



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1991 Volume IV: Recent American Poetry: Expanding the Canon

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## **Cultural and Personal Identity Through Poetry**

Curriculum Unit 91.04.09  
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Cultural and Personal Identity Through Poetry is the title of my curriculum unit because as a dance instructor with the Comprehensive Arts Program I realize how useful the arts are in boosting self-esteem. The seventh and eighth grade students that I teach are adolescents who have many pressures to deal with. They are dealing with sexuality, identity crisis, peer-pressure, racism and sometimes a lack of self-worth. Although I sometimes see it expressed in their actions they have a difficult time expressing themselves verbally. Poetry combined with dance, art, music, and history will be the vehicle used to help the students discover, understand and be proud of who they are.

I will have three classes a day which will meet three times a week for forty minute sessions for approximately four months. I will have to alter some of the lesson plans depending on the reading level of the students. I am unable to determine this in advance because the reading levels vary a great deal. Most of the reading selections are quite simple but some of them might be too complex. In such cases excerpts can be used or I may even rewrite the poem and preserve the theme.

At the end of the unit lessons a show will be produced based on the students' writings, interpretations and experiences to be performed before a school audience.

A great way to introduce students to poetry is by using simple selections that are short, easy and fun to read. This way students won't feel intimidated by poetry and will see that they are capable of writing poems that are just as valid as the ones they are being introduced to. Suggested poems are "The Rope," by Eloise Greenfield, "The Creature in the Classroom," by Jack Brelusky, "Bubble gum," by Nina Payn, "Song of Pop Bottlers," by Morris Bishop, "Batty," and "Night-Light". After reading the poems a group discussion will take place about the content of the poem the plot, interpretations, and definitions. Students would enjoy taking turns reading poetry as choral groups. There are many variations such as line a child where two children alternate each line, unison where the entire group reads together. Sound groups where groups are separated by vocal tones, and body chants where movements are done which correspond to the words.

Students may enjoy this experience with poetry because little pressure is placed on them to perform and it's presented in an enjoyable fashion. It has been suggested by a colleague that this group experience should precede the writing process and I tend to agree.

Once students have been introduced to poetry they will be taken to the next level which will be writing poetry. Because students may not feel they possess enough creativity to write a poem on their own, formula poems

are extremely useful in helping a student realize they have the ability to write a poem. In a formula poem each line is accompanied by a description of what should be included in each line of the poem. Example: Line 1 a noun, Line 2 a verb which describes the noun, Line 3 an adjective which describes the noun etc . . . As the students follow the instructions the end result is a poem that they themselves have written. The students can take turns reading their poems aloud. Having completed the assignment they can collaborate with a friend in writing a formula poem.

Another creative way to prompt students to write is with a poem which has a repeated phrase in every sentence. The students will write fifteen sentences that begin with I am proud that I . . . . And each sentence will help a student with her writing but it will also help her to see fifteen things that she can be proud of. It is a wonderful way of boosting self-esteem.

I think that Kenneth Koch has wonderful suggestions for teaching poetry and I definitely plan to incorporate his ideas in this unit. The poems written to classical music were interesting. It's a marvelous activity that brings a different dimension to poetry. The students listen to a minute of the music. They are then asked questions about the colors, sounds, places, times of the year, and feelings they associate with the music.

Comparisons are another form which are really important and easy to stimulate. The key is to let students compare any two things they want. It doesn't have to be totally rational; as long as there is some kind of similarity the comparison should be accepted as legitimate. Have students make two columns which contain the words Like and As. They should follow that formula down the page.

Wishes are a great deal of fun. Students rarely get the opportunity to do this so it's a welcomed change. They begin each sentence with "I wish." It is good to allow the wishes to be as wild and crazy as they like.

Metaphors are a bit more challenging. Children are told to think about a thing being like something else except they replace the word like with is.

We will read the Diary of Anne Frank. It's about a young Jewish girl who grew up in fear of being captured Nazi leaders. Anne and her family were in hiding for years. The play is focusing on Anne's diary. She wrote in her diary because it helped to feel like she had some kind of control over what was happening to her. She discusses the tension and fear, being in a cramped apartment, unable to go outside and play with her friends, having little food to eat, and basically having no freedom because of the views of the Germans. Anne remained optimistic until the end. They were discovered by the police and taken off to camps. Eventually all of them died except for her father.

I like this story because it shows that blacks aren't the only group of people who had to deal with racism, bigotry and prejudice. In spite of all the families were going through they stayed together. And even though Anne was young in age she was mature in dealing with being trapped and giving up her freedom for survival. I like her pride in being Jewish. She demonstrated this when she said to her friend Peter the yellow star is the star of David and she refused to take it off. Her courage and strength in such a desperate situation are very admirable. She is a young hero.

This story too will be followed by a study of the five w's. Who, What, When, Where, and Why. Who was Anne Frank? What was happening to her? When did this take place? Where did this take place? and Why did this take place?

A poem will be written in the form of a diary.

We'll discuss the discovery of Puerto Rico. The struggles of their past and present. The constant struggle for independence. I would like to show the relationship of African-American history and Puerto Rican history. The problems with assimilation, language, and oppression both past and present.

This lesson will be followed by the study of various poets from various ethnic backgrounds. This I am doing so that students will become aware of the fact that other cultures exist besides their own and that there is a great deal to be learned from every culture. They will also begin to see how various cultures really have a great deal in common. The poets I have chosen are Langston Hughes, Ntozake Shange, Rolla Riggs, Judith Cofer, Garrett Hongo, and Ezra Pound.

We will discuss the background of each poet, read their work, and then analyze them. We will try to write poems in the same form depending on the degree of difficulty.

Langston Hughes has an interesting biography because he was involved in the Harlem Renaissance which is a very significant time in the history of black art. His work can help people think of the black experience in a positive way. In the Heath anthology his friends were quoted as saying "No one enjoyed being a Negro as much as he did." In his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", Hughes is taking about Africans, slavery, and African-American history. It's so simply expressed that I believe that seventh and eighth graders will be able to understand it.

Students will discuss the theme, repetition of certain words, the imagery, metaphors and historical significance.

Ntozake Shange, an African-American female writer who was also a dancer in Raymond Sawyer's Afro-American dance company, wrote "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf." This play was performed in bars before it became a hit. Her play is a play about women and relationships, and the various experiences they've had. The poem I want to focus on is "Toussaint". It's appropriate because it's talking about an eight year old African-American girl who was tired of reading books that weren't about her history. One day she ran into the adult reading room to discover Toussaint L'ouverture. Reading about this famous Haitian who wouldn't take any mess from the "White man", made her proud. While walking home she met a young African-American boy who was also named Toussaint Jones. I think this was done to prove that there are black men today who we can be proud of because they did what was right and still did not have to compromise their values and their pride.

What I enjoyed about this poem is that the character in the poem is a very young girl who was very eager to learn history. Too often African-American history is taken for granted and not just by African-Americans.

All cultures can stand to learn African-American history but African-Americans especially. I would also like to choreograph dances to this poem because that is what was done in the play. I will explain choreography in the next section.

Rolla Riggs is of Indian decent and he has an interesting history. Although he spent more time away from Oklahoma his writings are derived from his youth in the old Cherokee nation and early Oklahoma. His characters are dealing with a changing and often hostile environment. Indians like Africans were taken from their land. I would like to emphasize this common factor.

I would also like to emphasize the fact that many traditions and historical events have been restored in art. I want to focus on the "Santo Domingo Corn Dance".

Having worked on writing poems with students the next step would be adding more substance to the students' poetry. History lessons will be tied into poetry lessons.

Students will study historical events and then write poems about characters, the actual event, or their reaction the event. Students will learn about Joeseph Cinque and The Amistad Mutiny. We will read the story together from the Golden Legacy publication. It's written in the form of a comic book and it effectively holds the students' imagination.

The story of Cinque and the Amistad Rebellion is a touching story about an African male who was a Mendi chief. While working in the fields some slave catchers captured him. They put him on a boat and set sail for Spain. Cinque and his comrades managed to free himself and the other captives with a sugar cane knife. Cinque and his comrades overthrew the captain and his crew. They were trying to get back to Africa but ended up in New Haven because they were tricked once again. In New Haven there was a trial and lots of people rallied to their defense. After two long years Cinque and his people were permitted to go back to Africa.

In this true story, Cinque is a hero. It is a positive description of a black male. This is something young black men can relate to and be proud of. The fact that he was a Mendi chief, a man with high status, provides a positive image for youth. The fact that artists found him so beautiful they wanted to draw his picture and that he spoke so eloquently the jury believed his story makes him an admirable historical figure.

These are aspects of the story that I would like to emphasize. I would follow the discussion with a written exercise. Students will answer the five w's. They are Who, What, When, Where, and Why. Who was Cinque? Where did the events take place? What happened in the story? When did this happen? Why did things turn out the way they did?

The next exercise would be relating this historical event with the plight of the African-American male at present. We'll describe problems and solutions. The problems being limited job opportunities, drug-addiction, teen fathers, and A.I.D.S.

These are all sometimes perceived as oppressive factors in the lives of African-American males. The solution is education. Through knowledge and wisdom one can change the situation of American-American males to make things better.

Students will then write poems about Cinque and take turns reading them before the class. This assignment would take two class sessions.

She reminds us of our "Common national character." "The Woman Who Was Left at the Alter" is intense. The black lace, the veil, and the live chickens leave vivid images in my mind. This poem could motivate a very good conversation on Spanish culture. I would ask the Spanish students to offer their opinions.

I like the way the biographies of the poets help to clarify their poetry.

Because I am a dance instructor it would only make sense to use dance as another creative tool that will add another dimension to poetry. Along with the poems the students have written a dance will be choreographed. Dance is a very important part of this unit because it can be used as a creative form of individual expression. Interpretive dance, like poetry, tells a story. Dance is one of the oldest forms of communication. I am going to show students how to use dance to reinforce the ideas that they themselves have expressed in their poems.

Choreographing movement gives the poem more of a personalized touch because the body is the tool used in dancing. Now the way this is done is quite simple. Students will have had a number of dance classes in Jazz, Ballet, modern, and Hip-Hop. They can even mime the movements to correspond to the words expressed in the poem. But the rhythms of the movements must match the rhythms of the poems. The tone, the imagery and even proper emphasis on movements must correspond with the poem.

The student will have to read the poem several times. Study it, analyze it and internalize it. I would have them write out the five w's. I'd have students think of the tastes, smells, touch, sight and sounds. As long as they can justify the movements that correspond with the lines and evolve into a finished choreographed dance. Something they themselves created based on something they themselves created based on something they themselves have written.

An interpretive dance is a dance that tells a story. It is communication through movement. I will teach Modern, Ballet, Jazz, Ethnic, and Hip-hop dancing. It is good to teach the various forms of dance so that students will have many styles of movement to choose from when creating the dance. A person with a poem about snow might want to do Ballet because snow falls lightly on to the ground as it dances through the air. A person who has written a poem about pain might choose modern dancing because of the contracting and releasing and even falling to the ground which is often seen in Modern dancing. A poem dealing with life in the streets would probably fit well with Hip-hop dancing because it evolved in the streets and would fit the tone of the dance very well.

The title alone is inspirational when one thinks of rituals signifying fertility, communication with the Gods, and dancing to drums. The poem is filled with wonderful imagery which can be accented with movement. Also the rhythm of the speech and the many tones implied will make this a very interesting piece. And the way it has parts divided into Rain, Child dancer, the dancers indicates group dances being performed in a specific order.

Ezra Pound, had a very intriguing background because of the controversy surrounding his life. His fascist views, anti-semitic views, arrest for treason, and incarceration in a hospital for the insane make him quite controversial. What I do find extremely significant about his background is that he caused people to take notice of poetry and its relationship to politics. This is important because not only can one marvel at the beauty and wit expressed in a poem one can also determine what the political climate was like at the time the poetry was written.

Pound's "A Pact" is interesting. It seems as if he was not getting along with Whitman and he has finally decided to stop challenging him and put all of the discrepancies aside to be friends. The elderly image may be symbolic of society and the many people he offended with some of his views. Maybe he's apologizing. Maybe not.

I am sure that adolescents will be able to understand this because it's quite simple to understand and probably fun to try to imitate.

Garrett Hongo, a Japanese writer, writes about poetry as a "quest for ethnic and familial roots, cultural identity and poetic inspiration." I found it interesting that in his biography his neighborhood was described as a Japanese community adjoining Watts, a black community and Torrence, a white community. I wonder if that is to imply that it may have in some way influenced his work. His poem "Yellow Light" does seem to deal with many characteristics of an urban neighborhood. He's constantly using the color yellow. His descriptive language places a lot of emphasis on the characteristics of a city. It might be fun to compare this poem to New Haven and have students think of the many similarities and then to write a similar poem about New

Haven.

Judith Cofer, a Puerto Rican female writer, spent a lot of time moving back and forth to Puerto Rico because her father was in the Navy. They eventually settle in Georgia. She basically had a very unsettled life. In her writing she focuses on relationships being unstable. She focuses on the tension of having a dual culture and she shows the refusal to assimilate. I find this quite positive in some ways because I personally interpret it as Puerto Rican pride. I am sure that there are many cultures that can relate to this, because migrators are always expected to assimilate and bury their culture.

A poem about Cinque would fit well with African dancing because Cinque was a Mendi Chief from Africa who was strong and proud. Because African dance involves energetic, percussive, strong yet graceful movement it would be very appropriate for a poem about Cinque. A poem about a relationship would go well with Jazz because of the flirtatious movement of the hips and the emphasis on personality when performing Jazz dancing. The movement of the hips, the swaying of the backs, and the fancy high kicks found in Jazz dancing would work well.

*Example:*

Stars

white, bright

smoothly, clearly

dreamy, peaceful

Stars

In this poem about stars I would use modern dance. That doesn't mean that if a student chose to do Ballet they would be wrong. I stress that this assignment is a creative individual form of expression with very little interference from the teacher when conducting this assignment. Students should be able to justify their choices. But the choices are theirs and should not be imposed or suggested by the teacher. Of course if a student is at a loss for ideas suggestions can be made but the majority should come from the student who wrote the poem.

If a student is too shy to perform, applying too much pressure is not advisable. Gently encourage the student and let them know you're not evaluating the final product. Instead you are evaluating the amount of effort used in choreographing a dance that is going to correspond with the poem, which is often referred to as a choreopoem.

It also helps if they are permitted to work in pairs or even in groups of three. This way pressure is taken off of them as individuals.

When describing the stars one could make hand gestures to show the sparkling of the stars. The words white and bright could be described by shielding the eyes with the hands. The words smoothly and clearly could be shown by sliding with the hip from side to side. The words dreamy and peaceful could be described by putting the palms of the hands together and placing them on the side of the face as though one were asleep. And the final word would be a repeat of the first movement since the word is the same in the first line which is stars.

As the words are spoken aloud the movements are done simultaneously. The rhythm, the speech, emotion, tone and the emphasis of the speaker will influence the dance. The dancer will also influence the way in which the speaker recites the poem.

This exercise is a lot of fun for the students because they are creating the poem and the dance on their own with a little guidance from the teacher.

Another creative device to inspire creativity is art work. Which is why I would like to take students to the Yale Art Gallery to view the paintings and sculptures. They can observe life and experiences captured in a still picture. They can discuss the colors, textures, the objects in the painting and what the art work says to them.

The final product of this unit is a publication of poems written by the students to be placed in the library. There will also be a production consisting of dancing, singing, acting, and of course reciting of poetry. I really feel that students will grow so much from this experience because they are fusing all of the art forms together while receiving lessons in history.

The students self-esteem will be elevated because they will be able to identify with the heroes studied in the history lessons. This is extremely important because many troubled youth have an identity complex or low self-esteem or both.

The self-esteem of the students will also be elevated by the pride they will experience when completing a poem which came from their inner feelings. To actually see a finished product on paper will contribute so much to their sense of self-worth.

It is also important that once they as individuals learn to respect themselves by relating to these heroes and their wonderful poetry they learn to respect others. But they must first learn to respect and love themselves.

The icing on the cake is the performance, which is the biggest boost to every child's self-esteem. To actually get up on a stage in front of peers and teachers to recite one's own work is the greatest reward of all.

### *Time Table*

- Week #1 Introduction to Poetry
- Week #2 Writing Poetry
- Week #3 History and Poetry  
Cinque and the Amistad Mutiny
- Week #4 The Diary of Anne Frank
- Week #5 The Discovery of Puerto Rico
- Week #6 Discussion of Famous Poets and works
- Week #7 Dance and Poetry
- Week #8 Dance, Poetry, and Recitation
- Week #9 Art and Poetry
- Week #10 Selection of works to be performed
- Week #11 Rehearsal
- Week #12 Rehearsal
- Week #13 Rehearsal
- Week #14 Performance

This is a rough estimate of the amount of time needed to use this unit. One must allow time for vacations marking period changes and testing.

### **Lesson Plan #1**

Define the following using a dictionary.

1. Rhythm
2. Metaphor
3. Iambic Pentameter
4. Imagery
5. Personification
6. Theme
7. Tone
8. Narrative
9. Descriptive
10. Autobiography

Students will be instructed memorize definitions for a test.

### **Lesson Plan #2**

Refer to today's poem and answer the five Ws.

Who is speaking in the poem?

What is the subject of the poem?

When did this take place?

Where did this take place?

Why did this happen (if applicable)?

### **Lesson plan #3**

*Cinque and the Amistad Rebellion*



Students are to form groups of three and discuss the following:

1. How can you relate to Cinque?
2. Why did the slave catchers capture Cinque?
3. What would you have done if you were Cinque?
4. What kind of slavery exists today? Explain.
5. Is there anything about Cinque you can be proud of?
6. Have you ever done anything heroic?

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