



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

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## Introduction

Our 2003 Seminar was entitled "Poems on Pictures, Places, and People." We studied poems on those topics in roughly that sequence, supplemented by poems suggested by the Fellows. After introductory sections on the definition, overall history, and technical aspects of poetry, we devoted one meeting entirely to children's poetry from the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries chiefly selected from *The Oxford Book of Children's Verse*. We continued with three weeks each devoted to traditional and contemporary poems on pictures and other art objects (ecphrastic poems), on places (or the sense of place), and on people (and animals or other things or ideas speaking or addressed as people). These categories allowed us to consider the following broad themes, respectively: the orientation of poetry to other modes of expression; the orientation of poetry to the surrounding world; the orientation of poetry, as voiced utterance, to its audience and to social themes. As occasion arose, we discussed the genres and forms of poetry. During the last two sessions, we discussed additional poems brought in by Fellows and returned to a list of technical terms that had been distributed at the outset by the seminar leader.

Apart from a few of the technical terms such as metaphor, alliteration, and personification, however, this was not a subject matter that was likely to find its way by any direct means into the teaching plans of public school teachers—with the exception of one Fellow who was preparing twelfth graders for their Advanced Placement exams. We can naturally hope that our discussions exerted an indirect influence on the curriculum units that follow, and on their authors' way of reading of poetry; but their main concern from the beginning, quite understandably, was the practical business of preparing material that would be suitable for their students and their State-mandated teaching objectives. Indeed, from the time the first drafts were submitted, we set aside much of our time to the presentation by each Fellow in turn of their unit material. During these discussions, the degree of cooperation, mutual interest, and constructive suggestion among the Fellows was truly remarkable.

From these discussions alone (and from the units that follow), one can arrive at certain useful generalizations about the practical benefits of teaching and learning poetry at the successive grade levels. In early primary grades, the strong rhythms, recurrence of sound, vividness of imagery, and memorability of verse enhance and accelerate the language learning process, especially that part of the process that builds up clusters of kindred words. Cognitive and moral development through poetry is also brought in at this stage (e. g., music, science, geography, thoughtful behavior), but the emphasis remains the medium of language. The energetic and memorable qualities of verse continue to make poetry useful for teachers in the later grades, but the emphasis changes to content. In the fifth through middle school grades, reading and writing poetry would appear to be useful mainly as a memorable means of teaching "across the curriculum" and modeling social roles. This emphasis continues through the high school grades except, again, where the emphasis is on

college preparation. At this level, something like a balanced understanding of poetry as a unique medium of communication featuring the complete interdependence of form and content can begin to be conveyed.

To acknowledge the practical emphasis of all our participants, then, I have arranged the units that follow quite simply in order of grade level. As will be seen, this arrangement results at the same time in a grouping by theme. We begin, then, with the reunion of the "Beecher School Team" that participated in this seminar when I led it ten years ago. (The end-of-the-year performance at the Beecher School that built on work done in that seminar was written up the following year by Jean Sutherland and me in the Teachers Institute newsletter, *On Common Ground* .) Using her celebrated voice puppets to animate the material, Geraldine Martin presents a unit for first graders and up on the poems of Jack Prelutsky, one that touches on broadly related activities (such as dance) even beyond those mentioned above. Beecher music teacher Thomas Sullivan uses a sequence of Mother Goose rhymes to introduce the rudiments of musical understanding to third graders. Interested teachers will wish to read his initial remarks on the differences and similarities between music and poetry in the history of education. Jean Sutherland, who completes the Beecher Team, offers a unit on Shel Silverstein for slightly older students, emphasizing not only the poetry but the books of prose and illustration. Her sequence of lesson plans shows how one poem can be adapted to a variety of teaching purposes. Next, Christine Elmore offers a unit on three women who write children's poetry: Karla Kuskin, Valerie Worth, and Patricia Hubbell. Teachers will find her references to the secondary literature on teaching the reading and writing of children's poetry especially helpful. Zoila Brown teaches fifth grade in an environment that emphasizes "across the curriculum" teaching, and accordingly offers a unit on "making connections" through poetry with science, history, social studies, performance-and with other people. Amber Stolz teaches in a small high school that emphasizes character development, and she accordingly chose to present the work of Maya Angelou, whose many autobiographies and high profile make her an interestingly complex role model. Amber uses a sequence of poems to develop a sense of Maya Angelou as a person. Mindi Englart presents a carefully-researched unit on teaching rap music to grades 9-12. She emphasizes positive, socially constructive lyrics by Nas and others, but does not overlook the socially aggressive side of rap (giving advice on how to approach the raw language and violence), and connects this form with other traditions of dissonant poetry. Susan Santovasi has devised a unit for grades 11-12 concerning poems of protest and political commentary, focusing especially on reactions to war, from the Revolutionary War to Vietnam and the Gulf Wars. Like Englart, she moves into music lyrics in exploring modern protest, but also devotes much of her time to traditional poems. Dina Secchiaroli finally is the teacher above-mentioned who is preparing her students for the Advanced Placement exams, and offers a unit modeling how this might be done, offering a wide variety of poems and genres (traditional and recent), keeping in mind actual questions asked on recent exams, and giving examples of "close reading" techniques.

Together, these units truly reflect what it might be like to teach poetry from grades K-12, and memorialize an enjoyable and interesting seminar. We do hope to have offered something of interest for all poetry teachers

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