



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

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## Poems Of Every Time Rock You

Curriculum Unit 85.01.02  
by Anthony F. Franco

Every September on the first day of classes I warmly welcome each group of eighth grade students assigned to me with a preview of what they can expect throughout the year in their English class. I inform them that they will receive lessons in spelling and will be duly tested each week on a new list of words—a test which will also include definitions. I emphasize that they will be dealing with grammar on a very regular basis which will encompass a review of all grammar supposedly learned in previous years as well as grammatical constructions normally reserved for eighth graders. Then, with a gleam in my eye and the slightest smile, I mention that they will have the opportunity to read a selection of short stories and novels in several units that had been coincidentally developed by their new English teacher at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. Finally, I further inform them that I will hope to hone their writing talents through a series of units developed by that same teacher under the auspices of that same collegial effort. Invariably, the bell sounds, the class leaves for its next scheduled assignment or the counselor's office to make a schedule change, and I remain—safe, secure, and knowing full well what to expect in the next one hundred and eighty or so days.

I never mention poetry. Poetry's absence from my personal repertoire of English curricula is probably due to a two-fold reasoning process which eliminates any consideration of ever teaching it. First, there is so much more to do in English during a school year, and all of it is so much more important that the teaching of poetry. Add to this the propensity with which I lose academic time for the teaching of English to superimposed achievement testing and survey taking during my classes, and it becomes apparent that a teaching year is much shorter than an academic year. Why study or experience poetry when there are parts of speech to learn, paragraphs to write, stories to read and discuss, verbals, adjective clauses, and those automatic spelling tests to dictate every Friday that there is a Friday? My students and I both have so much more to do than to discuss metered lines of words which do not always rhyme.

Secondly, and herein lies the fodder for a psychologist's dream, I do not know all that much about poetry.

Sure, I read much of what was assigned to me in my undergraduate days, and I have written some for my high school publications and close acquaintances, but I seldom read poetry and have not taught it since my first year of teaching several eons ago. Turn back the years to that first teaching experience and you will see a true novice full of idealism and bursting at the seams in a search to change the academic world. I vividly remember carrying Perrine's *Sound and Sense* back and forth from home to school and occasionally to the cafe to impress my colleagues. I clearly recall writing the various definitions of poetic conventions on the blackboard until my hands achieved that certain whiteness that only a classroom teacher experienced with

dustless chalk knows. I distinctly remember how with painstaking care I constructed what I considered the ultimate in poetry tests only to almost totally disregard the results when grading time rolled around. I played the game and needless to say there was no winner. I often think fondly of that class but to this day I never have seen one of their names under two stanzas in a magazine.

The time has come. This unit represents a long, overdue attempt to return poetry to my English classes. Any success I have in using this unit will be due to my personal interest in what I have planned as well as my belief that it will work within the classroom. I am not expecting a flawless, utopian experience. Indeed, I welcome difficulty so that I might learn from my mistakes. In any event, poetry will henceforth become a fixture, not an abhorrence, in my classes. I have already dusted off Perrine and we are both primed.

This present attempt to introduce poetry to my eighth grade students is not without a somewhat unconventional mode, however. I do not plan to force feed poetic definitions into the happy faces who will be sitting before me. My hands are rougher now and the chalk does not wash out as easily as it once did. This unit will strive to introduce poetry to my students by using the lyrics of contemporary rock music as a first step and then by comparing those lyrics in a thematic way to poems written by poets who have withstood the passage of time. Reader beware: I caution the potential users of this unit that if you do not care for rock music, if you do not drive to school each morning changing the station on your car radio in an attempt to find your favorite rock song, and if you do not delight in pausing for more than three successive music videos on your television set, then you should read no further. If, however, you are the least bit curious and want to take advantage of a cultural phenomenon that is here to stay, then rock on toward what I believe will be a foot stomping, finger snapping educational experience for both you and your students.

The lyrics of contemporary songwriters rock us as we listen to contemporary music because what is heard has meaning—there is an identifiable connection between the song and those of us who listen. This fact can be easily substantiated by taping ourselves while in the shower or while driving down a highway as the only occupant of the car. Further proof with respect to our students can be gleaned if we intercept an occasional note passed between two desks or notice what a seemingly conscientious student is meticulously writing on a clean sheet of notebook paper while the rest of the class is following one of our lessons on the blackboard. Although we listeners are arguably first attracted to rock music because of the beat that encompasses the song or the visual images provided by the music video, invariably we experience the song because of its lyrics. The song has a special influence upon us because the lyrics that are heard hold a far greater meaning for us and provide a deeper impact than the twang of a guitar or the beat of a drum.

The focus of this unit will be to tap this heretofore greatly slighted resource of rock music as an educational tool in the English classroom and capitalize upon its importance to society and the typical eighth grade student. Rock music is often the number one friend of many of our students simply because it is so accessible. I have met a number of students who have never been quite sure about how to use the principal parts of a verb, and I have bid farewell to a slightly lesser number who felt the same way. I would be hard pressed, however, to find more than a few students who did not own records or a radio or who could not tell me the title of their favorite song even if it had changed on a weekly basis. Music is a large part of our daily existence, and it seems especially prominent in the life of a typical eighth grader. Song lyrics keep transmitting messages to us and the more we listen, the more messages we receive. The more messages we receive the more immersed we become in our music until the lyrics that we hear are assimilated as part of our lives and give us meaning.

I feel there are three major areas of consideration in which a listener identifies with a song. Many songs

appeal to listeners because we, as listeners, and the singer feel the same way. Oftentimes, the listener associates his environment to the environment that is implied by the song. Mostly, we are attracted to songs because the experience related in the song raises a consciousness in us of events that have happened in our past or events that are hoped for in the future.

Poetry can have the same effect upon a reader that rock music can have on a listener. A poet often utilizes the poetic device known as a metaphor to draw a comparison between two not necessarily similar entities. The result is a blatant statement which causes the reader to view one entity in terms of a totally different other. The mental picture formed in the mind of the reader becomes more clearly focused because of this metaphor. A reader of poems, just like the listener of rock lyrics, can identify with his medium to the extent that he assumes the poetic voice as his own, he lives in any environment suggested by the work, and the experience he reads about is his experience. In essence, both the reader of poetry and the rock music listener are each one half of a metaphor themselves as their feelings and lives are one and the same with the poem or song. Our students and some of us readily involve ourselves in rock lyrics to this metaphorical level; we need to realize that we can derive the same emotion by the reading of poetry.

The themes of life are increasingly changing and yet they remain the same. Love, fear, happiness, and sorrow are emotions that readily permeate rock music. They are also the same themes that poets have been writing about since the dawn of time. If we can immerse ourselves into the lyrics of a top forty hit, can the transition to a seventeenth century sonnet be very difficult? The language of the latter may be a bit awkward for us at first, and there may be some confusion because of the absence of an apparent melody or electronically reproduced synthesis, but the emotion is there to rock us. We need only to read the poem, several times if necessary, to ascertain its theme.

The theme of love is the one theme most prevalent in the lyrics of contemporary songwriters. Under this umbrella category of emotion we can include the thrill of first love, the soft warmth of passion, and the disappointment of both unrequited and lost love. This theme is the basis for most rock lyricists and it seems only fitting since a similar pattern exists throughout the work of their poetic ancestors. The rock music aficionado can associate with one or all of these categories quite freely, as favorite songs of love are most frequently hummed in the shower or the car or possibly even at this very moment. Is there much difference, however, between what these rock love songs are saying and the amorous sonnets of a John Donne or William Shakespeare? The use of words may be different, and the absence of a video may put the reader of poetry at a loss, but the message Donne or Shakespeare left us is essentially the same one a Stevie Wonder gives us today.

Another theme conspicuous in rock music and certainly used by the poets of history is what I categorize as the theme of social consciousness. Included in this category are songs and poems that are anti-war or pro-peace in nature, lyrics which decry social injustice including those written to bring attention to the victims of famine, and songs which deal with the lamentations of the urban experience. We need only look to poets such as William Blake and Langston Hughes to realize that what our rock hits are saying has all been said before.

The themes of love and social consciousness as they exist in contemporary music and the entire realm of poetry are just two of the themes that I hope to explore with my students. Certainly other themes exist in both genres and when applicable they will be discussed. A word of caution must be inserted here. There are some elemental themes that exist in rock music that I will not be introducing to my class—namely, sex and violence. I do not intend to make use of such lyrics in the classroom although it is inevitable that some students will want to discuss such songs and compare them to poetry. I feel the user of this unit should be prepared for

such an occurrence. As for myself, teaching at the eighth grade level, I see no real need to discuss songs that are anti-women or that are fraught with the themes of suicide or self abuse by drugs. Yet, these social evils are prevalent in society and, if I am confronted with the inevitable, I can not turn the other way. In dealing with any of the lyrics of this type, I plan to stress the moral issues these songs raise and accentuate only the positive elements underlying the controversial aspect of the lyrics. The immorality of a song's lyrics may be touted by the singer, but the impressionable student should be made aware of the accepted alternative of the issue or the preventive measures used by society to combat it. Perhaps a high school teacher using this unit may wish to purposely introduce controversial lyrics such as these, but I feel the eighth grade is too low a level to do so. Many popular rock songs do encompass these questionable themes so it behooves the user of this unit to do his homework first.

This is a unit in poetry appreciation—an introduction. It is not an attempt to teach students rock music lyrics. I do not read music, nor do I play any musical instrument.

Therefore, I will not carry a guitar to class although my dog-eared copy of Perrine will be close at hand. The many poetic devices such as simile, metaphor, alliteration, assonance, meter, rhyme, personification, symbol, and the like will be discussed only as they arise in the reading of music lyrics or poetry. Students will experience these uses of language only when they pertain to the songs or poems discussed. Any teacher using this unit is, of course, free to stress any or all of the poetic devices apparent in poetry, but I caution you to tread easily and not force feed figurative language to your students; let them experience the songs and the poems, mention the various uses of figurative language to them using examples that arise, and I assure you that using this unit will be a pleasant educational experience for both of you.

The teaching strategies and suggestions that follow are what I feel most comfortable with in the implementation of this unit. What may work for me in my classes will not necessarily be effective in yours. If you already teach your students poetry, you may want to use this unit as a supplement. If poetry is a distant memory in an old plan book for you, as it is for me, try the unit as I suggest. At its best, you and your students will feel good about poetry and you will be satisfied that poetry is once again part of your English curriculum. At the very least, you will have ended your exile from poetry as I am about to end mine. We both will have tried.

Teaching students an appreciation of poetry by introducing them to poems which have similar themes to contemporary music lyrics may not appear to be thoroughly conventional, but it does make sense. In doing so, you can tap a resource that already commands a great influence on our students; indeed, for some students music is the chief preoccupation of their lives. Cultivating their interest in music lyrics and poetry will reaffirm certain themes that have been experienced by man since the dawn of time. Asking our students to write original poetry based on similar themes only completes the cycle. The writing suggestions included below give the student a vehicle in which he can express his views on matters which are very important. The student thus has an opportunity to externalize his feelings rather than keep them internalized as he would if he just listened to music lyrics on the radio. I realize that this is by no means a foolproof formula which will work for all songs and poems and students, but, if the student can be made to realize that something can be gained from every poem read—no matter how slight or subtle the metaphorical connection—the poem can be appreciated no less than if it were blasting through a set of headphones. You and your students will become the beneficiaries of this unit and its purpose if you let poems of every time rock you.

### **Teaching Strategies and Sequence of Lessons**

The design of this unit dictates that each lesson will begin with lyrics from contemporary music and then a

poem of similar thematic concern will be introduced and discussed. Although the procedure tends to make both the entire realms of rock music and poetry eligible for consideration, I have chosen some guidelines for myself in an attempt to narrow the scope of each genre. I shall attempt to introduce only those lyrics from rock music in which the singer of the song was the sole lyricist or at least had direct input in their formulation. This method will add a certain familiarization between the student and the song as well as allow me to use lyrics that previously were recorded by the singer or group with some thread of continuity for the student. Of course, there will be exceptions to this guideline especially when students volunteer lyrics that are meaningful to them but not necessarily written by the recording artist. The prescribed method, however, will enable me to use many songs of a particular recording artist thereby making the lyrics more accessible. For example, the lyrics of a Stevie Wonder would provide a certain familiarity for the students even if a song was two or three years old rather than the lyrics of an unidentifiable personage whose songs have been recorded by a variety of artists.

I have placed similar restraints upon the unit in dealing with the realm of poetry. Since I do want to stress good poetry that has withstood the passage of time, the older the poem is the more effective will be the intended purpose. I plan to use a number of such poets but will, of course, not entirely limit myself to their works only. Chief among these poets and their works are the sonnets and songs of John Donne, the poetry of Andrew Marvell, William Shakespeare's sonnets, and several selections from William Blake. I will occasionally use poets from the twentieth century such as Langston Hughes, but I feel the dramatic effect of comparing like themes in rock music and poetry will be greater if there is a large gap in time between the two.

A word of caution needs to be inserted here. Searching for rock music lyrics and poems of comparable themes can be a devastatingly time consuming preoccupation. I have included several resources in the bibliography which will address both genres. These resources do make the task somewhat more palatable, but some legwork is still needed. There is also at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute a packet of poems and rock lyrics which have been paired already and is available for your use. This resource package and accompanying cassette tape will provide excellent starter materials for anyone using the unit, however, with the nature of rock music continual additions and deletions of materials from year to year would be necessary.

Presently, I plan to use this unit two days each week for an entire marking period which generally averages ten weeks in length. Should circumstances permit, however, the unit can be easily adapted for a shorter but more intensive length of time. Since the unit depends upon current rock songs whenever possible, it can be used at any time during the year although time must be set aside to gather the rock lyrics and the corresponding poems of similar themes. Introducing the unit in September may be a tough act to follow. I will most likely use the unit during the second or third marking period with my classes although I may ask my students to volunteer their personal preferences in rock music prior to implementing the unit.

The unit as it is designed should work equally well with all levels of students. More sophisticated classes may be able to read the poetry with fewer problems; however, as long as there are music lovers in any class, the unit will work. I feel my biggest obstacle in implementing the unit will arise from some students who may not be willing to share their musical preferences or from those few who may not have any at all.

The unit depends upon the thematic comparison of rock music lyrics to poetry. Below are the major themes which can be embodied in the actual teaching of the lessons. It is here where I expect to teach my students even more than an appreciation of poetry. Each of these themes are central to our daily existence, and, if my students can learn a bit more about life from this unit, then it really will not matter how many more poems each of them reads in the future. The thematic concerns are as follows:

## **Love**

First love

Passion

Unrequited love

Lost love

Hardship

Loneliness

Fear

Poverty and famine

War/Anti-War

City Life

The above should not be construed as an all encompassing list. There are many more themes that can be addressed through rock music and poetry. Also, it is quite possible that you would only wish to concentrate on two or three of these themes depending upon your needs or purpose. I might add that although a music lyric and poem will have essentially the same thematic purpose, that theme can be adapted when the students are asked to write their own poetry. For example, the sub theme of a lost love may not be entirely applicable for every eighth grader, but certainly there will be those students who lost a relative or had to move away from a childhood friend.

Each lesson will follow the same nine step procedure explained below. Once again you may wish to circumvent some of these steps or add some of your own. Below each step I have listed several notations that further explain the process.

### **Basic Lesson Plan**

1. Play the song.

Playing a rock song first will automatically serve several purposes. First, just hearing the beat of the music will be a signal to students that they are about to do something different. This should be a real attention getter. Secondly, if several students consider this song to be one of their favorites, they might start humming or singing along with the tune. You now have a class that is ready to learn.

### **2. Read the lyrics.**

Make sure you have enough copies of the song's lyrics for everyone in the class. If copying is a problem, two or three students can share a single copy. Ask for volunteers to read the lyrics. You might also request that any tireless refrain in the song could be skipped.

### **3. Discuss the lyrics.**

This is a very important step. You should discuss the lyrics as poetry would be discussed. Probably your students will know very little about poetry so you should lead the discussion. Students should be encouraged

to discuss the full implications of certain lines from the lyrics. Any uses of figurative language should be pointed out and fully explained. Do not become too technical and do not discuss any poetic devices unless they actually exist in the lyric.

#### **4. Set the theme.**

Sum up the experience of the song. What is the song about? How do you feel when you hear it? What do you think about when you hear the song?

#### **5. Introduce the poem.**

Once again it would be good to have a copy of the poem for each student. Should the poem prove difficult for the members of the class to read, you should read it. Point out any problems with respect to vocabulary. I leave it up to the individual teacher as to whether or not to mention the author and when he wrote the poem. You may want to keep the date unknown until the end of the lesson as a sort of shock value.

#### **6. Discuss the poem.**

Generally poetic devices and figurative language will be more apparent in the poem than in the song. Be sure to point out and fully explain any such inclusions in the poem. Perhaps the poet and the lyricist both used a simile or metaphor to describe a person that was included in their work. How does each writer treat such a description?

#### **7. Set the theme.**

If you have searched for songs and poems that match thematically, the students should recognize the theme of the poem quite easily. Please do not tend to be too particular. Unless you want to spend hours reading song lyrics and poetry, a theme that is similar is close enough.

#### **8. Review the song and poem.**

You can tell your students how old the poem is in this step. Encourage the class to comment on the theme of both the song and poem. Why was each written? Did the poem rock you as did the song?

#### **9. Writing assignment.**

This step can proceed in any number of ways. Students can be asked to write on a theme similar to that of the poem or song. This does not need to be a lyrical masterpiece. You could ask each student to write one line and have the class collaborate on a poem. Possibly each student's individual line could be a simile or a metaphor. Perhaps the entire class could personify a particular theme. Advanced students could start with rhymed or unrhymed couplets. I refer the reader to the work of Kenneth Koch ( *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* ) for a number of ideas and strategies that have been successfully used with students. Students should be encouraged to share their poetic feelings with each other. Be flexible. There is no need to expect poems that are publishable. Encourage each student to do the very best work of which they are capable. If you teach in a departmentalized situation you can even share the work of one class with another through an occasional bulletin board. In any event—have fun and rock on:

#### *Additional Suggestions:*

1. Students can try to find their own song or poem that has a theme similar to one already discussed.
2. Small groups of students can write their own poetry and then the work of each group can be combined into a collaborative effort.

3. Students can write or find the lyrics to their all time favorite song and then they try to find a poem that matches the theme.
4. A poetry notebook can be maintained by students which would include all song lyrics and poems introduced by the teacher as well as those songs and poems found independently by the student.
5. Since a cassette recorder is indispensable for the implementation of this unit, have a blank cassette handy for those students willing to read their individual poetic efforts on tape.

### *Resource Packet*

The following list of paired music lyrics and poems constitutes the genus edition of the resource material available for this unit at the Teachers' Institute. Substitutions and additions are welcome as the packet is meant to be a developing resource that will be continually refined as more lyrics and poems are discovered and used with students.

<i>Song</i>		<i>Poem/Author</i>
"Fresh"		"Air and Angels"—Donne
"Just To Be Close To You"	"To His Coy Mistress"—Marvell	
"Lately"		"The Dream"—Donne
"Evil Woman"		"The Message"—Donne
"Allentown"		"London"—Blake
"Living for the City"		"City Life"—Lawrence
"The War Song"		"The Man He Killed"—Hardy
"Walking on a Thin Line"	"They"—Sassoon	
"Somebody's Watching Me"	"The Unknown Citizen"—Auden	
"Everybody Wants to Rule the World"	"Ozymandias"—Shelley	
"We Are The Champions"	"Lyric for Legacies"—Herrick	
"Understanding"		"To A Waterfowl"—Bryant



“Nightshift”

“Misled”

“Surrender”

“We Are the World”

“To The  
Muses”—Blake

“The Road Not  
Taken”—Frost

“Paper Men to Air  
Hopes and Fears”—  
Francis

“The Human  
Abstract”—Blake

## Bibliography

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Donno, Elizabeth Story, Editor. *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems* . Great Britain: Penguin, 1983.

The complete poetical works of this seventeenth poet are included in this modernized text. Marvell is an excellent poet to introduce to students concerning his various treatments of love themes.

Dunning, Stephen, Lueders, Edward, and Smith, Hugh, Compilers. *Some Haystacks Don't Even Have Any Needle* . Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1969.

A very useful anthology of modern poetry grouped into various themes. Easily adaptable to this unit.

Dunning, Stephen. *Teaching Literature to Adolescents : Poetry* . Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1966.

Stephen Dunning offers some sound suggestions for the teaching of poetry to students. The book also includes essays by Robert Francis and Philip Booth.

Harrison, G.B., Editor. *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* . New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1952.

This text or any number of others that include Shakespeare's sonnets should be available throughout the implementation of the unit.

Koch, Kenneth and Farrell, Kate. *Sleeping on the Wing* . New York: Vintage Books, 1982.

Koch and Farrell have put together an interesting anthology of modern poetry geared for today's students.

Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* . New York: Perennial Library, 1980.

Koch's masterpiece should be required reading for any teacher hoping to introduce poetry to students. Teaching suggestions and strategies are excellent. Actual poems written by students are included. This book belongs on the teacher's desk whenever poetry is introduced in the classroom.

Loban, Walter, Ryan, Margaret, and Squire, James R. *Teaching Language and Literature* . New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969.

This textbook offers some very valid teaching suggestions for the teacher who wishes to use poetry in the English classroom.

Ostriker, Alicia, Editor. *William Blake: The Complete Poems* . Great Britain: Penguin, 1983.

Blake's "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience" offer many choices for implementation in this unit.

Perrine, Laurence. *Sound and Sense* . New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963.

Perrine's work is my companion for the teaching of my unit. The book offers explanations and examples of all forms of figurative language and is very easy to consult.

Scholes, Robert. *Elements of Poetry* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Scholes' book should be read and reread especially by anyone who is introducing poetry to students for the first time in a long while. Scholes puts his readers in a poetic frame of mind with his concise but comprehensive scholarly work.

Smith, A. J., Editor. *John Donne: The Complete English Poems* . Great Britain: Penguin, 1984.

Donne's sonnets and songs are perfect matchups for many contemporary music lyrics. He is the classic love poet of the seventeenth century.

## **Additional Bibliography**

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The publications listed below and their schedule of distribution is an invaluable source for obtaining rock music lyrics. Much time and effort can be saved through the use of these magazines.

"Rock & Soul", Derby, CT: Charlton Publications, Inc. (Monthly)

"Song Hits Magazine", Derby, CT: Charlton Publications, Inc. (Monthly)

"Soul Hits", Derby, CT: Charlton Publications, Inc. (Quarterly)

"Super Song Hits", Derby, CT: Charlton Publications, Inc. (Quarterly)

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