



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2003 Volume III: Teaching Poetry in the Primary and Secondary Schools

Poetry: The Medium of Choice for Political Unrest

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Introduction

Why do we still produce and value lyric poetry? In the multimedia age, how could something lacking raging bass sounds or exuberant three-dimensional images be seen as worthwhile? Perhaps it is the multidimensionality of poetry and its undeniable power over the public that keeps the short literary genre so high in people's hearts.

This unit will explore one way that poetry allows people to express their views regarding topics that affect everyone: politics. Political poetry illustrates what makes modern society so unique. Our society expects varying views and differing opinions to appear in every media outlet available. That is, of course, unless the country is in conflict. When war or similar conflicts that arouse the fears of citizens are on the horizon, opposition becomes unpatriotic if not altogether treasonous. At these times passions are so inflamed that people who believe that they are simply acting out their civil right to free speech and protest are condemned and often blacklisted.

Political poetry has a long-standing tradition in American and World history. As each dynasty and civilization developed and collapsed, poets with political opinions were memorializing the events. As early as the first settlers visited America, poetry became a clear medium for people to express their political views. Colonial poets used political poetry to convey their patriotic pride as well as their uneasiness concerning the impending war with England. Phyllis Wheatley wrote numerous poems about the glory of Revolutionary leaders like George Washington. Songs praising both Loyalist and Patriot parties were commonly heard. During the First World War Era, poets like Ernst Toller and Wilfred Owen were quite vocal in their views about war and its effects on generations of soldiers.

More recently, poets have begun to voice their beliefs far more outspokenly than their predecessors. During the 1950s and 1960s, poets and songwriters did not simply speak their views to listeners and readers; rather, these poets screamed their pride in or disgust with America. In the 1950s the Beat generation created a public demand for poetry that spoke to those who were not afraid to go against the conservative majority. Poets like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and others pushed the envelope concerning political messages in poetry. Specifically, Ginsberg's "America" and "Howl" boasted a message and tone that had been previously unheard of by most Americans.

"All we are saying is give peace a chance," "War...what is it good for? Absolutely nothing," "There's battle lines being drawn/Nobody's right if everybody's wrong/Young people speaking their minds/Getting so much resistance from behind." You can't watch a movie about the 1960s without hearing these songs and others that voice similar responses to the Vietnam War. At a time when the world seemed overwhelmed with chaos, poetry even in song form became an outlet of choice for those who needed to vent their frustrations and fears. Although this response was not created by the hippie generation, it sparked a new acceptability for these anti-establishment poems. Our more recent political unrest has prompted a new resurgence of the genre. The Gulf War Era has reintroduced political poetry through both poems and songs. The controversy concerning political statements by artists is no less intense today than it was over two hundred years ago. There remain our loyal patriots and our conscientious objectors. The irony is that the patriots and the objectors share a common goal: the safety of their brethren. In the modern age, the fine line between them can mean the difference between an artist's name on an award nominee list and on a black list.

Objectives

The curriculum unit that will follow will offer new ways to make poetry more accessible to eleventh and/or twelfth grade students. Specifically, I teach this unit to an Advanced Placement Literature class, but I have also taught it to a class of students with varying abilities, and found similar success. The school in which I have taught this unit is an arts and humanities magnet high school, which means that the class is comprised of students from various suburban towns as well as the urban center of New Haven whose primary goals surround the arts. My aim for this time around teaching this unit is to incorporate as much media into lessons as possible. Students tend to look upon video, audio, and internet material as neither ethical nor academic. I would like to show students that media resources can be beneficial if the correct resources are used. In doing so I hope that students will learn that typing their assignment title into the search box in Google just won't do the trick. This unit will consist of Internet-based lessons and assignments and a unit-end project that requires an Internet-ready presentation.

Assuming that all activities are performed well and that all performance objectives have been met, through this curriculum unit students will:

- learn about the genre of political poetry and its uses in our culture.
- What is political poetry?
- Can students recognize political poetry?
- Is there a purpose to political poetry?
- Is there a place for the political within poetry?
- understand that all eras in history have protest poems or lyrics.
- What universals are consistent across all protest poems in history?
- Have protest poems evolved or improved?
- study the art of the protest poem by examining its elements
- Specifically how does the poet use his or her subject, occasion, audience, purpose, speaker, tone, rhetoric, and poetic devices?
- What is the intended message of the poem?

- learn how to identify the presence of bias and propaganda in poetry.
- Does the poet try to persuade with fear or intimidation?
- Does he or she use myths or lies about America to persuade?
- learn the preceding objectives through their study of poems and lyrics from multiple periods and various poets with differing perspectives on the political issues.
- Revolutionary War Era
- World War Era
- Vietnam Conflict Era
- Gulf Wars Era
- connect political poetry with protest novels.
- *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe
- *The Heroic Slave* by Frederick Douglass
- perform Internet-based lessons and assignments.
- Follow links as described in daily lesson plans
- Research websites that discuss the politicization of poetry
- understand that all poetry is biased and there are at least two sides to every political issue.
- Why is there a dichotomy when it comes to politics?
- Is every issue really as black and white as it is assumed?
- " create an Internet-ready multimedia presentation.
- Create an innovative digital visual presentation, or
- Turn the poem or lyrics into a complete song and video

Strategies

Introduction to Political Poetry

The unit will begin by introducing students to the idea of political poetry and its place in American and World History. Students will most likely take this poetic sub-genre as they do any other: it's just another useless detail to remember for the exams. What they may not realize and what is our responsibility to teach them is that this particular sub-genre is something they already know and probably admire. There are two ways that I have introduced this topic in the past and each has worked quite well. You need to know your students well enough to decide to what they will best respond. The first option is to show a video of protests from the past and present where people are chanting or singing particular protest lyrics. The second is to create and play a CD with a few protest songs from the present and past. Either way, you will want to give the media presentation to the students and then open up the class to dialogue. Personally, I like the element of surprise in my classroom so I never prompt them with introductions or objectives before activities like this. Rather, I prefer the activity to speak for itself so that students can interpret the objectives on their own, thus owning the lesson from the beginning. The dialogue may require some prompting by you as the moderator in order to get the discussion on the right track. Perhaps you ask students to journal about what they think is going on in the song or video that they observed. Then ask students to share their journaling with the class. You are really looking for students to say a few key things like: protest, radical, bias, perspective, propaganda, etc., depending upon the class and the material offered to them.

At this time, you may want to address the controversy over political poetry as students are probably wholly unaware of the issue. The issue of course is whether or not it is acceptable and/or expected for poets to be political. Is all poetry political? Should no poetry be political? I have my students research the Bulletin Board on the AbleMuse website entitled "Political Poetry: Eratosphere." The postings on this site all revolve around one initial post that asks whether or not there is a place for political poetry. The subsequent responses are amazing. Another site to which I send my students is Modern American Poetry's "Merwin on Political Poetry." This site includes an excerpt from W.S. Merwin concerning the debate. The last site that I assign is MSN's "Poetry and War, Again." This is an article concerning Laura Bush's poetry event in March 2003 that includes Yeats' politically apolitical poem concerning war. I assign students to read the sites thoroughly and write a persuasive essay wherein they discuss whether they believe there is a place for the political in poetry. They may use the arguments and resources stated in the articles or follow up on resources mentioned in the articles for more information. At any rate, after this assignment, students are meant to have a very firm opinion on the topic.

Connection

Once you have their attention concerning the idea of protest, it is a good idea to get them to connect to the idea. Ask students what they think is or was worthy of protesting. Perhaps students connect with the idea of civil rights, war, abolition, etc. I usually try to teach this unit after we have already studied a unit on the American Protest Novel, like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Frederick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave* so that students have the vocabulary necessary for understanding the art of protest. You will probably get at least a few of the stock joker comments from the usual suspects, but you can even utilize these seemingly useless interruptions as things that really are protested in our society.

When students seem to understand that the lyrics and songs have come from the poets' political opinions,

have students offer other examples with which they are familiar. Feel free to offer those that you think of during this dialogue, even if you wait until the end to share them so that you don't offer something that a student may come up with on his or her own.

Political Poetry

Next, you will want to bring in the heavy artillery. That is, start to introduce the poetry that you plan to study. Students will work with close readings of these pieces in order to gain a better understanding of the authors' views regarding war and politics and, more importantly, how the authors voice these views within the poetry. Specifically, students will study the functions of satire and irony shown through the elements of metaphor, personification, alliteration, hyperbole, diction, cultural reference, and antithesis.

Now, what poetry and what poets you study will be your next major decision and, again, this depends entirely upon your students and with what you feel they will connect. Because this unit can be used in any literature course, you can gear it to consist of whatever specifications you would like, e.g. World Literature, African American Literature, American Literature, Multicultural Literature, etc. As I stated in the introduction, I generally use this unit with my Advanced Placement Literature course, but I have also used it with my courses in Women's Literature and American Literature. Because of the number of Juniors and Seniors in my Advanced Placement Literature courses, I try to mix up the amount of World (although this mostly means British) and American Literature. This is to ensure that the Juniors will receive enough American Literature so that their lack of a wholly American literature course will not leave them unaware of the vital aspects of American Literature; but feel free to alter the material as you see fit. The following represents my plans for teaching this unit during the next school year with my Advanced Placement Literature Course.

American Revolutionary Political Poetry

I begin by introducing political poetry from early American history with which they are familiar from their American History course. Specifically, I use Phyllis Wheatley's "To His Excellency, General Washington" and the anonymous "Revolutionary Tea" to show the Patriots' side to the American Revolution, and the songs from the website "Loyalist, British Songs, and Poetry of the American Revolution" to show the Loyalists' side.

I begin teaching this section by assigning students to read through Discovery.com's website "The American Revolution: Causes," written by Gary Carmichael, before coming to class. Students are to read through the information, including the poem "Revolutionary Tea," and complete the six discussion questions. The discussion questions and pre- and post-reading information help get students into the right frame of mind for this section as it pulls in the historical context that is necessary to understand the perspective and bias of the poem. As we go over this poem and lesson in class, I also provide students with printouts from the website. Next, I pull in Wheatley's poem "To His Excellency, General Washington." After close reading of this poem, I ask students to discuss the portrayal of Washington through Wheatley's eyes.

The following day, I focus on the Loyalist side to the American Revolution. I start out by sending students to Christopher New's website "Loyalist, British Songs, and Poetry of the American Revolution." This website offers songs that greatly contrast with the heroic poems of the Patriots. Specifically, students will study the song "The Rebel." Students will need to break down the poem in order to analyze its political message just as they have done with previous poems.

I like to end this lesson by discussing how each side in the War had its own perspective and that neither was wrong or unreasonable. The poems illustrate how passionate and persuasive poets can be regardless on which

side of the battle lines they may lie. The Patriots felt as though their pride was as valuable as the Loyalists'. It is their perspective that creates their bias and it is their bias that helps them to work their rhetoric into persuasive arguments in poetic form.

World War Era Political Poetry

From there, I move on to discuss poetry from the World War Era; although you can supplement a section from the Civil War Era in between the two, for the sake of time I skip quite a bit here. During this time period, we study Wilfred Owen's poems "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "Dulce et Decorum Est" as well as Ernst Toller's "To the Mothers" and "Corpses in the Wood." Within this section we discuss how the authors' use of imagery turns the military propaganda into ironic mocking. I utilize the websites of "The Wilfred Owen Association" and Spartacus Schoolnet's "Ernst Toller" to show the poems and to discuss how the authors' lives and experiences in the War have led to their resentment of all things military.

I start this section by assigning students to read the assigned poems and the background information by exploring the sites and the links before coming to class. When students return to class I again provide them with printouts from the website

so that they can look over the poems as we discuss them in class. We start by discussing Owen's poems. I try not to set up the class around expected or assumed discourse; rather, I like to have a list of points that I feel should be made for each poem to use if discussion gets off-track or stalled. For Owen's poems, I want to make sure that students discuss the way that he uses the sound of harsh consonants and onomatopoeia to echo the sounds of war that he heard in battle as well as the gruesome images of soldiers and what they see in action.

When we move on to Toller's poems, I try to have students build on the poetic techniques analyzed in the Owen poems. Toller uses similar sounds and images in his recounting of war. After taking apart the poem, I have students work on the way that these two men, from such very different backgrounds, share such similar memories and horrific accounts of the front line. Both men's biographical sketches reveal a life stunted and maimed by war. They are condemned to see the same images and hear the same sounds for the remainder of their lives. The trauma is inconceivable.

A song that may be good to include at this time is "My Buddy" written by Gus Kahn and most recently recorded by Nancy Sinatra. The song speaks of a buddy that was lost in the war. This song is significant because it was actually written in response to World War I, but continues to resurface in popularity during every subsequent war.

Beat Generation and Civil Rights Political Poetry

The unit will then focus on poetry from specific authors from the Beat generation like Ginsberg and Kerouac as well as lyrics from songwriters/poets who wrote some of the most politically poignant lyrics of the generation. During this difficult time in American culture, people faced McCarthyism, Civil Rights, and the Vietnam War. Specifically, we will study John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance" and "Imagine," and Paul Simon's "The Sound of Silence" and "America." Then perhaps, if time and interest allows, we will focus on other poems/lyrics such as Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" and "Mercy, Mercy Me," Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," and Neil Young's "Ohio" as well as poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "I am Waiting."

In this section I have students take apart the song lyrics and poems by artist. For instance, I start out by

assigning students to visit the websites that include lyrics, interpretations, and biographical sketches for each poet. My point with these poems is not to see if students can interpret them, it is to see how they will connect the interpretations of each and all. I like to start out by studying Kerouac. Although his works are less overt than that of his peers in terms of political commentary, I feel that students tend to automatically associate the Beat Poets with Jack Kerouac so the transition is a bit easier. I have found a boxed set of CDs that include audio recordings of Kerouac (and others) reading some of his better-known works, some complete with musical accompaniment. At our arts school, students tend to really connect with this overlapping of language and music, so it does the trick.

Once they are comfortable with the Beats, thanks to Kerouac, I like to make a complete shift to Ginsberg's works. To really shock students, I send them to Ginsberg's website to read "America." I assign them to list and then research as many of the little allusions that escape them in the poem as they can. When they come back to class they are stunned that they were assigned to read a poem with so much vulgar language and topical reference in it. They usually start by nonchalantly asking me if I read the poem before I assigned it. (At least now I really know that they've read it.) We spend at least an entire class on this poem alone. We cover the allusions and more direct references for a bit, but we then move on to discuss the idea of satire, parody, irony, and sarcasm. Students tend to really enjoy this lesson because the terms seem so sophisticated and difficult, yet they find that they already understand them without knowing what they were called.

For the next day I assign students to read Ginsberg's "Howl." Now, if you are unfamiliar with the poem, you will want to be sure that you get to know it before you decide to study it in your class. "Howl" led to an enormously well covered obscenity trial for its publisher that was ultimately lost by the conservative prosecution. I also like to refer students to the website "Annotated 'Howl'" by Levi Asher. This particular version of the poem offers annotations regarding particular sections of the poem and its allusions. This poem brings up far more than America's hypocrisy. It also addresses the enormous group of cultural deviants of which he feels a part, discusses psychological meltdowns, and includes a pretty racy sexual component. When we are ready to discuss this poem in class, I start by having students get a permission slip signed by parents or guardians stating that they have read the poem and that they don't mind their seniors studying the poem. When we do study the poem, rather than having students or myself read through the poem, I play the recording of Allen Ginsberg's performance. After this, we discuss not only the poem, but also the trial and the topic of censorship regarding literature. If the lessons have been proceeding well and time allows, this is a good place to include the study of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "I am Waiting."

Next, I like to shift to studying song lyrics. Again, they are usually familiar with these songs so it makes it really easy to transition here. When we get to more genre-specific songs, it helps to study the lyrics before allowing students to listen to the song: this puts kids less likely to begin the whole 'I don't listen to that kind of crap' argument that may otherwise ensue. Lyrics are lyrics: they can cross genre lines regardless of the music that may accompany them in their final form.

We begin with John Lennon, a necessity for any good peace rally. "Give Peace a Chance" includes discussion of the issues of the day with the repeated title chorus. The song is almost saying that although these are the issues we are debating, can't we just forget them for a bit so that we can all get along to save ourselves. Interestingly enough, the lyrics also name Ginsberg and Dylan. Lennon's "Imagine" offers similar commentary, but with an outward message of peace in terms of the world sharing all lands and possessions, the brotherhood of man, and the idea that conflict is unnecessary.

Paul Simon's "America" and "Sound of Silence" share Lennon's ideals, but offers a different approach. Simon's

"America" is a far more palatable discussion of the country's troubles than Ginsberg's. Then again, Simon was looking to stay in the good graces of as many troubled countrymen as possible in order to sell records. Simon needed to speak his views to the mass public with a far more neutral tone. He chose to personify the nation as something everyone seemed to be seeking. His artistry is evident through his ability to capture the spirit of the era through offering listeners/readers ordinary American cultural events and items: taking a trip via Greyhound, smoking cigarettes, eating Mrs. Wagner pies, etc. This device welcomes the reader by expressing the shared identity and experiences of Americans, unlike the approach of Ginsberg who vilifies the reader as being one of the sheep who take part in the expected events.

"Sound of Silence" uses a similar approach by not outwardly offending, preaching, or complaining; rather, he allows the lyrics to inspire listeners to decipher the meaning and to question precisely what the messages are as he refers to them in the song. An interesting point I like to focus on in this poem is the passage, "People talking without speaking/People hearing without listening/People writing songs that voices never share." The use of parallel structure forces the reader/listener to pay attention to these lines, and the use of paradox in the first two lines gives an opportunity to open up a thoughtful conversation on the device and the political concepts to which it refers. Most important, though, is the question that arises from the last of these three lines: why wouldn't the writer voice his or her songs? This question leads into the concept of fearing backlash for unpopular or liberal opinions, still to be feared today.

A few other possibilities for this section of the unit are Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," Marvin Gaye's "Mercy, Mercy Me" and "What's Going On," Neil Young's "Ohio," and Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." Depending upon your familiarity with these songs, you may wish to make selections with which you can be comfortable.

In contrast to these poets who felt that peace and love were the only answers or that America was far from being the ideal place to live (as was the conditioned response), there were poets and lyricists who believed that those with complaints and without a draft card had no business being in their America. These pro-America and anti-Hippie artists penned lyrics and poems that equally held no punches when it came to expressing their distaste for those who doth protest too much.

Many of these responses in the form of song lyrics came from various country music artists who held traditional American values. Merle Haggard, well known for his conservative views on life, released "Thank God I'm a Country Boy" and "Okie from Muskogee" in an attempt to offer his voice to the argument. In "Okie" Haggard tells us what Okies do and don't do in "Muskogee, Oklahoma, USA" in order to assert that their dichotomous partnersthose disrespecting Hippiesdo and don't do the very opposite. This contrast sets up the us and them battle and forces the audience to either side with the Okies against the Hippies if they want to be considered to possess any of the positive characteristics that Okies do or disagree with the Okies and be considered one of the Hippies and consequently possess none of the Okies' qualities and all of the Hippies faults. Okies don't "smoke marijuana," take "trips on LSD," "burn our draft cards down on Main Street," "make a party out of lovin'," or "let our hair grow long and shaggy,/like the hippies out in San Francisco do;" all those crazy protestors and Hippies must do these things and these things must be bad or wrong. Okies do "like livin' right, and bein' free," "like holdin' hands," wear "manly footwear" like boots, and "respect the college dean" so those crazy Hippies must not do any of these things. This black and white debate that refuses to leave any room for gray in the middle is the very basis of the controversy.

"Song of the Patriot" written by Marty Robbins and performed with Johnny Cash, offers a different approach. Rather than unearthing the contrast between the good and the bad, this poem hypes up the patriotic side of

the argument to confirm it as the right and good side. The references to each of the symbols of America and the myth of America as "the greatest country here on God's green earth" enforce the view that to be a good American is to agree with the philosophies and messages of the lyrics. Symbolic references and historical allusions include "Uncle Sam," "rough riding," "Yankee," "apple pie," "the old red, white and blue," "old glory," a quote by "Teddy." All of which lead up to the conflict concerning seeing "old glory burning," when the audience is to suddenly be filled with Patriotic anger to fight the revolting traitors.

Other songs that can fit into this section of the unit include "Ballad of the Green Berets," "The Battle of Vietnam," "The Fightin Side of Me," "The Gallant Men," "Keep the Flag Flying," "What We're Fightin For," and "What's Come Over This World." For the sake of time you may wish to spend some time looking over the list to see which you would like to include when teaching this unit.

Gulf War Era Political Poetry

Next, students will use this knowledge in order to address more contemporary lyrics by various country and folk artists and poems by Alix Olsen. The focus on this particular section of the unit is as much on the public response to the poetry as it is on the poetry itself. That is, it is important for students to analyze the poetry as well as the way that the poetry/lyrics were received. The more contemporary works offer an extraordinary opportunity to engage students because most will have a strong opinion regarding the subjects for which they were alive and aware, unlike that of the historical political poetry to which they have less of a connection. This connection, after all, is the reason for this unit. After the past few years that have been filled with attacks and wars, students have been desperate to see the responses from others as well as respond themselves. I created this unit to give them such an outlet in their safer, more structured academic world.

Since September 11, 2001, there has been an explosion of response to the terrorist attacks and later to the conflict with Iraq. The first and perhaps greatest response came in the genre of Country music. Immediately, artists began releasing new songs that they had written in response to the attacks of 9-11 and previously written songs that seemed particularly appropriate because of the situation. Just as with the Vietnam Conflict, there were country artists who spoke out as the patriotic conservatives they have come to be known, but, surprisingly, it has also been the country artists with the loudest voices against the violence and revenge. Alan Jackson wrote and released "Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning" and performed it at the Grammy's for all the world to see. His lyrics seemed not to offer a stance on retaliation, but on reflection of our country's turmoil. The lyrics seem to echo the conversations that everyone was having following the attacks, mostly based upon where one would happen to have been and what they happened to have been doing on that somber morning. Soon after, Aaron Tippin released "Where the Stars and Stripes and the Eagles Fly," a song that he had previously felt was too patriotic for mainstream country, but after the circumstances of terrorism seemed to perfectly express the feelings of many Americans. These lyrics mostly speak of patriotism and pride for America, but there are a few lines devoted to denouncing Americans who question the belief that America is the freest country in the world. Going even further toward outright anger, Toby Keith released "Brought to you Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue/The Angry American." This song received as much acclaim from listeners as it did controversy thanks to Peter Jennings, probably based upon the same lines of the song. The lyrics read "We'll put a boot in your ass/It's the American way." Jennings wanted Keith to perform the song on an ABC special but only if he would edit those lines. Keith felt that it was utter censorship and commented that Jennings just didn't get it because "he's Canadian isn't he?" At any rate, the biting, aggressive, assaultive lyrics that offended people like Jennings sparked a flame of patriotism in many others. The song's vengeance and retaliation for those that harmed our country sounded like bittersweet memories of schoolyard fights against little bullies who dared to sucker-punch the bigger but quiet kids.

Since the situation with Iraq escalated in 2002-2003, country artists have again stepped up to become for this generation what the folk radicals were for the 60s. As people across the world were beginning to take up sides for or against the President's decision for war with Iraq, so were country artists. Like any other politicians or political speech writers, these artists used their skills of rhetoric to try to persuade their audience to see their side of the controversy. They use emotional appeals and various techniques of argument to reach their listeners. Country singer/songwriters Darryl Worley and Phil Vassar are perfect examples of this. Worley penned a song entitled "Have You Forgotten" wherein he begins, "I hear people saying we don't need this war/...Before you start preaching/Let me ask you this my friend." He begins the lyrics by setting up the argument that those opposed to the war must be wrong and he will tell us why as the song continues. What he continues with is exploitation of the already fragile emotions of many Americans. He follows with the descriptive chorus of: "Have you forgotten how it felt that day/To see your homeland under fire/And her people blown away?/Have you forgotten when those towers fell?" These lines, in direct reference to the attacks of 9-11, are meant, rather obviously, to enrage listeners to support the war or seem unwilling to honor the people lost by the terror attacks. The end of the chorus reads, "And you say we shouldn't worry 'bout Bin Laden/Have you forgotten?" Again, the use of rhetoric is artful, but the basis is flawed. Worley is using the horrific, emotional cues of 9-11 to argue the basis for war with Iraq. Are we Americans that foolish that we would fall for such a bait and switch? We did. Thousands of listeners called into radio stations and talk shows requesting the song and thanking Worley for finally shutting up those anti-American protestors. These people saw the lyrics as the evidence the protestors needed in order to support the war. The fact that it was a war with a different country for far different reasons that had absolutely nothing to do with Bin Laden or the terror attacks seemed irrelevant to these Americans.

In the hype of this, the Dixie Chicks got mixed up as an enemy in this battle and came out looking like traitors to many. The initial issue began when the Chicks' lead singer, Natalie Mains, was reported as saying that Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue/The Angry American" was "ignorant" and made America seem like a country full of vigilantes, ready to fight on demand. The latest controversy was based upon the fact that at a concert in Europe where the majority were against the action toward Iraq Mains commented that she was embarrassed that President Bush was from her home state of Texas. The crowd was amused by the comment, but many back home were deeply offended. Some radio stations were calling listeners to come down to the stations and toss their Dixie Chicks CDs and merchandise into bonfires to show their disgust for the once beloved group. Even after apologizing for the comment, the Chicks seemed tainted with anti-Americanism when they were booed by a number of members of the audience of fellow country artists at the Country Music Awards in 2003. I suppose it didn't make a difference that they had a hit with their song "Soldier's Coming Home" that spoke of a young Army recruit and the girl he met just before being deployed, illustrating the unspoken and often unseen terrors of the soldiers and those they leave behind.

In a less controversial response to the war, Phil Vassar released "This is God," a song written from the perspective of God trying to talk to the human race and tell them that they have really gotten the wrong impression concerning how to live their lives. Perhaps the most prophetic lines of the song read, "Yeah, this is God:/You fight each other in my name./Treat life like it's a foolish game./Well, I say, you've got the wrong idea." These lines, contrarily to those of Worley, use emotional appeals to try to show that there is no need for such violence. Vassar uses the motive of the aggressors in this case, religious views that they must kill in their God's name and turns it against them by saying that it is not what God had meant in the first place. This song, perhaps because it did not share the same aggressive tone as others, quietly played without discussion or enlightenment as Vassar may have desired.

With a radical opinion that is focused far away from the idea of terrorism and foreign wars is slam poet Alix

Olson. Olson came to notoriety in the late 1990s within the realm of slam poetry and women's festivals. Each poem is performed, sometimes set to music, beats, or just background rhythms. Olson's flavorful repertoire includes a poem concerned entirely with hair and not your head variety either; rather, she focuses on armpit and the ever-avoided pubic hair to make her satirical, often parody-like points well known. For this unit, I plan to use "America's On Sale," a tongue-in-cheek list of cultural references and allusions aimed at raising her audience's awareness of the grossly consumerist, materialist, and capitalist society in which we live. Her intention seems to be to shock listeners with her honesty and brashness in order to make them feel guilty for taking part in such horrible rituals of the masses. There is an audio and a text version of this poem available at her website. Another variation of this unit could be spent entirely on poems entitled "America." The three poems in this unit alone show such vastly different Americas, but the addition of Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes would be interesting as well.

Other possibilities include using rock lyrics of the more recent variety, such as Robert Plant's "Network News," which was written in response to the Gulf War in 1991. Additionally, you may wish to include a section regarding Native American issues, including poetry and lyrics by and about Native Americans and their struggles. The material that you choose to use is really up to you. It is important that you select poems and lyrics that you are comfortable teaching and that your students may enjoy learning.

Assessment

Students will be asked to keep a daily journal of their poetic journey. In this journal, they are to discuss what poems and poets they learned about on a daily basis and share what important or interesting information they learned about them. This is a place for students to truly begin seeing the relevance of poetry in society. Along with their daily notes, students are to seek pictures, articles, other poems or songs, etc. that allude to or mention the poems or poets that we discuss in class. Students then begin to believe that these poems and poets really are expected to be in our cultural repertoires.

Additionally, students will be asked to write two essays: one in the middle of the unit and one at the end of the unit. In the first essay, students are to take one or two of the poems studied and argue their interpretation of the individual poem or connection between the two poems. The second essay requires that students conduct research regarding a specific poem's and poet's reception, influence, and effect on his or her peers. The essays are to meet our class standard of 3-5 typed, double-spaced pages in Times New Roman 12 following all MLA standards. The poems selected and thesis are entirely up to the students but must be approved before students begin to actually craft a draft. Essays must include an outline, multiple drafts, and a Works Cited/Consulted page.

As we are an arts and humanities magnet high school, students will be asked to take their papers a step further by creating a completed media project. Students will elect to either work independently or in a group, and create what they choose to create. As our student-elected art concentrations include choir, music, drama, visual arts, film, and dance, projects may include turning the poem into a song complete with music accompaniment or creating an innovative visual presentation of the poem. Each project, regardless of content, must be ready to be placed on the Internet site.

The primary objective of this unit is to help students see the relevance of poetry even in our technologically-focused culture and the power the issues-oriented poetry possesses over the culture in which we live. Many people in today's society question the value of poetry in light of the advancement of technology and the scientific sophistication of people who no longer need myths or inspirational protocols for life. Considering the public response to political poetry/lyrics from the last one hundred years alone, one seems to have an answer

to this criticism.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One

Overarching Questions Addressed

- What is political poetry?
- Can you recognize political poetry in the world?
- What is going on/what is the situation and/or message in political poetry?
- What universal cues are present in political poetry?
- Is there a place for the political within poetry? (Preview of next lesson)

Materials

- CD Player
- CD Compilation of Songs of Protest
- Large Writing Area and Utensils (Newsprint or Board and Markers or Chalk)
- (Students should have) Designated Journal or Notebook Section

Into Activities

- The element of surprise! No introductions or hints as to lesson.
- Have students prepare journals for immediate use. Instruct students to take notes in their journal during each song regarding the questions: What is going on/what is the situation and or message? After each song, students will be given a few minutes to write a timed journal response in sentence form wherein they respond to the questions: What do these songs share/what is the point of this lesson?
- Play the CD, stopping for a few minutes after each song to allow students to journal in response to the above questions, using their notes as guides.
- Really prompt students to stay quiet and dig deep in their responses.

Through Activities

- After students have completed journaling for all of the songs you plan to use, begin full class discourse. Begin by asking students to read from their journals regarding particular songs, starting from the first. As students begin to speak from their heads rather than their journals, let them go with it. This dialogue is the point for the journaling anyway.
- Get students to really analyze what they have found in terms of connections between the songs. Students should respond with something about how they are all geared toward protesting, peace, changing the world, etc.
- Prompt students to respond as to why you have asked them to do this activity and what it has to do with literature. Students should respond with something about how lyrics are really poems and this is just a particular type.
- Ask students then what type of poetry this is. Students should come close to political, protest, social reform poetry.
- Ask students to make connections to other texts. Students should connect the songs with the Protest Novels studied earlier in the year, such as Uncle Tom's Cabin and The Heroic Slave.
- Then ask students to decide what characteristics exist within political/protest poetry. Students should respond with really interesting things here like lyric poem, encourages thought, takes a stance, uses rhetoric, aims to persuade, etc.

Beyond Activities

- Ask students to take what they have learned/observed/considered today and consider if there is a place for the political within poetry and whether or not the political belongs within poetry.
- Have students journal about it for homework.*

*This lesson assumes that the process of journaling has been laid forth earlier in the class so that simple prompts are enough to receive the response for which you are looking. If this is not the case, you must define what the journaling assignments will entail.

Lesson Two

Overarching Question(s) Addressed

- Is there a place for the political within poetry?

Materials

- Large Writing Area and Utensils (Newsprint or Board and Markers or Chalk)
- (Students should have) Designated Journal or Notebook Section
- (Each student should have access to) An Internet-ready Computer

Into Activities

- Prompt students to recall the last portion of yesterday's lesson by considering whether or not there is a place for the political within poetry.
- Have a few students share their journal entries from the previous night to begin the discussion. Do not let students discuss the topic outside of their journals only for the sake of time.
- Students should offer varying points of views based upon different arguments.

Through Activities

- This lesson is based almost entirely on the Internet so students need to have access to Internet-ready computers for this lesson.
- Have the sites that students will visit written on the board for them to see and perhaps have them placed on the favorites or bookmarks lists on the computers ahead of time so that they can easily navigate their way to the sites.
- Students will begin at the Bulletin Board at AbleMuse (as listed in the Bibliography). The webpage, entitled "Political Poetry: Eratosphere," contains postings devoted entirely to the debate concerning whether or not there is a place for the political within poetry.
- Students will continue to Modern American Poetry's website, specifically a webpage entitled "Merwin on Political Poetry" (also listed in the Bibliography). The article on this page offers W. S. Merwin's take on the subject.
- Next, students are to travel to MSN to read "Poetry and War, Again." The article on this page discusses Laura Bush's poetry event in March 2003.
- Assign students to read the sites thoroughly and take notes in their journals concerning the major arguments and intentions of each.*

Beyond Activities

- Ask students to take what they have learned/observed/considered today and reconsider if there is a place for the political within poetry and whether or not the political belongs within poetry. They are to do so by writing a persuasive essay wherein they discuss whether or not they believe there is a place for the political within poetry. Due the subsequent class day.

*This lesson assumes that the process of journaling has been laid forth earlier in the class so that simple prompts are enough to receive the response for which you are looking. If this is not the case, you must define what the journaling assignments will entail.

Lesson Three

Overarching Questions Addressed

- How similar are forms of Protest Literature?
- Do Protest Poems function in the same manner as Protest Novels?
- Are Protest Poems as effective as Protest Novels?
- What are the subjects of protest literature and poetry specifically?

Materials

- Large Writing Area and Utensils (Newsprint or Board and Markers or Chalk)
- (Students should have) Designated Journal or Notebook Section

Into Activities

- Prompt students to consider the elements of political/protest poetry as discussed during Lesson One of this unit.
- Prompt students to consider the elements of protest or social reform novels as studied earlier in the year.

Through Activities

- Prompt students to consider the connections between these two types of protest literature.
- Ask students whether or not these genres work similarly or differently.
- Ask students to consider whether these genres are equally effective in persuading their audiences and encouraging action and/or change.

Beyond Activities

- Ask students to consider what other subjects are worthy of such intense public and/or individual protest.
- Ask students to offer other examples of protest literature with which they are familiar.
- For homework, have students find five new examples by discussing the activity with family and friends. Have students record these examples in their journals.*

*This lesson assumes that the process of journaling has been laid forth earlier in the class so that simple prompts are enough to receive the response for which you are looking. If this is not the case, you must define what the journaling assignments will entail.

Resources

Annotated Bibliography for Teachers

Andresen, Lee. "Battle Notes: A Teaching Tool." 22 May 2001. BattleNotes. 13 July 2003

http://www.battlenotes.com/Battle_Notes_A_Teaching_Tool.html>. This site has a tremendous listing of songs listed by type: protest, patriotism, war, etc. and a fairly useful lesson plan.

Asher, Levi. "Annotated Howl." 2002. 25 May 2003 <http://www.charm.net/~brooklyn/Poems/Howl.html>>. This site offers the words to Ginsberg's "Howl" along with annotations concerning direct references and allusions as well as commentaries on the poem's reception.

Brown, Calvin S. *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts*. Hanover: UP of New England, 1987. A work that furthers the discussion of poetry and music lyrics.

Carmichael, Gary. 2002. *Discovery.com*. 25 May 2003 <http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/revwar1/>>. This site offers the lyrics to the Revolutionary War songs as well as a standard lesson plan.

Clinton-Baddeley, V.C. *Words for Music*. Cambridge: The University Press, 1941. A bit out-dated, but this is an excellent source of information on the earlier examples of poetry and music's tangled relationship.

Critical Inquiry. Summer 1987. 25 May 2003 <http://www.uchicago.edu/research/jnl-crit-inq/v1-v19/v13n3.html>>. This site boasts an interesting article concerning political poetry and social reform if you can track it down.

Damsker, Matt. *Rock Voices: The Best Lyrics of an Era*. New York: St. Martin's, 1980. This is an excellent collection of lyrics to classic rock songs, complete with commentary and analysis of each of the songs.

"Ernst Toller." Spartacus. 25 May 2003 <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWtoller.htm>>. This is an excellent site that offers poems with annotations along with a biographical sketch of Toller's life.

Fisher-Reed, Terri. "Connecting Songs and Stories." *Classroom Notes Plus* April 2001: 4-5. This article offers an interesting lesson plan that utilizes popular songs and lyrics as connectors to the high school classic literature.

Ginsberg, Allen. "America." 19 January 1999. University of Pennsylvania. 25 May 2003
<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/america.html>>. This site offers the complete text of Ginsberg's poem "America."

---. Editor. *Poems for the Nation: A Collection of Contemporary Political Poems* . New York: Seven Stories, 2000. Really the title says it all; I'd recommend it.

Gourly, Catherine. "How Does Music Change Your Mood?" *Writing!* January 2001: 9-11. This is an article geared toward students that discusses how various poems and music can alter mood. It is a follow-up to the next citation that surrounds using lyrics to teach poetry.

Kizis, Sarah. "The Lyrics of Rebellion." *Writing!* January 2001: 4-7. This is an article summarizing a detailed lesson on studying the art of lyrics and creating lyrics.

Kunstler, William Moses. *Hints and Allegations: The World in Poetry and Prose* . New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994. This is a well-written text that explores, among other things, the relationship between politics and poetry.

"Merwin on Political Poetry." *Modern American Poetry*. 25 May 2003
http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/merwin/political.htm>. This is a great (and short) piece about the political and its place within poetry. A must read!

Morrison, Lillian, ed. *Rhythm Road: Poems to Move to* . New York: Morrow, 1988. This text is a collection of song lyrics and poems that celebrate rhythm.

New, Christopher M. "Loyalist, British Songs & Poetry of the American Revolution." 1996. 25 May 2003
<http://users.erols.com/candidus/music.htm>>. This is a great collection of song lyrics and poems from both sides of the American Revolution.

Olson, Alix. "Written WordAmerica." 2003. Alix Olsen. 29 March 2003
<http://www.alixolsen.com/written.html>>. This is Alix Olsen's official site, where one can find lyrics, recordings, etc.

Perone, James E. *Songs of the Vietnam Conflict* . Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001. This text offers readers a good overview of the songs that most readily represent the Vietnam Conflict, from both perspectives.

Pinsky, Robert. "Poetry and War, Again." 14 March 2003. MSN. 25 May 2003
<http://slate.msn.com/id/2080074/>>. This is kind of a funny article that pokes fun at the First Lady's attempt at a poetry event with no poets willing to attend for political reasons.

"Political Poetry: Eratosphere" 29 July 2002. Able Muse. 25 May 2003
<http://www.ablemuse.com/erato/ubbhtml/Forum15/HTML/000108.html>>. This site is actually a message board with hundreds of posting regarding the debate concerning whether there is a place for the political within poetry.

Pordon, Judith. "Social, Political and Antiwar Poems." 30 April 2003. 25 May 2003
<http://judithpordon.tripod.com/poetry/id125.html>>. This is an interesting site, but not quite the poems you'd think.

"Reading Poetry in Times of War." 17 May 2003. University of Texas-Austin. 25 May 2003
<http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~schonberg/rhe309s03/Eliana/>>. This site was created by a class at UT-Austin regarding political poetry and its effects on people during times of war and conflict.

"Rock & Roll through Literary Terms." 2003. Rock & Roll Library. 13 July 2003
<http://www.rocklibrary.com/Education/Lessons/literary.html>>. This site is really great. I can't wait to teach some of its ideas to my

students. If nothing else, it offers a good listing of classic songs and the poetic tools their authors used to create them.

Santovasi, Susan. "The Poetry We Sing." 2001. Yale New Haven Teachers Institute. 13 July 2003 [/curriculum/units/2001/3/01.03.07.x.html](#)>. This is a link to my last YNHTI Curriculum Unit, which contains a number of valuable resources including a concise list of literary terms and definitions.

Scully, James. *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1988. This text is lacking the more recent poetic responses to social and political responses, but that which it does include is very helpful.

Stark, David and Michael Randolfi. *Inspirations: Original Lyrics and the Stories behind the Greatest Songs Ever Written*. New York: Sanctuary, 1999. This is a great book on lyrics and their origins.

"Twentieth Century Poetry and War." Learn Peace. 25 May 2003 <http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/poetry/index.html>>. This is a peace-loving foundation's site that shares the findings of its research studies.

Vassar, Phil. "This is God." Coquet-Shack.com. 8 April 2003 [http://www.coquetshack.com/lyrics/Lyrics T/This Is God 1866.htm](http://www.coquetshack.com/lyrics/Lyrics%20This%20Is%20God%201866.htm)>. This site includes lyrics to the song.

"Wilfred Owen-Poetry." 1999. Wilfred Owen Association. 25 May 2003 <http://www.1914-18.co.uk/woa/>>. This is the official site of Wilfred Owen and his poetry.

Worley, Darryl and Wynn Varble. "Have You Forgotten." AnySongLyrics.com. 2003 <http://www.anysonglyrics.com/lyrics/d/darrylworley/haveyouforgotten.htm>>. This site offers lyrics to the song.

Annotated Reading List for Students

Students will be asked to read through the above-mentioned works either through computers or handouts. Most works will be assigned from handouts that include the readings of particular poems and song lyrics. All other works will be assigned by directing students to specific websites to read poems and song lyrics. Specifically, they will visit the following websites:

Asher, Levi. "Annotated Howl." 2002. 25 May 2003 <http://www.charm.net/~brooklyn/Poems/Howl.html>>. This site offers the words to Ginsberg's "Howl" along with annotations concerning direct references and allusions as well as commentaries on the poem's reception.

Carmichael, Gary. 2002. Discovery.com. 25 May 2003 <http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/revwar1/>>. This site offers the lyrics to the Revolutionary War songs as well as a standard lesson plan.

"Ernst Toller." *Spartacus*. 25 May 2003 <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWtoller.htm>>. This is an excellent site that offers poems with annotations along with a biographical sketch of Toller's life.

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Vassar, Phil. "This is God." Coquet-Shack.com. 8 April 2003 <http://www.coquetshack.com/lyrics/Lyrics T/This Is God 1866.htm>>. This site contains lyrics to the song.

"Wilfred Owen-Poetry." 1999. Wilfred Owen Association. 25 May 2003 <http://www.1914-18.co.uk/woa/>>. This is the official site of Wilfred Owen and his poetry.

Worley, Darryl and Wynn Varble. "Have You Forgotten." AnySongLyrics.com. 2003 <http://www.anysonglyrics.com/lyrics/d/darrylworley/haveyouforgotten.htm>>. This site contains lyrics to the song.

Materials for Classroom Use

The following is a list of items that I use or have considered using in order to teach this curriculum unit; however, you may feel free to alter this list as you see fit.

- Access to an Internet-equipped computer for each student
- Overhead projector
- Compact Disc Player
- Compact Disc recordings of various poets performing their political poems and/or lyrics
- Assignment sheets with assignments, web addresses, and directions for each day of the unit
- Overheads of various song lyrics and poems as selected for the unit
- Paper copies of various song lyrics and poems for students to keep and write on during group discussions and close readings
- Any other details that I have forgotten to mention in my presumptuousness

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