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Poetry in the Literature Class

Diana Mitchell

“Thanotopsis” almost did me in. I was teaching American Literature for the first time and suddenly that poem was leering up at me from the pages of the American Literature anthology. In my seventeen previous years of teaching I had taught high school history and junior high school English, so I wasn’t quite sure of myself in this literature class. Since I had no resources other than the text, I had decided for the first year to use the text and see what I could do with it. It was pretty easy for me to get students involved in Ben Franklin’s pieces, and students actually liked writing in imitation of Patrick Henry’s “Speech in the Virginia Convention.” Then the Romantics appeared and along with them came William Cullen Bryant. Before I left school the day before I was to teach Bryant’s poem, I skimmed through it quickly and was baffled. What was I to do with something as daunting as “Thanotopsis”?

I planned on a long evening devoted solely to “Thanotopsis” so I could get my bearings and figure out how to approach it in class. However, that evening my daughter became ill and I knew it would be a long wait in the clinic for minor emergencies. I panicked. How could I ever be ready for the next day? I grabbed my American Literature text on the way out the door, prepared for the long wait. As I sat in the emergency room, I read the poem over and over again until it finally

made sense. Then I could see that William Cullen Bryant was talking about his view of death.

“Wow!” I thought. “Bryant is interested in what happens when we die and how humans reconcile their beliefs about the afterlife with the way they live their lives.” Once I figured that out, I was interested and took a closer look at the poem. First, I saw that Bryant makes us deal with the fact that our bodies will decay. He reminds us that a tree’s root might “pierce thy mold” or that we might be that clod of dirt which “the rude swain turns with his share.”

After Bryant makes sure we get the picture, he explains that, hey!, we might be hanging around with the powerful of the earth like kings or even the “wise, the good” after death. The rest of the poem gives comfort by assuring us that everyone “in their turn shall follow.”

But it was the last stanza that gripped me. “So live,” Bryant commands us, so when it’s our time we can go “sustained and soothed.”

Once I grasped the meaning of some of his unfamiliar words and phrasings — I was bowled over. In one poem this man had basically sketched out his whole philosophy of life. He started with death and what it meant to him and built backwards to what our eventual death says about the way we should live our lives.

Now I knew what I would do the next day in class. Before we read the poem we would talk

about our conceptions of death. We had a spirited discussion about what we think happens after we die and how our beliefs about an afterlife influence the way we lead our lives.

Then I read "Thanotopsis" because now I could read it with meaning. After the first reading, students responded strongly by labeling as "gross" the ideas that our bodies turn into parts of the earth and that someone might step on them! At the second reading, they got glimmerings of Bryant's conception of the after-life. As I read parts again, students got a little more of the picture Bryant was painting. Soon we were comparing Bryant's philosophy of life with our own. The excitement in the class that day was contagious as students actually started grappling with their own views of the purpose of life and how their conception of death influenced the way they lived. But for me the excitement also had to do with the fact that I had finally figured out one path into the poetry in my American Literature text.

I felt insecure about teaching high school poetry because, although I had always liked poetry, I never could keep in my head exactly what an iambic pentameter was. I never knew how to beat out a poem's rhythm on a desk, although I could read a poem and capture its rhythm in my reading.

That year, I often had to look up poetic terminology before I taught it. But I found that this did not disqualify me from teaching poetry. Once I got over the hurdle of thinking I couldn't do it because I didn't know enough, I approached it as another genre that I would try to involve students in. I didn't approach it as an impenetrable puzzle we were supposed to solve, but rather I approached it as something to be talked about, something to appreciate, and something to enjoy.

Dumping all the "I should know's" and "I should do's" of poetry teaching freed me to do whatever I had to do to get students involved in poetry, to like it, or at least to respect the craft involved in writing it. I hasten to add, this did not happen all at once. It happened over a period of years as I worked to find more ways to get students involved in the poetry in the text.

The Challenge of Poe

The strategy I used with "Thanotopsis" simply did not work with the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe. "The Bells" and "The Raven" didn't deal with issues we could really delve into, so what was I to do? I knew that I didn't just want students to find samples of assonance, consonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia (I actually knew what all those words meant!) No, Poe's poems deserved more than to be used as a place for a terminology hunt. Since I respected Poe's skill in writing poetry, I decided to focus on the craft involved in his poetry writing. First we read "The Bells" and laughed a lot because students found the repetition of the word "bells" seven times in a row, a bit much. Then we turned to looking at what it meant and students noticed what kind of sounds Poe used to capture the mood expressed by each of the different bells he described. For instance, in the first stanza they noticed that the sounds describing the sleigh bells had short vowels which conveyed a feeling of quickness and merriment. But when we got to the more somber last stanza describing the funeral bells, the vowel sounds were long and drawn out so that they slowed down the reading and served to emphasize the serious nature of the subject of death.

After we read "The Raven," which I consider a masterpiece, I asked each student to write one stanza using Poe's internal and external rhyme scheme. In addition I asked them to follow his syllable count. As students struggled with the task, they looked carefully at just what Poe did in each stanza and realized the skill and care it took to craft a poem like this.

When a poem in the anthology totally stumped me, as a couple of Ralph Waldo Emerson's did, I felt the freedom to skip some of them. A few of these seemingly impenetrable poems did make for interesting group work as we tackled them using all we knew about poetry. A few we found success with, many we did not. I reasoned that if I couldn't find ways to get students involved in the poem through discussing the issues the poetry raised, through focusing on the craft of the poem, or through having students write imitatively about the poem, then I didn't need to bore them by

tediously flogging them through the poem, trying to explain each word, line, or stanza.

Writing in response to or in imitation of a poem

When we got to sections of the anthology with large selections of poetry by one author, such as Emily Dickinson, I tried another approach. From the biographical information on Dickinson, I found that she considered her poems to be her "letters to the world." I asked students as we read Dickinson, to try to figure out what she was including in her "letter" and why. After reading all the selections in the anthology, I put students in groups of three or four and had each group grapple with two of Dickinson's poems. It was a struggle in many cases, but with three people working on each poem, students usually found ways into the poem and then could tell the class what Emily seemed to want to tell the world.

To wrap up the work on Dickinson, I had students write a letter as if it were written by Dickinson to the world, telling the world everything she wanted it to realize about life from the information they gleaned from her poetry. After we shared letters in groups and read some aloud to the whole class, I asked students to write their own "letter to the world," telling the world what they had figured out so far and what they thought the world needed to understand. Some did it in prose and others in poetry. But they liked the assignment because it asked them to share important ideas and because they felt a bit more related to Emily Dickinson's work.

Then along came Walt Whitman. Initially he was harder for students to get involved in because his "Song of Myself" is massive. I decided to use a compare/contrast approach with Whitman. Initially, I gave students the line "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," and asked them to do a quick-write or to compose a list of what would follow for them if that was the first line of a poem about them. What would they include about their experiences in and with this world, and what would they exclude? After students got over the shock of being asked to "celebrate" themselves, most of them came up with lots of ideas. Then we tackled "Song of Myself" and looked at the kinds

of things Whitman considered part of his song. I did point out to them how his form sprawls all over the page and isn't written in neat little rhymed stanzas. We talked about what statement Whitman was making by choosing to write in this way. As we finished our work on this poem, I asked every student to write his/her own "Song of Myself" (an idea I got from Tom Romano's *Clearing the Way*). The results were varied and often stunning.

One student called his poem "Pathetic Tune of Mine." He began this way:

Ideas trapped inside
Feelings trying to escape.
Love, hate blocked out
All from a stupid characteristic—
Trying to express out loud with my voice
Only leads to fumbled, dizzy, words

He goes on to express his anger and frustration at being shy and unable to say what he would like to. He ends:

So I plan the perfect speech
The one that would be heard around the world
The one that will give me power and support
The speech that tells me I have defeated my greatest flaw.
The bottled thoughts would be released.
But until that day the thoughts will gather.
And bit by bit the speech will build.

Another student simply called his "Song of Myself" and I thought it showed how deeply he had thought about his life.

I love myself
and I scold myself
with equal amounts of energy spent.
I change my mind
because my mind changes.

I read not a Good Book
for I depend on myself
rather than on imagination and myth.
I say the only way to believe
is to believe in yourself.

The world is grass and concrete.
I celebrate both
As they are miracles of nature and man.
My life is dependent on nature

for thought and wonder.
My life is dependent on concrete
for knowledge and advancement.

I sing the tunes of many songs
because the tunes are all enjoyable.
I sing jazz for its style,
classical for its grandness
and march for its definite being.

I compete with myself to achieve.
I commend myself for achievement.
I trust myself to judge
and I need myself to be myself
and think my thoughts
everyday.

I found out that when students write in ways like this that are imitative, but based on their personal experiences, they never forget the poet or what the poet wrote because they developed a sense of that poet's poetry as they struggled with their own work.

Looking Closely at a Poem

Whitman's "Beat! Beat! Drums!" and Stephen Crane's "War is Kind" are both marvelous poems to work with to help students understand the impact that sound can have on the meaning of a poem. Since we had already talked about how the hard sounds of "b" and "d" add to the harshness of Whitman's "Beat! Beat! Drums!", by the time we got to "War is Kind" students were ready to look closely at the effects that sounds, line lengths, and differences in stanzas can have on the meaning of the poem. As homework I asked students to explain what they thought Crane meant in this poem. I also asked them to discuss any poetic or literary devices that they thought added to the meaning of the poem. I cautioned them not to just say, "alliteration is used" but to explain what it does and how it adds to the poem. I also asked them to include in their discussion sentence length, as well as the sounds of the letters and words, and the arrangement of and differences between stanzas.

I was flabbergasted the next day at some of the sophisticated ways they had looked at the poem. They did, however, differ widely in their interpretations of the poem. Many said things such as,

"The title is ironic because Crane goes on to talk about killing lovers, fathers and sons. He describes the detail of dying and of corpses and of young men trained to kill and die. I think it is an excellent anti-war statement." Other interpretations differed. "Crane evidently supports war. This poem is about bravery and the glory of war. War is powerful and only men with guts can leave such a glorious ordeal."

Instead of dealing head-on with these differences, I used a strategy so all students might eventually see how Crane brings his readers to his point of view. First, I took home all their comments and typed up a representative sampling. The next day I selected groups for students to work in, making sure that each group had students who came to different conclusions about the poem. First they went over all the comments their classmates had made about the poem. The following is a brief sampling of the range of their comments:

Repeating "War is Kind" and "do not weep" alters the meaning and makes you realize it's ironic. Repetition pounds this point into your head.

"Heart hung humble as a button"—when a button is hanging, it is hanging by a thread that can be easily ripped off or broken. The repeated 'h' sound almost sounds like gasps or panting or someone trying to catch their breath like a mother would be upon hearing of the death of her son.

Sentence length is short and not smooth as war is abrupt and doesn't allow for life to go on smoothly.

Structure of stanzas 1,3,5 are distorted or uneven to show how distorted or uneven our lives are in war when we might lose loved ones. Stanzas 2 and 4 are tighter, line length more even perhaps to show the order and regimentation of the military.

The syllable count of stanzas 2 and 4 does not vary much from line to line going only from 6 to 10 syllables perhaps to show how in the military and in war there is little room for difference. Men must all fall in and obey orders.

Stanzas 2 and 4 are indented perhaps to show that being in war sets you off from the rest of the population and makes you different.

Crane's vivid imagery shows us the inhumane way soldiers die "raged at his breath, gulped and died."

Crane's diction makes clear his negative views on war. He uses: die, slaughter, corpses, gulped and died, killing and rages. These help to recreate the negative feeling on the battle field to persuade you to adopt the author's view of war.

The second and fourth stanzas are harsh. The consonant sounds such as "b" in "blazing" and "booming" and the "d" in "drill and die" and the "k" in killing emphasize the harshness of war.

The alliteration of the "d" sound in "drill and die" and the repetition of it gives it the feel of a drill sergeant shouting orders at a steady beat.

Crane uses oxymoron continuously to make his sarcastic views apparent. "The virtue of slaughter," "the excellence of killing," "the bright splendid shroud"—all of these are unimaginable.

After reading all the comments, students had to come to some agreement on interpretation in each group, showing how images, line length, diction, poetic devices, sounds etc. contributed to this interpretation. The discussions were lively because the students had so much material to work with and because they came to the task with a specific point of view. Needless to say, all groups did not agree on a single interpretation but all groups did understand the ways poets used everything available to them to enhance the meaning of the poem. That day, I think students came away with a new respect for the craft of writing poetry and how every choice a poet makes about a poem, can have an impact on meaning.

Writing Options with Poetry

Edward Arlington Robinson's poems are fairly easy to get students involved in because they are familiar with the issues he writes about: suicide,

alcoholism, and loneliness. I usually start with his poem "Richard Cory." I found Simon and Garfunkel's recording of "Richard Cory" and played it to the class, looking at how their version changes or adds to the meaning of the poem. I gave students a choice of assignments following the reading of Robinson's poetry. I've asked them to do such things as create Richard Cory's background in story or poetic form so we can understand what led him to commit suicide. I have even gotten poems written in the same style as the original. Another option was to write a poem or story on loneliness. I got some powerful writing from students this way. One student wrote:

I hurt inside today.
There is an empty, still feeling inside of me,
like the
rusted, hollow church bell that mourns itself
among fragile cobwebs....

For this kind of assignment I try to have at least six or seven choices so each student can in some way, write in response to the poetry read.

Dramatic Readings

When we read Edgar Lee Masters, I reminded students of what an epitaph was and then we approached most of Masters through dramatic readings. I made copies of the poems from *Spoon River Anthology* that speak to each other. One such pairing was Elsa Wertman, the German servant who allowed the Greens to adopt her son by Mr. Green, and her son Hamilton Green. Students came to class prepared to read these as dramatically as possible. I often had candles glowing in the room and the lights off to emphasize that these people were speaking from their graves. Students really got into this assignment and did a wonderful job. I will never forget the year a German foreign exchange student read the epitaph for the German servant impregnated by her employer. She brought tears to the eyes of many of the students in the room with her powerful reading.

After several days of dramatic readings, I asked students to write two epitaphs from any two people to each other. I've had history buffs write from Hitler to Stalin. I've had music buffs

write from Nancy Spungen to Sid Vicious. I've had Marilyn Monroe write to her fans. I've had students write powerfully to someone in their lives. Students write their epitaphs on blank paper, cut to look like a tombstone or grave marker. These are hung up in the room and students from other classes actively read them.

Varying Approaches to Poetry

As I worked with poetry in the literature class, I found out it was usually deadly to do the "Poetry Units" in the anthology. To make sense to students, poetry needs to be in a context and just to read it because it's in a whole unit of poetry doesn't seem like enough of a context to me. I do have students use the poetry in other ways though. I might ask them to skim through the poetry in that section of their text to find a poem that a certain character might like, or a poem on a certain theme. I try to give them reasons to read the poetry.

One other way I have used poetry in the class is to bring poetry in that relates to a theme in the literature we've been reading. For instance, after we finished Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels* and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, I brought in war poetry that the students dramatized. I brought in four or five different poems, divided students into groups, and asked them to basically act out the poem while reading it. Students loved this and never forgot the poems.

Another way I've encouraged students to read poetry is to ask them to do a poetry notebook. I might require them to turn in twenty poems that somehow appealed to them. They need to take the poems from at least four different sources (this is when they closely read the poems in that poetry section in the anthology), copy them by hand or by machine, write on the back what each poem

means to them and why they chose it, find illustrations for at least two of the poems, create a cover for the collection and put it all together. Some students draw illustrations, some cut pictures out of magazines, some generate them on their computers, and some use photographs. On the day these are due, students either as a whole class or in small groups share a few of the poems they have selected. It's usually a wonderful day with students rejoicing in some of the poems they have found.

Over the years I have learned many things about using and teaching poetry in the literature classroom. I have found out not to be afraid of poetry just because I don't feel like I know enough about it. The only way I learned about poetry was by getting involved with it and trying different ways to involve students in it. I've also learned not to try to do everything with every poem. The close reading we did with "War is Kind" is not something I would repeat frequently. Asking students to write in imitation of a poem can only be done a few times each year. I also learned it's better to teach poetic devices and terms AFTER students have noticed them or at least have been exposed to them. And mostly I learned that poetry should not be taught in terms of "answering the questions at the end of the selection." Poetry must also be read aloud so students can hear the sounds of it and enjoy it, not wince whenever they see a poem in a text because they know it signals that questions will follow.

Works Cited

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