



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1989 Volume II: Poetry

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## **Character Portrayal In Reading And Writing Poetry**

Curriculum Unit 89.02.03  
by Marie P. Casey

This curriculum unit is written for junior year students of Hillhouse High School at the basic and college-prep level. American literature is the focus of third year English and this unit will concentrate predominately on American poetry; at least half of the selections will be by Afro-American male and female authors.

This unit will concentrate on poetry as a vehicle for character portrayal and raise questions about the storytelling qualities of poetry. The classroom discussions will ask students to consider the relationship between prose and the short story and poetry and the rhythmical use of words to tell a story. This unit will particularly focus on poems with dialogue—such as Robert Frost’s “Death of the Hired Man.”

The students will be encouraged to read each poem for four levels of meaning: (1) the sense: what is said; (2) the feeling?: what are the emotions expressed?; (3) tone or tact: what is the writer’s attitude towards his audience?; (4) intention: what is the purpose or why has the author written the poem?

Along with the above, this unit will include a greater understanding of terms such as meter and cadence—the flow of natural speech. Also, metaphor, allusion, alliteration analogy, hyperbole, simile, folk ballads and blank verse of plays, as well as sonnets.

This poetry unit will also consider the English language as it changes and evolves over time and experience of people. This poetry unit will show the students that the idiom of language evolves as people change, that words acquire their sense from the current experiences of people. The words from poems of long ago are more difficult and images are more obscure when they are not common to us today. For this reason, this unit will concentrate more on the modern poets—the poets whose expression is more closely related to the experience of the students of Hillhouse—an urban school with a majority of Afro-American students—many of whom also have a rural southern experience. Moreover this unit will endeavor to connect and use the students’ present experience of streets and violence with the experience and feelings of poems of older times and similar experiences. Hopefully, this discussion will give students a heightened awareness of the English language.

To illustrate the importance of making a connection with students’ experience, I will describe a class experience.

Finally, this unit will have the students write their own poetry, from their own experiences. Some of these writing exercises will imitate forms of authors studied and others will be free verse or poems of their own

choice of form.

I have had a class this year become disruptive at the prospect of reading an assigned poem. After putting the poetry aside and doing something else—I decided to bring out the poem again. “We want to read Kris Parker”... and “Kris Parker is a poet” were the remarks they made from their seats.

It was in this way that I learned how deeply they were involved with listening to and writing about their own kind of poetry. Kris Parker is a popular rap poet—from New York, with Boogie Down Productions. I agreed to read his poetry and assigned three students to write down the verses of their favorite selections of Kris Parker. Within two days they brought in about 5 sheets of rhyme—one called “Necessary”, a long dialogue about violence and another called “Poetry”, a dialogue in rhyme about rap music and poetry. I photocopied these pieces, passed out copies, and found that the class was volunteering Danny Gorham, a student, to read them.

Danny not only read the Kris Parker selections, but brought out two notebooks of his own full of verse. There were too many to be read in one night—but I took one poem “Old Park Man” and made copies for the class. I also made copies of “The Hired Man” by Robert Frost. It was in this manner that I was able to introduce and discuss poetry with this class.

This class showed great interest, attention and even excitement about poetry. During the spring semester once a week, we would break from our other readings to do poetry in class. Danny would often read or introduce his poems—sometimes accompanied by music and then I would pass out selections of classic poets. Sometimes we would discuss them as a class, and other times I would ask them to write their own interpretations in paragraphs. Two other students emerged in this class with their own writings. With Danny’s music tapes the students wrote their own poems to a certain beat. Also, I was able to assign topics to write on in class.

Most of the student critiques favored the rap music and found great favor with Danny’s poems. In this way, the students found their own voice and expression which is the heart of poetry—an expression of feelings. In fact, it is with this class in mind and Danny that I was able to compile the following selection of poets many of whom are Afro-American. I include short biographies to introduce in class as the “Kris Parker’s” of their own time.

I invited Danny to visit our poetry seminar this summer and he read for our class. He also listened to our poems and joined in the discussion that we had for class. This poem is reprinted with Danny’s permission.

#### OLD PARK MAN

A man sat quietly in Pecan Park, his attire was dusty, his skin was dark. No whiskey or wine on his breath gave a scent, just a wise old man with time well spent.

In a pocket was bread that he fed to the birds, though he whistled and chirped he said not a word.

As the hours got elder he sat still on his spot, was he waiting for family? That he was not.

No son, no daughter nor wife for that part, just bushes and birds and squirrels in the park.

Alone on the holidays no one to share with, a Thanksgiving dinner or Christmas gift.

As I walked out the park I thought of that man, and many more like him, poor homeless clans.

Danny D.F. Gorham

One of my objectives is to give my students a background in the literature of American poetry along with the poetic influences from English literature. I have selected poems of three kinds: one, American Classics; two, poems that represent an important regional influence, such as Afro-American poetry; three, poems of English literature which are classics and have strongly influenced American poetry.

I would suggest two major texts, *Sleeping on the Wing* and *Black American Poets* with inclusions of photocopies of Frost, Shakespeare, Afro-American folk poetry and spirituals.

## Part II

Poets to be studied:

*Robert Frost* (b.1875, d.1963) Poet of New England, New Hampshire. He is the poet of work, the farm—rural vs. urban living. He uses talk. There is meaning in each of his poems. Born in San Francisco, lived in California, until his father died when his mother moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts and became a school teacher. After high school, Frost attended Dartmouth; however he dropped out after one semester. He held odd jobs, factory work for the next several years. He married in 1895 and two years later, he entered Harvard. He studied English for two years leaving again without a degree. He taught school. In 1900, he bought a farm in Derry, Vermont where he lived for eleven years trying to make a living on a rocky soil. In 1912, he decided to write full time and left for England where he lived for three years. In 1913 his first book was published, *A Boy's Will*. When he came home to the United States, he was a recognized poet and his success continued. He lived on farms in Vermont and New Hampshire. He received a Pulitzer Prize. The poems included from his works are "Death of a Hired Man", and "Mending Wall."

*William Shakespeare* (1564 to 1616) Born in Stratford on Avon in England. He is regarded as the greatest poet in the English language and popularized the sonnet form in English poetry. He wrote 154 sonnets which were published in 1609. He refers in them to various people, a woman, a handsome man and a rival poet. The sonnet is fourteen lines of IAMBIC PENTAMETER, 5 stressed syllables for each line with a set rhyming pattern. His sonnets remain extremely popular even 400 years later.

At 18 he married a local girl, Anne Hathaway. He had three children. By 1584 he had become famous in his own time.

*Langston Hughes* (b.1902, d.1967) Black American poet and writer. Born in Joplin, Missouri, young Hughes was raised by his mother and grandmother. His father, light skinned black lawyer, left for Mexico when he became embittered by racial discrimination. After his grandma's death, Hughes and his mother moved frequently looking for better living conditions. Hughes discovered his identity with the "folks" and not the literary snobs. He was always the Harlemiter, always the poet of the working poor. He moved to Harlem, where he began writing and published 75 books. His most famous poem, "If we must die", was written in response to lynchings. It was read by Winston Churchill before World War II. It was the first time in history a Black writer wrote about fighting back.

*Gwendolyn Brooks*— Born in Topeka, Kansas, 1917. Her works deal with the everyday life of urban blacks. She grew up in Chicago, graduated from Wilson Junior College in 1936. *Annie Allen*, published in 1949, won her the Pulitzer Prize. It is a loosely connected series of poems relating to a Negro girl growing up in Chicago. *The Bean Eaters* published in 1960 contains some of her best verse and the poem "We Real Cool". She stayed married to the same man until he died and is the mother of two children. She was the first Afro-American poet to receive the Pulitzer Prize. *In The Mecca* was published in 1968 and is a long narrative poem about people in

the Mecca, a fortress-like apartment building in Chicago—a slum. It contains two famous poems. “Boy Breaking Glass” and “Malcolm X”. Both of these poems will be in the collected poem attached to this unit.

*Imamu Amiri Baraka* formerly Everett Leroy Jones (b. 1934) Newark, New Jersey—Afro-American poet—A leading Black Nationalist who writes of the experiences and anger of Afro-American people. He graduated from Howard University in 1953. He came from the middle class. His mother went to college, his father worked for the post office. He attended an integrated High School, was popular and well liked. He did graduate work at Columbia University and lived in Greenwich Village in the late 50’s. He lived in the center of the Beatnik movement, married a Jewish woman, had two children. Later, he left his wife and went to Harlem where he started a theater and a school. The government broke into the school and accused him of having semi-automatic weapons. He moved back to Newark and started a Spirit House. Because of his involvement in Afro-American identity, he changed his name to Imamu-Spiritual; Amiri-Blessed; Baraku-Prince. In 1968 he founded the Black Community Development and Defense organization—a Moslem group, committed to affirming Black political power. “Air” and “A Poem for Black Hearts.”

### **Walker, Giovanni and Ntozake Shange**

*Alice Walker* is included as a contemporary Afro-American woman writer. Her book *The Color Purple* won the Pulitzer Prize, is enormously popular with students, and it is helpful for understanding her poems. Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia and now lives in San Francisco. She has published poetry, short stories, essays, novels as well as a biography of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston reader. “On Stripping Bark from Myself”, “Gift”, “The Abduction of Saints”, “Hymn”, and “Burial”.

*Nikki Giovanni* (b. 1943) poems are considered revolutionary. She is a poet of black feelings. I have included in this appendix the following poems to be studied: “ego-tripping”, “My House”, “Trips”, “A Poem for Carol”, “Basketball”, from *The Woman and the Men*— “The Women Gather,” “All I Gotta Do”, “The Way I Feel”, “Poem”, and “How Do You Write a Poem”, “The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.”

*Ntozake Shange* is an Afro-American playwright who puts her poems to song and dances. The selections I have included are from *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* . In her own words: “In the summer of 1974 I had begun a series of seven poems. . . .which were to explore the realities of seven different kinds of women. They were numbered pieces: the women were to be nameless and assume hegemony as dictated by the fullness of their lives. I was smitten by my own language.”

one thing i dont need  
is any more apologies  
i let sorry/didnt meanta/& how cd i know abt that  
take a walk down a dark & musty street in brooklyn  
i’m gonna do exactly what i want to  
& i wont be sorry for none of it (p. 57. *For Colored Girls* .)

She is a poet of the city woman and happens to be one of my favorites.

*Countee Cullen* (b.1903, d.1946) He was one of the finest poets of the Harlem Renaissance. He was married to the daughter of W.E.B. DuBois for one year. Born in New York City, he went to high school in Harlem and graduated in 1925 from New York University. He received an M.A. from Harvard and wanted to write beautiful lyrical poetry. He was recognized and successful at a young age. He taught in New York City public schools. He struggled with his racial identify and Christianity and had a hard time believing in God. The sonnet "Yet do I Marvel" addresses this conflict. "Heritage" is included in the appendix. It addresses the question, "What is Africa to me?"

*Claude McKay* (b. 1890, d. 1948) Born in Jamaica and died in 1948 in Chicago. He is of particular interest because of his Jamaican background, which so many of our students share. McKay was a good poet who also stands as a critic of race relations between the old days of Booker Washington and the "black power" movement of the 1960's. Before coming to American in 1912, he wrote two volumes of Jamaican dialect verse, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* .

He attended Tuskegee Institute 1912 and Kansas State Teachers College 1914. The shock of American racism turned him from his old conservative ways. He became the most militant poet of The Harlem Renaissance.

The poem "America" is included in the appendix.

*Emily (Elizabeth) Dickinson* (b.1830, d. 1886) American woman poet from Amherst, Mass. was a master of short lyric poetry. Her greatest literary output (800 poems) coincided with the Civil War.

She attended school at Amherst Academy, then Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary in 1847 for a year. She did not return. Her gardens and her home in Amherst became her whole world. She began to write about 1850, inspired by R.W. Emerson and Emily Bronte. Her themes were love, death and nature. Only five of her poems were published in her lifetime; she preserved the others in hand sewn leather booklets. She wrote with great passion and wit. The remarkable thing about this great artist is that she was alone most of the time and almost no one knew that she wrote poetry.

*E. E. Cummings* (b. 1894, d.1962) Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts and died in North Conway, New Hampshire. Poet and painter. He eliminated all punctuation in his poems. He won the Bollingen Prize in Poetry 1957 and completed twelve volumes of poetry.

His poems appeal to the young. They are tough or tender.

"The voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses. Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands." These lines are from the poem "Somewhere I Have Never Travelled Gladly Beyond" and it is included in the appendix.

*Edgar Lee Masters* (b. 1869, d. 1950) His fame rests on *Spoon River Anthology* published in 1914. It ruthlessly exposed hypocrisy. He attended college, studied law and practiced successfully in Chicago. In *Spoon River Anthology* , people speak from the grave about bitter unfulfilled lives in a small town. Students will really enjoy these short narratives of human lives—telling the truth from the grave. I have used these poems in lessons on group discussions to give students confidence in their interpretive skills. See the appendix for poems and

lesson plan one.

*Etheridge Knight* (b. 1931) Born in Missouri. An Afro-American poet who joined the army, went to Korea and was injured with shrapnel. He became addicted to heroin to control the pain and resorted to armed robbery to support his habit. He spent eight years in prison. In prison he started to write poetry. *Poems from Prison* and *Black Voices from Prison*. He was discovered by Gwendolyn Brooks and paroled from prison in 1968. His philosophy is that poetry belongs to the people: If the people won't go to the poet then the poet should go to the people. He gives a lot of poetry reading and I have included a reference to a tape in the bibliography. He writes about the dispossessed and life in prison. He makes an effort to understand the human realm—his theme is love, not revolution. Married three times, he once married Sonya Sanchez, a successful Black female poet. He has had to struggle with major addictions to drugs and alcohol.

I have included "The Shine", "Dark Prophecy", "The Violent Space", and "Belly Poems". In "Belly Poems" Knight writes that's where his feelings come from—from the guts. "The Idea of Ancestry"

## Lesson Plan One/Speaking Poetry

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**Objective** To teach poetry while improving speaking and listening skills.

### **Strategies**

1. Use public speaking/reading poetry aloud.
2. Listening/Discussing: Here students learn and practice informal talks about literature in groups.
3. Individual oral interpretation. Students learn and practice the requirements for reading aloud for others to enjoy.

### *Day 1*

1. Have the class break into groups of three or four and appoint a recorder for the group. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for group discussion.
2. Assign the poems "Tom Merritt" and "Mrs. Merritt" from Edgar Lee Masters *Spoon River Anthology*.  
Have a large sheet of paper and a marker pen for each group.
3. Reconvene the class and allow each group to contribute their ideas for the class. Have each recorder write his group's ideas on the sheet of paper.

## Day 2

1. Separate the class into groups again and assign the poem "Faith Matheny" and "John Ballard". Answer these questions: What is the meaning? Who are these people in the poems?

Proceed as on Day 1. Leave the group remarks on poster paper hanging in the room.

## Day 3

Introduce *Afro American* folk poetry read aloud in class for credit. Ask for each poem:

1. What is said? What is the sense?
2. What are the emotions expressed?
3. What is the writer's attitude to his audience?
4. What is the purpose or why has the author written the poem?

### *Afro American Folk Poetry*

*Oral Tradition* offers a wealth of spirituals such as:

#### ***Of The Sorrow Songs***

I walk through the churchyard  
To lay this body down;  
I know moon-rise, I know star-rise;  
I walk in the moonlight, I walk in the starlight;  
I'll lie in the grave and stretch out my arms,  
I'll go to judgment in the evening of the day,  
And my soul and thy soul shall meet that day,  
When I lay this body down.

Negro Song

*Folk Poems*

The following Spiritual used by Martin Luther King in his famous mountaintop speech.

***I Thank God I'm Free at Las'***

Free at las', free at las',  
I thank God I'm free at las'.  
Free at las', free at las',  
I thank God I'm free at las'.  
Way down yonder in de graveyard walk,  
I thank God I'm free at las'.  
Me an' my Jesus gwineter meet an' talk,  
I thank God I'm free at las'.  
On-a my knees when de light pass by,  
I thank God I'm free at las'.  
Thought my soul would arise and fly,  
I thank God I'm free at las'.  
Some o' dese mornin's bright and fair,  
I thank God I'm free at las',  
Gwineter meet my Jesus in de middle of de air,  
I thank God I'm free at las'.



***That Hypocrite***

I tell you how dat hypocrite do,  
He come down to my house, an' talk about you;  
He talk about me, an' he talk about you;  
An' dat's de way dat hypocrite do.  
I tell you how dat hypocrite pray.  
He pray out loud in de hypocrite way.  
He pray out loud, got a heap to say;  
An' dat's de way dat hypocrite pray.  
I tell you how dat hypocrite 'ten',  
He 'ten' dat he love, an' he don't love men.  
He 'ten dat he love, an' he hate Br'er Ben;  
An' dat's de way dat hypocrite 'ten'.

***Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?***

Were you there, when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there, when they crucified my Lord?  
Oh, sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there, when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there, when they nailed him to the tree?  
Were you there, when they nailed him to the tree?  
Oh, sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there, when they nailed him to the tree?  
Were you there, when they pierced him in the side?

Were you there, when they pierced him in the side?  
Oh, sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there, when they pierced him in the side?  
Were you there, when the sun refused to shine?  
Were you there, when the sun refused to shine?  
Oh, sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there, when the sun refused to shine?  
They pierced Him in the side, an' He never said a mumbalin' word.  
They pierced Him in the side, an' He never said a mumbalin' word.  
Not a word, not a word, not a word.  
The blood came twinklin' down, an' He never said a mumbalin' word.  
The blood came twinklin' down, an' He never said a mumbalin' word.  
Not a word, not a word, not a word.  
He bowed His head an' died, an' He never said a mumbalin' word.  
He bowed His head an' died, an' He never said a mumbalin' word.  
Not a word, not a word, not a word.  
Were you there, when they laid him in the tomb?  
Were you there, when they laid him in the tomb?  
Oh, sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there, when they laid him in the tomb?

## Lesson 2—Teacher-Moderated Discussion

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**Objective** *To promote listening and speaking skills in a large group discussion. To engage as many as possible in the discussion, and have each person feel that his or her participation is needed and encouraged.*

### **Strategy**

1. The moderator/teacher must be prepared to ask a series of questions that control the discussion and give it direction.
2. The teacher should examine each student response by asking for the reasons for them or the implications that they have.
3. The teacher should try to engage the students in two-way discussions with one another when the views they contribute appear to be in conflict.  
Questions should raise issues; questions should *not* be answered by yes or no.  
The teacher should be sure that all the questions are listened to and understood by students.
4. All the participants including the teacher should be prepared to change their minds as a result of the discussion in which they engage.

**Materials & Activities** Read aloud the poem “Death of The Hired Man” by Robert Frost. Assign the reading of four lines to each student to read aloud. At the end of the reading ask students to tell about their section of reading.

### *Story of the poem for teacher’s use*

“The Death of The Hired Man” consists of a dialogue between Warren, a farmer, and his wife Mary. Silas, their old hired man, has returned, sick, after a long absence. He stays with them during the hard winters but leaves for other farms with better wages in haying time. They feel sympathy but do not know what to do. They want to send him to his wealthy brother but know that Silas doesn’t want to go there. Social attitudes emerge as the couple remember how Silas fought with a college boy about book learning and life experience. Warren is antagonistic to Silas whom he regards as an economic liability. Mary is more emotional and begs Warren to give him a home one more time. Meanwhile, Silas dies in the next room.

Questions for discussion:

1. What is the story of the poem?
2. What are the feelings portrayed in the poem by each character? Silas, warren, Mary.

3. What are the social issues discussed in the poem? Are they still relevant today? e.g. Homelessness, education, who has the obligation family or society?

## Lesson Plan 3

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### To Teach Poetry by Writing Poetry

**Objective** To teach what a poem is—by writing poems. Poetry is a very unique way to use language because poetry is the language of feelings and experience of the human condition.

**Strategies** To assign sonnets, and free verse—to encourage student writing.

Day 1:

**Materials & Activities** Read the following sonnets and hand out worksheets to write sonnets. Discuss form on the worksheet.

#### *When in Disgrace with Fortune and Men's Eyes*

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweep my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,  
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least;  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;  
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.  
By William Shakespeare

## **Sonnet 130 by William Shakespeare**

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

## **Sonnet**

Instructions: Write a sonnet on a topic of your choice on this grid, using the rules below.

1. Write exactly fourteen lines, putting one syllable in each box.
2. In the first twelve lines, describe a problem, introduce an issue, or pose a question.
3. In the last two lines, resolve the problem, make general comments or conclusions, or answer the questions.
4. Follow the pattern for stressed and unstressed syllables shown along the top of the grid.
5. Follow the pattern for end rhymes shown along the right side of the grid.

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1 a

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2 b

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3 a

---

4 b

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5 c

---

6 d

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7 c

---

8 d

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9 e

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10 f

---

11 e

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12 f

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13 g

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14 g

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NAME \_\_\_\_\_

## Day 2

These are poems of personal experience. They are read in class. Ask students to write their own poem of experience.

### **Materials & Activities**

Read 3 poems from prison (see appendix by Etheridge Knight, "The Idea of Ancestry" "Cell Song" and "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane", and "To Make a Poem in Prison".

Read: Ntozake Shange *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* . p. 58 to 63. Narrative of lady in red.

Read: Langston Hughes *Selected Poems* , "Love", p. 69. "Dream", p. 97, "Homecoming", p. 135.

## Day 3

Writing the poem.

Directions:

1. Ask the students to decide whether to use the first person "I" or the third person, "he" or "she" or some other way to observe and reflect on some experience of family, or friend or stranger.
2. Invite memories or feelings or images which are the strongest—perhaps—evoked by the reading of the poems—perhaps entirely personal—to come to mind. Write them down. Write at least four of the strongest thoughts.
3. Give the strongest thoughts a single word—definition.
4. Experiment with form. Write prose or free verse of dialogues or letters to a friend.
5. Write a rough draft.
6. Revise for homework and bring to class to read the next day.

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### Videos

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2. Library of Congress, Recorded Sound Section, Washington, D.C. 20540.

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