



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

A History of Poetry of Various Cultures in America

Curriculum Unit 85.01.07
by Mary R. Sorrells

I teach English to seventh graders at Betsy Ross Middle School. Since my students are from different cultural backgrounds, I think that a history of poetry of various cultures in America will be an excellent point from which to start this unit. My students' cultural backgrounds are African American, European American, and Spanish American. The poets I have chosen for this unit are from the same cultural backgrounds as my students. The poets are Langston Hughes, an African American, Emily Dickinson, an European American; Julia de Burgos and Miguel Pinero, are from Spanish American origins.

My goal in this unit is to enhance my students understanding and appreciation for poetry. I think that the best way to achieve my goal is to relate the poetry of the outstanding poets about to my students own personal life style and experiences. I think students can better understand and love poetry if they feel that the poets think and feel very much the way they think and feel about the world in which they live. Once students realize how much they are like the outstanding poets above, they will most likely want to identify with them. Their positive identification with the poets' experiences will encourage my students to feel freer to write out their inner thoughts and experiences in poetic form. For some of my students who have a problem writing in general, they will have a different outlook on writing once they are aware of the non-threatening-free style writing which is found in poetry. Prose, unlike poetry, can be difficult to read and write by many students whose academic levels range from average to low. I have also discovered that academically advanced students have experienced some difficulty writing in prose form. There is no doubt on my part that my students have the ability to write in any form, but many of them tend to be apprehensive about writing in prose form. One reason is that strict rules of composition threaten many students. Whereas in poetry, the strict composition rules are not emphasized. When I introduce poetry to my students, I try to get them to focus on the poets' experiences and the poets' ideas expressed in their poems. I found that when students focus on this aspect of poetry, they do not worry as much about rules of composition. They are interested in the ideas and thoughts expressed in the poems. Their apprehension of writing seems to lessen a great deal. Now, I feel, my students are ready to write poetry. I feel that poetry writing gives students the confidence they need to write in any form.

If I am going to enhance my students' understanding and appreciation for poetry, it is not only necessary to introduce students to many poems; it is important that students know something about the poets of whom they are reading. It is imperative that students understand that a poet in sixteenth-century America perceived his world quite differently from a poet in modern twentieth-century America. This approach above will help my students become familiar with the poets' style, help them see the point of writing that way, and give them a

way to begin to feel comfortable with reading the poems.

Teachers who are interested in teaching poetry might find it very helpful to read some tips from a great writer and teacher of poetry, Kenneth Koch. Kenneth Koch, in his *Sleeping on the Wing*, "An Anthology of Poetry," takes a similar approach to teaching poetry as mentioned above. He states, in his introduction to *Sleeping on the Wing*, how poets are inspired by what the world around them is like. He said that poetry is different in different times and what people experience is different and so, to some extent, is the language they use.

A historical approach to teaching this unit is significant because it will give my students a chance to explore the poets' life experiences and it will enable them to understand why some poets write from different perspectives. Langston Hughes, for instance, is from an African American background. He was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, but the most part of his childhood Hughes lived with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. This was the time of the John Brown revolt against the slave owners. Langston Hughes' grandmother died when he was thirteen years old. In his words, "her first husband having been one of the five colored men to die so gloriously at Harper's Ferry." Hughes' grandmother was the last surviving widow of John Brown's Raid.

This information on Langston Hughes' background is interrelated in many ways with the brutal history of slavery in this country, America. It would be very informative to all students of all backgrounds and it will make the African American students more aware of their own history, since their cultural background is the same as Langston Hughes.

Emily Dickinson was born 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts. She lived simply and deliberately. It was said by many at her time that she lived very much an austere life and she was known to be secluded from many people. In Emily Dickinson's poems, she does not write in racial vernacular style. This style of writing—the non-racial vernacular style—is typical of many poets from European origins. One reason Emily Dickinson did not use racial overtones is that she did not come from a background of racial discrimination. Emily Dickinson, unlike Langston Hughes, was not concerned with expressing ethnic pride. I would try to get my students to see why Emily Dickinson was so concerned with the subject of nature. Her secluded life style could have given her more time to focus closely on the nature of things. I will help my students understand that her quiet private life style has influenced her to write philosophically on the natural phenomena of life itself, such as the soul and even death.

Julia de Burgos and Miguel Pinero are from Spanish origins. Julia de Burgos was born 1917 in Carolina, an island near Puerto Rico and Miguel Pinero was born in 1946 in Gurabo, Puerto Rico. Burgos lived for quite some time in the United States. Miguel Pinero lived for the most part in the Lower East Side of New York City. These poets are writing from a bi-cultural experience. Like the Hispanic students I teach, they too have somewhat of a similar background. However, most of my students from Spanish origin were born in America but speak Spanish and they have parents from Spanish backgrounds.

Julia de Burgos and Miguel Pinero expressed their feelings of racial suppression and economic suppression. Julia de Burgos speaks of, ". . . through the eyes of my soul for my enslaved people," in her poem, "Rio Grande de Loiza." Miguel Pinero speaks of economic and political suppression in his poem, "The Book of Genesis According to

Saint Miguelito," ". . . the ghettos and the slums and all the other great things I've created will have dominion over thee." Burgos and Pinero, like Langston Hughes, came from social backgrounds of political, racial and economic oppression. I will try to help my students understand why these two poets focus on issues pertaining

to their brutal experiences and that of their ancestors. The information on these poets will enhance students understanding of cultures different from their own and it will make students from Spanish origins more aware of their own ethnic background.

I must add that I found it difficult locating information on Julia de Burgos. However, I will have to give my students a copy of her biography taken from *An Anthology of Contemporary Latin American Poetry* .

My approach to teaching poetry in this unit:

In this unit, A History of Poetry of Various Cultures in America, I will focus on four poets: Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson, Julia de Burgos, and Miguel Pinero. I will introduce my students to a brief biographical profile of each poet before I introduce them to the poems by the poets. I will spend eight weeks to teach this unit. This unit will be separated in four phases. Each phase will consist of two weeks and in each phase, I will cover one poet.

My overall objective is to have my students be able to relate to the thoughts and various experiences of each poet by taking their own thoughts and experiences and relate them to the poets. Secondly, I want my students to experience reading poems that reflect various lifestyles, and thirdly, I want my students to be able to write their own poems. I want them to create poems that are similar to the poems of the poets on which they are reading.

Week One—Phase One

Objective Students will read a biography and one poem by Langston Hughes. Students will choose a poem that they can relate to Langston Hughes life experiences. They will present that poem with a one-page report on Hughes' life.

Teaching the poems I will read the poem, "Afro-American Fragment," aloud to the class. I will ask the student to define the terms metaphor, simile, stanza as well as various words that I will underline in each poem. I will ask students to identify any metaphors and/or similes in each stanza. Then I will ask students to discuss why they think poets use metaphors and similes.

Activity questions:

1. Define vernacular and infer.
2. Who is the poet speaking to?
3. What is the subject of this poem?
4. Identify in the poem one or two words that is reflective of Langston Hughes' vernacular.
5. What can you infer about the poet?
6. Do you like this poem? Why? Why not?

This approach will be used for each of the five poems by Hughes. The five poems are:

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”
“Afro-American Fragment”
“One Way Ticket”
“The Negro Mother”
“Theme for English B”

All poems will be taken from, *Selected Poems Langston Hughes* , pp. 3, 4, 177, 288, 289, 247, and 248, respectively.

Week Two

Poetry writing activity:

Objective Students will create two poems similar to the style of any of Langston Hughes five poems.

Activity Write two poems that express your thoughts about yourself or about the world in which you live. Express your experiences or thoughts similar to Hughes’ style.

The title you choose for your poems should relate to the theme of your poem.

Week Three—Phase Two

Objective Students will read a biography and one poem by Emily Dickinson. Students will choose a poem that they can relate to Emily Dickinson’s life experiences. They will present that poem with a one page report on Emily Dickinson’s life.

Teaching the poems: I will read the poem, “I Heard a Fly Buzz,” aloud to the class. I will ask the students to define the terms metaphor, simile, stanza as well as various words that I will underline in each poem. I will ask students to identify any metaphors and/or similes in each stanza. Then I will ask students to discuss why they think poets use metaphors and similes.

Activity questions:.

1. What is the subject of this poem?
2. Who does the person represent?
3. What does line 15, “. . . And then the windows failed—and then . . . ” imply?
4. Does the poet speak in any vernacular? If so, list a phrase or one word that reflects the vernacular.
5. What do you infer about the poet?
6. Do you like this poem? Why? Why not?

Week Four

Poetry writing activity:

Objective Write two poems that express your thoughts about your world in which you live.

The title you choose for your poems should relate to the theme of your poem.

All poems will be taken from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, pp. 2352, 2363, 2371, and 2386, respectively. The five poems are:

“I Heard A Fly Buzz”

“In Winter In My Room”

“Nature Is What We See”

“Of All The Souls That Stand Create”

“These Are The Day When Birds Come Back”

Week Five—Phase Three

Objective Students will read a biography and one poem by Julia de Burgos. Students will choose a poem that they can relate to Julia de Burgos' life experiences. They will present that poem with a one-page report on Julia de Burgos life.

Teaching the poems I will read the poem, "Pentachromatic" aloud to the class. I will ask the students to define the terms metaphor, simile, stanza as well as various words that I will underline in each poem. I will ask students to identify any metaphors and/or similes in each stanza. Then I will ask students to discuss why they think poets use metaphors and similes.

Activity questions:

1. What is the subject of this poem?
2. Who is the poet speaking to?
3. Does the poet use a vernacular? If so, list a phrase or a word which reflects the vernacular.
4. What can you infer about the poet?
5. Do you like the poem? Why? Why not?

Week Six

Poetry writing activity:

Objective Students will create two poems similar to the style of any of Julia de Burgos five poems.

Activity Write two poems that express your thoughts and experiences in the world in which you live. The title of your poem should relate to the theme of your poem.

All poems were taken from *Inventing A Word*, and the five poems are:

- "Pentachromatic" p. 65.
- "Call Out My Number," pp. 61 and 63.
- "Poem of the Intimate Agony," p. 59.
- "Rio Grande de Loiza," p. 53.
- "Poem with the Final Tune," p. 57.

Weeks Seven and Eight—Phase Four

In this phase, the same approach will be used for Miguel Pinero. His five poems are listed below.

- “There Is Nothing New in New York”, p. 68.
- “Runnin Scared,” p. 69.
- “A Poem for Joey’s Mami’s Struggle,” p. 71.
- “Seekin The Cause,” p. 73.
- “No Hay Nada Nuevo en Nueva York,” p. 67.

All poems are taken from the *Nuyorican Poetry* , “An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings.”

During the fourth phase, I will include my three poems I wrote. They are:

- “Lost In Time”
- “Lost In Time”, Revised.
- “Name Them Right!”

I will explain to my students how and why I revised the second, “Lost In Time.” I will tell them that when I wrote the first poem above, I did not feel comfortable with it because it did not relate to anything that had real substance to my life. When I changed my poem with my deceased mother in mind, I created a clearer version. I will use my revised version to demonstrate to my students that when poetry can be related to something of importance to them, they can write poetry better because they are writing it with a purpose in mind.

Bibliography for Teachers

Randall, Dudley. *The Black Poets* . New York: A Bantam Book, 1971.

Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems Langston Hughes* . New York: Random House, Inc., 1959.

Marzan, Julio. *Inventing a Word* . New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

Chapman, Abraham. *Black Voices* . New York: The New York American Library, Inc., 1968.

Koch, Kenneth and Farrell, Kate. *Sleeping on the Wing* . New York: Random House, Inc., 1981.

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

Gottesman, Ronald and Murphy, Francis. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* . New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc. 1979.

Algarin, Miguel and Pinero, Miguel. *Nuyorican Poetry* . New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1975.

Fitzpatrick, Joseph. *Puerto Rican American: The Meaning of Migration to the Mainland* . New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1971.

Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* . New York: Random House Inc., 1969.

Perrine, Laurence. *Sound and Sense* . New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1977.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>