



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

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## **Rapping and Rhyming—Poetry in Motion**

Curriculum Unit 85.01.05  
by Jan Johnson

Whenever a student walks up to me with a “fresh” new joke, I laugh when the punch line is the same as it was when I first heard it, at his age. I realize once again how things never change. The methods may vary, but the messages are all the same.

In my unit I plan to deal with this concept. I will attempt to make the connection between old and new through studies of poems and ballads that span from the 18th century to the present. After all of this material has been explored and digested the students will be asked to create their own ballad in rapping form. I see this rapping breakdance jargon as the urban student language of the ‘80’s. Like it or not, it seems to be a vehicle of true expression for many. This final rap and other student works will be included in a collaborative evening of dance and theatre. One single theme, interpersonal relationships, will be presented using poetry written from the 1700’s to the present.

How does this unit relate to anyone but a dance or theatre teacher? As a dance teacher at Conte Arts Magnet it is an ongoing challenge for me to incorporate academics into my modern and jazz curriculums. My aim with the Teachers Institute has been to create a unit that evolves from movement yet has academic thrust. This has been a thought-provoking process.

A large portion of my unit is composed of transitional creative writing exercises that could be tailored to fit a language arts class. Chronologically sequenced American ballads could relate to an American history class. My hope is that these concepts may inspire teachers to be creative with the ideas and be able to use them in their own curriculums.

At Conte I teach fifth through eighth graders. They take one class a week in dance, theatre, visual arts and music in addition to their academic subjects. A favorite class, titled a “choice” class, is taken an additional two times per week. This unit will be presented to the seventh grade dance choice and theatre choice classes. My dance class will perform the movement segments and the theatre class, taught by a theatre specialist, will perform the narratives. Both classes will be covering the same material. We will try to arrange our classes so they meet simultaneously which will enhance our collaborative efforts.

I will be using the written word as an impetus for movement ideas. Within a structured improvisational framework the students will express poetry through movement. This will be a new experience for my students. Normally, a piece of music is chosen and the melody and rhythms alone are followed. Music will be selected and intertwined with narratives written by students as well as poets. In some instances I see dancers

responding only to the spoken word. I also see dances inspired by poetry but adapted to chamber, jazz, rock and roll, electronic and finally breakdance music. The relationship between dance and drama will be completely explored and my main objective will be to make a dramatic statement of literary material through dance.

My unit will be divided into six parts:

I. *Variations in Subject Matter* : Sets of poems on the same theme and transformation of ballads by other poets.

II. *Ballad Study* .

III. *Writing Ballads* : The development of ballads through the creative writing process.

IV. *Making Connections* : A discussion of poems and ballads written from the 1700's to the present. We will examine reactions to the dated material and how the students relate to it.

V. *A Study of Rap Songs and their Relationship to Oral Tradition* .

VI. *The Final Connection* : Transforming a well known early ballad into a Rap.

I. *Variations on Subject Matter* . We will begin this segment with the exploration of a variety of poems. The object of this segment is to make students aware of how subject matter can be expressed in a number of ways. I have divided this activity into two parts. Part One is composed of various poems with the same theme. One such theme is the death of a president. The following poems will be included in this study.

1. *Oh Captain, My Captain* and *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed, An Elegy for Abraham Lincoln*, by Walt Whitman.

2. *Down in Dallas* , by X. J. Kennedy.

3. *Elegy for J.F.K.* , by W. H. Auden.

Then, transformation of a ballad by another poet will be shown. We will compare Edward Arlington Robinson's *Richard Cory* to the lyrics of a song of the same name written by Paul Simon and recorded in 1966 by Simon and Garfunkel. Simon adds information to his rendition that updates his account a bit. He gives us more facts and adds to Mr. Cory's personality which I feel enhances it. *Barbara Allen*, an anonymous ballad claimed to be of both Scottish and English origin, is a 15th century ballad dealing with unrequited love. Two black versions will be compared. In *Barbree Allin* , Sir John Graeme becomes po' Willie and the eleven stanzas of the former become fourteen in the latter. The longer version seems more real somehow. The dialect and additional information make it seem more believable. In *Barbry Allen*, the main character is a man instead of a woman but the story line remains the same. A student discussion will reveal their feelings about the comparisons. Their opinions of what works and doesn't work and what they like and don't like will stimulate the thought process in preparation of the final writing project.

II. *Ballad Study* . Part two of my unit will be a discussion and critical analysis of ballads. Its primary focus will be metric form and content. Students will learn the structure of a piece as well as the basic message of its poet. Once themes are discovered, we will explore their relevance to modern society. Here is our connection between past and present, our secondary focus. *Ballad of the Landlord* by Langston Hughes, although not that old a ballad, can easily be related to. The poem concerns a landlord who refuses to fix a leaky roof and broken down steps. As a result the tenant, who refuses to pay his rent until the repairs are made, threatens the landlord and ends up in jail for ninety days. This theme is timeless. *Brennan on the Moor* is an outlaw ballad of the Robin Hood influence. Of Irish, English and American origin, it is the story of William Brennan and Julius Bunn. They avoid the law until they are captured as they rest in an open field. Finally Billy

Brennan is executed. This theme can easily be transferred to the city streets of 1985. With Bonnie and Clyde flavor, using cars, planes and trains for getaway, disappearing into city after city, this story will be a fun one to explore. It includes adventure as Billy is hauled into town where his wife, who is shopping, sneaks him a blunderbuss from under her cloak. After he steals the mayor's gold he tears off into the hills once again to continue his highwayman life.

The third and last poem I will dissect in this segment is *The Ballad of Mrs. Noah* by Robert Duncan. Although a biblical story, the theme of Mrs. Noah's despair over being adrift in the ark, picking up after animals, with no land in sight, is a familiar one. This could be related to any number of responsibilities that don't seem to let up. At home, school or at a job the sane feelings evolve. Mrs. Noah asks the sleeping cat, a searching crow, and finally Noah himself when they will land. All types of characters can be added to our updated version. The students will be asked to create their own story with a creative ending based on the theme of this ballad.

III. *Writing Ballads*. Creative writing will be our next exploration. I want to give the students lots of freedom, yet have them write about things that are familiar to them. The objective of this section is to teach them how to write a ballad. The introduction and first lesson plans follow.

In a quiet room with lights turned off, the students will be asked to lie on the floor with their eyes closed. In a sense memory exercise they will be asked to think back to an exciting time in their life. Now they will be asked to think deeper into that experience and really try to feel it again.

1. How old were you?
2. Where were you?
3. Who was there?
4. What were their names?
5. What was happening?
6. Was there conflict? What was it?
7. What time was it?
8. What were your feelings? Their feelings?

Still in silence, they will be asked to take a sheet of paper and write everything they can about that experience. When this exercise is completed I will ask them to volunteer to read their experiences aloud. If anyone has a question about facts that were not included, he or she will be encouraged to ask for those details. This exercise will begin the process of opening up their minds to experiences they have had, the analytical process of writing facts, and the creative process of expression.

A lesson plan leading out of this will begin in the same way. The subject matter of this experience, however, must be expressed to the class, so they may choose to think a little more about which experience to express.

Once the experience has been written down, they will be asked to put all of this information into a newspaper article. Now they must pull themselves away from the emotional aspects of the experience and concentrate on facts. This will force them to become more objective. They will be asked to include the most important details and to make the story dramatic. As they write the article they will have to keep all of these ideas in mind. The results will be read to the class and discussed.

The third lesson will be an extension of the second. The newspaper articles will be developed further into a ballad form. The structure and metric form can be fairly loose but there must be four lines to a stanza and the first and second and third and fourth lines should rhyme or the first should rhyme with the third and the second should rhyme with the fourth. The subject

matter may need to be changed a little for the sake of the structure. Any creative changes of that sort will be welcomed as long as the students don't stray too far from the facts.

The final ballads will be read aloud and discussed. If time allows, we will do an identical activity as lesson two and three using the theme of interpersonal relationships. If the results are exceptional they may be chosen to be presented as part of our final production. These exercises lead right into the next segment.

IV. *Making Connections* . In this step a mixture of poems and ballads will be introduced to the class. All of them concern love relationships. Father to son, grandmother to granddaughter, relationships of friends and lovers. Material has been chosen from various time periods beginning in the 1700's and continuing through the present.

*A Ballad of Any Father to Any Son* by J. C. Squire (1883—) is a wonderful expression of a father's lament over the use of sending his son to school. After all the money he has spent on education his son hasn't amounted to much. Written in a Cockney dialect, it almost sounds as if Langston Hughes penned it. It speaks of blacking boots and coughing up 5,000 cool. It is a great poem for the class to read aloud and discuss.

*We Real Cool* by Gwendolyn Brooks sums up a student's feeling in eight short lines. "We real cool, we left school . . ." This will tie in with the father to son poem.

*But He Was Cool or : he even stopped for green lights* by Don L. L. (b. 1942) is a young girl's description of her boyfriend. He is "super cool, ice box cool". With a very light attitude this poem is fun to recite and to hear.

*Grandma's Advice* is an anonymous American ballad. A young girl explains that her grandmother told her over and over again how deceitful men are. This influences the girl so much that she tells each man who courts her to leave. Finally she realizes that if all her grandmother told her was true, she surely would have died an old maid. Attitudes of the young and the old will be the topic of discussion upon reading this poem. Have attitudes changed any? Can we relate to the poem as if it were written today?

*Frankie and Johnny* is one of the finest of the original American folk ballads. The powerful refrain and dramatic focus combine to make this a great narrative song. Many variations exist. There is still controversy over whether it is of Negro origin or not. If the Negro did not originate it, he certainly sang many variations of it. The story line is of Frankie, the woman who was "done wrong" by her lover, Johnny. She spent \$100.00 on his suit of clothes and took good care of him. He went off with another woman. Finally Frankie finds him in a bar and shoots him. The death scene is dramatic and strong. "He was her man but he done her wrong." This ballad is very powerful when read aloud. The emotions, which we will discuss, are ageless.

V. *The Study of Rap Songs* . As I have worked more and more with breakdancers I have become intrigued by what and how their message communicates. The metric form is light and the intonation carefree while the messages are often highly poignant. This open tell-it-like-it-is method seems to be an ideal form into which to transfer our final ballad. At this time the language of rap will be discussed. The following rapping songs will be included. *Roxanne* is a rap about a stuck up girl who can't be won by any guy. E.M.B., Kango Man and Doc Ice try to lure her with their best attributes: eloquence, a high I.Q., and medical knowledge. Try as they may, she won't be bothered. *Roxanne's Revenge* is the follow-up song in which Roxanne cuts on E.M.B., Kango Man, and Doc Ice, telling of their faults. This segment will offer students the opportunity to participate in a rap. A line-by-line recitation by the students will loosen up the class as well as introduce them to the mood and structure of rapping form.

Oral traditions will be my next link. Although rap songs are on record or tape, it is

unusual to see lyrics written on album jackets or in song books. The songs are transmitted orally. The lyrics to *Roxanne* that I will be working with have been written down by one of my students and therefore, may not be identical to the actual recording. A copy of *Roxanne*, along with one copy of each of the other ballads and poems included in this unit, is available at The Teachers Institute. The following formulas used in oral traditions closely tie the two forms.

1. Often repeated phrases, redundancy, superfluous wording.
2. Specific rhythmic pattern.
3. Recurring themes.
4. Heroes and their names.
5. Faraway places and customs of long ago. (Raps are concerned with familiar city situations and habits of the times.)

Reciting in the oral tradition must be part of the thought process. Singers of folktales practiced songs until they could recompose them rather than memorize them. They required instinctive understanding of alliteration as well as the ability to spontaneously form metric and melodic patterns. Ballads from Europe in the Middle Ages had many of the same primary characteristics as today's raps:

1. Dramatically telling a story in song with a simple melody. (Electronic innovations have influenced today's form, but the theory is the same.)
2. It is a folk song. (Rap deals with subject matter that directly relates to the black urban culture.)
3. The singer treats the song with detachment, objectivity, impersonality. (This could be debated and discussed. Rapping seems to me to be a very personal expression.)

An important issue we confront here is the quality of rap songs. How do students judge a rapping song? What are the characteristics of a good rap and of a bad rap?

VI. *The Final Connection* . At this point the class will choose a ballad that has been presented to them. This ballad will be transformed by the class into rapping form. We will begin with some improvisational rapping which will be taped, reworded, reorganized, and finally, for our records, written. The basic theme of the ballad will be followed, but the form will be kept open and free for the students' own interpretation. The following guidelines will be followed.

1. They must use the rapping form we have discussed. (Dialect and metric patterns must be used.)
2. The city of New Haven will be our setting. The familiarity of writing about their own neighborhood will help to develop a very real narrative.

The final stage of my unit will be changing and taking shape right up until the last few weeks of rehearsal. I see a production that incorporates many of the ballads and poems we have discussed as well as creative works that have come from the theatre and dance classes. Some of the works will be used to suggest improvisational activities and from this expression I hope to find some exciting material. Choreographically, this is how I work, so this process is very hard to explain. I work in a very spontaneous way, keeping all of the fresh ideas and building on them. I see music being used for dance pieces as well as background and a transitional tool. The most important focus of the performance will be the theme of interpersonal relationships and how the ways of expressing these feelings have not really changed. We still feel and react in basically the same way.

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