



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

Introduction

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Although the seminar in which these units were written was called “Poems on Pictures, Places, and People,” the units did not conform to the announced rubric for a variety of constructive reasons. The reader will see that places and people—and even pictures in one or two cases—do figure in the units, but that the authors’ guiding concerns lead them in other directions. The teachers in this group, ranging from kindergarten through high school, view poetry either as an incentive (to learn reading and speaking or to increase understanding of cultural diversity) or else as a means of improving dramatic expression, whether specifically in training for the stage or in the broader context of classroom “role playing.” Hence the title of the volume.

The first three units stress incentives to improve communication skills. Bill Dillon’s lesson plans are meant to show how to use poetry to inspire remedial readers; Roberta Mazzucco addresses problems that beset traditional approaches to poetry teaching and searches for new ways of piquing interest; Soraya Potter, like Mazzucco, wants to overcome traditional resistances while inspiring students to write poetry as well as read it. The next two units, both by drama teachers, share an interest in the dramatic performance of poetry in the classroom. Cleo Coppa has chosen poems for recitation and discussion that evoke intense interpersonal relations; Carol Penney has chosen the dramatic monologues of Tennyson, Browning, and Eliot as a special exercise where by acting students can think their way into roles in the absence of normal dramaturgical constraints. The remaining units all concern the interrelations of poetry and culture. Historical change is the focus of Iole Apicella’s unit on the precieuses ridiculed by Moliere, compared and contrasted with the Dandies of a later era; and historical change likewise inspires Casey Cassidy’s survey of African-American poets and poetry from Dunbar through Hughes to Gwendolyn Brooks.

The remaining four units are written by a team of elementary school teachers from the Beecher School. Their aim is to use poetry to introduce culturally diverse perspectives, leading up to a planned “International Fiesta Day” at the school. Francine Coss introduces the hornbook verse of Colonial America in conjunction with the learning of the alphabet; Patrice Flynn introduces students to the poetry and culture of Japan in the context of many broader curricular goals; Geraldine Martin’s unit on the “Learning Train” passing through Mexico teaches Mexican culture via poems arranged in ways that correspond to the learning of the Spanish numerals one through ten; and the unit of Jean Sutherland (our Seminar Coordinator) introduces African-American culture through poems taken from both oral and written traditions.

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