**Discovering the Power of Language Through Contemporary Poetry**

John Kreider

Grades 11 – 12

**Estimated timeline for teaching:** Ten 90-minute block lessons.

**Unit Overview**

Students explore the power of language to convey ideas and emotions by studying and responding to poems.  Students will read and listen to several poems, some simply for pleasure. Students will interpret and analyze poetry while relating poetry to other literature/art as well as their lives. Students put what they’ve learned to practice by composing original poetic work in a variety of forms, which will be read at a public event. Students reflect critically by reviewing the public event for the class’ “newspaper”.

**Theory to Practice**

Students have long attached a stigma to the study of poetry, making the teaching of poetry especially difficult. Many teachers, though, “have a gift for infusing their students with not only a knowledge of poetry, but a love for it as well” (Somers 13). We can all attain that goal “by having students read great poetry, ask questions of the poet, and use the poems as models or inspirations for their own poetry” (Linaberger).

Molly Travers identifies some of the characteristics of good poetry teachers: “[They] like poetry and take it seriously . . . are enthusiastic; emphasize the pleasure of poetry; are flexible, experimental; . . . consult pupils on choice of poems; allow conversational and informal discussion; . . . [and] do not make pupils afraid of saying the wrong thing” (380). With these ideals in mind, not as prerequisites for teaching poetry but as consistent goals, this unit offers ways to creatively introduce poetry into the classroom and inspire students to engage with it.

Ideas were borrowed inspired by and borrowed from:

Linaberger, M. (2004). “Poetry top 10: A foolproof formula for teaching poetry.” *The*

*Reading Teacher*, *58*(4), 366–372.

Fisburn Moore, Haley. “Choosing the Best Verb: An Active and Passive Voice

Minilesson”. *ReadWriteThink.* National Council of Teachers of English. Web. 18

April 2011.

Gardner, Traci. “Many Years Later: Responding to Gwendolyn Brooks’ ‘We Real

Cool’”. *ReadWriteThink.* National Council of Teachers of English. Web. 18 April

2011.

Haugh, Eleanor K.,  et al. "What is your favorite activity for teaching poetry? " *English*

*Journal*  91.3 (2002): 25-31. Web. 18 Apr. 2011

Murphy, Eileen. “Sonic Patterns: Exploring Poetic Techniques Through Close Reading”.

*ReadWriteThink.* National Council of Teachers of English. Web. 18 April 2011.

Romano, Tom. “The Many Ways of Poems”. *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing*

*Multigenre Papers.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000. 90-109. Print.

Somers, Albert B. *Teaching Poetry in High School.* Urbana, IL: National Council of

Teachers of English, 1999. Print.

Tchudi, Susan J. and Stephen N. Tchudi. *The English Language Arts Handbook:*

*Classroom Strategies for Teachers.* 2nd ed.Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999.

Print.

Thiel, Diane. *Open Roads: Exercises in Writing Poetry.* New York: Longman, 2005.

Print.

Travers, Molly. “The Poetry Teacher: Behavior and Attitudes.” *Research in the Teaching*

*of English.* 18 (1984): 216-217, 380. Print.

Vopat, Jim. “Random Autobiography”. *Micro Lessons in Writing: Big Ideas for Getting Started.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007. 22. Print.

**Student Objectives**

Students will interpret and respond to a wide range of 20th and 21st Century poetry.

Students will explore how word choice and form relate to the interpretation of a poem.

Students will compose original poetic work in a variety of forms, which will be presented orally at a poetry reading in the community.

Finally, students will take on the voice of a cultural newspaper critic, responding to art academically and journalistically by writing a “review” of the poetry reading.

**Michigan Content Expectations**

Write, speak, and visually represent to develop self-awareness and insight.

Write, speak, and create artistic representations to express personal experience and perspective.

Use writing, speaking, and visual expression to develop powerful, creative and critical messages.

Determine the meaning of unfamiliar words, specialized vocabulary, figurative language, idiomatic expressions, and technical meanings of terms through context clues, word roots and affixes, and the use of appropriate resource materials such as print and electronic dictionaries.

Participate as an active member of a reading, listening, and viewing community, collaboratively selecting materials to read or events to view and enjoy

Interpret literary language while reading literary and expository works.

Recognize a variety of literary genres and forms (e.g., poetry, drama, novels, short stories, autobiographies, biographies, multi-genre texts, satire, parody, allegory) and demonstrate an understanding of the way in which genre and form influence meaning.

Identify different types of poetry and explain how specific features influence meaning.

**Resources**

**Materials and Handouts**

*All recordings are available for purchase on iTunes. Some are available for free on YouTube.*

“My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke along with recording of Roethke reading the poem.

“For My People” by Margaret Walker along with recording of Walker reading the poem.

“History” by Mos Def featuring Talib Kweli, lyrics and recording.

“Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden along with recording of Hayden reading the poem.

“We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks along with recording of Brooks reading the poem.

Other poems and recordings, selected by instructor.

Examples of reviews of cultural events from newspapers and magazines.

“Autobiographical Poem” worksheet.

“Marking Your Text: The First Reading” worksheet.

“Key Word Study for ‘Those Winter Sundays’” worksheet

“Poetry Peer Revision” worksheet

“Poetry Self Revision” worksheet

“Newspaper Review” assignment

“Newspaper Review” grading rubric

**Technology**

Projector (preferably connected to a computer), audio player.

Computer access (www.etymonline.com, www.theoi.com, www.poets.org, owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/01/)

At least one digital camera

**Other**

A venue for a public poetry reading (this could be your classroom, a coffee shop, the schoolyard, the school gym or cafeteria or auditorium, etc.)

**Teacher Preparation**

The beginning of this unit involves comparing a poem to the graphic novel *Stitches* by David Small. If your class will not have read and studied *Stitches*, carefully select another poem that engages with a novel you will have studied.

Compile a portfolio of your favorite poems. This can be a digital portfolio if you can project it from your computer.

Collect reviews of literary events and readings from the Arts & Culture section of newspapers or magazines.

**Detailed Lesson Plans**

**Day 1:**

1. **Discussion and comparison.**
	* Display “My Papa’s Waltz” and play the recording or read it aloud. Begin a “conversational” discussion about the poem, rooted in the same topics and terminology of the previous unit. This may or may not happen naturally.
	* Where does the poem take place? Who are these people and what are they doing?
	* If *Stitches* does not come up right away, be patient. Guide them, but let the students make the connection. Center the discussion on the mood of the poem.
	* Discuss the poem’s vocabulary compared to *Stitches.* Could Roethke’s words be found in *Stitches?* Refer to p. 46, mama’s “silent fury”. Discuss word choice, including the meaning and sound of words.
	* Explore how other elements of the poem affect its mood. How does the rhyming, “waltz” quality fit into *Stitches?* Remind the class of a lighter passage from *Stitches* (pp. 48-49).
	* Include the elements of graphic novels students have learned, specifically how panels and gutters mark the passage of time.
	* Gutters (the space in between panels) can allow readers to fill in the blanks with assumption and/or imagination. How does reader assumption/imagination work in “My Papa’s Waltz?”
2. **Personal poetry portfolio**
	* Introduce your portfolio of your favorite poems.
	* Depending on how much time you have, pause on a couple short and/or very popular poems and read them.
	* Explain that poetry is personal - not everyone likes the same things, but you want to show your favorites and share theirs.
	* Tell them about the upcoming event they will be putting on – a poetry reading of their own work!
	* Homework: Have each student choose a personal theme song. They will choose an excerpt of the lyrics (10 – 20 lines) that best represents them, and email the excerpt to the teacher or bring in a hard copy without their name on it.

**Day 2:**

1. **Personal Theme Song**
	* Display the student’s excerpts one at a time, reading them out loud. The teacher should include an excerpt as well.
	* Students try and guess which student each song belongs to. Class gets 2 guesses before the student reveals her/himself. Pass excerpts back to students to begin their portfolios.
2. **History and Identity poems**
	* Read and listen to Margaret Walker’s “For My People” – allow students to respond out loud.
	* Play the song “History” by Mos Def and Talib Kweli while displaying the lyrics. You may opt instead to show the music video. Allow students to respond out loud.
3. **Autobiographical Poem**
	* Pass out the *Autobiographical Poem* sheet and demonstrate how it works by completing the worksheet. Students work silently to create the poem.
	* Students form groups to share their poems and ask questions about each other’s poems.
4. **Homework**
	* Homework is to read Robert Hayden’s “Those Winter Sundays” and Gwendolyn Brooks “We Real Cool” out loud at least two times, and complete the *Marking Your Text: The First Reading* worksheet about both poems.
	* Tell your students the importance of reading poetry out loud. This is a good time to remind them about the event they will be putting on in a few days!

**Day 3:**

1. **Analyzing and Interpreting “Those Winter Sundays” – initial responses**
	* Begin by asking for a volunteer or two to read “Those Winter Sundays” out loud – next play the recording of Hayden reading it.
	* Facilitate a brief discussion about initial responses to the poem and their completed homework assignment sheets.
2. **Careful Word Study**
	* Begin careful word study by writing the following words from the poem on the board: “Winter”, “Sundays”, “Early/early morning”, “offices”.
	* Have students write down everything that comes to mind when they think of these words, encouraging them to write without stopping for 2 – 4 minutes.
	* Pass out the *Key Word Study* worksheet and divide class into groups of 4.
	* Each group member is responsible for researching one of the four words on the worksheet. Students share their findings with their group, and record each other’s.
	* Ask students to share their findings and their (new?) interpretations of the poem. You may want to read or listen to the poem again.
3. **The sound of language**
	* Introduce the concepts of “consonance”, “assonance”, and “alliteration”.
	* As a class, read through the poem again, highlighting all of the hard “k” sounds.
	* In their groups of 4, have students find repetitions of other sounds in the poem.
	* Still in their groups, students discuss the following questions:
		+ What sounds are associated with the father? The speaker? Their relationship?
		+ How does the poet use these sounds to illustrate conflict between characters? Internal conflict?
4. **A break in the action**
	* Play a song about a memory. The best songs for this deal with an image or a specific memory, but songs about looking back in general work as well. I like to use “Empty Room” by Arcade Fire. Point out that both “Those Winter Sundays” and “My Papa’s Waltz” look back on a specific moment in time (both also deal with fathers).
5. **Your turn!**
	* Pre-writing activity: Quick writes. Give students the following prompts and have them write rapidly for two minutes each, letting language fly. (Students must do 4 quick writes, but you may wish to allow them to use one prompt multiple times.)
		+ “My father/mother was…” – a memory of a parent.
		+ “When I was…” – pick a year of their life.
		+ “The first time I…”
		+ Write about an actual personal event that you couldn’t possibly remember (your grandparents’ wedding, your birth, your first something).
	* Have students choose one of the quick writes and cluster images and language the quick write brought to mind. Demonstrate this process first.
	* Have students use their cluster to compose a few stanzas. Demonstrate this process first. If there is time, ask if anyone wishes to share anything they’ve written.
	* Homework is to repeat the process of clustering and writing for at least one more of their quick writes.

**Day 4:**

Students will read “We Real Cool” out loud and compare it to the recording of Brooks reading it. (It is important that students don’t feel that their reading is “incorrect”.) Students will listen to and discuss readings and performances of a variety of poetry in a variety of settings for half of the class period. Students will determine the details of their public poetry reading and prepare promotional materials for the other half of the class period. Homework is to invite parents and friends to the event.

**Day 5:**

Students will spend the entire class period writing poetry. You may choose to prompt them in any way, or not. Homework is to choose one piece of work to read at the poetry reading, and prepare it for partner sharing and revision.

**Day 6:**

1. **Peer revising**
	* Students will pair up for peer-revising their poem.
	* First use the *Marking Your Text: The First Reading* worksheet for their partner’s poem.
	* Students will then move to the *Poetry Peer Revision* worksheet.
2. **Self Revising**
	* Students will first carefully look over the revision materials from their partner and revise accordingly.
	* Students will then use the *Poetry Self Revision* worksheet.
3. **Rehearsal**
	* Partners will take turns performing their poems for each other.
4. Homework is to finish revising and polishing their poem for performance.

**Day 7:**

1. **Assign newspaper review**
	* Distribute the *Newspaper Review assignment* sheet and explain the assignment.
	* Divide class into groups of 4. Distribute example articles and have students read them individually.
	* Discuss articles in groups. Have students find examples of factual language and emotional language.
	* Discuss articles as a class, specifically the function of factual language and emotional language.
2. **Active and Passive voice grammar mini-lesson**
	* Show the class the Active/Passive verbs page from the Purdue OWL.
	* Demonstrate active and passive verbs.
		+ Throw an object across the room. Ask the class to make a sentence about what happened. Write the sentence on the board. (Mrs. Teacher threw the keys.)
		+ Ask them to restate what happened, beginning the sentence with “the keys”. Write the sentence on the board (The keys were thrown by Mrs. Teacher.)
		+ Ask the class to identify the subject and object in each sentence.
		+ Point out that in the first sentence, the subject was *active* – it was doing something. In the second sentence, the subject was *passive* – it was having something done to it.
	* In their groups, have students reread the articles, paying special attention to verbs.
		+ Each group chooses 5 sentences from the article to write down, identifying the verb and the subject, and deciding whether the sentence uses active or passive voice.
	* As a class, share the examples of active and passive voice. Discuss the use of both types of voice. Have students share their conclusions about when writers tend to use either voice.
3. Homework is to be ready for the poetry reading the next day.

**Day 8:**

Students will perform their poetry for a live audience!!!!! Each student must also play the part of newspaper critic, taking notes and interviewing at least two audience members (only one of which can be a classmate). Teacher will take pictures of the event, or if desired, students can take their own pictures.

**Day 9:**

Students will work on writing their newspaper reviews.

**Day 10:**

Students will peer review their newspaper reviews using the actual grading rubric.

Homework is to have the “final copy” of the newspaper review ready to be turned in the next day.

Newspaper reviews can be compiled in a magazine along with photographs from the poetry reading. Each student will get a copy of the magazine.

**Discovering the Power of Language**

**Handouts:**

**Autobiographical Poem**

**Marking Your Text: The First Reading**

**Key Word Study for “Those Winter Sundays”**

**Poetry Peer Revision**

**Poetry Self Revision**

**Newspaper Review**

**Autobiographical Poem**

**Your task:** Complete some or all of the following prompts to make your own “autobiographical poem”. You do not have to include all of the prompts – choose those which fit the poem you create. Make up your own prompts if you want. You can start on this worksheet, but transfer your final poem to a separate sheet of paper.

**Name**

**Hometown or favorite place, color or favorite**

**adjective, astrological sign or other “identifier”**

**I am told (memory) . . .**

**I held . . .**

**I have seen . . .**

**I love . . .**

**I lost . . .**

**I hear /see/smell/taste/feel . . .**

**I used to . . .**

**I’ve learned . . .**

**Personal symbol or image**

**Marking Your Text: The First Reading**

Use the following annotations as you read the poem for the first couple times:

* Mark a check (√)next to lines or sections that you really feel you understand.
* Place a question mark (?) next to words, lines, or sections about which you have a question.
* Draw a star (★) next to anything you really like.

Now complete *at least two* of the following statements:

This poem is about…

Something I really like about this poem is…

Something that puzzles me about this poem is…

This poem reminds me of…

**Key Word Study for “Those Winter Sundays”**

**Your task:** Research your assigned word. Begin with the dictionary, writing down any definition which you think may apply to the poem. Then move on to www.etymonline.com and/or www.theoi.com. You will report your findings to your group and record their findings on your sheet.

**1A) chronic**

**1B) Research the myth of Cronos, also known as Kronos.**

**2) austere**

**3) offices**

**Poetry Peer Revision**

It can be hard for writers to evaluate their own work. Peer revision is a great opportunity to get another perspective on your poem.

**Your task:** Read your partner’s poem and answer the following questions.

Does the poem have a title? If so, what effect does the title have? If not, could you suggest one?

What is the *perspective* of the poem? Can you imagine the poem from a different perspective? If so, how would the poem change in that perspective?

Do you know the setting of the poem? If so, how do you know? Could it be more subtle? More direct? If the setting is vague or generic, is that on purpose? How does the setting or lack of setting affect the poem?

Does the poem hold your interest throughout?

Is the language general or specific? Abstract or concrete? Note any abstract words that could be changed.

Does every sentence or line have a purpose? Does every word have a purpose? If not, be specific.

**Poetry Self Revision**

**Your task:** To reflect on your work, and polish it for performance.

1. Read your piece carefully.
2. In one or two sentences: What is the meaning or purpose of your poem?
3. Is your answer interesting and compelling? If not, restate your answer so that it is.
4. Read your piece carefully again. What scenes, images, statements, or words do you need to change in order to achieve your revised meaning or purpose? Does anything need to be deleted? Revised? Added? Do so.
5. Repeat the process above until you are satisfied that your poem achieves the meaning or purpose.

**Newspaper Review**

**Your task:** To write a professional newspaper-style review of our poetry reading event.

**Requirements:**

1. **Take notes** at the poetry reading on your favorite performers and poems, the audience’s response, and the general atmosphere of the event.
2. Review the event from the **point of view of a journalist** and in **newspaper article format and style.**
	1. **Introduce** the event concisely in the first couple sentences.
	2. **Describe** the event.
	3. **Conclude** your article by summarizing the event in the last one or two sentences.
3. Include a mix of **factual language** and **descriptive language,** using mostly **active voice**.
4. Include **quotes from at least two audience members.** To do this you must interview two people at the event. Only one can be a classmate of yours.
5. Include **at least two references to poetry** that we read in class or that you have read on your own. These must be thoughtful references in the form of comparisons between student and published poetry, or using language from published poetry to describe the event.

**Length: 2 pages double-spaced.**

**Rough Draft Due:**

**Final Draft Due:**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **4 - Above Standards** | **3 - Meets Standards** | **2 - Approaching Standards** | **1 - Below Standards** | **Score** |
| **Point of view and style** | The writer sounds like an experienced cultural journalist throughout the article. The article is publishable in a newspaper. | The writer sounds like an experienced cultural journalist for most of the article. The article may slip into a more personal style once or twice, but is still publishable in a newspaper. | The writer fluctuates between a personal style and a journalistic style, and does not sound like an experienced cultural critic. The article would need work before being published. | The article does not sound journalistic and would not be publishable in a newspaperwithout major changes. |   |
| **Language** | An appropriate mix of factual and descriptive language is used. The article is written mostly in active voice. | A mix of factual and descriptive language is used, but it may be heavy on one or the other. The article is written mostly in active voice. | A mix of factual and descriptive language is used, but heavy on one or the other. The article is written in a mix of active and passive voice. | The article contains mostly factual or mostly descriptive language. The article is written mostly in passive voice. |   |
| **Structure** | The event is introduced in the first couple sentences and summarized in the last couple sentences. | The event is introduced near the beginning and summarized near the end, but not very effectively. | The event is introduced near the beginning, but not summarized near the end or vice versa. | There is no clear introduction or conclusion. |   |
| **Quotes** | At least two quotes from audience members are included, only one from a classmate. |   |   | Two quotes from audience members are not included. |   |
| **References** | The writer makes at least two references to published poetry, either comparing to student poetry or using the language of published poetry to describe the event. | The writer makes at least two references to published poetry, but one is arbitrary or lacks substance. | The writer makes at least two references to published poetry, but they are arbitrary or lack substance; or the writer makes only reference to published poetry. | The writer does not reference published poetry. |   |
| **Grammar, spelling, mechanics** | There are few to no distracting errors. | There is 1-2 distracting errors. | There are 3-4 distracting errors. | There are many distracting errors. |   |

Newspaper Article Grading Rubric

Student: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Score: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_