



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1994 Volume II: Poetry in the Classroom: Incentive and Dramatization

Poetry Through the Eyes of An Actor

Curriculum Unit 94.02.04
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I have selected poems for this unit that I feel are dramatic. I am using the term “dramatic poetry” in a very broad sense. As a drama teacher and a working actress my goal is to develop a unit rising poetry as an approach to acting. As an actor, you always try to ask yourself questions from the standpoint of the character, “where and who am I?” and “what do I want.” Dramatic poetry is usually thought of as involving a speaker or a character addressing a specific audience. the poet has a thought of what he/she wants expressed, then puts it into words. The actor has the words but has to find the sense, the feelings, the physical life. There is rhythm to a poem just as there is rhythm to a script. Students will be exploring the sense of the poems, the rhythm, and the behavior of the characters involved. the students will examine the poems from the standpoint of the character, thus they will have to make their own choice in response to the questions, “who am I” and “what do I want”.

I would like students to be able to express themselves through poetry as well as understand and enjoy poetry. I feel that most students view poetry as something they would rather not work with. I believe that by having students act out poems it will benefit not only students understanding of poetry but also indirectly, their understanding of drama. I would start with some “theatre games” as warm tip. (I must point out that though they are called games, they are not just a pastime, these games help form a working relationship with the actor). The idea of “theatre games” is an important part of developing an acting group with young people. I teach 7th and 8th graders and I feel that these “games” provide the students with the sense of belonging you need in a theatre group. Since my students will be acting out poems the use of “theatre games” for the warm ups give the students the same benefit of being united within the group they will be performing with. This is very important because in order for the students to express themselves they must feel relaxed.

One of the games we use in class is called “the Sculpture”. In this game a student stands in the middle and all the others get to mold him/her. The other students can not hurt or do anything to the one in the middle they wouldn’t want done to them. The other students can move the one the middle only once. After we have gone around a couple of times we introduce a variation to the game. When I say “freeze” whoever is “molding” at that moment becomes part of the sculpture as well. As more and more students become part of this sculpture several changes take place. One thing that happens is that students begin to feel comfortable with each other because they are molding and being molded, this continues until all students are in the sculpture.

Another warm tip is called “Zen in the Book”. The object is for the student to walk to the end of the room and pick up a book on the floor with their eyes closed. The student must first focus on the book, then picture the

book in their mind, they must also be completely concentrated. Each student stands a few feet away from the book, closes their eyes and tries to tap the book or get as close to the book as they can. The main object is concentration and focus. There are other games I use with my students but these gives an indication of how they work.

I would like to begin our class work on poetry by having students read various poems aloud. (I will have selected poems in advance). The first thing I would like my students to be able to do is understand what they are reading. I want them to have a sense of the poem. I believe this is very important, for without a true sense and understanding all else is lost. The next step is to examine the texture of the poem, its rhythm, punctuation and flow. I would do this with several poems until each students has chosen a poem. They will memorize the poem, rehearse and perform it with costumes, props and music.

Complete understanding of a poem can never be obtained ; all we can hope for is relative understanding. Just as beauty is in the “eye” of the beholder, poetry is in the “eye,, of the reader and the “ear” of the listener. One example of a poem that can be acted out is “Annabel Lee”, by Edgar Allen Poe. Annabel Lee is a poem which could be described as a monologue in a script. We would start by breaking the poem into sections.

Lesson Plan First the students would be asked what the poem is about?

- 1)Who is Annabel Lee?
- 2)What is the relationship between the character speaking and the subject of the poem?
- 3)How did Annabel Lee die?
- 4)Did Annabel Lee die?
- 5)What was Annabel Lee’s social class? (3rd stanza, 5th line: “so that her high born kinsmen came and bore her away from me”).

The next set of questions we would explore is: how did this speaker die?

- 1)Did he commit suicide, or die of a broken heart?
- 2)Did he die “inside”, feeling that he was just a shell without the love he once had?
- 3)Did he belong to a lower class than Annabel Lee, admiring her from afar, knowing that some day she would marry in her own class and he would never see her again?

Annabel Lee is one of my favorite poems. I feel that it is bittersweet. The rhythm of the poem flows back and forth in a sing-song style. The words are sad and harsh with an accusing tone. The combination is wonderful.

Again students would break into groups, and based on their interpretation each group would recite the poem according to how they view the speaker.

ANNABEL LEE It was many and many a year ago,

In a kingdom by the sea,

That a maiden there lived whom you may know

by the name of Annabel Lee;-

And this maiden she lived with no other thought

Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child,

In this kingdom by the sea;

But we loved with a love that was more than love-

I and my Annabel Lee-

With a love that the winged seraphs of Heaven

Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,

In this kingdom by the sea,

A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling

My beautiful Annabel Lee;

So that her high-born kinsmen came

And bore her away from me,

To shut her up in a sepulchre,

In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,

Went envying her and me-

Yes!-that was the reason (as all men know,

In this kingdom by the sea)

That the wind came out of the cloud by night,

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Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love

Of those who were older than we-

Of many far wiser than we-

And neither the angels in Heaven above,

Nor the demons down under the sea,

Can ever dissever my soul from the soul

Of the beautiful Annabel Lee:-

For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams

Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes

Of the beautiful Annabel Lee:-

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side

Of my darling-my darling-my life and my bride,

In her sepulchre there by the sea

In her tomb by the sounding sea.

The second poem I would like to discuss is "Lord Walter's Wife", by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. This poem is written in rhyme verse. It is written in a narrative form. Two characters are talking to one another. This makes it the same as a script, for each actor would have their own lines to memorize. I would incorporate some history along with this poem. Since the setting is England, 1862, it would be a good idea to show students some pictures of women's and men's fashion of that time. In line Eighteen, "You kissed my fan when I dropped it. No matter! I've broken the thing." Fans were a very important part, not only of women's fashions, but to their body language as well. There are several ways of interpreting the characters in this poem. The female character, Lord Walter's wife, may feel she is engaging in some harmless flirtation. She may also be flattered by the attention she is receiving. The male character may feel that his charm has captured her attention. He might have felt that she would not respond to him but when she started to do so he became unsure of her intentions and his own charm.

The same misunderstandings happen today. A man may feel he knows a woman (her type) by the way she dresses, her body language and assumed attitude. The same goes for women who feel they know a particular type of man. It would further our Understanding of the poem to discuss these matters.

Lesson Plan Students would discuss the poem and the characters. There might be considerable difference between how the female students see these characters and how the male students see them.

- 1)How would you describe the female character if she were a relative of yours, a sister or a cousin?
- 2)Would you have a different opinion than if you didn't know the character?

The same questions would be asked of the female students.

- 1)How would you describe the male character, if he were a relative of yours, a brother or a cousin?
- 2)Would you have a different opinion if you didn't know the character?

It will be interesting to hear the responses to these questions. Based upon those answers we can begin developing the characters each student will act out.

In both poems, "Annabel Lee", and "Lord Walter's Wife", the time and setting are more than a hundred years ago. In my experience, as a teacher, I find that most students have no sense of times past, so a discussion of the attitudes and morals of that time may be very helpful. Another way of getting students to feel more comfortable portraying these characters is by role playing. I would use the answers given during our discussion as the basis for the role playing. Hopefully, this will make the "acted out" poem more fun and more substantial.

I feel that the poem "Lord Walter's Wife", would make a very good One Act play. The poem itself would act as a foundation. The first thing we must do is establish which direction the characters are going to take. Lets say that both characters feel that they are engaging in a harmless flirtation. The female character with her coy response, and the male character with his wit and charm. Perhaps they both start to feel, somewhere, during their conversation that the other is getting a bit too serious and each character slowly backs away from the flirtation. This would be one possible direction. The second step would be to add visual behavior. (Actors are always looking for "behavior". Behavior is all the things an actor does on stage: drink a cup of coffee, light a cigar, eat a bowl of pasta. This combined with the words goes toward making a good performance. People don't generally stand around and talk, they do things. It is finding the "behavior" that gives the impression of reality.) An example of behavior in this piece might be, taking line eighteen, "You kissed my fan when I dropped it. No matter!-I've broken the thing." We might see the male character pick tip her fan kiss it and slowly hand it back to her. Perhaps a smile or a gazed look might accompany the return. Visually this would make the lines come to life, and that is an actor's job to make characters come to life.

LORD WALTER'S WIFE I.

'But why do you go?' said the lady, while both sat under the yew,

And her eyes were alive in their depth, as the kraken beneath the sea-blue

II.

'Because I fear you,' he answered, '-because you are far too fair,

And able to strangle my soul in a mesh of your gold-coloured hair-'

III.

'Oh, that,' she said, 'is no reason! Such knots are quickly undone,

And too much beauty, I reckon, is nothing but too much sun.'

IV.

'Yet farewell so,' he answered, '-the sun-stroke's fatal at times.

I value your husband, Lord Walter, whose gallop rings still from the limes.'

V.

'Oh, that,' she said, is no reason. You smell a rose through a fence.

If two should smell it, what matter? who grumbles, and where's the pretence?'

VI.

'But I,' he replied, 'have promised another, when love was free,

To love her alone, alone, who alone and afar loves me-'

VII.

'Why, that,' she said, 'is no reason, Love's always free, I am told.

Will you vow to be safe from the headache on Tuesday, and think it will hold?'

VIII.

'But you,' he replied, 'have a daughter, a young little child, who was laid

In your lap to be pure: so I leave you: the angels would make me afraid.'

IX.

'Oh, that,' she said, is no reason. The angels keep out of the way;

And Dora, the child, observes nothing, although you should please me to stay.'

X.

'At which he rose tip in his anger, '-Why, now, you no longer are fair!

Why, now, you no longer are fatal, but ugly and hateful, I swear.'

XI.

At which she laughed out in her scorn: These men! Oh, these men overnice,
Who are shocked if a colour not virtuous is frankly put on by a vice.'

XII.

Her eyes blazed upon him-'And you! You bring us your vices so near
That we smell them! You think in our presence a thought' would defame us to hear!

XIII.

'What reason had you, and what right,-I appeal to your soul from my life,-
To find me too fair as a woman? Why, sir, I am pure, and a wife.

XIV.

'Is the day-star too fair up above you? It burns you not. Dare you imply I brushed you more close than the star
does, when Walter had set me as high?

XV.

'If a man finds a woman too fair, he means simply adapted too much To uses unlawful and fatal. The praise!-
shall I thank you for such?

XVI.

'Too fair?-not unless you misuse us! and surely if, once in a while, You attain to it, straightway you call its no
longer too fair, but too vile.

XVII.

'A moment,-I pray your attention!-I have a poor word in my head I must utter, though womanly custom would
set it down better unsaid.

XVIII.

'You grew, sir, pale to impertinence, once when I showed you a ring.
You kissed my fan when I dropped it. No matter! I've broken the thing.

XIX.

'You did, me the honor, perhaps, to be moved at my side now and then
In the sense- a vice, I have heard, which is common to beasts and some men.

XX.

'Love's a virtue for heroes!-as white as the snow on high hills,

And immortal as every great soul is that struggles, endures, and fulfills.

XXI.

'I love my Walter profoundly,-you, Maude, though you faltered a week,
For the sake of . . . what was it-an eye-brow? or, less still, a mole on a cheek?

XXII.

'And since, when all's said, you're too noble to stoop to the frivolous cant
About crimes irresistible, virtues that swindle, betray and supplant,

XXIII.

'I determined to prove to yourself that, whate'er you might dream or vow
By illusion, you wanted precisely no more of me than you have now.

XXIV.

'There! Look me full in the face!-in the face. Understand, if you can,
That the eyes of such women as I am are clean as the palm of a man.

XXV.

'Drop his hand, you insult him. Avoid us for-fear we should cost you a scar-
You take us for harlots, I tell you, and not for the women we are.

XXVI.

'You wronged me: but then I considered . . . there's Walter! And so at the end
I vowed that he should not be mulcted, by me, in the hand of a friend.

XXVII.

'Have I hurt you indeed? We are quits then. Nay, friend of my Walter, be mine!
Come, Dora, My darling, my angel, and help me to ask him to dine.'

What are Sonnets? I feel that Sonnets are a unique form of poetry. The fact that sonnets are always fourteen lines adds to their uniqueness. I personally love Elizabeth Barrett Browning's collection called Sonnets from the Portuguese. However, I feel the most prolific writer of love sonnets was the bard himself William Shakespeare. LESSON PLAN

1)We will be reading the sonnets of William Shakespeare and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

- 2) We will discuss what the students think the sonnets mean.
- 3) How do the love sonnet of old compare with the love poetry of today?

SHAKESPEARE SONNET CXXVII

In the old age black was not counted fair,
Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slander'd with a bastard shame:
For since each hand hath put on nature's power,
Fairing the foul with art's false borrow'd face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.
Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black,
Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem
At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,
Slandering creation with a false esteem:
Yet so they mourn, becoming of their woe,
That every tongue says beauty should look so.

In Shakespeare's sonnet CXXVII, the first line tells us what the "look" was at that time, what one needed to be said to possess beauty. His mistress did not have the standard "look" for the time but she was beautiful as stated in the last line, "that every tongue says beauty should look so".

The idea of what is the "look", especially for women continues today. We are told through the media that if you look a certain way, you will be able to possess happiness, success and even love. Even though some ads suggest being different and being yourself is the new way of thinking it is still overshadowed by the overpowering, "What's In Now?"

Lesson Plan

- 1) Exposing students to different cultures.
- 2) Discussions of "Self-Esteem."

- a. Learning to accept yourself.
- b. Learning to accept others for what they are.

After reading Shakespeare's sonnet #CXXVII aloud we would explore the questions of different cultures and self-esteem as laid out in the Lesson Plan. The next step would be for the teacher to divide the class into two groups. Let's call them group A and group B. The group A students would each select a culture of their individual interest, research its history, fashion and social morals. The group B students would all be assigned, by the teacher, a culture to research; its history, fashion and social morals. The final part of this exercise would be for the two groups to get together and discuss their findings. The group A students will be very diverse compared to the group B students.

This lesson would not only expose students to different cultures but also to the understanding and acceptance of "difference".

An additional note about William Shakespeare's sonnets. It is believed by some that the "dark lady" of his sonnets was his mistress, Mary Fitton.

Sonnets from the Portuguese

HOW DO I LOVE THEE? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

I LOVE THEE TO THE DEPTH AND BREADTH AND HEIGHT

MY SOUL CAN REACH, WHEN FEELING OUR OF SIGHT

FOR THE ENDS OF BEING AND IDEAL GRACE.

I LOVE THEE TO THE LEVEL OF EVERY DAY'S

MOST QUIET NEED, BY SUN AND CANDLELIGHT

.I LOVE THEE FREELY, AS MEN STRIVE FOR RIGHT;

I LOVE THEE PURELY, AS THEY TURN FROM PRAISE.

I LOVE THEE WITH THE PASSION PUT TO US

IN MY OLD GRIEFS, AND WITH MY CHILDHOOD'S FAITH.

I LOVE THEE WITH A LOVE I SEEMED TO LOSE

WITH MY LOST SAINTS,-I LOVE THEE WITH THE BREATH,

SMILES, REARS, OF ALL MY LIFE!-AND, IF GOD CHOOSE,

I SHALL BUT LOVE THEE BETTER AFTER DEATH.

The first line of this poem is familiar to almost everyone, from children to adults. I have even heard cartoon characters saying the first line, “How do I love thee, let me count the ways.” However, if you should ask how the rest of the poem goes you will be met with a blank stare.

The actor assumes the poet is speaking to a lover or someone he or she is in love with. It is not clear whether the person the poet is talking about knows of their feelings. We do not know the character’s age and there is no specific place given or implied in the sonnet.

LESSON PLAN After reading the sonnet aloud, I would have students break into groups. Each group would write an outline of who they think the poet is talking to.

- 1)Where is he/she? At home, at a desk putting feelings down on paper?
- 2)Who are these people?
- 3)How old are they?
- 4)Do you think they live far away from each other?
 - a.Why do you think they live far from each other
 - b.Why don't you think they live far from each other?

After the discussion of these questions I would have the students act out their interpretation of this poem.

ELDORADO

This is the last of the poems I wish to explore for this unit. It is a rather short poem by Edgar Allan Poe but in his melancholy style. This poem was written in the last year of his life and perhaps it reflects a sense of his impending doom. The poem is one of the little known works of a great writer. Poe considered himself a poet, while the rest of us may not see the body of his poetry as that great I believe this is a great little poem. For one thing, Poe wrote mostly in “first person” but this is one of the few poems he wrote, that is not written like that.

Eldorado tells the tale of a Knight, courageous and bold who traveled long trying to find a place called Eldorado. The poem says he sang a song which I take to mean he had a happy heart. I think that this was a knight, not like of the “Round Table” variety, but more like a soldier of fortune. He searched his whole life long looking for Eldorado but never found it. As he grew old and was about to die he met “A pilgrim Shadow”, who I believe to be “Death”. This shadow told him he would have to look “over the mountains of the moon, down the valley of the shadow”, and that he must “ride, boldly ride”, in order to find this mythical place. Now, where are the “mountains of the moon”? Or the “valley of the shadow”. I don't believe they exist in the physical plane. One would have to “pass over” into the spiritual plane to reach such a place. I think that's what the “shade” meant. The knight would have to die in order to “get there from here”. The shadow also told him to Ride, boldly ride, which I take to mean he should approach death as he had approach life—with courage and zeal.

According to Poe Eldorado is a place that does not exist. It is like the Seven Cities of Gold, or the Fountain of Youth. This knight had a life long goal that he never achieved, but was his life a waste? I don't think so. One may have a fruitful and prosperous life and never attain one's true goal. This is how I feel about this knight. He had a good life even though he never found Eldorado.

LESSON PLAN

- 1)I will have the class read the poem aloud, several times.
- 2)We will brake the poem down line by line .
- 3)I will have students look up certain words such as "Bedight".
- 4)Before we act out the poem in its final stage, I will have students act it out in modern language (slang).
- 5)Finally, we will act out the poem in costume and with props.

ELDORADO

Gaily bedight,
A gallant knight,
In sunshine and in shadow
Had journeyed long,
Singing a song,
In search of Eldorado.
But he grew old-
This knight so bold-
And o'er his heart a shadow
Fell, as he found
no spot of ground
That looked like Eldorado.
And, as his strength
Failed him at length

He met a pilgrim shadow

“Shadow,” said,

“Where can it be-

This land of Eldorado?”

“Over the Mountains

Of the Moon,

Down the Valley of the Shadow,

Ride, boldly ride,

“The Shade replied,-

“If you seek for Eldorado!”

Edgar Allan Poe April 21, 1849

CONCLUSION The final project would be for students to write their own poems and act them out using props and costumes. The students would be able to choose a topic from a list given by the teacher. After the students have all chosen their topics we would prepare this project as a group. We would start with “theatre games”, which I mentioned earlier in the unit. The “Mirror” exercise is an excellent warm-tip and great for concentration. Two students face each other one student is the mirror, the other student is looking in the mirror (which is the other student). The two would simultaneously move their hands, make facial expressions, comb their hair, etc. The poems and sonnets discussed in this unit are by no means the limit to poetry. I want to share with my students other poets such as; Langston Hughes, Morning After, Consider Me; e.e. Cummings, Somewhere I have Never Traveled, and Robert Frost’s, The Death of the Hired Man are just to name a few. The possibilities are endless. Bibliography Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. *Selected Poems* . London: Carcanet Press Ltd. 1983.

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