



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2011 Volume III: The Sound of Words: An Introduction to Poetry

Introduction

Our seminar used a focus on sound as a way to approach poetry. In poetry, sound is a primary organizational principle: rhythm, rhyme, alliteration – these and a host of other "sound effects" structure poetry, and set it apart from other kinds of language use. Poetry can be a daunting subject in the classroom, because it is often difficult to say what it means, and students shy away from it under the pressure to unlock its meaning. But a focus on sound postpones the question of meaning while also providing an effective way to approach it. It presents poetry as a medium of expression. It makes poetry available to anyone who can learn to listen, or to memorize and recite; and these skills can provide a basis for students to develop skills of writing and speaking as well as interpretation.

To focus on sound is to focus on something essential about poetry, then. But we can turn this idea around and see poetry as a way to learn something about sound and the essential role it plays in communication generally. We de-materialize language when we look to it for a message alone. But language is always a material form. We apprehend it through our senses. Sound reminds us of the primacy of the material, of the sensory, in our use of language. In poetry it is impossible to isolate content from form, or a message from its medium. This is true of communication generally, but poetry foregrounds it as a principle; and studying poetry helps students – at every level of school – to integrate these different dimensions of language.

Poetry is an archaic form, the most ancient of literary kinds; its patterns of sound, its structures of repetition, refer us to the earliest literary forms in culture, and to the basis of the literary and of literacy itself in orality. The primacy of sound in poetry also returns to the early history of any individual: that is, to the experience of language acquisition, when we struggle out of infancy into speech, learning to form meaningful sounds with the muscles of our mouths, and to our first experiences of patterned language in nursery rhymes, schoolyard chants, song, or readings of scripture.

Our seminar began by listening to musical performances of W. B. Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree" and W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues," the one a poem set to music, the other a blues song we treated as a poem. (The poet Elizabeth Bishop's favorite example of a line of iambic pentameter comes from Handy's song: "I hate to see that evening sun go down.") The question I posed – How do poems, when they are not set to music, generate a music of their own? – we returned to throughout the seminar.

To sensitize ourselves to sound patterns in poetry, we discussed modern poems written in Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter by Ezra Pound and Richard Wilbur in order to learn to hear accent and alliteration. To the accentual scheme of Anglo-Saxon poetry, we added nursery rhymes – a prosody based on accent and rhyme – and some popular song forms. We explored basic principles of lineation and rhythm – in free verse poems by Whitman and Elizabeth Bishop – and moved from there to accentual-syllabic meter, with Robert Frost's

"Birches" as a model. With Frost as a guide, but now as a theorist as much as a poet, we explored the concept of "tone" in poetry. We discussed Frost's notions of the "Vocal Imagination" and the "Imaginary Ear," and his definition of "the sound of sense." These topics led us toward a working definition of "voice" in poetry.

We studied the patterning of blues poems by Langston Hughes, and the use of rhyme – and ideas about rhyme – in Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Criticism," where Pope declares "The Sound must seem an Echo to the Sense." Pope uses rhymed heroic couplets; for comparison and contrast, we looked at some poems by the recent U.S. poet laureate, Kay Ryan, which use improvised and internal rhyme, and in Thom Gunn's "The Man with Night Sweats," which moves from strict, full rhyme to slant rhyme.

Pope and Gunn both play with notions of "imitative form": rhymes – and more generally word-sounds – that somehow imitate the sense of what is being said. We turned this idea on its head with provocative, challenging poems by Sylvia Plath and Frederick Seidel and the lyrics of contemporary rappers like Microphone Rakim in which we saw how sound sometimes takes the lead to generate unexpected senses. This point brought us, in our last class, to children's poetry and the expressive pleasures and cognitive test of nonsense. We used May Swenson's inventive poems as a model, including a delightful poem made out of spoonerisms called "A Nosty Fright," and Wallace Stevens's "The Man on the Dump."

Throughout the seminar, we mixed discussion of these texts and concepts with reflection on classroom teaching. We also had time for reading aloud, individually and collectively, and hands-on, practical play with words. For example, we practiced turning prose into poetry by taking a passage of prose and introducing line breaks. We got the hang of hearing metrical patterns by analyzing the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in our names, and then experimented with writing blank verse individually and as a group in class. Fellows collected "sentence-sounds" overheard in the course of a week and brought them in for discussion.

Here follow the excellent curriculum units that emerged from these seminar discussions. They demonstrated the interest of sound in poetry by bringing the ideas and exercises of our seminar to bear on a wide range of classroom subjects and situations, including the teaching of reading in first grade, English as a second language, middle-school language arts, and visual art classes.

A common theme among the units is poetry's potential to engage students who are hard to reach and motivate or who require special attention. Lyndsay Gurnee will use poetry in first grade to involve reluctant readers in the pleasure and satisfaction of mastering nursery rhymes and writing for beginning readers. Jaclyn Maler Ryan, also in first grade, will use poetry to develop second language literacy for students just beginning to use English. Working against absenteeism and distraction at the other end of the school system, Patricia Sorrentino, rather than ask her seniors to stop listening to hip hop, will show them the poetic properties of rap while using the music they listen to as a way into poetry. Matthew Monahan will use poetry and (like Sorrentino) specifically rap lyrics to help students face the dread fall-term-senior assignment: personal essays for college applications.

Putting the emphasis on sound, these teachers allow their students to play with words, to practice listening, speaking, and performing, and to take pleasure in language, on the assumption that that pleasure is an essential foundation for future studies and a bridge to formal analytic writing and thinking that is attentive to tone and expression and therefore comprehension. Caterina Salamone's plans for teaching poetry to third-grade students are full of engaging – and instructive – forms of play and performance. Laura Namnoum's students will learn to hear and experiment with creating their own versions of the simple patterns of rhyme and meter that underlie the poems of Emily Dickinson and Jack Prelutsky. Elizabeth Trojanowski, using Kenneth Koch as a model, has developed an exciting program for teaching poetry writing to her middle-school

children, combining reading and writing skills. Mary Lou Narowski, working with slightly older children, also combines the reading and writing of poetry and uses her focus on sound as a way into teaching literary concepts and techniques.

Chelcey Williams brings poetry to her students of English as a second language as a way for them to grasp, with limited language skills, sophisticated forms of expression. By introducing poems in languages such as German and Japanese, she will present her students' native languages and English as only two among a great variety of languages; her goal is to sensitize students to cultural difference and encourage curiosity about other languages while instilling pride in their native languages. Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins also plans to use poetry as a means of emphasizing and exploring cultural diversity. She has built a detailed course of study around the sounds of African American poetic tradition, which is so rich in expressive resources and historical resonance, as a way of engaging her predominantly African American students and developing in them positive self-images.

Sound is a matter of the senses. To appreciate sound in poetry is to develop our sensual apprehension of language through the ear and tongue. Crecia Cipriano, the only foreign-language teacher in the seminar, highlights this dimension of the subject in her alliterative title which plays on the delightful French words for common types of fruit: "Pêche, Poire, Papaye, Pastèque: Breathing Life into Building Vocabulary by Exploring and Writing Poetry in the French Classroom." Amy Migliore-Dest, a visual arts teacher, emphasizes the senses by planning to explore synesthesia with her students: the mixing of the senses in poetry that draws on and responds to visual art, and visual art that similarly draws on and responds to poetry. Crecia's class will savor the sounds of French on the tongue, and Amy's young artists will listen with their eyes.

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