

Speaking Through and About Poems

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My experience with teaching poetry has run the range of student reaction from abject failure and disgust to “I’ll do whatever you say if it gets me the A.” In the past, my method for teaching poetry has come from my own feelings of inadequacy at writing poems –

The verse I penned
tended to be doggerel,
and those I read,
it must be said,
stood me on head
without much sense
of what was up
or
down-a-roll.

In fact, I was afraid. My fear was a familiar one that I have confronted for each of the 12 years since I decided that teaching English would be an honorable way to earn a living – I would have to be an authority on something that I could lay no claim of authorship to or scholarship on, and convince a hostile (ignorant at best) audience that what we were studying was of value. Fried by the pressure of an impending bell drawing closer by the minute, my heat-oppress’ed brain conjured heartless and mindless plans. I planned lessons that sold the soul of poetry for one class period (just get me through the day!) of reprieve with busy hands and quiet mouths. I sold out for a worksheet that students filled out with the definitions for poetic devices such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, end rhyme, imagery, personification, apostrophe and allusion. I gave over to the Ditto Devil all hope of students’ identification with or understanding of the people speaking in the poems for 41 minutes of quiet classroom ignorance and bliss save for the sounds of glossary pages flipping and pencil points tapping out the rhythm of the piper’s tune.

Sooner, but I hoped for later, I would have to pay that piper, but as I was able to stretch those lessons into days and weeks, I lost sight of what identification I had with the poems and their speakers. I no longer looked for what made these personae utter their “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” that Wordsworth proclaimed as the purpose of poetry in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (*Norton Anthology of English Literature* Vol. 2 164). If I was not looking for the heart of the poems, then neither were my students, though some of them

felt the emptiness of the poetry lessons that focused on attempts to describe and define meter and rhyme. More of them saw the long distance we were from the emotional center of the poems we were picking apart. Many of them gained strength and rallied in numbers behind the bold few who challenged “What does this poem mean?” or “Why do we have to read poetry anyway?” My rationale for the poetry lesson began to change to an analytic explanation of how to do poetry. In practiced sophistry, I reasoned that poetry requires technical explanation before one can “get it.” So, I returned to the tried and untrue methods of naming the parts, of painting the numbers, in the shallow hope that somehow the students with the intellect to question my methods would make the profound leap to the heart of the poem’s emotions on their own. It was a lie that my heart would not believe and that my head knew students would be cynical about.

I despaired in a deep, dark hole; my students who had done the worksheets and got high marks for their quantity of work were off and gone. They had not gained, as Vendler says a poetry course should provide, new pleasure through emotional responses to words and structures more intensely expressed than most people can muster; nor had they honed their own habits of attentiveness, acute discrimination and study; nor had they gained any pride in their cultural heritage and the accomplishments of American art from sampling English and American poetry (Vendler, Helen. *Author’s Notes for Teaching Poems, Poets, Poetry* 20-21).

Can I find a better way? Through this Pittsburgh Teachers Institute Seminar, I am learning that the best way into the heart of the poem is through the self of the speaker. I teach a senior English course for gifted students, some who will take the AP English Literature and Composition exam. The exam has both essay and objective tasks that are based on sight reading of the kinds of poems that are anthologized in the text we are using in the seminar, *Poems Poets, Poetry* by Helen Vendler. If I can help students to read lyric poetry as if they were the speaker in the poem, I believe they will be better able to hear and understand the theme in the lyric as well as understand and identify the ways that the author creates that meaning. As Vendler says over and over again throughout her book “A lyric, then, wants us to be its speaker. We are not to *listen* to the speaker, but to *make ourselves into* the speaker” (183). My objective will be to teach that strategy for understanding, playing with, and taking pleasure in poetry to my students.

Vendler focuses her analysis and explications on lyric poetry, which she defines as a different genre from the narrative (including the epic and verse-tale) or the dramatic social (which are addressed to an audience). The defining characteristic of lyric poetry, Vendler says, is its intimacy. “Lyric is the genre of private life; it is what we say to ourselves when we are alone” (xlii).

Recognizing that a lyric is meant to be spoken by its reader as if they were the one uttering the words of the poem is not just using the air passage that gives a poem breath, but also the heart that pumps the lifeblood of its emotion and the electric shocks that stimulate the pleasure centers of the brain.

I am seeing a light. Students have said to me so many times: “Why do we have to analyze these poems to death?” and “Why do we have to read these poems by people that died a hundred years ago and whose lives are nothing like ours?” and “You are killing me with these boring stupid poems that I don’t have a clue what they mean.” I have cringed and become defensive when I have heard their criticisms, smarting under the quip that somehow I must be failing to provide them the key to the poems, and even more despairingly, that I must not understand the poem very well myself. Well, sometimes I do not, and I must say that in the past I have killed some poems.

In the past, I have used a poetry text called *Sound and Sense*. It is a good anthology (including many of the same poems that Vendler’s book includes and many that she does not) and puts forth some similar ideas as Vendler. Perrine and Arp say that life is the province of poetry, and that its primary concern is not with truth, beauty, philosophy or persuasion, but with life experience (8). This seems consistent with Vendler. They urge the student of poetry to grasp the meaning of the poem by paraphrasing it in a prose way, which is also what Vendler suggests when she urges the teacher (in the first few weeks of an introduction to poetry) to briefly paraphrase poems to get everyone onto the same plane of understanding and then get onto the more interesting questions about the “imaginative thrust of the poem” (Author’s Notes for Teaching 8). Perrine and Arp also counsel the reader to ask questions about the poem, primarily these: “Who is the speaker? What is the occasion? What is the central purpose of the poem? and By what means is that purpose achieved?” (Perrine 25-28) They make some apt analogies too, such as reading poetry is like a game of tennis with enjoyment directly proportional to the effort put in. Tennis players and readers of poetry must both be on their toes for every type of shot that comes over the net – running, jumping and stretching for the “ball.” Yet, poems are not games to be won, for as much as the poet wants the reader to stretch for the shot, they want the reader to return them (28).

Where I have problems with *Sound and Sense* is the “naming of the parts” method they use in the beginning of the lesson sequence – a trap that I have fallen very far down into. I think that it is useful to be able to talk about how a poet creates a certain effect in his or her work: to distinguish between denotation and connotation; to label images as appeals to one or more of the senses, to point out the use of figurative language such as metaphor, personification, apostrophe, metonymy

symbol and allegory, paradox, overstatement, understatement, and irony; in fact the classic essay question on the AP exam prompts one to write about the theme in a poem and explain how the author conveys that idea. It *seems* like a good formula to be able to recognize a main idea and then to label the devices that the poet used to create the meaning. I call it a trap because there is no life to this method. It is interesting that Henry Reed's poem "Naming of Parts" appears in *Sound and Sense* (43) and *Poems, Poets and Poetry* (170). I can almost hear Perrine and Arp (and myself!) as the sardonic drill instructors in the first four lines of each stanza:

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today, we have naming of parts...
...This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got...
...This is the safety catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb...
...And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: We call this
Easing the spring...
...They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy
If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking –piece, and the point of balance,
Which in our case we have not got...

Vendler, on the other hand, is the breath of life that keeps whispering in the ear of the trainee, taking her attention away from the naming of parts to the glistening and trembling, assaulting and fumbling dance of life that connects the living flowers and bees:

...Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens...
...The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures...
...The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see...
...and the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and
Forwards,...

When I teach poetry by the naming of the parts, I am the drill instructor who provides the nomenclature but no use of the actual parts of the weapon that the trainee is learning to care for. I do not mean to say that the extension of this analogy is that poems are firearms; instead I can hear the thoughts of the other speaker in Reed's poem, my students, who are taking mental leave, staring out the window, tuning their minds to a different station that is playing the music of their life.

If I were to live the poem by becoming the speaker(s) in the lyric, both the drill instructor and the trainee, I see, hear, and experience the poem. I did this with Reed's poem (now I understand why its name had been stuck in my brain for a few weeks) and I finally made some sense of it. I will admit that Perrine's questions at the end of the poem, and Vendler's too in her chapter on "The Play of Language" helped me to see the contrasts between the speakers, through the repetition of phrases, and puns that Reed uses. I started to hear the difference in tone that Vendler speaks of as a marker of selfhood (183); the difference between the reverie of the trainee and the droning of the automaton instructor – and neither of them knows that the other is not listening.

Poetry as the representation of life experiences, then, is to be the guiding principle for my curriculum unit, and becoming the speaker of the poem will be the primary strategy to get students to understand, enjoy and live the poems that we choose in class. Examination of the speaker cannot be the only thing we do in our poetry unit (lest the students groan and wag their tongues: "We done that already. We done the speaker in time and space, we done their motivation, we done 'em as a witness, AND as typical of any human experience, we done their tone, their imagination, and we done the various persona -- which comes from the Latin verb *personare* "to speak through a mask" – that the poet adopts, including ones so different from their biographic self that allow them to say things that they couldn't in their own person."

With apologies to Monty Python, and promises of not using a handgun, or (even worse) sarcasm for disarming a student attacking a poem (or the teacher) with a banana, this unit will treat poems as a set of instructions for voicing. We will not listen to the speaker, but make ourselves into the speaker. We will strive to speak the words of the poem as though we spoke them first, and in speaking them, we will know the speaker's past, his motivations, her emotions and their lives (Vendler *Poems, Poetry, Poets* 183).

The Student Speaks

In addition to learning how to recognize and become the speaker of a poem, students need also to be able to speak about the poetry they have read. So many times a discussion in class that I hoped would rage over the interpretations of a poem such as Robert Graves' "The Naked and the Nude" fizzled as students confronted words they were unfamiliar with, imagery with classical allusions, and themes with ambiguous meanings. I thought that the title of the poem alone would draw kids in and make them search hard for all of the sexual images that they could dig up. However, what I found, even after consulting dictionaries, teaching a lesson on connotation, and explaining references to Gorgons and Hippocrites, students were unable, perhaps unwilling to put their interpretations of the poem out in front of the class for discussion, dissection, or ridicule.

I think Connolly and Smith put their finger on the problem I was having when they analyzed discussions about poetry in a ninth grade honors English class. Connolly and Smith concluded that the teacher's conception of discussion differed significantly from the students' understanding of the discussion norm in the classroom. When teachers get together in discussion groups, they depend on the willingness of all to develop their ideas in the conversations, being open to criticism, new and opposing points of view, and listening respectfully to one another. What he sometimes found, however, is that student conceptions of classroom discussion differ from the teachers'. Connolly and Smith found that students expected teacher-centered discussions as a fact of classroom life no matter how much the teacher tried to chance the paradigm of the discussions. Connolly compared his experience with "...going to a dance with a girl with her leg in a cast. Dragging her along, Neither of us enjoying ourselves...And I grew tired and frustrated lugging her around. Tired of the yawns, the tapping of her cast, Sensed that this was just another bad date. When I twitched my head toward the door she knew...(Connolly 4)"

Bill Connolly, as the teacher of the class, had the goal of being the facilitator and participant in discussions; sharing the leadership role with students to make them think and speak freely about the poems they read (Connolly). This, too, is my goal in discussions about poetry in my class, yet in the past I have found that most often the students have been unwilling to talk about the poems we have read. When we read Robert Graves' poem "The Naked and the Nude" (Perrine 40), I expected that the title alone would poetically pique their prurient interest and open the gates to a spirited discussion about connotation, diction and how poets use specific words because of their associated meanings. What I heard was the sound of silence. Then, after more than 30 seconds of wait time, I heard myself say "This poem is about how people can use words that mean the same thing to make themselves seem to be somehow better than someone else..." There I was: the sage on the stage again. I would have to change my position in the discussion to being the guide on the side.

I think that students suffer from a fear of being wrong. Not wanting to make a mistake and be corrected by the teacher, or make an unpopular interpretation and be ridiculed by their peers, the students in my twelfth grade gifted English class remained silent after we read a poem aloud. I am learning that students can discuss poetry, but that those discussions, unlike Athena, might not come out fully-grown at birth. Scaffolding students' understanding of a poem with some activities on reading strategy, some information about the author, or the theme of the poem can help them be more open, daring and successful in their discussions.

Connolly and Smith's study began with the goal of inculcating collaborative discussion engaged in by all and the belief that just counting the number of voices in the discussion was not an effective way to evaluate a discussion (Connolly 4). Student journals about their discussions commented favorably on the value of a variety of speakers in both small and large groups: "Involvement," "Sharing," "Cause others to think," "Leading to new twists, spins on the topic" were the kinds of comments made by students in their reflections. Some students thought the small groups were best for promoting collaboration in making meaning, while others thought that some small groups were dominated by one individual and that large groups were a better source of alternative interpretations.

However, a number of student responses contrasted with the teachers' desire for students to work together and to build on what others said. Connolly and Smith's data showed that nearly one quarter of the students spoke positively of disagreement as a feature of good discussion. Some of the students seemed to enjoy the lively and playful debates that occurred when two diametrically opposed camps argued their position with no expectation that the other would change (5). When discussions featured an openness to disagreement, students said they no longer felt pressure to be right in their ideas before they spoke about them. They also indicated that disagreements brought understanding of another point of view. Sometimes small group discussions in which students agreed with each other about everything were like blinders that kept students from thinking about new ideas because the safe interpretations were never challenged. Perhaps the most powerful realization of disagreements value came from one student who said "Students change their view if they were convinced of others' opinions. Students would also try to prove other students wrong in order to prove themselves right" (6).

These insights into the value of disagreements in Connolly and Smith's study echo John Knapp's method of teaching college level poetry called Hypothesis-Experiment-Instruction. Knapp finds that there is fertile ground for

teachers of poetry between the New Criticism of the 1940-50s objective theory of a poem's art organized around a true and complete idea, and a totally subjective reader-response practice that reduces or eliminates the agency of the author and teacher. Knapp points out that Louise Rosenblatt's rationale for her transactional theory of literature remains solid although misappropriated by educators who welcomed a lively classroom discussion after reading a novel, story or poem, albeit one full of only the many things students had to say about themselves (3). In her book, *Literature as Exploration*, Rosenblatt rejected literary experiences that were completely subjective:

Though a free, uninhibited emotional reaction to a work of art or literature is an absolutely necessary condition of sound literary judgment, it is not, to use the logician's term, a sufficient condition. Without a real impact between the book and the mind of the reader, there can be no process of judgment at all, but the honest recognition of one's own reaction is not in itself sufficient to insure sound critical opinion" (Rosenblatt 75).

Knapp puts it in plainer terms; student talk can be cheap. What he argues for is a way to induct novice readers of poetry into an interpretive community of developed expertise. Knapp credits Kobayashi for the structure of the HEI method that requires students to build domain knowledge of general literature and poetry analysis while engaging in a horizontal social flow of information between or among students, rather than information flowing only from teacher to student, or student to teacher. Knapp says that HEI can help beginning students learn how to conduct interesting literary debates in ways that are not just subjective or imitative of the teacher's opinions (4).

HEI works this way: the teacher prepares the students for discussion of a poem by leading them through a way of thinking about poetry in general. Knapp says the way to guard against too much of a vertical flow (teacher to student) of information is by "priming" the students with a framework, or general poetry heuristic" (5), and let the small group of 4 students grapple with applying the heuristic to the specific poem under investigation. Knapp provides a series of questions to the teacher and to the students about the poem as art, scenic development, rhetorical units, imagery, and the speaker and listener in the poem. I find that Vendler's checklist for exploring poems (*Poems, Poets, Poetry* 126-133) to be apt for exactly this kind of priming. For example, Vendler's outline for describing poems includes investigating the antecedant scenario of the poem, the main agent of the poem and their main speech act, and the changes in the speaker's tone over the course of the poem. The teacher could lead the class through a practice with these ways of reading a poem.

This priming seems necessary to help students "learn the moves" of poetry analysis and be able to think and argue like an expert, which is Knapp's purpose

in using HEI. Knapp says that HEI moves students from the polar extremes of right, wrong, or primarily subjective responses, to an “intellectual environment where students feel safe to argue from a position where the scaffold has already been erected for them ...with their argument already correct in part” (4).

HEI students are put into groups of four and given a handout with four possible Hypotheses about the lyric. Each student chooses one hypothesis and uses the moves they have learned to argue for their position relative to the other hypotheses. The horizontal flow of information in the social context of a debate is the Experiment phase of Knapp’s method. Student’s test the validity of their hypothesis by trying to convince others in the group that their hypothesis (a) is as plausible as any other, (b) avoids a major pitfall of another explanation, (c) accounts for a major element missing in other explanations (d) answers more questions than the other alternatives, or (e) allows better prediction of possible meanings of another poem by the same author. The teacher remains a neutral moderator throughout these stages of the process (Knapp 7).

After arguing for their positions for 20 minutes, the group members may change their original hypothesis choice when asked to vote again. The Instruction of HEI comes about when students discuss what poetic principles caused them to hold on to or let go of their original opinion. Students may test their stand by exposure to a larger audience, including asking the teacher for their interpretation, reading some criticism about the poem, or by joining other members of the group in their presentation to the whole class (Knapp 11)

I think HEI has potential value for instructing students, although the Instruction phase of the model seems open ended and lacking in reasons why students would go and read other poems by the same author. I do not think I would spend class time on presentations by the small groups for the class as a whole on their new opinions as that process would just be repeating what happened in each of the groups. Perhaps that is what Knapp means when he says that the ultimate goal of HEI is not necessarily achieve consensus, but to learn how to conduct interesting and instructive literary debate (4).

Students learn empathically

Hopefully, the discussions will be an experience of learning how to talk about poetry, but it seems just as important that they learn how to be someone else, specifically, the speakers in the poems they read aloud. McCarthy argues that activities that teach what it is to be like someone else can help students learn poetry. He says that students whose lives are limited in experience have no imagination for the things that poems may be about and cannot hear the voice of the speaker. He suggests teaching poetry with the idea that people read and write

poetry for itself, like the reasons that people do crafts, play sports or go to the movies. When they understand that poets play games, like balancing oppositions, and then learn to play the games, students begin to imagine what the poems are. When they learn to do some of the things that poets and poems do, then they begin to have an imagination for poetry (McCarthy 3). It is interesting that McCarthy says that poetry is not a useful thing; that it is a game more than it is an effusion of personal emotion, despite how Wordsworth defines it (5). Once students start seeing the games poets play, they can play those games themselves by writing some poems. Giving the students specific rules for the game enable them to produce their own poems, and suddenly they are playing poet. Play games with opposition, figurative language, rhyme and meter and they are now doing poetry for it's own sake – because it is fun.

Once they have played the games some, McCarthy introduces the idea that poets take a “stance” and speak from that stance. This is the chance to introduce the idea of a role that the poet takes on and a frame from which the poem can emerge. One such stance is the persona poem, where the speaker is nothing like the poet. Lenhart uses some poems by William Carlos Williams where the speakers are women and very different from the poet to show how the writer stepping into another person's shoes and speaking with their voice can be playful (8). McCarthy has students read some persona poems like these, and then has them write some from that stance. He also introduces other stances that poets speak from, such as apostrophe, symbolizing, and epiphany (9). McCarthy says that almost all of the poems in the standard poetry anthologies can be fit into these four stances, although Vendler lists some 15 different speech acts and 12 different content genres that a poet may use in taking a stance (*Poems, Poets, Poetry* 115). I find McCarthy a simpler way to introduce poetry to students, but would rely on Vendler as well.

The key here is for students to play in and with poems. By playing the speaker, they can learn first hand what is the root emotion and theme within a poem. This imagination for poetry can grow, broaden and deepen, but putting on the mask of the speaker is the beginning.

Lesson sequence

Lesson 1: The speaker

Introduce the idea of a speaker in poem. Read 3rd person version of “The Road Not Taken.” Discuss the concept that poet creates a speaker to speak through

Give pairs of students copies of the poems in “United States of Poetry – A Day in the Life.” Text available at

<<http://www.worldofpoetry.org/usop/index.htm>>

Read poem aloud.

Discuss who the speaker is and who is s/he talking about.

Draw pictures of speaker or cutout collages of the person.

Read the poem aloud to the class as that speaker after showing and describing speaker. Question and discuss “Did that sound like the imagined speaker?” Have multiple readings of the poems with students coaching the readers.

View “United States of Poetry – A Day in the Life” video. The video contains about ten different poems by contemporary street poets reciting their verse – some in persona, some as themselves. The video is close captioned which makes it possible to hear and read the poem, as well as watch the little dramas that accompany the poems. Students keep a video log as they watch to note images both in words and visual.

Discuss the times that the speaker of the poem is the poet him/herself, and times that the poets have assumed a role different than themselves. How does a poet create the speaker? Use discussion of this question to begin to identify figurative language and speech acts

Lesson 2: The Mask

Read together “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Lawrence Dunbar (Vendler 465).

Discuss how to read a poem aloud:

Follow punctuation, not line breaks to guide inflection, breath

Read as the speaker

Read for prose meaning

Discuss symbolizing stance of poem.

Making masks – As a way to understand the speaker in a poem, and to be able to be the speaker, students will choose a poem from the anthology that allows them the vision of who the speaker is. Use Poem Finder resource of Power Library and key word “mask” to find a poem. Print out the words. Extra credit for finding out some biographical information about the author

Using a plaster and gauze technique, students will create a masks for their speakers that are painted and given features of the speaker as the student imagines them. An alternate to making the mask is for students to create costumes for the speakers, complete with hat, shirt, coat, dress shoes and other signs of the speaker’s identity.

Create an exhibit with poem texts and masks.

Students memorize their poem and enact it for the class with mask/and or costume.

Lesson 3: Poetry as Life

Lyric – comes from lyre, musical verse, sung by bards epic poems that told the story of a culture. Greeks developed this into dramatic form, and fiction genres of novel and short story have evolved from this.

But lyric poetry has evolved on its own path as well. Lyric is the poetry of private life – what we say to ourselves when we are alone. It is meant to be spoken, read aloud, as if the reader were the one uttering the words.

Lyric is a script for performance – intimate and universal. We do not listen to the speaker, we become him/her.

The best way to get into a poem and understand its meaning is to BECOME the speaker. The reader enacts poems, puts them “on” and speak the words as if we were the first person to utter the lines. Lyric poems are like glasses, clothing, or technology that allow the user to see things that the speaker sees. Lyric poems make visible or palpable the experience of something rather than the commentary about it.

In class, read and discuss Mari Evans poem “When in Rome” p. 31-32. Ask “What has just happened to cause the speaker to say this? (antecedant scenario).

Ask “Who is the speaker? What images in the poem characterize him/her?

Ask “What are the dominant emotions that you, the speaker, are feeling?

Students read and study one of the poems in the anthology and plan a presentation of the poem as the speaker.

“Sorting Laundry.” *Sound and Sense*. 110.

“I’m Not Complaining.” *Sound and Sense*. 111.

“Southern Cop.” *Sound and Sense* 116.

“Traveling Through the Dark.” *Sound and Sense* 174.

“In the Museum.” *Sound and Sense* 76.

“Turning Pro.” *Sound and Sense* 315.

“Ozymandias.” *Sound and Sense* 108.

Lesson 4: Poetry as Pleasure

“If it ain’t a pleasure, it ain’t a poem.”

Imaginative, linguistic, intellectual, and moral pleasure.

I am indebted to William McCarthy for the use of the lesson design in his paper “The Poet’s Stance: Empathic Learning in the Introductory Poetry Class.”

Poetry is not a useful thing, it is something we do for its own sake. Why do kids play basketball? They don’t do it to increase their metabolism, or

cardiovascular fitness, coordination and socialization). They do it to have fun. Why build model trains? Why go to movies? We do these things for their intrinsic value.

We read and write poetry for itself.

Poetry is a kind of game, a set of games that sometimes poets play simultaneously.

Balancing oppositions –

Burns, Robert. “John Anderson, My Jo.”

Students point out oppositions in poem.

Students brainstorm other pairs of oppositions. Put on board, students write.

Students read contrast poems to see how other poets play with opposition:

Frost, Robert. “Fire and Ice.” *Sound and Sense* 90.

Students write three opposition poems with these rules:

1. Play with oppositions, ones from brainstorm and others you come up with.
2. When you have some that “fit together,” fit them together in a poem.
3. No rhyme.
4. Make the poem as short as possible: once it is written, go over it and cut out words, phrases, connectives.
5. Save all your drafts.

Students read their poems with little evaluative comments from teacher. Suggest words that can be cut, but focus on the games poets play.

Lesson 5: Other Games Poets Play -- Speech Acts

Speech act -- a stance that a poet takes.

Persona stance

Carpe diem poems

Waller, Edmund. “Go Lovely Rose” *Sound and Sense* 75

Herrick, Robert. “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” *Sound and Sense* 87

Apostrophe stance

Elegy and ode

Housman, A. E. “To an Athlete Dying Young.” *Sound and Sense* 292

Hayden, Robert. “Those Winter Sundays.” *Sound and Sense* 56

Roethke, Theodore. “My Papa’s Waltz.” *How Does a Poem Mean?* 1003.

Thomas, Dylan. “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.” *Sound and Sense* 332

Writing exercise: students think of someone or something important, either positive or negative. Imagine a situation in which they might speak to this person today. In a poem they are to say what they would like to say in that meeting.

Give teacher example.

Reminiscent stance

Epiphany – an insight encapsulated in an image that tops off an anecdote
Whitman, Walt. “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer.” *Sound and Sense*. 336

Lesson 6: Word games

Denotation and Connotation

Exercises 1-6 (Perrine 42-43)

Students bring to class and present their examples of a pair of words that mean the same but connote differently. Vocabulary word: euphemism

Students write meanings and connotations for words “naked” and “nude.”

Anticipatory Set: Show pictures of “art” Degas and Mapleson nudes and ask if this is art or porn? How does the naming of it change the way people think?

Background info about Ways of Seeing and The Naked and The Nude and the discussion about the history and line between art and pornography.

Read “Naked and Nude” (Perrine, 40-41)

Students write complete sentence answers to the questions after poem.

Students write one sentence about “The Naked and the Nude”

Put class into groups of 4-5. Students read their sentences.

Give groups HEI statements and allow their discussion and voting:

The poem is about the artifice of words.

The poem is about the sin of pretense.

The poem is about the certainty of punishment.

The poem is about false god of art.

Lesson 7: More Games

Organized around a theme such as snow or poetry, we could hear a group of poems through their speaker.

Snow

“It Sifts from Leaden Sieves” – Emily Dickinson (Perrine 63)

“Dust of Snow” – Robert Frost (Perrine 98)

“Soft Snow” – William Blake (Perrine 99)

“The Snow Man” – Wallace Stevens (Perrine 330, Vendler 608)

“Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening” – Robert Frost (Perrine 133, Vendler 154)

Poetry

MacLeish, Archibald “Ars Poetica” *Sound and Sense*. 18.

Ferlinghetti, Lawrence. "Constantly Risking Absurdity" *Sound and Sense* p. 282
Dickinson, Emily. "This is my letter to the world"
Pope, Alexander. "Sound and Sense" *Sound and Sense*. 206-207.

Use Vendler checklist for describing poems to discuss the speaker, the speech act, the emotional curve of the poem. Students should by this time be facile with talking about poems and able to identify some of the ways that authors use to create their meaning. The goal here is to build this framework by immersion in the poems, not by learning definitions.

Lesson 8: Writing About Poetry

Having students able to sight read poems and write on demand about those lyrics is a skill required by the AP Literature and Composition exam. We will practice these skills, by working through an essay on a poem like "Sestina" by Elizabeth Bishop. We will analyze the prompt and write a lead that cuts to the heart of the question in a fresh way. We will discuss strategies for supporting the thesis with ideas based on previous lessons. Finally we will outline how to produce an "upper half" AP essay in 40 minutes.

Works Cited

Anzul, John. "Searching for the Speaker." *Voices from the Middle*. Feb. 1997:
Vol. 4, no. 1, 30-37.

Argues that students are capable of discovering a great deal about a poem simply by exploring their thoughts, ideas, and feelings instead of worrying about whether their analysis matches that of the teacher. Presents "a lively and insightful" discussion with a group of sixth graders on Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Christiansen, Mark. "Exercises in Metaphor: Identification of Self". *Reading Improvement*. Fall 1993, Vol. 30, No. 3 P189-91.

Describes a technique in which students describe themselves through metaphors or similes and asks them to explain the comparisons they made. Discusses additions and extensions to the basic activity. Discusses a similar exercise in which students sought out poems that had a speaker that the student thought was like him/herself, and then wrote poems of their own.

Connolly, Bill; Smith, Michael. "Teachers and Students Talk about Talk; Class Discussion and the Way It Should Be." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Sept. 2002, Vol 46, no. 1, 16-26. ERIC WilsonSelectPlus_FT.

Accessed 5/16/03.

<<https://access.web.cmu.edu/http://newfirstsearch.oclc.org>>.

Teacher and researcher experiment with discussion in ninth grade honors classes and learn that because it is a social as well as intellectual activity that student often have different conceptions of discussion than teachers do. Varied formats for discussion of poems, the teacher's journal and student's reflections on the discussions lead to conclusions that students valued disagreement over collaboration, and that poems new to the teacher as well as the students freed both in the large group discussions.

Dermon, Edward S. "A Poetry Vacation." *Exercise Exchange*. Spring 1996, Vol. 41, No. 2, p 29-30.

This article offers a series of related approaches to teaching poetry and helping students to overcome their phobia of it. Suggests that students gain from discussion of vocabulary, the poem's speaker and his or her perspective, and word choices in the poem.

Doyle, Brian D. "Supplementing the Classroom Anthology: Critical Choices." *Clearing House*. Jan/Feb94, Vol. 67 Issue 3, 165-169. EBSCOHOST Professional Development collection. Accessed 4/18/03.

<<http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=9403237854&db=tfh>>.

Outlines strategies which illustrate how to incorporate several resources into instruction by addressing several interpretations of Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken.' 'Poetry Explication,' by Joseph Kuntz and Nancy Martinez; Electronic retrieval networks such as the MLA databank; Pre-reading activities; Post-reading activities.

Knapp, John V. "Teaching Poetry via HEI (Hypothesis-Experiment-Instruction)." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. May2002, Vol. 45 Issue 8, p718, 12p. EBSCOHOST Professional Development collection. Accessed 4/18/03.

<<http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=6629879&db=tfh>>.

Discusses the use of the Hypothesis-Experiment-Instruction (HEI) teaching method to help students analyze college-level poetry. Background on the HEI teaching method; Strategies for conducting an HEI discussion; Application of the HEI method in workshops and classroom discussions.

Lenhart, Gary. "Stretching Exercises: Range of Motion and Emotion in Four Poems by William Carlos Williams." *Teachers and Writers*. Sept.-Oct. 1998, Vol. 30, No. 1. p8-12.

Discusses four poems by William Carlos Williams used to teach creative writing to college students. Uses "Portrait of a Woman in Red" and "The Last Words of My English Grandmother" because they contain speakers who are clearly not the

poet, which gives undergraduate students opportunities to discuss details Williams uses to portray his characters.

McCarthy, William Bernard. "The Poet's Stance: Empathic Learning in the Introductory Poetry Class." Paper presented at 23rd Annual Meeting of the College English Association, Pittsburgh, PA. March 27-29, 1992.

The principle of empathic learning (involving activities that help students feel what it is to be like someone else) can be used to teach poetry. Students are presented with the conception that people read and write poetry for itself, like crafts, sports, or going to movies; that poetry is a kind of game and that poets play games: then the students play the same games for themselves and share the results with the class.

Norton Anthology of English Literature, The. M.H. Abrams, ed. New York: W. W. Norton and Company. 1979.

These two volumes cover English literature from the Middle Ages, the Sixteenth Century, the Seventeenth Century, the Restoration and Eighteenth Century, the Romantic Period, the Victorian Age, and the Twentieth Century. The editors introduce each of the selected authors and provide footnotes for literary personages and allusions, along with biographies and glossaries for authors and terms.

Perrine, Laurence and Arp, Thomas. *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.

Written for the beginning college student of poetry, the eighth edition shows the nature and variety of poetry, some ways to read it with appreciative understanding, and some primary ideas on how to evaluate it. This edition increases the number of poems by women and ethnic minorities and contemporary poets, and adds a section on writing about poetry.

Rosenblatt, Louise. *Literature as Exploration*. Fourth Edition. New York: Modern Language Association, 1976.

In one of the most important documents about the practice of teaching literature, Rosenblatt argues that the literary experience – what some have called response to literature – is a performance, a transaction between reader and text in which both are modified during and long after the reading.

Su, Adrienne. "The Poetry of Robert Hayden." *Literary Cavalcade*. October 99, Vol. 52 Issue 2, EBSCOhost Professional Development Collection. Accessed 4/18/03.

This article provides background on Hayden and his idea that experiences of African Americans can and should be expressed through English poetic forms.

The article provides three Hayden poems and some commentary on each, as well as a poetry writing assignment based on current event headlines.

The United States of Poetry. Dir. Mark Pellington. Washington Square Films. 1996.

A series of six video chapters that create a stylized portrait of America as seen through language and poetry, featured fifty poets including, Allen Ginsburg, Czeslaw Milosz, Lou Reed, Jimmy Carter, Johnny Depp (as Jack Kerouac) and many others. The New York Times called the series "Breathtaking television", and Raygun magazine called it "quite simply the most powerful series about the spoken word ever produced."

Vendler, Helen. *Author's Notes for Teaching Poems, Poets, Poetry*. Second edition, Instructor's edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002.

The Second edition Instructor's edition contains a manual with the author's notes, tips, suggestions and exercises for teaching poetry as well as a discussion of the chapter ending poems in the text.

Vendler, Helen. *Poems, Poets, Poetry*. Second edition, Instructors edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002.

An introduction to and anthology of poems as well as an explanation of how to read and unfold poetry. Vendler's methods for demystifying lyric poetry and introducing its artistry and pleasures are based on reading poems as representation of life experiences and on recognizing the speaker of the poems as someone who is moved to meditate on those experiences.

Student reading list

Blake, William. "Soft Snow." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.

Brown, Sterling A. "Southern Cop." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.

Dickinson, Emily. "It Sifts from Leaden Sieves," *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.

Dunbar, Paul Lawrence. "We Wear the Mask." Vendler, Helen. *Poems, Poets, Poetry*. Second edition, Instructors edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002.

- Evans, Mari. "When in Rome." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Ferlinghetti, Lawrence. "Constantly Risking Absurdity" *Sound and Sense* Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Frost, Robert. "Fire and Ice." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Frost, Robert. "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Frost, Robert. "Dust of Snow." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Gardner, Isabella. "In the Museum." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Graves, Robert. "The Naked and the Nude." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Johnson, Ben. "Still to Be Neat." *Poems, Poets, Poetry*. Second edition, Instructor's edition. Ed. Helen Vendler. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002.
- Hardy, Thomas. "The Man He Killed." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Hayden, Robert. "Those Winter Sundays." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Houseman, A. E. "To an Athlete Dying Young." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- MacLeish, Archibald "Ars Poetica" *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Owen, Wilfred. "Dulce et Decorum Est." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Plath, Sylvia. "The Mirror." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.

- Pope, Alexander. "Sound and Sense." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Reed, Ishmael. "Turning Pro." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Ritchie, Elisavietta. "Sorting Laundry." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Roethke, Theodore. "My Papa's Waltz." *How Does a Poem Mean?* Ed. John Ciardi, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959.
- Schultz, Philip. "I'm Not Complaining." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Ozymandias." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Stafford, William. "Traveling Through the Dark." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Stevens, Wallace. "The Snow Man" *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Thomas, Dylan. "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- Whitman, Walt. "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." *Sound and Sense*. Eighth edition. Ed. Laurence Perrine. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1992.

Classroom materials

Ciardi, John. *How Does a Poem Mean?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959.
A by-the-numbers poetry text with many poets anthologized. Still a good resource.

The United States of Poetry. Dir. Mark Pellington. Washington Square Films. 1996.

A series of six video chapters that create a stylized portrait of America as seen through language and poetry, featured fifty poets including, Allen Ginsburg, Czeslaw Milosz, Lou Reed, Jimmy Carter, Johnny Depp (as Jack Kerouac) and

many others. The New York Times called the series "Breathtaking television", and Raygun magazine called it "quite simply the most powerful series about the spoken word ever produced."

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Appendix – Content Standards

Communications

C1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.

C2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts.

C3. All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.

C4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform and persuade, in all subject areas.

C5. All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.

C6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.

C7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify their purpose, structure and use.

C8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.

Arts & Humanities

AH1. All students describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.

AH2. All students evaluate and respond critically to works from the visual and performing arts and literature of various individuals and cultures, showing that they understand important features of the works.

AH3. All students relate various works from the visual and performing arts and literature to the historical and cultural context with which they were created.

AH4. All students produce, perform or exhibit their work in the visual arts, music, dance or theater, and describe the meanings their work has for them.