



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1985 Volume I: Poetry

The Room 20 School of Poetry

Curriculum Unit 85.01.01
by Bill Coden

Think back. Summon up your reaction when the teacher announced the beginning of THE POETRY UNIT. Perhaps your eyes glazed over; white noise filled your head; your brain clicked off. For three weeks you had nothing to look forward to except tedium: definitions, line-by-line analysis, abstractions and memorization. Such experiences with poetry as students certainly stunted some of us who went on to become teachers—conveyors of poetry to children.

In the course of this unit, I will gain knowledge of poetry as well as confidence in teaching poetry and particular poems. In the development and presentation of *The Room 20 School of Poetry*, I will diligently avoid factors which turned me off as a student: silent isolation, overkill, meaningless questions, and overanalysis. The poems in my unit must pass the acid test—I must like them!

My unit will be presented as a series of “workshops” offering my students a structured and exciting study of the work of two poets. The workshop format will provide the structure; our discussions of the poems in the unit and our writings based on poetic concepts and themes taken from the poems will provide excitement.

My sixth-grade students will benefit in many ways from our study of poetry. Better reading will be one gain—an important one for students usually one or two years below reading level. The brevity of the poems under study is enticing; no poem will be impossible to read from start to finish. Brevity may also lead to a new awareness of the spoken and written word, for careful and conscious choices must be made when creating a poem. Improved skills in writing and discussing are also an important part of the unit; writing begins immediately. The success of the unit depends on a willingness on the part of teacher and student to approach the new and/or different realm of poetry, a willingness to express and share feelings, and a willingness to view the ordinary as appropriate subject matter.

I have reworked the workshop format, which is based on that developed by Neil Baldwin. Briefly stated, the format stresses listening, discussion and writing skills; the connectedness of the skills and the logical structure are crucial.

Structure and continuity are two important concepts to me; at times I feel I—as well as other teachers—fight against incredible odds to see that they are part of my teaching. My unit will allow my students to see that we are building toward something—the writing of poetry—using our new knowledge and the things that are important to us in our daily lives.

Each lesson will follow a step-by-step sequence:

- I. Reading aloud paired poems by Nikki Giovanni and Eve Merriam. Students and teacher will read aloud; the emphasis at this point is on poems as works of art meant to be heard. Several readings allow us to get the sense of each poem as a whole; the reading done by students will be a quick gauge on understanding.
- II. Brief discussion and questions about the ideas and themes in the poems.
- III. Emphasis on poetic concept or theme gleaned from the poems under study, which leads to,
- IV. Writing in class. I've found it best to work along with my students on poems and writing skills. Finding your own "voice" in your writing is stressed. More often than not, we will be striving for a conversational tone.
- V. Revision and rethinking (at home).
- VI. Sharing (further reading aloud).

I've made a few tentative stabs at teaching and writing poetry using this plan; to my timid-hearted delight, it works!

Since the study of particular poems will be intertwined with the study of poetry in general, I had to develop a working vocabulary of poetic concepts which would make sense to me and to my students. The language used in defining the poetics in the unit is purposely simple; while I'm operating with these concepts in mind, it is important that students contribute as much as possible to the definitions.

The unit deals with:

- I. image: the picture or event presented in the poem, Comparisons between musicians/notes, painters/brushes, poets/words will be made.
- II. simile: the images or ideas being joined are stated and explicitly linked by the word "as" or "like" or a similar linking word. Most of the similes in the unit's poems will be "simple" rather than "extended". ¹
- III. metaphor: a comparison made indirectly; one thing is discussed *in terms of* the other.
- IV. Line: the basic building block in a poem; a means of organization.
- V. rhythm: the flow or beat, music being the obvious connection. Rhythm is a natural part of our physical and psychological make-up. I want to deal with the wholeness of each poem in the unit, so I choose to avoid the governance by strict laws which reduces rhythm to meter. ²

In the early part of the unit, poems which promote discussion and understanding of basic poetic concepts will be studied. All poems in the unit must meet these criteria: they must speak directly to my students' interests and needs; they must be poems I like, so that I will avoid treading too lightly. Careful selection of poems is crucial, since they will serve as the jumping-off places for our writing.

When beginning *The Room 20 School of Poetry*, three class periods will be spent reading and discussing poems which center on a joy in sound and words ("Lullaby" by Eve Merriam, "dance poem" by Nikki Giovanni), as well as poems which attempt to define poetry ("Inside a Poem" and "The Poem as a Door" by Merriam) and hint at the power of the poet ("Advice from a Visiting Poet" by Merriam, "kidnap poem" by Giovanni). I will explore and include in the unit instances of similarities (themes, titles) and dissimilarities (a theme held in common but viewed from opposing angles). These similarities and dissimilarities will also be included in our discussions and writings. A list of suggested pairings and the theme or concept is presented later in the unit.

The poems in the unit were written by Nikki Giovanni and Eve Merriam; they range from delightful rhymes to the "slightly less than sweet." I have chosen to concentrate on selections from the works of these poets for many reasons: most importantly, children respond enthusiastically to them; the poets are women with strong links to the past and visions of the future; one is black, one is white; one is young, one is old. Their viewpoints frequently diverge. I sense, however, that strong feelings about war, racial strife, and feminism link them.

Both poets share an obvious joy in words: how they sound, what they mean, and what they connote. Eve Merriam's "How to Eat a Poem" advises the reader or speaker to bite, touch, lick—to make the poem part of yourself. Nikki Giovanni's "Poetry" tells us that a poem can bridge the inner and the outer—what we think and what we say.

In the course of my reading, I became increasingly frustrated at the lack of biographical material available on Eve Merriam. Nikki Giovanni is fairly well-documented, beginning with *Gemini*, her extended autobiographical statement. Some biographical information will be given during the course of the unit, but the poems form the core.

The works of both poets speak of change: anger at racial injustice expressed from within and directly opposed to the organized civil rights movement; concern with the role of women today, often viewed from a historical perspective; a need for solitude and at times an overwhelming desire to be with and share with others. Both writers are incredibly prolific; their most recent works were conceived with children in mind as the participatory audience—for children become swept up in the poems.

Presentation in many textbooks implies that poems are to be read silently and questions are to be answered in great detail. The "history" of poetry, of course, gives us an opposite view. ³Listeners were entertained, informed and thrilled by bards, balladeers and troubadors. Communication was instantaneous; the vocabulary was shared by the reciter (or singer) and the listener. The invention of movable type, however, led to composition for the eye, rather than for the ear. ⁴The poem became silent. Those fortunate people who learned to read poetry rarely heard poetry. It can easily be argued that we now hear poetry when we listen to popular songs. This musical allusion must also be applied to the oral reading of any poem we wish to bring alive for our students.

Presentation of a poetry unit in one fell swoop—and only then—is another drawback. Poetry can—and should—be an on-going, integral part of classroom life. Certainly early work must be done to lay the groundwork for further study and enjoyment. Following the initial three-session introduction mentioned earlier, the workshops will be conducted one day per week for a double period (one hour).

The unit will be given for at least one marking period.

I feel it is important to avoid the tendency to become so enmeshed in poetics that we lose the poetry. My unit will concentrate on only the five aspects of poetics mentioned earlier; they are vital and they are enough for a beginning study.

The study of poems frequently includes a series of meaningless questions, many of which center on the meaning of individual words. While I don't mean to denigrate the importance of vocabulary development, the questions I'll ask in the unit focus on emotional experience as well as details and facts as far as they can be determined. ⁵ The emphasis will be on perception (what the poem says to us) rather than on interpretation ("What does the poet mean by . . . ?", becomes at best a second guess). Difficulties with vocabulary will of course be dealt with.

As dangerous and damning as meaningless questions is overanalysis. Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has literally been torn apart, picked over and put back together by critics, teachers and students for years. The poet, as Untermeyer reports, said that,

"I've been more bothered
with that one than anybody has ever
been with any poem in just pressing
it with more than it should be
pressed for. It means enough
without being pressed." Disturbed
by "Pressers" puzzling about the
snowy woods and the miles to go, he
said that all the poem means is:
"It's all very nice here, but I must
be getting home. There are chores
to do." At another time when a
critic indicated that the last three
lines implied that the poet longed
for an after-life in heaven, Frost
smiled and shook his head. "No, it
only means I want to get the hell
out of there." ⁶

We will, at all costs, avoid futile and unrewarding searches for hidden meanings and symbols. A good poem means just what it says, and it suggests what it suggests. ⁷

Reading poems aloud, as I've intimated, is an important component of the unit. To many of us, it seems to be an onerous task and, consequently, we will read badly—or avoid poetry altogether. In reality, the reading needn't be a burden and can easily become a joy.

A few guidelines for gaining confidence in our oral reading of poetry are in order. ⁸ Before reading aloud to your class, know the poem well. Familiarize yourself with its rhythm and words.

Read naturally! Make sensible pauses that please you. Speak in a natural voice. Allow a little quiet time after a poem is read aloud, for it is important to think of how a poem is affecting you. ⁹ Analysis can come later. Any poem worth its salt, according to Giovanni in *Poetspeak*, should allow the reader to think.

Reading aloud is, of course, an individual performance incorporating our innate musical abilities: the pitch of our voices, choice of tone, emphasis and touch. The reader assumes the responsibility of conducting, orchestrating and performing. As teachers, we assume the responsibility of doing it well. Again, the poems in the unit stress the conversational tone; this should, I feel, make reading aloud easier.

The writing we'll do in the unit is gleaned from the poetic concepts or the themes presented in the poems under study. I intend to adhere to the following guidelines:

- I. Skills and concepts presented early in the unit will be ongoing and cumulative. As such, they should be referred to in each lesson.
- II. Activities which stress the use of imagination and imaginative thinking—word games, language arts and theatre games, creative problem solving—will be included.
- III. Relevant subject matter! We're more likely to find our "voice" in writing if we're dealing with a subject of interest or importance to us—not something we think we ought to care about. ¹
- IV. Revision must be part of our work—for better expression as well as for mechanics.
- V. Read, read, read—silently and aloud—more poetry. We'll become more familiar and comfortable with a literary form which is too often viewed as formidable. Further readings will include other contemporary poets.

I expect my students and I will learn much from Nikki Giovanni and Eve Merriam—and from each other—as we read, listen to, and write poetry.

Poems & Themes in this Unit

(figure available in print form)

Lesson Plan: “two friends” and “Sometimes”*

I. Poems will be read aloud, first by student volunteers, then by teacher. There should be no vocabulary difficulties.

II. Questions/discussion. What mood do the poems put you in? Why? What mood is the speaker in the first poem in? How can you tell? Lydia and Shirley have things “in common.” What does this phrase mean? Think of a particular friend; what do you have in common with him/her? What mood is the speaker in the second poem in? Why? Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever felt this way with a friend? In “Sometimes”, how is the rhythm different from stanza to stanza? Does it help set the mood? How?

III. Writing: Often we may have conflicting feelings about a person—a sister or brother, a good friend. We know we should like them, care for them, help them—but sometimes it’s hard. Begin working on a poem about how it feels to have this conflict or tell about a time when you felt you’d been pushed to the limit! If you’d rather, your poem may be about what you and a friend have in common.

Remember Concentrate on rhythm, rather than rhyme.

Skip a line between stanzas.

*In general, time is given each workshop for questions about the writing assignment. The assignment is repeated and writing begins. Revision takes place at home. Completed poems are due at our next class period. I try to bring out the theme or poetic concept during our discussions of the poems.

Lesson Plan: “a poem for carol (may she always wear red ribbons)” and “Say Nay”

I. Poems will be read aloud, first by student volunteers, then by teacher.

Vocabulary: offensive, singularly, inexorably, say nay

II. Question/discussion: What mood is the speaker in the first poem in? Why? Why wouldn’t the speaker go near the cat, even though she loved her? Nikki Giovanni separates the last two lines from the rest of the poem. How does this give importance to these lines? In your own words, what are these lines saying to *us* ? How does balancing “on the tightrope of hope” differ from saying nay? Which is harder to do? Why? What similarities can you see in these two poems?

III. Writing: We often have to make hard choices. Will we choose “right”—or “wrong”? Sometimes we wish we’d chosen differently. Write a poem about a hard choice you had to make—one you were happy you made or one you wish you hadn’t made. Be sure to include your reasons! Try to remember how you felt.

Remember Concentrate on rhythm, rather than rhyme. Skip a line between stanzas.

Begin new thoughts on new lines.

Lesson Plan: “My House” and “Love Letters, Unmailed”

I. Poems will be read aloud—first by student volunteers, then by teacher.

Vocabulary: revolution, goblet.

II. Questions/discussion: What mood is the speaker in the first poem in? How can you tell? What tells us that the speaker might be nervous? Does she get over this nervousness? How can you tell? The words “my house” are frequently repeated. What does this repetition do? What image do you see of the house? What mood is the speaker in the second poem? What do you think the title tells us about the speaker? What word pictures do you see? Would you agree that these are “love poems”? Why? Why not?

III. Writing: Telling a person we love him/her is difficult. We know how we feel. We know the reasons; we have the words—but it seems impossible! Think of someone you care for a great deal. Imagine that you’re talking to that person. What would you say? Write your words with that person as a poem. You needn’t name the person in the poem. It’s important to remember that you’re talking *to* —not about—the person. You may wish to include strong images.

Remember Concentrate on rhythm, rather than rhyme. Skip a line between stanzas.

Begin new thoughts on new lines.

Notes

1. Robert Scholes , *Elements of Poetry* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 36.
2. Louis Untermeyer, *The Pursuit of Poetry* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 266.
3. *Ibid* ., p. 23.
4. *Ibid* ., p. 107.
5. Neil Baldwin, *The Poetry Writing Handbook* (New York, Scholastic Book Services, 1981), p. 10.
6. Untermeyer, p. 83.
7. Kenneth Koch, *Sleeping on the Wing* (New York, Vintage Books, 1982), p. 9.
8. Lee Bennett Hopkins , *Pass the Poetry Please !* (New York, Citation Press, 1972), pp. 10-12.
9. Koch, p. 10.
10. Roch, p. 20.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS

Baldwin, Neil. *The Poetry Writing Handbook* . New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1981. [I've found it incredibly practical and helpful. The poems are all written by contemporary American poets; the focus is on the conversational voice.]

Giovanni, Nikki. *Gemini* . New York: Penguin Books, 1971. [The poet's extended autobiographical statement. *Gemini* , according to some critics, freely mixes fact, fantasy and fiction. I feel it leads to an appreciation—rather than an understanding—of Giovanni.]

Hopkins, Lee Bennett. *Pass the Poetry, Please !* New York: Citation Press, 1972. [An attempt at explaining the many things poetry can be. In addition to interesting teaching suggestions, Hopkins offers insights into authors kids appreciate and respond to.]

Janeczko, Paul B., ed. *Poetspeak* . Scarsdale, New York: Bradbury Press, 1983. [A collection of contemporary poems. Poets comment on their poems which have been reproduced in the book—sometimes explaining, sometimes raising further questions.]

Koch, Kenneth. *Sleeping on the Wing* . New York: Vintage Books, 1982. [Another helpful book. Modern poems serve as models for student writing. Some beautiful poems are included.]

Lopate, Phillip. *Being with Children* . Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975. [A poet's account of his work and life in various classrooms teaching poetry—and other things. One of my favorite books.]

Merriam, Eve. *Man and Woman : The Human Condition* . Denver, Colorado: Research Center on Woman, 1968. [Text of an address (witty, serious, moving) given by the writer.]

Scholes, Robert. *Elements of Poetry* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1969. [The first book we read in seminar—a good beginning! Scholes carefully and painlessly guides you through the “game” of poetry.]

Untermeyer, Louis. *The Pursuit of Poetry* . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969. [An informative and useful book: part primer, part anecdote, part history.]

Reading List for Students

The poems used in this unit have been placed on file at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute Office.

In preparing the unit, I read the books of poetry listed below. Please go through them for poems your students would like.

Nikki Giovanni: *ego-tripping* . New York: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1973.

My House . New York: Quill, 1983.

Spin a Soft Black Song . New York: Hill and Wang, 1971.

Vacation Time . New York: William Morrow and Company, 1980.

Eve Merriam: *Catch a Little Rhyme* . New York: Atheneum, 1966.

Finding a Poem . New York: Atheneum, 1970.

It Doesn't Always Have to Rhyme . New York: Atheneum, 1964.

Jamboree . New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1984.

Out Loud . New York: Atheneum, 1973.

Rainbow Writing . New York: Atheneum, 1976.

Other Resources: *First Choice : Poets and Poetry* (Filmstrips about Nikki Giovanni and Eve Merriam available from Pied Piper Productions, Verdugo City, California).

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