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Cities of Big Shoulders, Roses from Concrete: The Poetry of the City

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Among the first recorded genres of poetry is the idyll, a celebration of the mundane that shuns the heroism of Homeric epics. Nymphs, shepherds, and rolling hills long endured in the image of western poetry. While there may not be a formal generic equivalent to the pastoral, urban poetry, a celebration and examination of life in the city, likewise goes back to antiquity. Unfortunately, for some readers, the natural world seems a “superior” and more fitting poetic subject than the urban world. The Romantics, whose influence still looms large in English Language Arts curricula, decried the profane world of the city where one might “mark in every face I meet/ Marks of weakness, marks of woe.¹” The Romantics might have disdained urban life, but there is an equally strong tradition in English language poetry of celebration of the built world. William Blake decried the smoke and soot of industry, while Carl Sandburg declared that Chicagoans were “proud to be Hog/ Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation.²” Tupac Shakur saw the beauty and potential found in the city, declaring “long live the rose that grew from concrete / when no one else ever cared.³” In New Haven itself, Wallace Stevens walked the “metaphysical streets of the physical town.⁴” One of the great projects of poetry is to express the world we experience every day through language. Poets have imbued meaning into the physical world through language, with Emma Lazarus naming the Statue of Liberty as the “Mother of Exiles.⁵” Urbanization gave rise to the growth of printing and the rapidly expanding dissemination of poetry into the hands of increasingly literate populations. In this unit of study, students will examine how poets from William Blake to Tupac have understood and interpreted the city, its buildings, industry, citizens, culture, beauty, and ugliness. The two questions which will define the unit are: “What is the poetic voice, and how is that expressed through sound?” and “How do we interpret the physical sights, sounds, and people of life in the city through language, visual arts, and performance?” In the process of finding the poetic voice in shared readings, students will craft their own poems centered on their own lives and experiences in the city.

Part 1: Analytical and Theoretical Considerations

The City Poem

There exists no widely accepted definition of the urban poem, the very idea of which for some seems to be a contradiction in terms. Kristiaan Versluys writes “there was a time when urban poetry sounded like a contradiction in terms, and even today the belief lingers on that nature is poetic by definition while the city is frequently thought of as... fit only for prose.”⁶ One intention of this unit is to refute the idea that only the natural world can be poetic and that there exists a strict dichotomy between the city and the country. For the purposes of this unit, we will define the city poem as any poem whose subject includes urban life, cityscapes, landmarks, cultures, and histories. When Langston Hughes asked “What happens to a dream deferred,⁷” he titled the poem “Harlem.” Stripped of its title, there is no immediately evident connection between the text of the poem and the New York neighborhood. A thorough and critical reading of the poem demands that we place it in the context of Harlem in the 1940s and 1950s. While “Harlem” has sang out for years in classrooms as a defining poem of the Black experience in the mid-20th century, readers can at times lose sight of the fact that the poem is rooted in a specific time and place. The precise contexts of the poem that students shall read are intended to ground them within the broader conversation that surrounds life in the city. Place, and by extension, the city, are essential to the themes and questions of this unit, and will likewise be just as important for students reading and responding to these poems. Student interpretations to these poems might be rooted in a specific time and place, but given the broad and inclusive definition of the city poem provided, instructors have a wide berth of excellent poems to choose from, exposing a diverse set of perspectives on lives lived in the city.

Academic conversations surrounding the urban poem in the English language usually start in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the spread of Romanticism and the Industrial Revolution in Europe. As Versluys describes it, the urban poetry of the Romantics “brims over with either impassioned pleas to beautify the city or wrathful exhortations to raze it to the ground,” but by the 20th century “poetic efforts start from the awareness that the city is immovably there to stay and that, as a result, ways and means have to be devised to put seemingly intractable urban material to poetic uses.”⁸ From 1800 to 2016 the percentage of people living in an urban area grew from 6% to 80%.⁹ While poets perhaps now more than ever before have to contend with the realities of life in the city, and to interpret those realities through language, there are new opportunities to explore the meaning of life in the city, in a way that will resonate with more people than ever before. For the students who learn in New Haven Public Schools, this is their reality, making the themes and ideas that students will respond to in these poems increasingly vital. It is equally vital that their voices are included in this discourse, responding to poems from both the past and the present to shape their visions for the future.

While the English language city poem might have found its footing in the Industrial Revolution, the tradition dates back as far as the Roman poet Martial, whose Epigrams offer a unique glimpse into life in the ancient metropolis. In Epigram 1.86, Martial remarks that his neighbor Novius “may be reached by the hand from my windows,” yet he is not “privileged either to live with him, or even see him, or hear him; nor in the whole city is there any one at once so near and so far from me.”¹⁰ An important component of this unit is to have students read a broad range of texts, to find the commonalities of experience that can still unite peoples over tremendous swaths of both time and space. While some of Martial’s epigrams might cover subjects as unfamiliar to most modern readers today as Roman religious rites, most people who have lived in a city can

empathize with never knowing or interacting with the people who might live right next to us. Martial dedicates many of his epigrams to specific named individuals, and each one offers a brief glimpse into the Roman world that makes one of the largest metropolises of antiquity feel like a place full of life rather than a ruin. We must note, however, as William Chapman Sharpe does, that the locales we see through poetry may not be “cities of brick and mortar” but the “cities of mind, cities of words, into which the metropolis has been transformed by the power of art.”¹¹ Both the physical and cultural legacies of these cities persist; we cannot know the Rome depicted by Martial as it really was, but we can “begin to understand how these cities were perceived by the poets who lived in them.”¹² Sharpe seems to go too far in his assessment, however, as these interpretations of significant stages in the life cycle of a city reflect and respond to broader historical and socio-economic trends. The criticism of William Blake and William Wordsworth were born from a London which was rapidly industrializing, and we cannot read their work without that critical context.

In the English language, poets as far back as the early modern period followed the pattern set by Martial in the *Epigrams*. Ben Jonson even published his own *Epigrams* which covered life in the London of the sixteenth-century. Blake and Wordsworth present among the first city poems in English that deal with the cities of the Industrial Revolution, defined by their particular historical contexts. For these two poets, along with others in their literary circles, the city represented what was lost, a sort of break from harmony and order that the natural world presented. The fires of industry, which would endanger future generations through the damages of climate change, likewise blackened the streets and sky of nineteenth-century London, marring the city’s connection with the natural world. Take the “Chimney Sweeper,” whom Blake describes as “a little black thing among the snow,¹³” a victim of a rapidly urbanizing city, and a symbol of its maladies. These men could still find beauty in the city, but it was often not in its inhabitants. Consider Wordsworth, who writes of London in the morning, “Earth has not any thing to show more fair,” yet there are no people seen or mentioned in the poem, where “the very houses seem asleep.”¹⁴ It is people, then, who have blackened the skies and streets of London, marring the beauty that might be found there.

Walt Whitman provides a useful foil to many of the criticisms provided by Blake and Wordsworth, celebrating the throbbing life found in Manhattan. In “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun” Whitman urges his poetic alter-ego to “keep the blossoming buckwheat fields where the Ninth-month bees hum; Give me faces and streets” where dwell “comrades and lovers by the thousand.”¹⁵ Whitman’s New York feels inhabited and alive, and his poetry speaks to a deep connection between the poet and his subject. Blake’s poem evokes pity, while Whitman finds meaning in the unnamed, and fairly undistinguished, throngs. Similar to the sentiments found in Wordsworth and Blake, Whitman’s poem speaks to a dichotomy between Nature (note the capitalization) and the city. Many of the poems found in Whitman’s other works, such as *Leaves of Grass*, express a deep and meaningful connection to nature. It is interesting then, that Whitman splits the two in half here, with no apparent harmony between the two choices, even though Whitman himself found such meaning and purpose in both the natural world and cities inhabited by people. Versluys encourages his readers to consider Whitman and Wordsworth as two divergent perspectives in pursuit of the same goal, where for Wordsworth “the metaphysical unity is to be found outside the city, for Whitman inside.”¹⁶ One perspective is of the “City Reviled” and the other of the “City Redeemed.” Students will consider these two perspectives in how poets responded and reacted to cities that were becoming increasingly larger, more industrialized, and more global.

As the nineteenth century closed, far more people lived in a city than at its opening. Populations grew alongside the political and economic power of the metropolis. The socio-economic and demographic changes occurred in tandem with poetic aesthetics. Versluys writes that “the pressure of these sociological circumstances precluded an escape from the City into images of the ideal town or purifying nature. The city

was a fact not excoriate or to glorify, but to live with.¹⁷ ” As new poets offered their interpretations and visions of life in the city that were increasingly engrained in lived experiences, of life as it was, not just as a tragic example of the consequences of industrialization or as an idealized vision. At the same time, poets were continuing to explore beyond the limits of formal structure and lyric. In his poem “The Waste-Land,” Eliot declares London the “Unreal City,” a phrase he attributes to Charles Baudelaire’s poem “The Seven Old Men.” In that poem, Baudelaire declares Paris a “teeming, swarming city, city full of dreams,/ Where specters in broad day accost the passer-by!” In particular, he focuses on an unsightly old man whose likeness seems to multiply and fill the city streets. One cannot help but think of Eliot’s titular wasteland, and its opening section, “The Burial of the Dead,” as Baudelaire describes the old man “hobbling along in the snow and the mud/ As if he were crushing the dead under his shoes.” Baudelaire’s poetry focuses on the lived experiences of the city, using vivid description to bring Paris to life, a place that seems to teem, yet is seen through this lens of unreality, where the dead, and not the living, roam the streets. Sharpe writes that the poetry of Baudelaire, “insists on the motley splendor of the entire city and all its inhabitants, no matter how bizarre, perverse, or degraded.”¹⁸ There is a sense of isolation and detachment in Baudelaire’s poem from the motley splendor, a sense of isolation from lived experience that seems so common in Modernist poetry. Consider this along with Eliot’s description of London in “The Waste Land”:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Eliot illumines the reality of a post-war London, where approximately six percent of the adult male population had perished fighting in the First World War, and detachment found in this city, with their gaze now shunning the life that teems in London. Like Baudelaire, Eliot takes time to examine individual voices in that city, like “Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant/ Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants,” yet still feels lost in the brown fog of winter. Sharpe concludes that “Eliot’s metropolis reveals itself only as an insubstantial tissue of texts, perverse personae, and fragmentary relationships representing the ruin of Western civilization.”¹⁹ ” The view of the city, seemingly obscured by the density and complexity of Eliot’s lyric, is one that acknowledges the ironic isolation and loneliness that one might experience in a city surrounded by people.

As much as the city might be a geographic and demographic unit, it is at its core a political entity. In addition to poems celebrating, lamenting, and living within the city, poetry takes an inherent political gaze upon urban life. Alongside urbanization and industrialization came more concerted city planning. After all, local governments had to respond to growing needs of urban life, with sewage and sanitation, transportation, and even aesthetics increasingly becoming the mandate of cities. New Haven reveals a long and interesting history of urban development, from its status to one of the first planned cities in colonial America to the blunders of urban renewal. Nate Mickelson argues that “poets enact progressive modes of city planning in three ways, by exposing underlying urban realities... proposing alternative arrangements of resources and power, and politicizing the need for action.”²⁰ ” A primary aim of this unit is to encourage students to examine their own lives in the city through poetry, and translating this self-awareness to social and political consciousness, that poetry can speak truth to power. Too often we think of urban planning as a top-down

effort, where those in power enforce their particular vision of the city onto its residents. Mickelson refutes this idea, and sees the power of poetry to effect meaningful change, or at the very least to raise awareness of one's individual power. He does this by exploring the importance and place of neighborhood in Chicago as read through Gwendolyn Brooks, and poets of the Black Arts Movements who settled in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, where we see "poetic visions rooted in direct experiences of the city's harshest conditions and myriad small acts of resistance."²¹ Mickelson also brings Henri Lefebvre into the conversation, emphasizing the "right to the city which residents can only have when they possess the means to compose their own 'social reality' regardless of external constraints" something that is "existential as much as physical." This concept of the "right to the city" expressed through poetry can be found on stunning display in Jamaal May's "There are Birds Here," a poem which explicitly pushes back against preconceptions of life in Detroit. May writes:

There are birds here,
so many birds here
is what I was trying to say
when they said those birds were metaphors
for what is trapped
between buildings
and buildings. No.
The birds are here
to root around for bread

This poem asks us to consider how language is used to defame a city, rooted in misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The unnamed "they" of the poem stands as the outsiders, those who look in on the city without have lived or experienced life there. May rejects the assumptions that others place on his city, and instead redefines the metaphor into a celebration. This celebration, while perhaps not eliciting specific political change, still speaks to the power that the residents of a community have in shaping the narratives and stories which define it. A strong example of the political poem can be found in Lewis Macadams's "The River," an extended project of poetry, community resistance, and political action, centered around efforts to restore some of the Los Angeles River's natural splendor, cemented over as part of the plan of the city. In the poem, Macadams writes "we ask if we can/ speak on its behalf/ in the human realm./ We can't hear the river saying no/ so we get to work." Written as part of and in conjunction with the Friends of the Los Angeles River, Mickelson writes that "Macadams's poem enacts an insurgent mode of planning critical to producing a more just and equitable urban future."

Mickelson's ideas of the political city poem relate to the broader social scientific concepts surrounding city planning. Macadams's poetry again highlights the seeming divides between nature and the city. Julie E. Daniel in *Building Nature*, present several unique and interesting ways to consider nature, urban environments, and city planning in poetry. Daniel uses the specific lens of the city park, something that is itself an imitation of nature. Of special interest here are her discussions of Carl Sandburg and his connection to Chicago. Daniel is especially interested in how we might see "a vision of Chicago where nature and culture meet in an urban

garden on the edge of a shining lake promulgated and in part realized by Daniel Burnham the father of American city planning... Voices a persistent concern for the place of nature in this urban context.”²² These visions of the city are theoretically underpinned by the idea that the built environment has an impact on the way people actually live their lives. Consider how architecture influences social and political life, in addition to the ever-important concept of green space. Can we bridge the disconnection from nature that Wordsworth feared? Is there truly as sharp a distinction between city and nature as one might initially expect? This is a good intermingling with some of the activism that Mickelson brought up. “The spatial texts that so intrigued Sandberg, Stevens, Williams, and Moore persist. They shape us, we shape them. Our communities alter these architectures as needs arise, and our community uses change as spaces flood, freeze, infect, bloom, fall into neglect, and rise into new forms. What form should nature take in this place? These poets offer us the imaginative tools needed in our present moment as we build and rebuild our green worlds.²³” Wallace Stevens presents an interesting counterpoint to some of these questions, in the ways in which he interprets public spaces. Daniel writes that “Stevens combines admiration [of public green spaces] with critique, all while foregrounding the artifice of these apparently natural spaces.”²⁴ Consider the reference to the “metaphysical streets” that Stevens makes in his poem on New Haven, as he attempts to give meaning to the artifices of the city through the language, something itself which is not always concrete. The question of the relation of the city to nature persist throughout the poetry analyzed here across time, and its implications bear even more importance with the changes and destruction of climate and environment we see today.

Voicing the Poems of the City

The two most immediate sensory experiences one has in the city are sight and sound. Having analyzed the city poem as a literary form, and how that analysis must inform teaching of the city poem, these next two sections factor in how these urban sights and sounds are reflected in and by poetry. As a form, poetry emphasizes its sound and structure to our analysis. In making poetry more approachable and accessible to students, we must both consider the theoretical implications of the audible and material qualities of poetry and then apply that to our pedagogical practice. Indeed, these qualities will be the primary mode by which students will both analyze and create poetry in this unit.

One of the driving factors of this unit’s interpretation of sound is the idea of the poetic voice. Indeed, the idea of a poet’s voice is central to the unit’s essential themes and topic. The idea of voice is not just based on the literal interpretation of the sound of the poem, which includes for the purpose of this unit prosody and rhyme, and while this literal aspect must be included in students’ interpretation of poetry, we should consider the figurative meaning of voice. Leslie Wheeler perhaps puts it best in her book on the same topic: “Voice implies poetry’s reliance on sound; however, voice is also a metaphor for originality, personality, and the illusion of authorial presence within printed poetry. Voice in the political sense as the right or ability to speak or write also intersects with literary studies. It encapsulates these poetic conflicts but also suggests the common interest underlying them.”²⁵ In the course of the unit, it is essential that students explore and interrogate all three of Wheeler’s proposed definitions of poetic voice: the auditory, the metaphor of author’s presence, and the political. The selection of poems proposed in the teaching of this unit are intended to cover all three of these definitions; however, it must be noted that these three definitions are not distinct from each other, in that almost every poem can be said to possess a voice that is at the same time audible, authorial, and political. For the purposes of teaching the unit however, we must start with the verbal component, and then further elaborate upon the multifaceted meanings of poetic voice from there. A useful question, as posed by Wheeler, reads “can a poem regarded only in its textual incarnation possess a voice?”²⁶ While it will ultimately be up to the students to answer this question, the aim and purpose of this unit inherently points to

an emphatic ‘yes,’ an answer supported by Wheeler’s own scholarship. Indeed, with perhaps very few exceptions of poetry that appears unpronounceable on the page, there is always utility in hearing a poem read aloud, to hear the voice made alive. This vivification is made possible through the poet’s style, structure, word choice, prosody, rhyme, rhythm, and use of figurative language. Most readers “hear” the text in their head when reading, and the act of hearing a poem only solidifies the complex interplay of sound already at work in the poem. It is impossible, then, to consider any poem in only its textual incarnation. Sound will always play a factor in how we read, write, and share poetry. Authorial presence and style begets the verbalized voice of the poet. As historian of political thought J.G.A. Pocock argues, “verbalization itself [is] a political act.”²⁷ Even for content that is on the surface apolitical, especially given the climate around reading today (not discounting the at times even more fraught climates from the past, from the banning of books in libraries to restrictions on curricula, the very act of not just writing poetry, but speaking it aloud, is an expression of political voice). Given the subject and themes of many city poems are themselves explicitly political, and often concern citizens asserting their “right to the city,” this element of poetic voice is especially important to the aims of this unit. Using the theoretical premise that poetic voice is at once political, verbal, and stylistic, that students will understand how, as Sharpe offered, artists transform the physical city, sights and sounds included, into the poetic.

The concept of voice will be the primary lens through which students analyze the “sound” of poetry in this unit. Rhyme, rhythm, and prosody all construct the voice of a poem, and students will interpret these specific parts of the poem in the unit. For many students, rhyme is one of the most identifiable features of a poem, and indeed, in my classroom, students have often defined poetry as “a story that rhymes.” What better way to introduce students to the deeper purposes of sound in poetry than to start with rhyme? For example, In Wordsworth’s “Composed upon Westminster Bridge,” we see Wordsworth rhyme in the first and fifth lines to elaborate his vision of an ideal city: “Earth has not any thing to show more fair/ The beauty of the morning; silent, bare.” Through the use of rhyme, Wordsworth emphasizes that the city is at its most beautiful when its streets are emptiest. Rhyme works not only to make a poem sound lyrical, but in fact serves specific purposes which illuminate a poem’s themes and messages. Walt Whitman, a master of lyrical free verse, serves as an exemplar of how repetition, and careful choice of words, can make a poem feel lively and real: “Give me such shows! give me the streets of Manhattan!/Give me Broadway, with the soldiers marching—give/ me the sound of the trumpets and drums!” The repetition of “give” at the start of each line further stresses the poet’s deep love and admiration for urban life. Through the use of auditory imagery, Whitman places his reader directly in Manhattan, enabling the reader to both visualize and sonify the city that he is celebrating. Readers can imagine the clamor that Whitman might have heard on those streets, with the jubilant sound of trumpets and drums echoing across the city’s buildings. The poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes both employ sound to accurately reflect urban life and culture. Brooks’ “We Real Cool,” with its unique enjambment where the concluding word of each line begins the sentence of the next, has a sing-song quality that echoes popular music of the time:

We

Sing sin. We

Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.

With rhymes hidden internally and a consistent length for each phrase, Brooks' poem feels both musical and dialogical. In her own performance of the poem, one can hear the lyrical whimsy which supports the flippant wantonness of youth in the city and belies the darker conclusion to the poem. Langston Hughes, in his collection of poems *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, directly speaks to life in Harlem as it was. The very first poem in the collection "Dream Boogie" directly reflects the culture of Harlem in the 1940s: "Good morning, daddy!/ Ain't you heard/The boogie-woogie rumble/Of a dream deferred?" Hughes's poetry reflects the way people spoke, and at the same time places the poem in its specific context. The reader is immediately made aware that Hughes has placed a primary emphasis on the life and sound of Harlem in this collection. The concluding lines of the poem "Hey, pop!/ Re-bop!/ Mop!/ Y-e-a-h!" reflect the scat singing prominent in the bebop style of jazz prominent in the 1940s. For Hughes, sound is an essential component to both this poem and Harlem itself. In this poem, the voice of Harlem that Hughes crafts is the voice of jazz. While more concrete teaching strategies will be discussed in the section below, these examples show how sound, and the accompanying literary devices that poets employ, is essential to the close reading of poetry.

The reading of poetry aloud is a mainstay of English Language Arts Classrooms, and increasingly public reading and staging of a poet's work has been essential to literary success. In this unit, students will be asked to "perform" a poem, a term here which goes beyond recitation. It must be acknowledged that even a poem recited reveals problems between the written and spoken forms. Jan Baetens warns, however, that "in many cases a poem is depreciated by forcing it from the page onto the stage."²⁸ Baetens' analysis is focused primarily on the public performance of poetry, in most cases done by the poets themselves, and does distinguish between performance and recitation. His ideas give depth to our understandings of the role of sound in the interpretation of a poem. Baetens does not argue that we should ignore sound in poetry, but that there are stark difficulties in performing a poem stemming from the "crumbling of the old poetic model [i.e. metered verse] which guaranteed an easy transition of the text to the oral" and that "new conceptions of poetry do not always facilitate the movement between page and voice."²⁹ While the depreciation that Baetens warns of does not seem an evident problem, given the importance of sound in poetry, he does bring up important considerations with the meaning-making, or perhaps meaning-muddling, of poetic performance. In essence, the essential question that Baetens asks is "how does the 'voice' read the text?"³⁰ Consider diction, speed, elocution, and tone that all go into the delivery of a poem, and to further complicate things, the addition of visual elements to a performance. Given that a poem presents multiple meanings, does a reading of a poem then subscribe to one particular interpretation? Baetens' concerns are based on the confusion of meaning that the reading of poetry might create, yet for our students, both as readers and writers of poetry, the goal is to elucidate the meanings that speak to us. Public reading, then, can reveal meanings that might differ from the form seen on the page, as well as provide new lenses of interpretation.

The City as Poetic Object

The city poem transforms the physical world into the poetic. Both Wordsworth and Eliot set base poetic interpretations of London on Westminster Bridge. Lazarus's the "New Colossus" spells out the meaning of the Statue of the Liberty, where "from her beacon-hand/ Glows world-wide welcome." Indeed, Lazarus's poem is now permanently affixed to the statue's pedestal, her interpretation, as expressed through poetry, shapes the meaning that so many people see in the Statue of Liberty today. Lazarus has given figurative meaning to the material object. In "To Brooklyn Bridge," Hart Crane deifies the titular bride, that as "sleepless as the river under thee, / Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod, / unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend / And of the curviship lend a myth to God." Here, Crane emphasizes the scenic beauty of the Brooklyn Bridge as mythological in stature, an essential aspect to the spiritual life of New York. While people and culture are arguably what defines a city, one cannot discount that physical spaces, buildings, parks, streets, are essential

to the defining character of a city. The foundation of the field of urban planning is that the way that space is laid out has a demonstrable effect on the lives lived in that city. This “translation” of urban materiality into poetry is the primary concept of poetry as object that students will be asked to interrogate. We will also use tools that consider poetry as a literal object, from shape poetry, text structures and forms, to poetry as interpreted through visual arts, including both video poetry and illustrated poetry. Just like with our use of sound, these tools will be used both to expand the meanings already found in the textual form as well as providing new interpretations.

The internet age has considerably expanded access to poetry for readers of all ages. The growth of digital reading is certainly a boon, yet at times there is something significant lost in a poem’s meaning when it is removed from its original medium. Visual art in particular can be essential to our readings and understanding of poetry, especially when the poem originally included a painted or illustrated element. William Blake made paintings to accompany many of his poems, and the painting for London highlights the “marks of weakness, marks of woe” he sees in the faces of the city’s inhabitants (Figure 1). An older man and a child appear in the painting above the text, the old man is hunched over with a gait that speaks of aches and pain, while the child reaches his hand out. Perhaps they recognize in each other’s faces the weakness and woe that Blake describes. Further below, a fire roars, the smoke blackening the page and creeping into the poem’s lettering, emphasizing “how the Chimney-sweepers cry/ every blackning Church appalls.” The painting gives further context to the meaning and purpose behind the poem’s text, and allows students to cross-apply analytical tools for both poetry and visual art.



Figure 1 - William Blake, “London” - Public Domain³¹

Langston Hughes's "Come to the Waldorf-Astoria" is best understood and interpreted in its original context. Appearing in the Marxist magazine *The New Masses*, the poem directly mimics similar advertisements that appeared in *Vanity Fair* (Figure 2). The poem highlights the excesses of capitalism in the midst of the Great Depression, as Hughes's version of the advertisement declares to "all you families put out in the street: Apartments in the Tower are only 10,000 a year." The text satirizes the original advertisement, while the accompanying illustration further highlights the exclusive garishness offered by the hotel. Large-bodied doormen stand vigilant guard outside while guests revel and rage inside. Below the image along the edges of the page, seemingly crushed by the weight of the greed depicted and described in the image and text above, are images of working-class people, with looks of despair and concern on their faces, caring for their families. As Wheeler writes, "it is far richer in its original context-carefully laid-out and provocatively illustrated- than in the stripped down versions offered by its later reprintings."³² Without both the illustration and the intentional mimicking of the original *Vanity Fair* advertisement, the poem's stinging punch is lost. This poem also demonstrates how "Hughes sought ways to deliver voice and music into visual medium of print."³³ The interconnectedness of poetry's material and auditory qualities are both emphasized here, with Hughes's casual and faux-corporate tone working together with the illustration to criticize greed and excess.

FINE LIVING ... *à la carte* ?? Come to the Waldorf-Astoria!

Listen Hungry Ones!

Look! See what *Vanity Fair* says about the new Waldorf Astoria:
 "All the luxuries of private home . . ."
 Now, won't that be charming when the last flop-house has turned you down this winter? Furthermore:
 "It is far beyond anything hitherto attempted in the hotel world. . . . It cost twenty-eight million dollars. The famous Oscar Tschirky is in charge of banqueting. Alexandre Gastaud is chef. It will be a distinguished background for society. So when you've got no place else to go, homeless and hungry ones, choose the Waldorf as a background for your rags—
 (Or do you still consider the subway after midnight good enough?)"

Roomers

Take a room at the new Waldorf, you down-and-outers—sleepers in charity flop-houses where God pulls a long face, and you have to pray to get a bed.
 They serve swell board at the Waldorf Astoria. Look at this menu, will you:
 GUMBO CRABBLE
 CRABMEAT IN CASSOLETTE
 BOILED BRISKET OF BEEF
 SMALL ONIONS IN CREAM
 WATERCRESS SALAD
 PEACH MELBA

Have luncheon there this afternoon, all you jobless. Why not?
 Dine with some of the men and women who got rich off of your labor, who clip coupons with

clean white fingers because your hands dug coal, drilled stone, sewed garments, poured steel—to let other people draw dividends and live easy.
 (Or haven't you had enough yet of the soup-lines and the bitter bread of charity?)
 Walk through Peacock Alley tonight before dinner, and get warm, anyway. You've got nothing else to do.

Evicted Families

All you families put out in the street: Apartments in the Towers are only \$10,000 a year. (Three rooms and two baths.) Move in three until times get good, and you can do better. \$10,000 and \$1.00 are about the same to you, aren't they? Who cares about money with a wife and kids homeless, and nobody in the family working? Wouldn't a duplex high above the street be grand, with a view of the richest city in the world at your nose?
 "A lease, if you prefer, or an arrangement terminable at will."

Negroes

O, Lawd, I done forgot Harlem!
 Say, you colored folks, hungry a long time in 135th Street—they got swell music at the Waldorf-Astoria. It sure is a mighty nice place to shake hips in, too. There's dancing after supper in a big warm room. It's cold as hell on Lenox Avenue. All you've had all day is a cup of coffee. Your pawnshop overcoat's a ragged banner on your hungry frame. . . . You know, down-town folks are just crazy about Paul Robeson. Maybe they'd like you, too, black mob from Harlem. Drop in at the Waldorf this afternoon for tea. Stay to dinner. Give Park Avenue a lot of darkie color—free—for nothing! Ask the Juneteenth Leaguers to sing a spiritual for you. They probably know 'em better than you do—and their lips won't be so chapped with cold after they step out of their closed cars in the undercover driveways.
 Hallelujah! undercover driveways!
 Ma, soul's a witness for de Waldorf-Astoria!
 (A thousand nigger section-hands keep the roadbeds smooth, so investments in railroads pay

Ladies with diamond necklaces staring at Cert murals.
 Thank God A-Mighty!
 (And a million niggers bend their backs on rubber plantations, for rich behinds to ride on thick tires to the Theatre Guild tonight.)
 Ma, soul's a witness!
 (And here we stand, shivering in the cold, in Harlem.)
 Glory be to God—
 De Waldorf-Astoria's open!

Everybody

So get proud and rare back, everybody! The new Waldorf-Astoria's open!
 (Special siding for private cars from the railroad yards.)
 You ain't been there yet?
 (A thousand miles of carpet and a million bath rooms.)
 What's the matter? You haven't seen the ads in the papers? Didn't you get a card? Don't you know they specialize in American cooking?
 Ankle on down to 49th Street at Park Avenue. Get up off that subway bench tonight with the evening POST for cover! Come on out o' that flop-house! Stop shivering your guts out all day on street corners under the L.
 Jesus, ain't you tired yet?

Christmas Card

Hail Mary, Mother of God!
 The new Christ child of the Revolution's about to be born.
 (Kick hard, red baby, in the bitter womb of the mob.)
 Somebody, put an ad in *Vanity Fair* quick!
 Call Oscar of the Waldorf—for Christ's sake!
 It's almost Christmas, and that little girl—turned whore because her belly was too hungry to stand it any more—wants a nice clean bed for the immaculate Conception.
 Listen, Mary, Mother of God, wrap your new born babe in the red flag of Revolution!
 The Waldorf-Astoria's the best manger we've got.
 For reservations: Telephone
 ELdorado 5-3000.

Illustration by Walter Steinbiller

Figure 2 - Langston Hughes, "Come to the Waldorf Astoria" - Public Domain³⁴

Students will consider both traditional visual art along with video interpretations of poetry. While the images accompanying Blake's Hughes's poems were an intentional part of the original creative process, video interpretations of Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" and Jamaal May's "There are Birds Here" serve to show

how others can translate poems from the page to the screen. In the film version of “We Real Cool,” Brooks’s recitation of the poem is accompanied by scenes from Chicago created through paper-cut puppetry and accompanied with jazz, further immersing students in the life of the city as described in the poem. The video concludes with a musical rendition of the poem, emphasizing the “Jazz June” described in the poem. The video accompanying “There are Birds Here” takes a more abstract approach to the poem, thus allowing students to analyze two different approaches to adapting a poem to a video format. The intention of using video adaptations is to allow students to not only exercise critical thinking skills by comparing the poem on the page with that on the screen, but to also enhance their understanding of the original poem.

We have already analyzed how Langston Hughes made Harlem come alive through sound, and Hughes gives as much attention to the sounds of the city as he does to the sights. The poem “Neon Signs” gives life to the clubs and stages where Jazz musicians honed their craft. The shape of the poem itself resembles a dangling neon sign, and the name of different clubs appear in bold capitals, from the “WONDERBAR” to “MINTON’S (ancient altar of Thelonious.)” Here, visual interpretation plays an equally important role. Jacob Lawrence prepared several illustrations for the *Montage*, both emphasizing the centrality of Harlem as well as highlighting the Black experience in New York in the immediate post-war years. One illustration directly reflects the text of “Neon Signs” (see the link to the image found in the resources section). Lawrence’s illustration gives a sense of melancholy, seen in other poems such as “Harlem,” and “Dream Boogie,” with a solitary figure atop what appears to be a hearse amidst the neon signs. This poem emphasizes that the artistic and poetic process is often collaborative, as the meanings of image and text combine. Through visual art, the use of shape poetry, and Hughes’s return to the auditory imagery of bop in the poem, concluding with “Mirror-go-round... smears re-bop sound³⁵” that we see a stunning conjunction of the sight and sound of poetry combine to give true voice to the city. The structures that Hughes, and other poets, employ gives space to new significant meanings in analyzing the poem.

Part 2: Unit Execution and Rationale

The majority of the above is a theoretical exploration of the “city poem” and the role of sound and materiality in the analysis. Parts of this unit’s classroom approach is inherently intended to be broad and open, so that it may apply across secondary content levels and subjects. This reflects my own personal academic interests in both the disciplines of history as well as English literature. Additionally, it is intended to be adaptable to different grade levels. I believe that the essential questions posed later in this section are appropriate for students in grades 7 and above. Adaptions can be made based on the difficulty and selection of the poems discussed in the class readings. While the content is most obviously directed towards an English Language Arts classroom, and in this case the model presented is intended to be taught in an eighth-grade classroom, teachers can use the content here to examine the path of urbanization and its broader socio-political effects.

In teaching poetry, there are three prongs of analysis that I will focus on in this unit: the use of figurative language, the forms and structures of poetry, and finally, understanding poetry as performance (which includes both spoken word, slam poetry, and video poetry). Students will employ close reading skills to interpret texts, focusing on one of the three key areas in their analyses. Learning activities will include students identifying significant moments in the text, analyzing the significance of a single word on a poem’s meaning, and comparing and contrasting written and performed/spoken forms of a poem. Throughout the unit, special focus will be given on the sound of the poem, seen through the lens of figurative language,

structure, or performance (or a combination of all three). As a way to expand their own fluency and comprehension skills, students will see the teacher (or in some cases, a recording of the poet) reading the poem aloud, and likewise be expected to themselves read poems aloud for the class. Sounds and rhythm will be used to understand, for example, the impact that a line break or punctuation might have on certain parts of the text, or how sound can be used to highlight and emphasize certain words. Focusing on the oral and sonic aspects of poetry will alleviate some of the fear and apprehension that students find with poetry. By the time students reach eighth grade, most are tentatively familiar with poetry as a literary form, but find it difficult and inaccessible. Sound will serve as an entry point into better understanding the deeper intricacies of poetry.

In addition to reading and interpreting poetry, students will be asked to contribute creatively to the themes and ideas discussed in the shared readings. There will be two smaller projects, the first where students are asked to perform one of the poems we have read together in class (or one of their own choosing) and read it aloud in front of the class as a performance. Following this performance, students will then reflect on the experience of reciting and performing another’s work aloud. Following this project, students will create a visual representation of a different poem from the one they performed. These visual representations will emphasize student choice, where students may draw or paint an image representing the poem, rearrange and erase words from the poem to reinterpret a poem, or create a video to accompany an oral reading of a poem. The cumulative project for the unit will include students creating and performing their own poem that somehow comments on the themes discussed throughout the unit. As a potential extension, some students may also choose to include a visual component to the poems they write. For students to understand the craft of the poet, they must themselves participate in the creative process. By incorporating relevant themes and messages, the power of sound, and visual art into writing poetry, students will not only have a new outlet for personal expression, but will also have a better understanding of the possibilities and potential that both reading and writing poetry can provide.

Unit Objectives

At the start of the unit, students will be tasked with answering the following questions over the duration of their learning. The column on the right aligns these questions with the material covered in Part 1.

Essential Question	Learning Objective
How do poets express “voice” in their poetry?	Students will be able to define the concept of poetic voice, and understand how different authors employ their craft to elaborate their vision of the city and urban life.
How does poetic voice reflect the sounds and structure of the city?	Students will understand and implement analysis of poetry as sound and object.
How have poetic interpretations of the city changed over time?	Students will be able to identify and distinguish different styles and movements in poetry, and track them in connection with aesthetic and demographic shifts.
How do artists use poetry to affect political change?	Students will be able to use and interpret the political voice in poetry, and the right of poets and residents to the city.
What does city life mean to you?	Students will be able to express their ideas through poetry using material learned in the unit.

Pedagogical Rationale

Fortunately, there is a plethora of academic research focused on the best strategies and methods for teaching

poetry. The analyses primarily concern teaching poetry (both reading and writing) in the context of an urban classroom, although many of the findings found here could apply to a wide variety of classrooms. Our purpose in Part 1 was to highlight how considering genre (the city poem), sound, and materiality of poetry are essential to the analysis of poetry, which will be used by students as tools commanding both understandings of poetry and its creation.

Evidence shows that, unfortunately, in Language Arts curricula, poetry is taking a diminishing role. While poetry is covered in the Common Core State Standards for English, there has been in turn a great emphasis on the teaching of non-fiction texts in ELA classrooms. As Edwin Creely notes “this decline [in the teaching of poetry] may be due, in part, to a current focus on more functional notions of literacy in schools, as opposed to creative, performative or personal forms of writing.”³⁶ It is for precisely these reasons that poetry deserves a place of prominence in the classroom: poetry is a crucial outlet for students’ creative expression, and the creative portions of this unit are essential to its execution. Similarly, we must also consider that poetry does indeed have a place in forming crucial literacy skills. For example, using close reading practices, to which poetry is particularly well-suited, with an emphasis on word choice and author’s purpose, builds up student literacy across other content areas and forms of literature.

Two frameworks investigated here have been used to craft this unit. The first comes from Creely, who emphasizes the following four points:

“1. Modelling of reading, writing and performing poetry by educators; 2. Integrating poetry across disciplines and more centrally in the curriculum; 3. Re-centring poetry in regard to where and how students read, write and perform poetry and 4. Challenging traditional notions of what constitutes poetry and proposing instead a more radical and disruptive pedagogy for bringing poetry to the classroom.”³⁷ The multi-disciplinary aspect of this unit, the emphasis on a specific lens for reading poetry, and the use of sound and object as lenses for analyzing poetry will all enhance the student learning experience. The second framework, touched upon in Creely’s fourth consideration, concerns empowering students as agents of change through poetry. Writing specifically about teaching poetry in urban school districts, Maisha Fuller emphasizes the following five points:

1. Introduce students to a collaborative workshop model
2. Address codeswitching
3. Include vocabulary practices – focus on sound, syllables, and reconsidering words
4. Share individual truth
5. Aspire to push beyond ascribed lives³⁸

Point three in particular stresses that building student agency and creativity relies upon improving their skills as readers. Fuller’s analysis proves that students must engage in the writing of poetry not only to build their literacy skills, but also allows them to apply the skills they will learn over the course of the unit. Jusslin and Høglund argue that “arts-based responses could promote academic purposes while simultaneously attending to students’ interests, knowledge and previous experiences. Arts-based responses to teaching poetry enable and appreciate affective, emotional and experiential aspects needed for students to feel a connection to poetry.”³⁹ Jusslin and Høglund specifically mention dance in their research, allowing educators to take a broad approach to artistic interpretations of poetry that students can use in this unit. Valerie Kinlock argues that in teaching poetry, students must “Use their imaginations to be creative, explorative learners who draw on experiential knowledge from their families, communities, and one another to gain skills, learn discipline, and use writing for multiple purposes.” Poetry builds community, and through following a workshop encourages students to support, critique, and construct meaning together. Just like the collaboration we saw among visual

artists and poets, students will be offered that same opportunity for collaboration.

Creativity and poetry are acts of social justice. Because students in this unit will see both the city poem and the poetic voice as inherently political acts, and with a curriculum that is rooted in student interest, they will be able to harness the agency that lies in creative meaning-making. To do this effectively “requires listening, and supporting the spaces that further their development as adults who will be responsible for the policies, concepts, and ideas that govern the neighborhoods, cities and nations in which we live.”⁴⁰

Weekly Plan

The unit, as presented here, is intended to take approximately six weeks of instructional time. The following set follows a more-or-less chronological poetic timeline, starting from antiquity and concluding with the present day. Social Studies teachers might wish to consider using a single week to supplement their curriculum. Teachers should consider including opportunities for independent reading throughout the unit. Suggested poems for students can be found in the section labeled “Resources for Students.” Additionally, further substitutions can be made here. Alternative learning segments might center on a specific city across time periods, or look at a particular artistic movement. Poems which are not marked specifically for upper grade students are of an appropriate level of rigor for all secondary students.

Week	Topic Covered, Theme	Suggested Readings
1	Introduction to the Unit	Selections from Martial’s <i>Epigrams</i> , Selections from Ben Jonson’s <i>Epigrams</i> , Gwendolyn Brooks, “We Real Cool”
2	The Romantic Divide of Town and Country Student Project: Recitation/Performance of a Poem	Walt Whitman “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun”, William Blake “London” and “The Chimney-sweep”, and William Wordsworth “Composed upon Westminster Bridge”
3	Modernist Responses to Urbanization	Carl Sandburg, “Chicago,” T.S. Eliot selections from “The Waste-Land” (Suggested upper grades only), Charles Baudelaire “The Seven Old Men,” Wallace Stevens “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (Suggested Upper Grades Only)
4 Option 1	Making the City Physical New York City (Suggested Upper Grades Only) Student Project: Artistic Interpretation of a Poem	Allen Ginsberg, “Howl,” Hart Crane “To Brooklyn Bridge”
4 Option 2	The Life of Harlem Part 1 Student Project: Artistic Interpretation of a Poem	Read the entirety of <i>Montage of a Dream Deferred</i> , continued into week 5
4 Option 3	The Like of Bronzeville	Read selections from Brooks’ <i>A Street in Bronzeville</i> .
5	The Life of Harlem	Langston Hughes, selections from <i>Montage of a Dream Deferred</i> , “Come to the Waldorf-Astoria”
6	Contemporary Poetry Final Poetry Project	Elizabeth Acevedo “You Mean You Don’t Weep at the Nail Salon,” Terrance Hayes “New York Poem” Jamaal May “There are Birds Here”

Sample Lesson Plans and Activities

Lesson 1

In this lesson, students will engage in a close reading activity using Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem “We Real Cool.” Students will read the poem several times, first silently, then out loud. Lesson 2 builds upon this first lesson, and the two should be taught in close sequence. These two lessons should come fairly early in the unit, as an introduction to a sort of “slice-of-life” city poem.

Objective: Students will be able to interpret how the form and structure of “We Real Cool” informs its sound and meaning.

Do-Now: The Do-Now is a quick way for students to engage with the content and material of the lesson before it begins, allowing them to activate crucial background knowledge and relate it to the lesson. Students should immediately work on the Do-Now upon entering in the classroom, either in a dedicated notebook or on a loose piece of paper. Students will have the first five minutes of class to answer the question silently and on their own, and they will have three minutes to discuss their answers with their peers in a whole-class discussion. Adjust this question to fit the particular needs of your classroom. In this lesson, students will answer: “How do *you* define cool? How might other people define it? Have you ever done something to be *cool*?”

Background Context: As needed, include necessary background information for Gwendolyn Brooks, the history of Bronzeville (a key cultural center of the city of Chicago, especially in the early 20th century) and the Great Migration (the name given to the mass movement of African Americans northward to cities like Chicago). Brooks wrote the poem in 1959, and was inspired to write the poem when she saw a large group of boys in a local pool hall. This section of the lesson can be expanded, and might include students exploring photographic images of 20th century Bronzeville, notes on jazz music and its effect on poetry, along with maps and other historic documents. Brook’s poem can be described here as a “slice of life” of what Bronzeville was like in the late 1950s. Specific photographic resources and other materials on Bronzeville can be found in the “resources” section.

Close Reading: Pass out a copy of the poem to students, and include a set of guided notes for students to use and respond to questions as is appropriate for the duration of the lesson. Close Reading is a teaching strategy that emphasizes analyzing small portions of text with a specific focus. Students will be analyzing the sounds of the poem alongside its unique textual structure. They will read the poem several times, with each subsequent reading increasing in rigor as students identify meaningful patterns and forms within the poem. After each reading, give students adequate time to respond independently to the close reading question. Then, use a routine for classroom discussion such as the “turn-and-talk” for students to share their answer with peers. Here, students will have five minutes to write, two minutes to discuss their answer with the peer seated closest to them, and then each peer group will have three minutes to share with the entire class.

First Read: Students will read the poem silently and on their own. They will answer the question “What are your first impressions of what the poem is about?” Students are not expected to have a perfect understanding of the poem at this point in time, and this question serves as a useful Check for Understanding to gauge student responses to the poem.

Second Read: Students will again read the poem silently and on their own, and answer the question “What words stand out to you in the poem? Pay attention to any specific sounds or words that are repeated, and circle the words you chose.” Follow the same discussion protocol used for the first reading of the poem. If students do not bring it up, mention the rhymes repeated in couplets in most lines, such as “cool” and “school”, and the repletion of initial word sounds, such as “sing sin.”

Third Read: Follow the same protocol set previously, this time students answering “What do you notice about the form and structure of the text? Consider line breaks and line length in your answer.” If not mentioned, bring up the repetition of the word “we” at the end of each line, the basic three word pattern followed by most lines, and the punchy final two word line “die soon.”

Fourth Read: This time, have a student read the poem aloud for the class. Students will answer “What is the difference between reading the poem silently and hearing it out loud?” In the discussion that follows, ask the student who read the poem aloud to share their thought processes in completing the task.

Fifth and final read: Have another student read the text aloud. This final question has two parts. Students will answer “How are the pool players depicted in the poem? How are sound, poetic voice, and text structures used in the poem to enrich that depiction? Again, follow-up with focused discussion on the key questions discussed here.

The remaining time should be used for students to openly discuss the poem’s contents and ideas. Teachers should consider connections to jazz music as seen in the poem’s structure and rhythm, and reinforce any historical context that might benefit students’ interpretation. Encourage students likewise to connect the messages of the poem with their own knowledge and experiences.

Lesson 2

Lesson 2 should follow the lesson above on “We Real Cool.” In this lesson, students will begin to experiment with visual interpretations of the poem.

Objective: Students will be able to identify differences between the text and video forms of the poem, and interpret how the differences affect meanings.

Do-Now: Follow a similar protocol as Lesson 1. Start with eight minutes time to work silently and independently, and five minutes to share responses. Students are asked to do the following: “Reread Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem “We Real Cool,” and create an image/doodle based on the text.” Allow students creative license with how they create their images. In the discussion that follows, discuss the process of artistic *interpretation* that students here connected with particular aspects of the meaning, sound, and presentation of “We Real Cool” and used that in their own image. Emphasize some of the potential differences between different student images, with each based on the artist’s own understanding of the subject matter.

Next, have students watch the video version of the poem produced by the Poetry Foundation. A link can be found in the resources section of the unit. The video runs about six minutes and includes audio of Brooks herself explaining the background on the poem and its composition, followed by Brooks reading the poem. The video, featuring music throughout, concludes with a short jazz composition accompanying the video, using the text of the poem as its lyrics.

After viewing the video, students will participate in a Socratic Seminar style discussion. For this style of discussion, ensure that students are in a circle or other arrangement which enables them to easily see and hear their peers. Discuss ground-rules and basic expectations with students for the discussion, and that this is a dialogue, not a debate. Everyone is welcome to offer their own ideas and interpretations, but do not have to refute their classmates’ ideas. Students’ ideas and responses should both build upon and respond to peers’ contributions. Teachers can break the class into several smaller groups or keep one whole-class discussion group, and may serve as the facilitator or assign the role to a student. Students should be taking notes during

the discussion, and making references to both the text of the poem as well as the video in their responses. The following questions serve to spearhead discussion, but good facilitation follows no predetermined path:

How does the interpretation of the poem in the video differ from your own expectations?

Did anything strike you about how Brooks read the poem? If you read (or have read) the poem aloud, would (or did) you read it the same way?

How does the inclusion of music affect our reading of the poem?

Did any visuals stand out to you? Why do you think the film-makers included those visuals?

Towards the beginning of the video, Brooks explains some of her process and inspirations writing the poem. Did anything surprise you here? Did this influence your interpretation of the poem?

Why do you think the film-makers used paper puppets? How does this medium influence the visuals on the screen?

How would you film this poem? What about other poems we will have read in class?

How does the video accentuate Brooks' poetic voice?

After wrapping up the discussion, give students the remainder of the class time to write down their two largest takeaways from the discussion, and collect this to assess student understanding.

Lesson 3

This lesson comes from the second week of the weekly plan, where students will compare and contrast different perspectives of life in the city through the urban poem. By this time, students should have already read selections from some of the English Romantic poets, especially those critical of urban life. William Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" is a particularly useful counterpoint to Walt Whitman's view of Manhattan in "Give Me the Silent Sun."

Objectives: Students will be able to analyze the use of imagery as a figurative device in "Give Me the Silent Sun." Students will be able to compare and contrast the ideas and forms between two different poets.

Do-Now: Allow students five minutes for writing their responses, and five minutes for discussion. "Where would you rather spend the day, exploring a new city or exploring the wilderness? Why?"

Model the process of analyzing imagery with students. Emphasize that imagery, as a figurative device, is not limited just to visuals, but includes sound, touch, and even taste. Share examples with students from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," or Percy Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." Both poems which make excellent use of imagery, while also allowing students to understand the Romantic deep love of nature in contrast to the disdain for urban life. Explain how the use of imagery allows readers to better visualize and understand the message the poem is trying to convey. Given that many of the poems that students are reading in this unit are about cities, real, physical places, it is especially important that they are able to understand imagery as a literary tool.

Background Context: Before reading "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," review student background

knowledge of the Civil War. The poem is explicitly set during the war years, and ensure that you give necessary background information about Whitman's career as journalist and time working as a nurse during the war.

Have a student read the poem aloud for the class. Then divide the class into two groups. Each group will be tasked with looking at one of the two sections of "Give me the splendid silent sun." The first section is a celebration of nature, the second a celebration of the city. Students must first identify examples of imagery (and whether it is visual, auditory, tactile, or gustatory imagery), then they must analyze and answer what *specifically* attracts the voice of the poet to either the city or to nature in that section (e.g. What does Whitman love most about Manhattan?)

The groups will then join together as a whole class, and prepared with evidence from the text, share their findings with the other group. An open seven-minute discussion should follow. Students then respond, first on their own on a piece of paper, and then as a class in discussion, to the following question: "Why does Whitman celebrate nature in the first part of the poem, but then seemingly reject it in the second? Are the two points of view at odds with each other?"

Depending upon the length of your class, this protocol can be used again as a tool to compare and contrast different poems. One group might analyze Wordsworth's perspective in "Westminster Bridge," the other Whitman, and perhaps even a third group with William Blake, with each group presenting the individual poet's view towards nature or the city, and then finally doing the analytical work of comparing and contrasting in the whole group discussion. Similarly, have students examine literary forms and devices used in the poems, to see, for example, how Whitman's use of free verse compares next to the English Romantics use of more structured poetic forms.

Finally, return back to the Do-Now question that the class started this lesson with, and encourage students to write their own lines of poetry that celebrate what they love about nature or the city. Students may then share their lines with the rest of the class.

Final Project

This section contains the instructions as presented to students for the final poetry project.

Over the course of this unit, we have read a wide range and variety of poems that examined life in the city, from its buildings to the people who walk its streets. We have also both witnessed and participated in experiments with sound, visual art, and video in these poems. You will take what you have learned, and create your own interpretation of the city.

You are tasked with writing at least 25 lines of poetry that deal with urban life. You may choose to write one longer poem or write several smaller poems. Your poem does not have to rhyme or follow any mandated structure, but you should consider how you will employ rhythm, sound, and structure in your poem. Be sure that you include at least two examples of figurative language, such as simile, metaphor, personification, or imagery in your poem.

You will read the poem for the class. You will choose one of the following options to accompany the reading of your poem: a piece of visual art that you make; a video, either that you film yourself or includes a montage of photography; instrumental music.

In addition to completing your poem, you will prepare a two-page artist's statement. In the statement, you will describe what the process of writing the poem was like, the decisions that you made along the way, and the influences from this unit or your own reading that shaped your writing. You should also explain the image/music you chose to accompany your poem.

You will have two days in class to draft your poem. On day three, you will read the poems of two of your peers, with all students providing constructive and supportive feedback on the other poems. Using that feedback, you will have one day to finish your poem. The remaining two days will be dedicated to working on your artist's statement. When presenting your poem, your peers will give you two pieces of feedback.

Bibliography for Teachers

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Williams, Raymond. *The country and the city*. London: Vintage, 2016. Williams explores how the distinction between town/country came to be in English literature, and is an excellent tool in analyzing urban poetry.

Student Reading List and Suggested Poems

1. William Carlos Williams "Patterson"
2. Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street in Bronzeville* and "We Real Cool"
3. Langston Hughes, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*
4. Erika Meitner, *Ideal Cities*
5. Carl Sandburg, "Chicago"
6. Marcus Valerius Martialis (Martial), *Epigrams*
7. Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"
8. Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus"
9. Tupac Shakur, "The Rose That Grew From Concrete"
10. William Blake, "London" and "The Chimney Sweep"
11. William Wordsworth, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" and "Tintern Abbey"
12. Walt Whitman, "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun"
13. Alan Ginsburg, "Howl"
14. Hart Crane, "To Brooklyn Bridge"
15. Elizabeth Acevedo, "You Mean You Don't Weep at the Nail Salon"
16. Terrance Hayes, "New York Poem"
17. Jamaal May, "There are Birds Here"
18. Ben Jonson, "Epigrams"

19. S. Eliot, "The Waste-Land"
20. Charles Baudelaire, "The Seven Old Men"
21. Lewis Macadams, *The River*

Classroom Resources

1. Gwendolyn Brooks Reading "We Real Cool" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaVfLwZ6jes>
2. Video Interpretation of "We Real Cool" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0USvSvhue70>
3. Jamaal May's "There are Birds Here" Video Interpretation - https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=there+are+birds+here
4. Resources for exploring Bronzeville of the mid-20th century - <https://chicagostudies.uchicago.edu/bronzeville/bronzeville-history-bronzeville>
https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/uic_pic
<https://www.nps.gov/crps/CRMJournal/Fall2003/reviewexhibit4.html>
5. Resource for exploring Harlem of the mid-20th century - <https://archives.nypl.org/controlaccess/3950?term=Harlem+%28New+York%2C+N.Y.%29>
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/>
6. Jacob Lawrence's drawing for the Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred* - <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2037190>

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

This unit is closely aligned to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. The process of reading, interpreting, and writing poetry builds students' skills in analyzing texts, interpreting author's choice and craft, and discerning and using purposeful language and vocabulary. As this unit will be taught in the 2023-2024 school year to seventh grade students, the standards are aligned for this grade level. Other applicable strands can be adjusted for other grade levels.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1

Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Students will use close reading to explore and analyze poetry. Classroom discussions and written assignments will require that students provide evidence to support their ideas. All sample lessons demonstrate how this standard will be implemented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.4

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Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.

The use of sound in poetry is essential to the teaching of this unit. By extension, students will have to understand how poets use language to craft their works. Sample Lesson 3 demonstrates how this standard will be implemented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.5

Analyze how a drama's or poem's form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning.

In this unit, students will encounter a variety of forms of poetry, including both sonnets and free verse. In sample Lesson 3, students compare how the form of a poem like Whitman's "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" differs from those such as Wordsworth's "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge."

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.7

Compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem to its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium (e.g., lighting, sound, color, or camera focus and angles in a film).

Students will both create their own audio/visual/performed version of the poems in this unit, as well as analyze existing interpretations. These lessons will focus explicitly on how specific techniques influence the meaning presented in different forms. Lesson 2 demonstrates the implementation of this standard.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3.D

Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.

Students will write their own poetry in this unit, and using techniques from the texts they have read, will implement the use of rhyme, imagery, and figurative language.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.5

With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1-3 up to and including grade 7 here.)

As part of the concluding poem project of the unit, students will work with their peers to edit and revise their final submission.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Throughout the course of the unit, discussion will play a crucial role in learning activities. All samples lessons include examples of collaborative discourse.

Notes

¹ William Blake, "London," 448.

² Carl Sandburg, "Chicago."

³ Tupac Shakur, "The Rose That Grew From Concrete."

⁴ Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven."

⁵ Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus."

⁶ Versluys, *The Poet in the City*, 1987, p. 2.

⁷ Langston Hughes, "Harlem."

⁸ Versluys, p.114.

⁹ <https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization>.

¹⁰ Martial, *Epigrams*, 1.86, from <https://topostext.org/work/677>.

¹¹ Sharpe, *Unreal Cities*, 1990, p. xi.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper."

¹⁴ Wordsworth, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3rd , 1802."

¹⁵ Walt Whitman, "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun."

¹⁶ Versluys, p. 74.

¹⁷ Versluys, p. 114.

¹⁸ Sharpe, p. 39.

¹⁹ Sharpe, p. 102.

²⁰ Mickelson, p. 17.

²¹ Ibid., p. 59.

²² Julie E Daniel *Building Natures*, p. 19.

²³ Ibid. P.162-163.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 54.

²⁵ Leslie Wheeler, p.3.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

²⁷ Pocock, p. 27.

²⁸ Baetens, p. 1.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 65.

³¹ Image provided courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/347997>.

³² Wheeler, p. 61.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Image provided courtesy of the Marxist Internet Archive Library, from the December 1931 issue of the *New Masses*.

³⁵ Hughes, *Montage*.

³⁶ Creely, p. 116.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Maisha Fuller.

³⁹ Jusslin and Höglund, p. 49.

⁴⁰ Stovall, p. 64.

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