undoubtedly changes will be made as we actually teach our units, the team plans to have a culminating activity that involves a display of poems and stories that grow from our studies, together with the presentation of similar elements (poems and stories) for parents and other students. This culminating activity, naturally, will include dramatic presentations of some of Silverstein's poems that the students count among their favorites. The event will probably occur just before April vacation. As mentioned, parents and other staff members will be encouraged to assist in the event. Plans for the activity will be ongoing, as each team member teaches his/her individual unit. The team will also meet regularly to develop the integration of activities that will eventually lead to the final program.

Lesson Plans

As I have done in my narrative section, all of my lesson plans will relate to the poem "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out." They may be easily adapted to other poems, but I wish to illustrate how much can be done with one poem and feel that, since I have thoroughly discussed the poem, the teacher reading this unit will be able to easily grasp my objectives.

Lesson One: Using Poems to Develop Degrees of Reading Power

Subject Matter Area: Reading

Vocabulary: Will vary with each lesson developed.

Objectives:

1. Students will develop skill at using various context clues to identify unknown words and as a result will develop greater reading power.
2. Student will be able to justify their choice of the appropriate missing word.

Procedure:

The goal of developing independent readers is a primary objective of the elementary school. One means of achieving this goal is through an approach which teaches pupils to look for various clues within the context of the material being read as a means of recognizing and understanding unfamiliar words. Besides teaching these techniques for unlocking unfamiliar words, this approach trains pupils to read more carefully, resulting in an overall improvement in comprehension. All New Haven elementary school teachers are familiar with this program, designed to increase pupils' "degrees of reading power." (DRP)

There are a variety of materials available to use while working with students in such a program. Basically, these materials provide paragraphs where key words have been omitted. Students are asked to find the appropriate word from among four choices, all of which could "fit" within the sentence's structure, but only one of which makes sense within the context of the larger piece. Students learn to explore the context before and after the missing word in order to find clues that will help to identify the missing word. The important skills developed here are to understand the procedures needed to explore the context for clues and to recognize and utilize these clues when they are found.

In this lesson plan, I provide an example for using a poem related to this unit to create an original worksheet that will be used to develop the skills discussed above. This sheet and others that I will develop will have the advantage of serving as reading instruction material as well as providing a source of review of the poem's content and narrative components. Its primary function, however, will be to improve the student's reading ability. Initially we will focus on the context that leads one to the appropriate missing word. Pupils will be asked to justify their choice. The completed worksheets will be saved in a folder for future reference related to the unit's content.

Below is an example of such a passage based upon the poem "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout."

"Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out"

Read each of these paragraphs about Sarah's problems. Where there is a missing word, use context clues to help you select the most appropriate word from those listed after the blank. Be ready to identify the clue(s) that led to your selection. You may underline those words from the context that helped you make your choice.

Although Sarah refused to take the garbage out, there were some chores that she was _____ (a. unable b. willing c. reluctant d. slow) to perform. Scouring the pots and scraping the pans were among the _____ (a. events b. games c. memories d. tasks) she would do. Her refusal to take the garbage out particularly _____ (a. pleased b. interested c. enraged d. attracted) her father, who would proceed to scream and shout. Sarah still refused.

Eventually the garbage _____ (a. filled b. excited c. angered d. enjoyed) the entire house. There were no places left for it to go, so it crashed through the windows, roof, and walls. There was no _____ (a. truck b. shovel c. food d. barrier) which could hold it back.

Higher and higher and further and further, the _____ (a. colorful b. disgusting c. famous d. happy) pile spread. Even the neighbors were driven away by the repulsive mixtures. When Sarah _____ (a. wrote b. read c. realized d. laughed) that her friends would not come out to play, she finally _____ (a. laughed b. played c. finished d. relented). She announced that she now would take the garbage out. Unfortunately, it was too late. The garbage had spread across the entire _____ (a. nation b. yard c. city d. street), from New York to the Golden Gate.

We have not been told _____ (a. slowly b. quickly c. exactly d. happily) what happened to Sarah, but somehow the garbage was _____ (a. arrested b. responsible c. chosen d. punished) for her awful fate. Hopefully we will all _____ (a. call b. imitate c. remember d. find) Sarah if someone should happen to ask one of us to take the garbage out.

When students complete the worksheet, there will be a discussion to determine which word is the most appropriate choice. Students must justify their selections by referring to context clues from the story. Similar exercises will be included for other poems we read.

Lesson Two: Creating Our Own Garbage Pile

Subject Matter Area: Language arts and art

Objectives:

1. Students will develop skill in using descriptive language.
2. Students will develop ability to create rhyming lines.
3. Students will develop ability to develop a single poem from a group of related but unorganized parts.

Procedure:

Before this lesson is initiated, students will have read and discussed Shel Silverstein's poem "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out." They also will have taken part in a number of writing activities related to the piece.

To begin, they will review the vivid, rhyming descriptions of the disgusting pile of garbage which accumulated

when Sarah refused to take it out. The use of end rhyme, alliteration, and descriptive language will be stressed. They then will be asked to check their refrigerator for leftovers, especially any that should have long ago been removed. They should also observe the remains of their meal: their own plate, what is scraped from serving bowls and thrown down the drain or into the garbage, any crusted pots or pans remaining on the stove, and even the garbage itself. If you are brave and perhaps include an appropriate note to parents/guardians, the children might collect some of the available "material" in a plastic bag and bring it to class for further examination and discussion. Each teacher should examine their own tolerance and that of the group before deciding whether to have the real items brought to class. There definitely should be clearly stated guidelines and restrictions placed on student collections. Either way, students should make a list of what they have observed and/or collected.

The next day, the group will make a class list on the front board based on the individual investigations of each student. If actual samples are selected, their ingredients should be explained as they are shown to the class. This could be done by viewing the sealed plastic bag or by placing the contents on a paper plate. Again, the discretion of the individual teacher should determine what is done.

Students will now be asked to add adjectives that they think are appropriate for describing the individual items. To the adjectives, metaphors and similes will be added. Students should consider all of the senses when attempting to describe them.

After reviewing the rhyming lines from Silverstein's poem, students will be asked to write similar lines motivated by the list of garbage components and descriptive words and phrases which they have compiled. Depending upon the group, it might be helpful for the group to develop one pair of lines together or for the teacher to model one of her/his own. A possible example might be: "Mushy, moldy bits of peach/Smelling like a low-tide beach."

Upon completion, students will share their lines with the whole group. Constructive comments and/or suggestion might be made now. The group will now attempt to put individual rhymes together to form a single poem. If there is repetition in content, the group should decide the best remedy: putting parts from different poems together, changing lines slightly to make for more variety, asking some to revise what they have written, or whatever solution the group thinks is appropriate. An attempt should be made to include the work of as many students as possible. They should also be reminded that everyone contributed to the collection, listing, and description.

The students will now have the opportunity to create illustrations related to their garbage collection. These could show individual concoctions, the pile as a whole, scenes from their home where the garbage originated, or whatever the student is motivated to draw. At least some of these should be displayed with the final draft of the poem, which should receive its title from the group. The poem and pictures may be shared with another classroom or during a culminating activity when students share highlights of the unit with other classes and/or parents. Finally, I strongly suggest that you carefully get rid of the actual garbage before the custodian discovers it.

Lesson Three: A Closer Look at Sarah Cynthia Stout and Lazy Jane

Subject Matter Areas: Language Arts-Reading, writing, speaking and social development

Objectives:

1. Understanding and appreciation of each poem.
2. Ability to identify elements of poetry in each poem.
3. Ability to recognize problems that may be created by a lack of appropriate action.
4. Ability to recognize the possible consequences of inaction.

Procedure:

By the time this lesson is initiated, students will be quite familiar with the tale of Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout and will have met Lazy Jane, a character from a Silverstein poem with that title. The story of Lazy Jane is much shorter than that of Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout. It is a poem consisting of one sentence written in a vertical line with one word on each line. The word "lazy" is repeated six times in succession and the word "waits," connected with "and," occurs five times in a row. Though broken by a few other words, "wants" and "water" occur in the string of "w" words. The only rhyming words are "Jane" and "rain."

To begin, students will be asked to find the similar elements of poetry occurring in the two poems: rhyme and the repetition of words and beginning sounds. The differences will then be explored. They will note that "Sarah" contains a great deal of descriptive language, while it could be argued that "Jane" has none, other than the physical structure of the poem. We are given considerably more detail about "Sarah" and more of the elements they share are present in "Sarah." Students will discuss what effect these facts have upon the poems.

The class will then turn to comparing and contrasting the poems' content. They already know Sarah quite well: a stubborn girl who must face the consequences of refusing to take the garbage out. Examining Lazy Jane, we'll discover a girl of similar age, judging from the illustrations, who wants a drink but refuses or lacks the capacity to use common sense in obtaining that drink. Her solution is to lie down with mouth wide open and wait for it to rain. As with Sarah, her decision is not an appropriate one.

Students will be asked: "How are the girls alike? Are they really alike? If not, how are they different? Are they both lazy and/or stubborn? Explain. What do you think will happen to Jane? Do you know people whose actions are similar to those of Sarah and/or Jane? What would you tell each of them regarding their actions? Does choosing stubborn or lazy behavior always result in a negative?" Some of these questions could require a written answer.

The discussion will attempt to show that though the girls' behavior is both similar and different, they each have made an unwise, impractical decision which has, as in Sarah's case, and could, as in Jane's case, result in dire consequences. The goal is help students to recognize the importance of examining the long-range picture when making decisions.

Poems a Teacher Might Use

This brief list suggests some poems that I feel lend themselves to my suggestions for developing student writing skills. They are especially suitable to narrative writing. There are many, many more that are appropriate.

"Santa and the Reindeer" (*Where the Sidewalk Ends* , p. 90-91.)

One of Santa's reindeer refuses to move until Santa realizes that even he, the reindeer, needs to be recognized with a small gift.

"Peanut-Butter Sandwich" (*Where the Sidewalk Ends* , p. 84-86.)

A young king's obsession with peanut butter sandwiches causes a major problem in the royal court.

"Spoiled Brat" (*Falling Up* , p. 89.)

After a series of outrageous misbehaviors, the spoiled brat is accidentally cooked for dinner. Despite the excellent seasoning, she was too 'spoiled' to eat.

"Pinocchio" (*Falling Up* , p. 89.)

This poem takes a rhyming look at the tale of Pinocchio.

"Clarence" (*A Light in the Attic* , p. 154.)

Clarence buys everything he sees advertised on TV. Including a brand-new Maw and Paw. Though the purchase is a success for Clarence, teachers may delve into the pros and cons of such a decision.

"Sick" (*Where the Sidewalk Ends* , p. 58-59.)

Peggy Ann McKay seems to have a million reasons why she is too ill to go to school, until she realizes that it's Saturday.

Bibliography

Books Related to the Teaching of Poetry

All of these texts by Kenneth Koch relate to the teaching of poetry to both children and adults. They discuss the elements of poetry and give examples of simple approaches that teachers may use in motivating students to write poetry. All, also, contain examples to illustrate the points and techniques that Koch is presenting.

Koch, Kenneth, *Making Your Own Day* . New York: Touchstone, 1998.

Koch, Kenneth, Rose, *Where Did You Get That Red* : Teaching Great Poetry to Children. New York: Vintage Books, Random House,

Inc., 1990.

Koch, Kenneth, *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

Koch, Kenneth, and Farrell, Kate, *Sleeping on the Wing*. New York: Vintage Books,

Random House, 1981.

Collections of Poetry by Shel Silverstein

These three books contain a variety of children's poetry by Shel Silverstein along with his trademark illustrations. In them, the teacher will find many poems that relate to the objectives of this unit. Although I have listed a few that I feel are particularly relevant, there are many more that the individual might prefer.

Silverstein, Shel, *A Light in the Attic* . New York: Harper Collins, 1981.

Silverstein, Shel, *Falling Up* . New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

Silverstein, Shel, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* . Harper and Row, 1974.

Books by Shel Silverstein

Silverstein has written a number of books for children that are also favorites of many adults. Most contain some of the same poetic elements found in his poem. All leave the reader with thoughts to ponder. Here are five that I have selected to use with my class.

Silverstein, Shel, *A Giraffe and a Half* . New York: Harper Collins 1964.

Children will enjoy the progressive repetition of this rhyming story. It is a story that some will enjoy memorizing just for the fun of it. It examines hypothetical things that might happen to alter a giraffe until things just seem to have gone too far. Silverstein then unravels events so that the giraffe gets back to being an ordinary giraffe. Though there is some room for discussion, this story is mostly for enjoyment.

Silverstein, Shel, *Lafcadio, the Lion Who Shot Back*. New York: Harper Collins, 1963.

After becoming a crack shot with a hunter's gun, becoming rich and world famous as a circus member, and finally becoming tired of his life as a near human, Lafcadio returns to the jungle, but his experiences have changed him forever. He cannot belong completely with either world and is left to face the conflicts his experiences have created. Provides many opportunities for discussion.

Silverstein, Shel, *The Giving Tree*. New York: Harper Collins, 1964.

Probably Silverstein's most popular book, it tells the tale of a tree that is willing to give everything it has to a demanding boy. Only when she is giving is she happy. The story raises many interesting questions especially regarding the relationships between male and female. Great opportunities for discussion.

Silverstein, Shel, *The Missing Piece* . New York: Harper Collins, 1976.

A circle, with a wedge missing, searches for its missing piece. When, after finding a number of possibilities that don't exactly fit, at last, the circle finds its missing piece. However, it soon discovers that it no longer can enjoy many of the things that made its life so interesting and enjoyable. The circle leaves the piece and rolls away happily singing of its continuing quest for the missing piece.

Provides many opportunities for discussion.

Silverstein, Shel, *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O* . New York: Harper Collins, 1981.

In this story we are presented with basically the same story, but now from the viewpoint of the missing. The results are similar, again, providing many opportunities for discussion.

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