An American Poetry Toolbox,
Designed for Instructors of L2 Learners
in Pre-1A English Classes
at Mount San Antonio College

A Sabbatical Leave Project, Spring 2015

by
Jennifer L. Leader, Ph.D.
Professor, American Language and English

Mount San Antonio College
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Abstract

American poetry is a pedagogical "super food": it can be used in the classroom to teach critical thinking, reading comprehension, rhythmic patterns of American speech, and cultural and historical competency. During the Spring Semester of 2015, the applicant will research, design and produce an American poetry toolbox for use by interested faculty teaching American Language and pre-1A English courses. The toolbox will include an overview of recent scholarship on pedagogical uses of poetry in English for Academic Purposes classrooms and a corresponding rationale for its use at Mt SAC. It will also include, at beginning, intermediate and advanced levels: (1) short historical and literary backgrounds of included poems and poets, (2) explanation of key points of rhythm and theme, (3) sample guiding questions and exercises for previewing, reading, and writing responses to poems, and (4) suggestions for incorporation of the toolbox into an instructor's semester plan of assignments.

Sabbatical Proposal
Jennifer Leader
American Language Department
For Spring Semester 2015

Background Rationale: Student Need

Nearly ten years ago, then College President John Nixon decided that Mt. SAC would no longer require English-as-a-second-language reading classes for non-native speakers. Since that time, the great majority of these students--be they international, generation 1.5, or California's most rapidly increasing student population, Long-term English Learners (classified as students born in the United States but enrolled in six or more years of ESL classes)—must rely *solely* on their pre-1A English *writing courses* for their English-language development of reading, speaking, and critical thinking skills.

The writing faculty teaching AmLa 41, 42, and 43 and English 67 and 68 necessarily include responses to texts in their assignments, but they have little time in their courses to develop or overtly teach reading and speaking skills. Since these classes are the only required basic skills courses for language development, non-native students would benefit if there were some quick and relatively painless way for writing instructors to seamlessly and substantively include materials and foci that both support writing skills and also develop the whole language learner. This is particularly true for our large body of adjunct instructors. By the same token, the American Language department continues to hone its writing courses so as to provide a seamless matriculation for students moving into college-level English courses. This means that students' written assignments should respond to reading in increasingly analytical and meaningful ways. However, it is difficult (and expensive for students buying the books) to find instructional texts that provide ESL composition pedagogy *and* readings that are tailored to our own Mt. SAC writing course scope and sequence.

Additionally, the three American Language reading courses stand to benefit from a tool that would allow instructors to more precisely target and teach reading comprehension and critical thinking. The results of the 2011-12 American Language reading class SLOs were disappointing and indicate that students need more practice locating, summarizing, and analyzing main ideas. When measuring students' reading comprehension of central meaning and key details of a text, the department found that students were not improving their comprehension skills as much as would be desired (in AmLa 31, just 75% of students met comprehension criteria for success; in AmLa 32, the SLO was not met, with only 71% of students meeting the criteria; in AmLa 33, just 77% of students met the criteria). AmLa reading instructors would be aided by materials that would help them to precisely articulate analytical methods for locating contextual cues and a text's salient and meaning-making features; further, shorter texts would enable them to give immediate feedback to students as to their success or failure in finding these key points. Such focused practice could enable the

reading courses to achieve and exceed our outcomes targets for reading comprehension.

Activities

An "academic toolbox" is a generic term referring to a set of self-contained content and pedagogical materials that are designed for stand alone and specific use in multiple classroom settings. In his keynote address at the Mt. SAC 10th annual Parachutes and Ladders Conference, for instance, Dr. Myron Dembo used the term to refer to the creation of such a "course in a box" that is specifically geared towards helping students learn strategies of academic self-motivation and discipline.

During my semester sabbatical, I will create an academic toolbox that uses American poetry to allow interested American Language and English faculty a compact way to address reading, writing, speaking and critical thinking skills integration in multiple ways and at multiple levels of cognitive engagement.

First, I will conduct a literature review of recent studies in the pedagogical uses of poetry in English for Academic Purposes classrooms. I will use this information to 1) write an overview and rationale for faculty who are interested in using the toolbox and 2) to find ideas to include in the pedagogical portions of the toolbox. Next, I will use my scholarly training in American poetry as a background from which to survey and find poems appropriate for beginning-, intermediate-, and advanced-level non-native students of English.

Upon completion of my research, I will design and write a pedagogical toolbox for inclusion in beginning, intermediate and advanced American Language reading and writing courses. Because numerous non-native speakers choose to take English 67 (the English department level equivalent of American Language advanced writing) instead of AmLa 43, and because numerous other such students place out of American Language writing and into English 68, I would design the advanced-level of poems and activities to be appropriate for inclusion in English 67 and 68 classrooms, as well. Since I have taught English 68 at Mt. SAC for the past seven years (with both native and non-native speakers in my classes), I believe I will be able to well address the pedagogical concerns of our pre-1A English courses.

Project

I will design and produce one American poetry toolbox that will include three levels of developmental material:

- The beginning level may be used in AmLa 41W and AmLa 31R
- The intermediate level may be used in AmLa 42W and AmLa 32R
- The advanced level may be used in AmLa 43W, AmLa 33R, Eng 67 and Eng 68[1]

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[1] I will be utilizing Dubin and Olshtain's four elements of reading complexity in assigning poems to levels of difficulty. They are "(a) the degree of redundancy . . . , (b) the degree of given vs. withheld information . . . (c) the complexity of the characters, and (d) the complexity of the events" (151). See also Nancy Martin Bailey's application of George Steiner's poetic taxonomy. The categories of

The American poetry toolbox will include:

- A 4-5 page overview of recent scholarship on pedagogical uses of po
  English for Academic Purposes classrooms and a corresponding ratior
  the use of poetry in classes at Mt SAC
- four to six poems for each of the three levels
- short (2-4 paragraphs) backgrounds for each included poem and poet to help
  instructors contextualize a poem's meaning and importance to American
  history and/or culture
- succinct (1-2 paragraphs) explanations of key elements of rhythm, rhyme,
  theme, imagery and etc. to aid instructors in explicating poems (see list of
  poetic elements and my pedagogical philosophy about them in Appendix
  One). Identifying these elements will support the critical thinking process for
  students.
- for each poem, 4-8 guiding reading questions and/or an exercise (such as
  filling in a chart as you read or highlighting/underlining strategies) for
  previewing the poems to facilitate classroom discussion (see example of
  guiding reading questions in Appendix Two)
- for each poem (or perhaps pair of poems if comparison/contrast is an
  interesting exercise), two to four writing prompts that may be used for
  assessment of comprehension, critical thinking, and level-appropriate
  composition outcomes (see example of a comparison writing prompt in
  Appendix Three)
- for each *level*, a few suggestions for incorporation of the toolbox into an
  instructor's overall semester plan of reading and/or writing assignments

Outcomes

I would make the toolbox available to the American Language Department through
the department wiki website and to the English department through its resource
library. I would also be willing to offer workshops to interested parties in both
departments, as well as a College-wide POD (see Appendix Five). Such a POD
workshop would briefly give the pedagogical rationale for teaching poetry and then
actively take the participants through a sample poem with pre- and post- classroom
activities. Should the toolbox prove successful, I might explore opportunities to share
the work on a larger scale, such as a conference presentation at our professional
organization, CAT.E.S.O.L (California Teachers of English as a Second Language) or
at the national organization, T.E.S.O.L.

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difficulty are: "contingent, a lack of understanding of the vocabulary of the poem; modal, a disparity
between the poet's and the reader's frame of reference; tactical, any unusual syntactical usage
employed by the poet; and ontological, poetry that does not conform to standard poetic conceits of the
Western poetic tradition. Steiner asserts that these four categories contain all of the possible pitfalls
one encounters when faced with a poem which is difficult to understand" (52).

Anticipated Value and Benefit to Students and Faculty

Overt teaching of American poetry in American Language and English 67 and 68 courses would benefit students and faculty in multiple ways. First, work with poetry interpretation directly addresses reading comprehension and critical thinking because it especially promotes analytical thought processes as readers work out how the individual elements of poetic form and overall meaning interact (see Appendix One). Such movement from literal comprehension to analysis and evaluation matches the hierarchy of cognitive development and skills in Bloom's Taxonomy. Barrett's taxonomy of the cognitive and affective dimensions of reading comprehension (see Appendix Four) demonstrates the way in which cognitive academic reading skills correlate with Bloom's Taxonomy. Poetry explication necessitates readers to move through these levels of literal and inferential comprehension in order to form aesthetic judgments. Explicit teaching of these elements of poetic and other literary genres have been shown to "benefit at least relatively high-level second language readers' reading comprehension" (Hudson 131) and to "enhance students' critical thinking skills in an L2 [second language] context" (Hirvela, "Connecting," 119).[2] "Because coming to terms with a poetic text demands both intense decoding and interpretative reasoning," Jean-Marie Schultz explains, "the study of poetry can foster the development of critical reading skills, skills crucial for students when they are faced with writing tasks" (921).

Next, poems and their backgrounds present profound and memorable opportunities to teach American culture and acquaint students with American history and literature (for example, what does "One if by land and two if by sea" refer to?). Cultural competence is a vital component of language mastery, and students' levels of cultural capital have recently been positively linked to collegiate persistence and success.[3]

Further, poetic rhyme schemes and beat patterns present models and metonymic devices to practice and learn the rhythms and intonation of American English. Since not all non-native students are able to take an American Language speaking class-- and the department regularly receives feedback from other departments requesting that our students would speak more often and more clearly in their classes—inclusion of poetry would give American Language and English instructors opportunity to include patterns of American speech in their reading and writing courses.

Finally, cognitive research has shown that circling back to skills throughout a course (rather than teaching each skill once and moving on sequentially to another) is key to

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[2] Hudson goes on to list some of the "specific components" that have "shown some effectiveness" in the teaching of specific literary genres. Components specifically applicable to the teaching of poetry include: "consciousness raising about the reader-writer relationship," "examination of prototypical rhetorical structure and its moves, variability in prototypical structure, and why that variability may be employed," "particular grammatical and lexical features associated with the genre," and "exploration of author's purpose in producing the text" (224).

[3] See Peterson and Coltrane on cultural competence in the second language classroom and Braxton et al. on the relationship of cultural capital to student engagement, integration, and persistence.

student retention of competencies they have gained.[4] Relatively short poem length allows for inclusion of multiple poems throughout a course and lends itself to more intense and frequent critical thinking, reading, and writing practice and response. Focusing intensely on reading and interpreting poems at several points throughout a semester would provide reading comprehension "super food" to give students the concentrated practice and immediate feedback they need for improvement in their critical reading and thinking skills. The non-native students in English 67 and 68 would also benefit from such concentrated bursts of interpretation, especially since it is likely that most of them have not taken an English-as-a-second-language reading course at Mt. SAC.

Consequently, the American poetry toolbox would aid writing instructors by providing them with self-contained readings and lessons that could be easily incorporated into an instructor's broader schemes of writing and grammar instruction. The American poetry toolbox would offer some cognitive hooks to more adequately prepare our pre-1A non-native English-speaking students to recognize the literary, cultural and historical references so important to collegiate success.

Anticipated Value and Benefit to the Applicant

At a personal level, researching, creating and using the American poetry toolbox would allow me to wed my two areas of expertise (English as a second language instruction and American literature) in the classroom. I believe that students benefit, of course, when their instructors are enthusiastic about what they are teaching, and I have noticed that as I have incorporated American novels in the classroom in my years at Mt. SAC, students have caught my enthusiasm and become excited themselves about reading; even at our beginning level, I find that students often have profound insights about life and language once they are given the vocabulary (such as "character," "plot," "setting," and "conflict") to express their thoughts. A semester sabbatical to research and create the poetry toolbox would give me both rest and renewed vigor to share my findings with future students and with my colleagues in the American Language and English departments.

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[4] See Kornell et al. As Alan Hirvela explains in *Connecting Reading and Writing in Second Language Instruction*, "reading and writing need to be presented as recursive in nature, that is, as activities involving back-and-forth movement between them, as it is this kind of movement that helps link them" (39).

Timeline

FEBRUARY/MARCH	**Research** the most recent scholarship on pedagogical uses of poetry in English for Academic Purposes classrooms. I will concentrate on the following three scholarly databases: Education Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC), Education Full Text, and Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts.
MARCH/APRIL (1ST HALF)	**Survey** American poetry to find 4-6 appropriate poems for beginning, intermediate and advanced levels of non-native English speaking students. At the same time, **collect** background information on chosen poets, poems and historical contexts.
APRIL (2ND HALF)	Based on earlier research and collection of poems and background information, **design** and begin to **write** the poetry toolbox.
MAY	Continue to **write** the poetry toolbox.
JUNE	Finish **writing** and **finalize** the poetry toolbox into its completed form. **Post** the toolbox on the AmLa Dept. web site and **give** to the English Dept. resource library.

APPENDIX ONE

Philosophy of Poetry Analysis

Ideally, the language and structure of a poem should fit hand-in-glove with the message or experience the poet is trying to create for the reader. When analyzing a poem, I encourage students to begin with their own responses as readers. They might ask themselves questions such as: "How does this poem affect me?" "How does it make me feel or think about what the poem describes?" "Where is it confusing or troubling?"

Once students have brainstormed about their responses, as instructors we can then ask: "So, what has the poet done with language to create these effects?" Keep in mind that sometimes the places that seem confusing to us are, in fact, meant to slow the reader down and cause us to ponder; poems don't read the same way that prose does. Don't be afraid to read the poem's difficulties as an important feature of the poem: "Why," for example, "does the poem's syntax become confusing at a certain point?" "What kind of experience is being created for me by this feeling of vagueness and uncertainty?" "Could this be part of the poem's message, too?"

The following list of terms, by no means exhaustive, are useful tools for understanding and then explaining the way the poet uses language in the poem:

Diction:	connotation/denotation	pun	paradox	
	allusion/literary reference	repetition	ambiguity	irony
	registers of speech (e.g. formal, slang, idiom, etc.)			

Motif and theme

Imagery (visual, aural, tactile, etc.)

Figures of speech (metaphor, simile, personification, etc.)

Symbol or allegory

Speaker (voice, tone, mood)

Setting/situation

Form: meter/rhythm
　　　　　line (run on, enjambment, caesura)
　　　　　rhyme scheme (eye rhyme, slant rhyme)
　　　　　syntax
　　　　　stanza display (quatrain, tercet, etc.) (sonnet, haiku, free verse, etc.)

Sound: alliteration/assonance/consonance/onomatopoeia

Genre:	tale, parable, allegory		complaint/request	
	lyric	confession		prayer
	epic	aubade	riddle	ballad

APPENDIX TWO (guiding questions)

"Prairie Spring"
by
Willa Cather

1)   Evening and the flat land,
2)   Rich and somber and always silent;
3)   The miles of fresh-plowed soil,
4)   Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;
5)   The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
6)   The toiling horses, the tired men;
7)   The long empty roads,
8)   Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
9)   The eternal, unresponsive sky.
10)   Against all this, Youth,
11)   Flaming like the wild roses,
12)   Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
13)   Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
14)   Youth with its insupportable sweetness,
15)   Its fierce necessity,
16)   Its sharp desire,
17)   Singing and singing,
18)   Out of the lips of silence,
19)   Out of the earthy dusk.

Guiding Questions:

1) What time of day does the poem depict (setting)? How do you know (what are some particular words and phrases that tell you)? What time of year does the poem depict?

2) What do the images in the first half of the poem (lines 1-9) describe?

3) What do the images in the second half of the poem (lines 10-19) describe?

4) Where did all the verbs go? What is Cather using instead of verbs and why?

5) What are some effective uses of personification in the poem?

6) Why is "Youth" capitalized? What qualities of youthfulness does the poem compare to physical images?

7) What is the tone of the poem and what are the two different moods?

8) What two things does the poem contrast? Overall, what would you say is a theme of this poem?

APPENDIX THREE (advanced comparative writing prompt)

"A Noiseless Patient Spider"
Walt Whitman

A noiseless patient spider,
I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be formed, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

"A Spider Sewed at Night"
Emily Dickinson

A Spider sewed at Night
Without a Light
Upon an Arc of White

If Ruff it was of Dame
Or Shroud of Gnome
Himself himself inform.

Of Immortality
His Strategy
Was Physiognomy.

As we have discussed in class, although both of these poems depict spiders as metaphors for poets and the creative process, Whitman and Dickinson have nearly opposite styles. In your opinion, do Whitman and Dickinson agree about the power and role of poets, or do they have differing views? Take a stand on that question and write a five paragraph essay comparing the two poems to prove your assertion. In your essay, analyze the way the poets' techniques complement and convey their messages. You might particularly consider their uses of: diction, repetition, meter and rhyme, narrative tone, and ambiguity.

APPENDIX FOUR

Quick Reference Outline of The Barrett Taxonomy

1.0 Literal Comprehension

 1.1 Recognition

   1.1.1 Recognition of Details

   1.1.2 Recognition of Main Ideas

   1.1.3 Recognition of a Sequence

   1.1.4 Recognition of Comparison

   1.1.5 Recognition of Cause and Effect Relationships

   1.1.6 Recognition of Character Traits

 1.2 Recall

   1.2.1 Recall of Details

   1.2.2 Recall of Main Ideas

   1.2.3 Recall of a Sequence

   1.2.4 Recall of Comparison

   1.2.5 Recall of Cause and Effect Relationships

   1.2.6 Recall of Character Traits

2.0 Reorganization

 2.1 Classifying

 2.2 Outlining

 2.3 Summarizing

 2.4 Synthesizing

3.0 Inferential Comprehension

 3.1 Inferring Supporting Details

 3.2 Inferring Main Ideas

 3.3 Inferring Sequence

 3.4 Inferring Comparisons

 3.5 Inferring Cause and Effect Relationships

 3.6 Inferring Character Traits

 3.7 Predicting Outcomes

 3.8 Interpreting Figurative Language

4.0 Evaluation

 4.1 Judgments of Reality or Fantasy

 4.2 Judgments of Fact or Opinion

 4.3 Judgments of Adequacy and Validity

 4.4 Judgments of Appropriateness

 4.5 Judgments of Worth, Desirability and Acceptability

5.0 Appreciation

5.1 Emotional Response to the Content

5.2 Identification with Characters or Incidents

5.3 Reactions to the Author's Use of Language

5.4 Imagery

      (unpublished, cited in Hudson, 96-97)

APPENDIX FIVE

Teaching Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Through the American Poetry Toolbox

Professional Development Workshop

This workshop addresses both the theory and the praxis of using American poetry to help non-native English-speaking students become proficient in reading, writing, and critical thinking at the college level. It is especially designed to address the interests of professors in the AmLa, English, ESL and LERN departments. The workshop will cover the following topics:

- The Barrett Taxonomy: how poetry explication builds critical thinking skills
- Uses of Poetry in the Language Classroom: current research on poetry in the classroom and examples of successful classroom models from throughout the country
- The American Poetry Toolbox: a kit for teaching selected American poems at the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels of English, including the cultural and historical backgrounds, elements of prosody and poetry explication, and pre- and post- reading and writing classroom activities
- The Poem in the Middle of the Room: communally reading and working through one poem as practice and demonstration of how the poetry toolbox may be used in a reading or writing lesson.

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"Detailed List (Narrative), Journal of Activities"

<u>Week of Feb. 23 through week of March 16 (weeks 1-4)</u>

During these weeks I researched, collected, read, and took notes on scholarship of the past ten to fifteen years concerning pedagogical uses of poetry in English for Academic Purposes classrooms, as well as in foreign language classrooms and content-area classrooms. I looked for both evidence-based studies showing benefits of studying poetry and for curricular or pedagogically-oriented reports by classroom instructors who had successful experiences using poetry with their students. As an alumna of both Azusa Pacific University and the Claremont Graduate University, I was able to avail myself of their collections and the following three data bases: Education Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC), Education Full Text, and Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts.

During this time I also used Scrivener software to design and create a virtual binder for the sabbatical project and report. This binder allowed me to set up an initial conceptual design for the entirety of the project, designating individual, nesting folders for various large to small categories that could be easily moved around as I gained more information and revised my organizational ideas. I do highly recommend this software for anyone working on large and complex projects as it is much easier to break items into small pieces and to

manipulate them than it is to do similar meta-organizational chores in Microsoft Word.

Week of March 23 through week of April 13 (weeks 5-8)

During these weeks I read broadly in the works of individual American poets, trying to find four to six poems that would be appropriate for Mt. SAC students at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of AmLa courses (including the overlap on both ends with ESL and English). In addition to thinking about the cognitive difficulty of poems (chiefly as rated by the Barrett Taxonomy—see Appendix A in the Poetry Toolbox), I also tried to keep in mind a host of other factors in making my selections, such as—poems with themes that would be both contemporaneous and universal, poems that would engage both students and instructors, poems (even at the beginning levels) that allowed for multiple interpretations, (and thus could lend themselves to a variety of assignments, activities and interpretive creativity), and finally, given the above restraints, poems from poets of both genders with some multi-cultural diversity.

As a scholar of American poetry, I already owned many volumes of poetry from which to survey. However, I also used this time to look through a number of poetry textbooks on the market to see what kinds of poems and activities college instructors have used in poetry courses for both reading and writing poetry (see Hunter; Thiel; Wallace; Gwynn; and Schakel in the Cumulative Bibliography). Finally, I also

read a few recent books about the value and purposes of poetry and literature: *Beautiful and Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry* by David Orr, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* by Alan Jacobs, and *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* by William Dyrness. At the end of this period I selected the thirteen poets and sixteen poems that would comprise the Poetry Toolbox.

Week of April 20 through week of May 25 (weeks 9-14)

This was the most intense period of the timeline as I did the bulk of the design and writing of the Toolbox during these six weeks. For each of the thirteen poets, I wrote a short introductory essay designed to give instructors a quick overview of the most salient points about the poet's life and body of work. Since the Toolbox is conceived of as something an instructor can put to use fairly quickly in his or her classroom, I wanted the introductions to the poets to contain just enough information to give instructors confidence and to answer any basic contextual questions that students might raise. Then, for each of the sixteen poems, I wrote a short essay to explicate the poem, pointing out and explaining some of the most prominent literary features of the poem and how they relate to the poem's overall theme. Like the introductions to the poets, this material is meant primarily for the instructors themselves; they may choose to use that information in their presentations and activities with students or not.

Next, for each poem I designed approximately five to eight preview activities to introduce students to the subjects and content of the poem before it is read; further, for most of the poems I was able to find visual enactments and/or audio readings that will introduce the poem to students as they follow along. I also designed approximately five to eight class activities for each poem, such as charts or comprehension questions to be completed in groups or pairs. At the end of each poem section I designed four to six written and also sometimes oral assignments that instructors could use for assessment of the poetry unit. The written assessments were based on the ESL Writing Rubric for CB 21 by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (see Appendix B in the Poetry Toolbox)("Basic Skills CB 21 Rubric"). Then I composed the introduction to the Toolbox, giving an overview of its contents and design, and wrote the suggestions about how instructors of the three levels might incorporate the poem units into their classes.

Week of June 1 through week of June 8 (weeks 15-16)

During the last two weeks of the sabbatical I wrote the report "The Research Is in: Poetry Is for English Language Learners (and Everyone Else)"—the short overview of poetry scholarship and rationale for using poetry in the second language classroom for inclusion in the Toolbox, and I put together the Poetry Toolbox's Works Cited. I also wrote the components of this sabbatical report and

put together its bibliography. I did apply to the Fall Flex Day committee to give the workshop I had promised in the proposal, but was not accepted as they received too many proposals. I am happy to apply for the Spring Flex Day program. I will post a digital copy of the Poetry Toolbox on the AmLa website and will give physical copies to the ESL and English departments.

Sabbatical Report Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this sabbatical report is to give a clear description of the research and pedagogical theory behind my design of the American Poetry Toolbox. As promised in the sabbatical proposal, the Toolbox itself contains the rationale for its own creation—an overview of recent studies concerning (1) poetry and/or literature and cognition and (2) positive learner outcomes from the use of poetry in English-as-a-second-language or content-area classrooms (see "The Research is In: Poetry Is for English Language Learners and Everyone Else"). Therefore, in the sabbatical report I have chosen to give an outline of the methodologies behind my pedagogical decision-making in designing and writing the Toolbox, i.e., why I made the choices I did concerning which poems to include, what skills foci to give the poetry lessons, and what methods of scope and sequencing to follow. The report is divided into seven sections, each of which presents research that informed my decisions in the following areas: (1) whether or not to include poems for beginning level students, (2) how to evaluate poems' difficulty levels, (3) in what order the poems and exercises should be arranged, (4) how much time lessons should invest in pre-reading activities, (5) what role interpersonal communication should play in classroom activities, (6) whether new vocabulary should be taught directly or indirectly, and (7) how to forge deep connections between the reading of poetry and the writing of responsive assignments.

Sabbatical Report (Body)

Literary Content for Beginning Level English Learners

Although it was challenging to find poems and to design pedagogical supports for students with AmLa 31, AmLa 41, and ESL level 4 placements, my decision to include the beginning level in the American Poetry Toolbox was based on research that indicates there are strong benefits to presenting students with authentic English texts as early as possible (Gascoigne; Hess). Alan Hirvela has found that "reading and writing about literature make possible meaningful literacy experiences *early in their acquisition of L2 reading and writing skills*, at a crucial period in . . . [students'] development, when strong associations and preferences for learning modes are being formed," and that "reading and then composing their own poems can have the same effects" (emphasis mine, 153). Consequently, particularly in the beginning level of the toolbox, I made certain to include written responses and reflections—even though they are just at the sentence level—at each stage in working through poems; I also included opportunities for students to compose their own poems based on a model of the poem being studied.

Evaluating Poem Difficulty for Toolbox Inclusion

I used the Barrett Taxonomy as a baseline rubric for evaluating the cognitive, reading, and general language skills that a student might need for broad comprehension of a particular poem (see Appendix A in

the Poetry Toolbox). Based on Bloom's taxonomy of critical thinking, the Barrett taxonomy moves from the most concrete levels of literal comprehension through increasing stages of inference and prediction and on to more abstract tasks of interpretation, judgement of value, and meta-cognitive recognition of and response to the poet's language as language. Also helpful in making my determinations was Nancy Martin Bailey's application of George Steiner's poetic taxonomy. The categories of difficulty that she details from Steiner's work are: "contingent (a lack of understanding of the vocabulary of the poem), modal (a disparity between the poet's and the reader's frame of reference), tactical (any unusual syntactical usage employed by the poet), and ontological (poetry that does not conform to standard poetic conceits)" (52). Thus, at the beginning level of the Toolbox I paid particular attention to ensuring that poems had low contingent, modal, and tactical difficulty. At the intermediate level each of these three categories present greater challenges for students, and at the advanced level the added difference is not found in an increased language difficulty but in thematically addressing the ontological and meta-cognitive levels. That said, I did not otherwise hew to a rigid set of measurable standards for my determinations as the three levels in the Toolbox are meant to be suggestive; ultimately, instructors will be able to decide for themselves which poems and exercises best fit their particular class's levels and needs. As Thom Hudson explains, "both

the first language and second language literature related to reading skills argue against evidence of strictly hierarchically ordered reading skills . . . . Reading acts and literacy events are sufficiently complex that they involve multiple skills and skills that are not unitary in their structure" (103).

Pedagogical Scope and Sequencing

Although their book was published twenty-five years ago, Dubin and Olshtain's *Course Design: Developing Programs and Materials for Language Learning* has been the greatest influence on my own creation of syllabi and other materials over the years, and I still find their holistic, cognitive, yet communicative approach to language learning both elegant and commonsensical today. Concerning sequencing, for instance, they write, "in designing activities for language use, learners should be guided from context-embedded to context-reduced situations, enabling them to develop the necessary skills to interact in the latter," a principle which I followed carefully both within the pre-reading, reading, and post-reading cycle of materials I developed for each poem and as part of the overall sweep of the Toolbox from the start of the beginning level to the final poems and activities of the advanced level (73). Concerning the determination of which particular reading strategies ought to be overtly taught to language learners, Hudson cites evidence for a reversal of the commonplace thinking that educators ought to focus on teaching coping strategies such as

skimming and dictionary use. Hudson has found that "technical aid moves actually interfered with comprehension more than they aided it. Clarification and simplification, on the other hand, promoted comprehension much more than they deterred it" (123). (He exemplifies "clarification and simplification moves" as "syntactic simplification . . . rhetorical function identification, and various forms of paraphrase") (122). Consequently, although the Toolbox does call for some classroom dictionary work with students (mostly at the pre-reading phases), I have chiefly tried to create reading activities that help simplify and clarify complex syntax and diction in order to help students achieve comprehension quickly.

Finally, Charlotte Melin's holistic skills approach to teaching poetry in her introduction to German literature course at the University of Minnesota has been an affirmation of the structure of this Toolbox. Melin describes a dynamic "cycle of tasks" involving listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and both active and passive learner responses, that demonstrate to students "how the experience of reading [is] as a process. This procedure also strives to go beyond reader approaches that end with students' first reactions to texts by explicitly raising awareness that interaction with a literary work is not a discrete operation. From being attentive to the diverse strategies applied to interpreting literary works, students gain appreciation of the multi-dimensional functions of poetry" (362). Melin's pattern for

introducing, digesting, and responding to poems is very similar to the one that I decided upon for the Toolbox.[5]

Extensive Pre-Reading Activities

Each poem in the Toolbox is preceded by a fair amount of listening, speaking, writing, and sometimes even extra reading activities before students are presented with the poem itself. This practice comes from my own long experience with the importance of supplying many cognitive hooks before introducing them to an authentic (as opposed to simplified) English text, and the research supports this admittedly time-consuming practice. Concerning pre-reading activities as a precursor to complex reading tasks in general, Hirvela has found that they have dual import: first, "students who are addressing response-based pre-reading questions will be encouraged to see themselves as active meaning-makers contributing to their reading"—a stance particularly important with poetry as poems leave readers many gaps to fill in with their own experience and inferences (57). Second, pre-reading activities can lower the anxious affective filter students may have erected concerning their abilities to

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[5] Melin explains, "Work with individual poems consistently included: a) preview activities that drew in part on task designs recommended by close-reading and genre-based approaches; b) audio clip or out-loud reading exercise; c) a question-and-answer segment to elucidate unfamiliar terms/phrases, using peer-feedback whenever possible; d) teacher-led discussion of key aspects of the poem (e.g., register, implied meanings, symbolism, construction of turning points) and issues of readership; and e) a short writing task designed to help students sum up and consolidate what they had learned, in part by asking them to reflect on the interpretive strategies they had applied" (362).

understand a complex text such as a poem in the target language. An inordinate amount of such a fear can "cause students to get bogged down in bottom-up reading aimed at decoding the text word by word and sentence by sentence," thus causing them to miss overall comprehension and lack emotional engagement with the poem (Hirvela 57).

Further, studies by Elizabeth Bernhardt and by other researchers have shown both the key role that background knowledge of a topic plays in a second language reader's comprehension of a text and the fact that readers do not automatically access their prior knowledge base and thus can benefit from being prompted to do so by an instructor.[6] Indeed, in *Understanding Advanced Second-Language Reading* Bernhardt asserts that as much as 50% of the mental components that L2 readers draw upon is neither from first language literacy, nor from knowledge of the second language, but from a category she deems "unexplained variance" that involves "content and domain knowledge, interest, motivation, etc." (38).[7] Consequently, although it is difficult to know just how successful one can be at this, I have created a number of pre-reading activities designed to specifically

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[6] See also Saricoban; Brantmeir; and Davis.

[7] Bernhardt finds that at the advanced level of proficiency, 20% of the components readers draw upon are from their first language literacy, 30% are from their knowledge of the second language, and 50% comes from the category of "*other*, which must surely entail factors such as background knowledge and motivation . . . these factors are *not* independent of each other; in fact, they are even *more than dependent*, they are inextricably intertwined because they are used by readers simultaneously in a compensatory fashion" (63).

activate learner's background knowledge on the subjects of specific poems. For instance, I have included videos showing how a spider weaves its web before Dickinson's "A Spider Sewed at Night," activities for examining ornithology web sites before Bishop's "Sandpiper," and short versions of the stories "Rumplestiltskin" and "Hansel and Gretel" before examining the poems "The Witch Has Told You a Story" and "Fairy-Tale Logic."

A Communicative Approach

While the Toolbox is designed for the English for Academic Purposes needs of the college-level English learner at Mt. SAC, I have still based many of my activities on the tried and true philosophies of Dubin and Olshtain, Stephen Krashen, and many others who have valued the whole language learner and reminded educators that

> In planning the overall course, we need to incorporate both fluency-oriented work leading towards face-to-face communication and accuracy work leading to better cognitive and academic language proficiency. The incorporation of both aspects of language acquisition will enable learners to develop both their interpersonal communicative strategies and the academic language skills needed for successful scholastic work."
>
> (Dubin and Olshtain 73)

Several decades ago they asserted that targeting language acquisition (as opposed to consciously focused language learning) to help students'

overall "communicative competence" would have the end result of improving students' academic performance, as well; these assertions continue to be borne out today. Recently, for instance, one researcher found that "literary texts can make the L2 reading experience more enjoyable for learners while increasing their communicative ability in L2; Literature provided a context to engage in extended meaningful discourse in the target language" (Kim, cited in Bernhardt, appendix). Another has shown that asking students to work in cooperative groups is an effective means of increasing their reading comprehension, and yet other researchers have found a meaningful link between oral fluency and reading fluency in second language learners (Ghaith; Van Wijneddaele and Brysbaert). Thus, instructors using the Poetry Toolbox will find multiple pair and group activities for every poem, visual and audio recordings along with listening exercises for almost all of the poems, and a focus on oral interpretation and student performance (with concomitant attention to rhythm and stress) for many of the shorter verses.

Direct and Indirect Vocabulary Instruction

In general, most language acquisition researchers agree with Hudson's findings that students are "more likely to learn a word if it is inferred by themselves than if the meaning of the word has been given to them" (247). As a consequence, I have not featured vocabulary learning prominently in the Toolbox, even though for most poems

beyond the beginning level I have included provisions for helping students to grasp key words, often working with pairs or groups using English-English dictionaries. I have chosen to do this because an individual poem, of course, has a much more limited set of words than a story, article, or longer book, and some words in the poems would be obscure even to native speakers. Moreover, researchers have found that there is indeed benefit to students when, in addition to providing them opportunity to guess meaning from context, instructors also address the fact that words have multiple meanings, uses, and connotations, and that they function differently in different contexts, helping to raise students' so called "word consciousness" (Scott, Miller and Flinspach 169).[8] Since poets choose their diction carefully and especially look for terms that have multiple connotations and referents, at a few key moments I have included activities to focus on "word consciousness" in the Toolbox (for instance, having students consider related possible meanings for the word "glazed" in "The Red Wheelbarrow"). Finally Alessi and Dwyer cite evidence that allowing students to find meanings for key vocabulary is more beneficial to comprehension *during* reading than beforehand, so I have often (but not always) arranged for vocabulary work to be done after the poem has been examined and not as a part of pre-reading activities.

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[8] On "five aspects of word knowledge in reading"—"incrementality," "multidimensionality," "polysemy," "interrelatedness," and "heterogeneity," see also Pearson, Hiebert and Kamil.

Reading to Write, Writing to Read

By including both reflective and analytical written responses to poems at every stage of the pedagogical cycle and in all three levels, I have attempted to follow the model set out so ably by Alan Hirvela in his book, *Connecting Reading and Writing in Second Language Writing Instruction*. As he explains, "writing before, during or after reading enables a reader to make sense of his or her reading, which in turn strengthens the quality of the reading and contributes to the development of L2 reading skills" (73-74). Hirvela's examples—as do my activities in the Toolbox—include summary, synthesis, and response writing, as well as marking (circling, underlining, etc.) specific features of a text and filling out charts during initial readings that can referred back to in a writing assignment. Such activities are especially well suited for the analysis of a poet's literary strategies, special diction, figurative language, and use of sound and rhythm (for instance, in the Toolbox students fill out a chart while reading Whitman's "I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" that helps illustrate his implicit negative comparison of listening to experts versus having one's own lived experience).

In response to David Hanauer's work demonstrating that not only do students strengthen cognitive skills when reading poems but they also do so when *writing* them (most recently, *Poetry as Research: Exploring Second Language Poetry Writing*), I have included informal opportunities

for students to write their own poems based on the syntactic and ideational models of the poems being examined. Additionally, I include summary and paraphrase activities at even the earliest level of the Toolbox. This is because multiple researchers have found that summary writing increases students' overall comprehension, possibly because of the recursive nature of summary and paraphrase that calls for cognitively-invested movement between reading and writing (Oded and Walters; Hudson; Hirvela). Such processes by their very nature develop students' abilities in the higher-level cognitive skills. As Hudson explains, "combining reading and writing into literacy instruction . . . provides for more focused teaching and learning with cross-learning opportunities. Focusing on the unity of purpose in the two skills situates both and helps to develop critical thinking" (286).

Sabbatical Report Summary Statement/

Statement of Value

In most ways, the research, design, and writing of the American Poetry Toolbox came together just as I had envisioned in the proposal (except that the elements of design and writing took longer than I had anticipated, but perhaps that is often the case). The most personally surprising thing I uncovered in my research is the way poetry is currently being used by high school and college instructors in disciplines such as science, psychology, and math to teach observation, empathy, critical thinking, point of view, and "arts-based research" (Hanauer, *Poetry*; see also Conner-Greene; Brown and Dewitz; and Kane and Rule). (See also the Toolbox report, "The Research Is In: Poetry Is for English Language Learners and Everyone Else.")

Concerning the Toolbox's value, given that:

- English is not the primary language for at least 12% of all students entering a two year college,[9] and that

- In 2010 there were 40 California school districts that reported 59% of the English learners in high schools were Long Term

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[9] According to the National Center for Education Statistics most recent longitudinal study of beginning postsecondary students, 2003-2009. See "Beginnings Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study."

English Learners (students who have been enrolled in a U.S. school and have been learning English more than five years),[10] it seems to me a reasonable conclusion that Mt. San Antonio College ought to work to establish structures and supports for a continuing wave of non-native English speaking students in the coming years. These students will not necessarily enter at the AmLa levels, but may be placed into English 67, 68, and 1A while still needing some second language support.

As a consequence, I believe the American Poetry Toolbox can be of great value to instructors and second language students at Mt. San Antonio College for the following three reasons:

- First, as demonstrated by the Toolbox research report, "The Research Is In: Poetry Is for English Language Learners (and Everyone Else)," the study of poetry is beneficial for many aspects of English language learning, including reading comprehension, listening and speaking acumen, grammar acquisition, and critical thinking and writing.

- Second, AmLa and ESL instructors whose M.A. is in T.E.S.O.L. may be interested in teaching poetry but might not feel confident in leading poetry explication or have the time to create the extensive materials needed to teach poetry to ESL students.

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[10] According to the study by L. Olsen, *Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Unkept Promise of Educational Opportunity for California's Long Term English Learners*, cited by the U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition. See "OELA Fast Facts."

- Third, instructors in the English department who are without T.E.S.O.L backgrounds may wish for some pedagogical ideas or supports that offer scaffolding to the many non-native English speakers in their regular English classes.

Finally, creating the American Poetry Toolbox was a valuable endeavor for me personally because it allowed me to use the pedagogical skills and experiences I have gained from using both of my advanced degrees, my M.A. in T.E.S.O.L. and my Ph.D. in American Literature (with a dissertation and subsequent scholarship in the field of poetry). In her excellent book *Understanding Advanced Second-Language Reading*, Elizabeth Bernhardt articulately sets forth some of the pitfalls that have impeded the introduction of poetry and other literature at all levels of language learning: "Perhaps literature is provided too early, introducing a high frustration level into the curriculum; perhaps literature is introduced too late and in a fragmented fashion sending the message that it is indeed something different and disparate. Perhaps the root of the problem lies in a beginning curriculum that does not focus on dimensions of sophisticated and complex text adequately or in an upper-division curriculum that makes no provision for substantive language learning" (96). I hope that my colleagues in the AmLa, ESL, and English departments will find this project a practicable solution to the difficulties Bernhardt has so adeptly outlined above, and that they will

find pleasure, along with their students, in reading and thinking about poetry.

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An American Poetry Toolbox,
Designed for Instructors of L2 Learners
in Pre-1A English Classes
at Mount San Antonio College

A Sabbatical Leave Project, Spring 2015

by
Jennifer L. Leader, Ph.D.
Professor, American Language and English

Mount San Antonio College
Walnut, CA
August 31, 2015

Toolbox Table of Contents

The Research Is in: Poetry Is for English Language Learners (and Everyone Else)

Although the American Poetry Toolbox is first and foremost a pedagogical aid, its genesis was based on a number of recent studies concerning (1) poetry and/or literature and cognition and (2) positive learner outcomes from the use of poetry in English-as-a-second-language or content-area classrooms; I also drew upon on reports of success by current classroom professors who are themselves using poetry to teach in a variety of disciplines.   This report presents a very brief overview of these studies and—in the spirit of a Toolbox meant for immediate and practicable use rather than study—is suggestive rather than exhaustive. Readers interested in perusing a more detailed explanation of the methodologies I used in making specific pedagogical choices for the Toolbox are encouraged to read the Sabbatical Report on file at Mt. San Antonio College or to contact me directly for a copy (see also appendices A and B). Instances where I have directly modeled Toolbox ideas on proven techniques published by other professors are cited in the text of the Toolbox itself.

In the Good Old Days When It Was Language "Arts" Instead of "Skills"

Although I concentrated my research for the Toolbox on studies conducted in the past ten to fifteen years, it quickly became evident to me that research on poetry in the ESL classroom had undergone a lull during 1990s and the first part of the twenty-first century and that the study of this subject is only now beginning to take on renewed interest. In the 60s, 70s, and first half of the 80s, our earliest colleagues in the field of T.E.S.O.L. were able to write fondly and unabashedly about the importance of poetry as a model for language fluency, as a vehicle for cultural competency and reading pleasure, and as a practicing

ground for students to make cognitive investments in meaning making.[11] Perhaps these approaches faded because of the sea change in thinking about ESL as something to be taught for particular purposes rather than as a holistic, "whole language" or "communicative" experience. The number of studies of poetry and pedagogy seems to be trending upward, however. One reason for this is that there is a rise in attempts to apply quantitative methods to literary texts in order to examine them as cultural artifacts, and to do so from cross-disciplinary perspectives (as new organizations such as the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature and its journal, *The Scientific Study of Literature*, attest). Such attempts may eventually constitute literature's answer to Big Data (or, just compile a lot of really boring studies about how many verbs there are in Shakespeare).

I Think, Therefore I Read Poetry

In the past six years, social psychologists, cognitive scientists, and others in related fields have been coming to interesting and exciting conclusions about the effect upon the brain of reading poetry and/or literary texts. For instance, professors at the Center for Cognitive Science at Rutgers University are using poetry to consider how "language straddles the chasm between science and art"; they argue that poetry, as a special kind of condensed language that forces us to analyze the ways meaning is encoded in surface elements—while at the same time requiring us be open to multiple interpretations—calls upon a particular type of creative thinking ability which ought to be cultivated (Lepore and Stone). In their words, poetry "evokes a special kind of thinking—where we interpret ordinary links between language and world and mind as a kind of diagram of the possibilities of experience." Cognitive psychologists Maja Djikic and Keith Oatley of

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[11] Some of the classic early studies on using poetry in the ESL classroom are by Sage; McConochie; Povey; Watts; Marquardt; McKay; and Widdowson.

the University of Toronto are the primary authors of a number of recent papers detailing the positive influence on personality from reading literature, finding that it can promote healthy self-reflection, empathy, and emotional intelligence, possibly as a result of emotional identification by readers or by the persuasive effect of indirect communication in a literary as opposed to didactic text.[12] David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano of the psychology department at the New School for Social Research in New York City have come to similar conclusions, documenting the immediate effect of reading literature to be a bump up in scores of social perception and empathy for their happily reading test subjects.

Particularly heartening is the Alzheimer's Poetry Project, a collaboration of poets and experts in neurological research and geriatric psychology that uses poetry with Alzheimer's patients and others with dementia in order to bring them social and cognitive engagement and a better quality of life. Their work is an outgrowth of ten years of research in which they found that poetry, like music, is something that patients remember from their childhoods. They have routinely found that "participants show a high level of positive facial expressions, laughter, verbalizing memories, and robust social interactions" when engaged in choral response and group composition of poetry (*Alzheimer's*).

What Has Poetry Done for Us (L2 Teachers) Lately?

In so far as poetry is being used in classrooms as a way to bolster specific language and thinking skills, my literature review indicates that college language instructors are beginning to find multiple uses for the

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[12] See especially Djikic and Oatley, "On Being Moved by Art: How Reading Fiction Transforms the Self" (2009), "Genre or Artistic Merit? The Effect of Literature on Personality" (2012), and "The Art in Fiction: From Indirect Communication to Changes of the Self" (2014).

study of poetry, and doing so for students at varying levels of English (or other foreign language) mastery. Poetry is being used and studied for its beneficial effects on:

- Reading Comprehension—Natalie Hess, an ESL professor at Northern Arizona University, makes the case that even students at the earliest levels of language skill can benefit from poetry if instructors are careful to use such techniques as meditative visualization of imagery, thematically related concrete objects (realia), comprehension questions, choral readings and responsive poetry writing. Jean-Marie Schultz asserts that at intermediate level the gaps in poetry force language students to work with both bottom up and top down reading strategies, thus involving them more intensely in the creation of meaning than they would be in the reading of prose. For advanced students, David Hanauer suggests that focusing on the formal features of poetry helps second-language learners become better aware of how such elements in language help to create meaning ("Poetry Reading"). Geoff Hall argues that in order for students to get what studies have shown are the benefits of (1) reading pleasure connected to engagement and (2) discrete analysis of language, "emotional processing needs to be seen as intrinsic" to poetry lessons (397). Harfitt and Chu find that reading poetry in the classroom bolsters second language students' reading confidence through a process they call "co-construction of meaning" (99). (See also Stanley; and Chang.)

- Listening and Speaking Acumen—Nancy Hadaway and her colleagues at the University of Texas at Arlington and at Washington State University have documented success with a process in which instructors use guided choral reading of poetry moving back and forth from the class, group, pair and individual levels to build skills in pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm.

Christopher Phillips reports similar results from asking students to use Audacity to make mp3 recordings of poetry anthologies they have assembled during the semester, finding that as students read the poems out loud they make interpretive choices and come to a deeper understanding of variables like intonation and accent. (See also Shulze.)

- Grammar Acquisition — Kate Paesani argues that poetry can be effectively used for inductive grammar instruction by using the structure of carefully chosen poems as a starting point for rule analysis, cloze sentence completion, communicative oral practice, and independent sentence writing. Debra Popkin makes a similar argument about using poems to target grammatical patterns or structures, but puts a greater focus on oral rather than written proficiency. April Brannon's work shows students can learn about how poets construct syntax and imagery by writing their own poems in imitation of a model. (See also Massey.)

- Critical Thinking — Particularly exiting in this area is David Hanauer's experiment with students working in pairs to explicate a poem out loud. In his analysis of the transcripts he found that they spent 57% of their time doing activities such as "noticing, questioning, [and] interpretive hypothesis," and making various "re-statements, counter-statements and applications of personal knowledge" ("Task," 303). This led him to conclude that "for advanced language learners the task of reading poetry can develop their knowledge of the target language by providing a context within which their language resources are stretched and applied to the understanding of new and perhaps unusual uses of linguistic and semantic form" (318).

Now Everybody's a Poet

In addition to studying the ways *reading* poetry helps build critical thinking skills in second language students, David Hanauer has also advocated for the benefits of poetry *writing*. In his 2010 book *Poetry as Research: Exploring Second Language Poetry Writing*, he makes a case for what he terms "arts-based research" in which writing poetry is described as a process for coming to understand a content area subject. He asserts that second language literacy develops when students are engaged with their topic and feel they have something meaningful to contribute. Further, by having students convey what they have learned through the medium of poetry, students gain "the ability to present concise, focused, emotionally informed, image-directed descriptions of moments of life that can engage readers and generate empathy and understanding of the 'other' without the usual objectification and erasure of participants (94).

Hanauer's theoretical model for poetry writing as a method to process and convey knowledge is fleshed out in the writings of a number of instructors from across the disciplines. For instance, as a part of a five-year Poetry Across the Curriculum emphasis at Clemson, psychology professors used poetry writing in abnormal psychology classes to promote the development of empathy, risk taking, and synthetic critical and creative thinking in their students. Students were asked to write a poem about some aspect of a mental illness (such as writing from the point of view of a patient with a specific mental disorder); these poems were judged not on artistic merit but on the dual bases of being accurately informed about the illness and of coming from a perspective of empathy (Connor-Greene). In their survey of uses of poetry writing for content-area disciplines, Kane and Rule found that writing and "analyzing poetry about science concepts with students can enhance their understanding of scientific developments

along with the roles and contributions of scientists" (659).[13] They found instructors using similar assignments in the realms of geography (learning cultural and spatial geographic concepts), history and anthropology (identifying with the peoples studied), and math (writing poems about math concepts to deepen understanding).

The Embedded Poetry Manifesto

So what can we as language (skills and/or arts) professors take away from this renaissance of poetry reading and writing across the disciplines that seems to be underway? German literature professor Charlotte Melin has very articulately called for a holistic approach to "embedding" poetry in our classes. By "emphasizing that literature is part of, not separate from, other domains of culture, and by incorporating it into language learning from the outset," she explains, "it helps us give literature a larger and more robust role in our curriculum. By treating literature as performance rather than dusty artifact, we can legitimately raise questions about context, readership, and the uses of literature" (362). I take her words to mean first of all that as language instructors we can begin incorporating poetry early and often into our courses, allowing our students to derive the multiple benefits that have been outlined in this report, and de-mystifying poetry in the process. It is my hope that the American Poetry Toolbox will be a resource to help instructors at Mt. San Antonio College do just that.

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[13] To illustrate, one of the science instructors they surveyed explained, "'We point out that symbolism, metaphor, and analogy are important parts of science, defining them and giving examples of each from science, literature, and everyday life'" (659). See also Brown and Dewitz on using poetry as a part of "inquiry-based instruction."

Preface: How to Use the American Poetry Toolbox

<u>What is a toolbox?</u> It is neither a comprehensive curriculum nor a set of individual lesson plans, but something in between. This American Poetry Toolbox is a pedagogical tool designed especially for Mt. San Antonio professors in the American Language, English, and ESL departments, or for any college instructor teaching English for Academic Purposes or who has a large percentage of second language learners in a basic skills English class. The Toolbox contains a set of preview, classroom, and assessment activities for sixteen poems (by thirteen poets) and is divided into beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. The toolbox is designed and arranged in such a way that you can select a poem you would like to teach and then pick and choose from the activities provided as best suits you, your class goals and objectives, and your allotted time frame for the poem. Each of the three levels contains the following sections:

Poet Biographies and Introductions to Individual Poems

These background sections are primarily for you, the instructor, rather than to be directly handed to students. I haven't attempted exhaustive explanations of these poets and their poems; instead I've tried to strike a balance between too much and too little—giving you enough information so that you feel confident to jump in and teach the poems without at the same time overwhelming you or detracting from this being a tool you can activate quickly and easily. In the individual poem introductions I have tried to present key literary features and to explain how they relate to a poem's possible themes or messages; you may choose to bring in some, all or none of this information into your actual discussion of the poem with your students. You will find these key features repeated in aspects of the preview, classroom, and assessment activities that follow a poem's introduction. Throughout

the toolbox I have indicated poetry terminology you might like to teach and the names of poets that appear in other entries with bold print.

Poems

In addition to thinking about the cognitive difficulty of texts (chiefly as rated by the Barrett Taxonomy — see Appendix A), I also tried to keep in mind a host of other factors in making my selections for the toolbox. These factors included looking for poems with themes that would be both contemporaneous and universal, poems that would engage both students and instructors, poems (even at the beginning levels) that allowed for multiple interpretations (and thus could lend themselves to a variety of assignments, activities and interpretive creativity), and finally, given the above restraints, poems from poets of both genders with some multi-cultural diversity.

While I give a few specific suggestions about how you might go about choosing poems from the toolbox for your class in the brief note at the beginning of each level, do not feel limited by the sections as any poem in this toolbox can be appropriately used for the most advanced students (that is to say, no poems need be eliminated because of their ease, though certainly poems could be too difficult for a given class if chosen from higher level sections). Poem discussions can go as deep as students are able to follow; especially, the shorter poems at the beginning level work well for memorization and recitation activities that would be perfectly appropriate for advanced students as well. I have also purposely built in some overlap between the hardest poems of one level and the easiest poems of the next. Ultimately, you should choose poems that speak to you personally and not worry about understanding them completely or having all the answers before you begin: you may find that you and your students discover some new interpretations as you work together.

If you are interested in trying other poems for use with your classes, you might find the vocabulary web tool in Appendix C useful. It indicates words that are in frequent word families and the AWL.

Finally, a note on the texts of the poems themselves: if you are viewing an electronic version of the toolbox, you will find links to the poems rather than the texts of the poems themselves. This is because fair use laws allow for copies of poems to be made for individual use in the classroom, but they do not provide for the sort of "publishing" that would occur should I type out the poems and post them myself on the Web. While some of these poems are out of copyright and in the public domain, others would require copyright permissions.

Preview, Classroom, and Assessment Activities

Throughout the toolbox, where instructions to students and to professors might be confused, I have placed the explanations to instructors in brackets. Involved directions or activities too long to conveniently be written on the board are on their own pages so that they can projected on the overhead or photocopied for students without need for cutting and pasting. For each poem I have tried to arrange activities from the most concrete to more abstract and from cognitively simple to more complex tasks. The preview and classroom activities are written so that one could logically do all exercises in the given order, but one could also do only a few that suit what is desired.

Some of the poems have been clustered thematically, and some lend themselves to similar types of discussions (e.g. "Fog," "This Is Just to Say," and "The Red Wheelbarrow" are all experimental poems and can lead to discussions about definitions of poetry, and "We Real Cool" and "A Spider Sewed at Night" are poems that lend themselves especially to oral interpretation and performance). In these instances, as it is unlikely that any instructor would use all of these poems for one class, you will find some repeated exercises or discussion guides, as well as cross-references in case you wish to use only one of these poems.

Concerning the use of technology, most poems have video and/or audio links for introductions to theme and content, as well as to give students a chance to hear the poem read by more than one person. Unfortunately, because most of the educational software I looked at

requires paid subscriptions, I have limited my use of technology to the above, with the exception of padlet.com, which allows you or your students to make interesting annotative displays.

Last, while I comment a bit more on assignments in the introductory note to each level, here I will mention that I have attempted to include written assignments that cover the complete spectrum from sentence clusters on the first beginning assignment to the last advanced assignment, which is really a 1A paper. The written assessments were based on the California Basic Skills Initiative rubric for written ESL assignments, CB 21 (see Appendix B). A number of the poems include oral assessments, as well.

A Note about the Beginning Level:

Although they are at the beginning level, it has been my experience that adult learners especially may be able to discuss poems at an astonishingly abstract and literary level if we give them the vocabulary to do so—hence, while there are many concrete activities here, I do also offer a number of opportunities for you to take a philosophical bent with your students, should you desire.

Unlike with the intermediate and advanced levels of the toolbox, I have not created any thematic pairings for this level, but there is a return to the question of "what is poetry," to the poetic value of finding the noteworthy in the usual (fog, a wheelbarrow, a stone), and of practicing the sounds and rhythms of American English. Because a number of these poems are quite short, they lend themselves to assignments of memorization and oral recitation, something that is impracticable with the somewhat longer poems in the intermediate and advanced sections. This activity is a great aid for students at all levels of English mastery to begin the process of internalization of English rhythmic patterns.

The written assessments call for sentence clusters and single paragraphs; they are based on the California State CB 21 rubric at four levels below Eng 1A and would be appropriate for students in AmLa 41, AmLa 31, and ESL 4 (see Appendix B). Even though students in these classes won't be doing direct poetry explication, I do still wish to begin to orient students toward conversation with texts. Consequently I have shied away nearly entirely from tangentially personal writing; instead, assignments call for reactions and responses to specific issues and patterns in the poems. I have included some non-graded "imitate the poem" classroom activities as pattern practice with grammar and syntax; these also help students to understand the art of poetry from the inside, so to speak.

Carl Sandburg, 1878-1967

Carl Sandburg has virtually disappeared from current teaching anthologies, but at one time his image was as recognizable to Americans as Mark Twain's. Wildly popular in his day (especially in the 1920s and 30s but continuing in the popular imagination until his death—there is a YouTube video showing the poet on a 1960 episode of "What's My Line" in which it's clear that he's beloved and respected), Sandburg toured the country not only reading his poetry, but also singing American ballads, playing his guitar and giving commonsensical advice (video links to his poems here feature Sandburg's own reading, and you can hear how he nearly sings). He won three Pulitzer Prizes, including one for his biography of Lincoln, and the governor of his home state, Illinois, declared his 75· birthday to be "Carl Sandburg Day." He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964.

Sandburg wished to write easily understandable poems for ordinary people; his poetry focuses on the lives of the urban working class (one of his most famous poems is "Chicago") and the immigrant poor (his own family had immigrated from Sweden). The titles of many of his books are indicative of these concerns: e.g. *Cornhuskers* (1918), *Smoke and Steel* (1920) and *The People, Yes* (1936). His work was highly influenced by **Walt Whitman**, as well as his own populist and pacifist socialist politics. Self-educated, Sandburg held a variety of odd jobs in the early years of his life, including serving in the Spanish American War (he did not see combat) and as a journalist.

Possible reasons why Sandburg was such a popular success in his own time but has fallen out of favor today might make for an interesting classroom discussion about aesthetic judgments of literature (or any art): who should decide what is real literature—the reading public? Contemporary critics? The test of time itself? In Sandburg's case, I believe the reasons for his diminishment are both historical and aesthetic. First, Sandburg's poetry was associated with the rise of

other early twentieth century Chicago and mid-western writers such as Edgar Lee Masters, Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson. These writers helped to define American realism and the concerns of the working and middle classes at a time when the country's economy and values were rapidly changing from agrarian to industrial. While these writers are read by graduate students now as a part of the history of American letters, their works have not had staying power, perhaps because the issues they address are often specific and dated rather than timeless and universal. Second, even in his own day Sandburg was not particularly admired by his fellow modernist poets such as **Robert Frost** and **William Carlos Williams**, poets who also set out to create a specifically modern and American poetry and whose work is now always included in lists of significant, influential, and lasting literature. Whether their dislike was from jealousy of his enormous popularity or from recognizing that his poetry was derivative of Walt Whitman and lacked staying power is arguable. Indeed, by the mid to late twentieth century, critical voices lauding the value of poetry for originality, for nuance, and for difficult ambiguity won out over voices calling for a common touch. You and your students can decide for yourselves about the power of two of Sandburg's best poems included here.

Fog

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

by Carl Sandburg
(first published in *Chicago Poems*, 1916)

Introduction to "Fog"

"Fog," as you can see, is a tiny poem, and it presents little challenge for students in terms of syntax or vocabulary. Because of its ease of comprehension, instructors can direct their students' focus relatively quickly to broader concerns of figurative language, imagery, sound, and meta-poetic function. For this reason I think it makes a wonderfully non-threatening introduction to poetry in general, no matter your students' level of English mastery. Here are four literary elements you might like to consider using this poem to address. First, "Fog" is a fine illustration of **metaphor**, a figure of speech in which one thing is implicitly compared to another (you might contrast that with **simile**, in which a similar comparison is made but the words "like" or "as" are used). The poem conflates fog and a cat in such a way that their identities are merged (the fog "comes / on little cat feet" not moves *like* it has "cat feet"); this alignment gives us opportunity to think in new ways about qualities of fog and of cats that perhaps we hadn't noticed in the same way before. In general, metaphors bring to our attention aspects of the objects of comparison that might also shed light on other relationships between ideas, feelings and things in our lives.

Second, as are many poems in the toolbox, "Fog" is written in **free verse** (without a definitive pattern of rhyme and meter), but Sandburg still wrote it with an ear to its **musicality**, its sounds, rhythms and intonations. Marking and practicing the poem's stresses can help identify the stressed/unstressed nature of English speech; in particular, because it is so brief, it can be memorized by students, experimented with, and performed. Third, "Fog" is an example of a short-lived movement of poetry known as **Imagism**. Coined by Ezra Pound and written by modernist poets during the Teens, Imagism was influenced by Japanese haiku and sought to valorize the use of every day language to capture moments of beauty and insight. These "images" were to be briefly described with concrete detail, requirements that lend themselves to metaphor. We could ask ourselves, "what is the value of such images in words (or in art or photography)?" This ties

in directly with element four—because it is unrhymed, the poem presents an opportunity to talk with students about expectations for and **definitions of poetry** itself. From this sort of discussion you might highlight how poetry gives us ways to think about language *as language*, as well as considering the greater purposes of studying literature— not only for achieving linguistic and cultural fluency in a target language but also to become a participant in a liberal arts education.

Previewing the Poem

Use the white board to list elicited responses from the class:

- What makes something a poem? [If you need to prime the pump, you might discuss genres of poems such narrative, lyric, haiku, or limerick; you might quickly demonstrate the elements of a poem such as lines, stanzas, and **enjambment** (line breaks in the middle of a thought), rhythm, rhyme, etc.]

- Have you ever had to memorize a poem? Examples? [I always use the first four lines of "Sea Fever" by John Masefield as an example of a poem I had to memorize. I still remember the first four lines because of its very strong iambic beat and abab rhyme scheme. Students may identify with the pain of poem memorization from their own elementary or high school years! You may ask them, "why do teachers make us do that?"]

Video introductions to the poem:

- Video one is a quiet, 53 second reading of the poem featuring text over stills of fog:
http://www.watchknowlearn.org/Video.aspx?VideoID=2867&CategoryID=2623

- Video two is a 2 minute presentation that reads the poem with its text four separate times. It's silly, shows pictures of cats and fog, points out the musical features of the poem (such as the repetition of "t" sounds), highlights the importance of sound in poetry in general, and utilizes a recording of Sandburg's own voice reading the poem:
http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xX1YWIRk-d0

Vocabulary:

- Students will be able to make a good guess about the meanings of "harbor" and "haunches" from the two videos

Activities with the Poem

Listening and speaking practice:

- On their poem handouts (you may wish to give them more than one copy), have students mark stress and intonation as they listen to the two videos and to your own oral interpretation. Point out how the line breaks might cause us to read it differently than if the poem were just written as two sentences of prose. The ensuing discussion will be an occasion to demonstrate the way stressed syllables are spoken with higher intonation and receive greater emotional attention and also the way that poetry can be interpreted differently just from making different verbal emphases.

- Working in small groups, have students decide and mark which words they believe should be emphasized. When the groups are finished, have them perform choral readings for the rest of the class. Ask the class to determine which words the groups particularly stressed.

Working with metaphors:

- In pairs, ask students to brainstorm a list about ways that cat and fog behavior are similar in the poem. Have them volunteer their ideas for a whole class discussion to define metaphor and simile.

- In pairs, ask students to come up with their own sentence examples of metaphor and simile. Share them with the class.

Have a meta-discussion on "what's this poem 'about'?":

- Is this poem *just* about fog and a cat? If not, what is its larger point? What is the point of poetry at all? [Use this idea if you are brave and like class discussions that tend towards the abstract. Some possible suggestions are that different types of poetry may: tell a story, teach a moral value, inspire, remember history, express emotion, cause us to better understand ourselves

and others, help us observe and appreciate the beauty or sorrow of the world around us, give us pleasure in enjoying word play and the satisfaction of capturing ideas and emotions in just the right way, and capture the affective registers of our knowing and observations that are beyond merely the logical or the rational.]

Poem Lesson Assessments

Oral interpretation:

✓ Memorize the poem as homework and perform it for the class (or in a large group subset of the class) with your own oral interpretation.

Sentence-level prompts:

✓ Based on our class discussion, write three sentences about similarities between fog and cat behavior. Then, pick another animal and another natural phenomenon or mechanical object and write three sentences to compare them with each other (for example, compare a horse and an engine). In your sentences, use comparison phrases such as "X is like Y because they both . . . " and "X is similar to Y in the way they both . . . "

✓ Write a three or four sentence paraphrase of the poem. A paraphrase is when you re-state what the poem says without adding or taking away any ideas and when you use as many of your own words as possible to do so. Try to find some synonyms in a thesaurus (but make sure to use the dictionary to look up a new word that you don't know before you put it in your sentence—some words have similar meanings but should be used in different situations or contexts). Make sure to check your grammar carefully.

Paragraph-level prompts:

✓ Based on our class discussions, write a paragraph to give your opinion about Carl Sandburg's poem "Fog." In your topic sentence state directly whether you think it is a "real" or successful poem or not. In the body of your paragraph give two or three specific reasons about elements of poetry that we discussed to support your opinion. In your concluding sentence, sum up your main point.

✓ Find a short poem or haiku in your first language that uses a metaphor to compare two unlike things. In your topic sentence or sentences, name the poem and the author and briefly say what the poem is about. In your paragraph, describe and explain the poem to us. Use a concluding sentence that sums up what you think the main point of your chosen poem is.

Grass

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work—
              I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
              What place is this?
              Where are we now?

              I am the grass.
              Let me work.

by Carl Sandburg
(first published in *Cornhuskers*, 1918)

Introduction to "Grass"

Written during the final bloody months of World War I, "Grass" is an anti-war poem. With brief explanations of the poem's locales and of its phrasal verbs, this fact will be readily apparent to students. Yet the poem also contains nuances of diction and tone that allow its theme to be interpreted with slightly different emphases; such nuances will be difficult for a non-native speaker to suss out, however, so depending on your students' levels of comprehension you may wish to stop with the most obvious meanings of the poem or to pursue deeper reflections. Four important elements intertwine with each other in the poem to convey its emotional brunt. To begin with, "Grass" presents an excellent opportunity to talk about **personification**, the attribution of human qualities to an animal or thing. Further, Sandburg's use of personification is closely tied to his construction of the poem's **voice** (the persona speaking) and **tone** (the poet's attitude towards his or her subject), all of which contribute to its overall **theme** (the poem's universal, underlying message).

Personification can serve many purposes, of course; in this case I think Sandburg wishes to use the trope of grass as a way to de-familiarize our complacent thinking about the war dead, causing us to imagine them from the perspective of the forgotten battlegrounds themselves. Instead of referring to those killed as someone's loved ones or even as humans, the grass calls them "bodies" and sarcastically invites or dares us to "pile them high" and "shovel them under." These repeated phrases underscore the brutal futility of our wars, as well as our tendency to be in a state of denial about war's carnage ("shovel[ing] them under," psychologically speaking). The poem's references to the Napoleonic, American Civil, and First World Wars highlight humanity's failure to learn from its mistakes, as do the passengers' naive questions to the train conductor in the second stanza. In this sense, the grass comes to represent our collectively short memory (a theme as true today as it was a hundred years ago when the poem was written); the grass of the poem "works" figuratively as well

as literally to "cover all" that it is inconvenient to remember. Thematically, then, Sandburg's message could be taken on multiple levels: in one sense he is demonstrating the ways that nature outlasts and covers the small doings and life spans of humans (from this perspective the poem could be read almost elegiacally); in another sense he is shaming the human race for its inability to learn from the horrors of war and for our historical ignorance that leaves us unprepared to prevent the next war.

Previewing the Poem

Small group activities:

- In your group, try to brainstorm at least ten terrible disasters, wars, scandals or injustices that have happened not this year but in the past two to ten years. Have people forgotten about these things? Why or why not, in your opinion? What are the advantages and disadvantages of forgetting so quickly as a society? [You might come prepared with a few examples of this to share with the class first, e.g. the 2010 earthquake in Haiti that initially received an outpouring of money from the world but is now hardly discussed, even though the situation in Haiti is as terrible as ever.]

- Give everyone in your group one or two of these words to look up on their mobile devices—Austerlitz, Gettysburg, Verdun, Waterloo, and Ypres. Write down brief notes about the Who, What, When, Where and Why's of the information you find out. Be prepared to write the information the group finds on the white board under each word's column.*

Pre-teach the following:

- phrasal verbs "pile high" and "shovel under"
- the imperative mood

Video introductions to the poem (students will need a copy of the poem to follow along with both of these):

- Video one is 38 seconds; it contains pictures of the battlefields and inspiring music. The narrator's interpretation makes the poem sound like an elegy rather than an indictment of the living: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GNXsiI3aBg

- Video two is 1.57 minutes and gives a reading of the poem twice. It features pictures and some written interpretation; Sandburg himself reads the poem. His interpretation of his own poem is

sarcastic and creepy:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGQG3-F5BX8

*NB: **Austerlitz** (1805 battle of the Napoleonic wars in the now Czech Republic; 25,000 casualties; French victory over Russia and Austria); **Gettysburg** (1863 battle in central Pennsylvania and among the heaviest losses in one battle of the American Civil War; Union victory with more than 50,00 casualties on both sides); **Verdun** (locale of 1916 battle in World War I France; nearly 800,000 French and German casualties); **Waterloo** (location of Napoleon's 1815 defeat in Belgium; 25,000 French and 23,000 Prussian and Ally casualties); **Ypres** (Three WWI battles here in 1915; especially noted for German's first use of poison gas; 250,000 died with many left in unmarked graves).

Activities with the Poem

Responsive writing:

- Free write for ten minutes to answer these questions about the poem — What do you think this poem is about? How does it make you feel? What current or historical events does it make you think about? Be ready to share these thoughts with a partner.

Listening and speaking practice:

- On their poem handouts (you may wish to give them more than one copy), have students mark stress and intonation as they listen to the two videos and to your own oral interpretation. Point out the differences in interpretation between videos 1 and 2 (for example, the stress on "under" in video 1 versus Sandburg's sinister (sarcastic?) sounding emphasis on "shovel" and "grass" in video 2).

- Ask each student to mark words and lines that repeat in the poem on their own copy. Decide as a class what words should be stressed in each line. Then divide the class into two groups to read the poem out loud as a choral response: one group for the stanzas on the left margin and one group for the five indented lines.

Class or small-group-to-class discussion on personification, voice and tone:

- What is the grass's "work"? How do you think the grass feels about its "work"? What things in the poem make you think that?

- Why don't the passengers know where they are?

- What do you think Sandburg's opinions about war are? What things in the poem make you think that?

- Why does he have "grass" speak these words? Why not just write his opinions about war as a regular paragraph?

Poem Lesson Assessments

Oral interpretation:

✓ Work individually or in groups to brainstorm and/or search in Wikipedia or with Google for place names where there have been battles or massacres in the late twentieth century or early twenty-first century. Then, substitute these place names for the five earlier battles that Sandburg mentions. Individually or as a group read the poem (and project the new "version" on the overhead) with these substitutions to the class, using stress and intonation to indicate your feelings about the subject. [Extra Credit: match the number of syllables to Sandburg's; e.g. "Fallujah" or "Rwanda" for "Waterloo."]

Sentence-level prompts:

✓ Using the poem as a model, write ten sentence clusters in the imperative mood with a personified voice from nature giving orders to humans. For example, "Build your towers as high as you wish. I am the earthquake; I destroy all" or "Cover the earth with nuclear bombs. I am the cockroach. I will survive."

✓ What are your opinions about war? Is war always wrong, or sometimes do wars have to be fought? Using modal verbs in the present tense, write ten sentence clusters to explain your thoughts about this topic (e.g. "We *must*" or "We *should*" or "We *ought to*"). In your sentence clusters, support your bigger ideas by giving specific examples from particular wars that you know about.

Paragraph-level prompts:

✓ Write a paragraph of at least eight sentences to paraphrase and explain Carl Sandburg's poem "Grass." In your topic sentence(s), give the name of the poet, the title of the poem, and the overall idea of the poem. In your paragraph explain the

entire poem in your own words, making sure to briefly identify the places and battles Sandburg lists. In your concluding sentence, sum up what you think is Sandburg's main point in the poem.

✓ Choose a contemporary problem in the United States or in the country where you are from that you think people ignore instead of trying to solve. Write a paragraph of at least ten sentences to name the problem and explain why you think people don't talk about it or try to find a solution for it. State the problem and your concern about it in your topic sentence. In your paragraph, use as many specific examples and illustrations as you can to support your topic sentence. Conclude your paragraph with a sentence using the imperative mood to state what you think people should do.

William Carlos Williams, 1883-1963

In many ways, William Carlos Williams' career was the opposite of **Carl Sandburg's**. While Sandburg gained fame relatively early in his life, Williams spent his first years as a poet in relative obscurity (except to other poets and to literary critics) and not until the latter years of his life was his work was recognized as a prescient model for a new generation of mid-twentieth century poets. Nor was he, like Sandburg, a professional performer and literary celebrity: Williams practiced medicine as a family doctor in his hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey, throughout his adult life, jotting lines for poems on the back of his prescription pads as they came to him. Indeed, he viewed the medical profession as a necessary means to support his aspirations as a poet. That he was able to have such dual (and separate) career tracks came about by two happy accidents: first, as a college student at the University of Pennsylvania he met and befriended the poet Ezra Pound, who was the great organizer of the modernist movement. Second, since he lived only an hour's drive from New York City, he was able to participate in the readings and gatherings of a circle of such famed poets as **Wallace Stevens** and Marianne Moore who were developing in the teens and twenties what became known as modernist poetry.

Williams' interest in words and in the nuances of the American language stemmed, perhaps, from growing up in a Spanish and English bilingual household (his mother was from Puerto Rico) — a fact you may wish to point out to your students. (And you might consider together: How does growing up with access to more than one language prepare one to be a poet?). Like many poets of his time, Williams wanted his poetry to break away from what he considered the effete tone and formalism of the previous generation's poetry and to inculcate the rhythms, diction and cadences of ordinary American speech. Consequently, Williams' poems were often experimental and consciously wrought to give an air of artlessness even when they were

highly worked-over. In the latter part of his career he invented what he called the "stepped line," which is a long line broken into three short lines and is characteristic of the visual (as opposed to aural) style of the modernist movement. Although he wrote in a great many different poetic modes throughout his long career, the two poems included here are most often associated with the early twentieth century poetic movement known as **Imagism**. Through juxtaposing images rather than constructing a linear narrative— "no ideas but in things," as he wrote in his epic narrative poem *Paterson* (1921)— Williams wished to avoid abstract pronouncements, believing if he could lay out the details of the physical and objective world, readers could assemble for themselves their deeper imports and resonances.

Having set forth these iconoclastic principles, Williams was bitterly disappointed by the critical acclaim that came to T. S. Eliot when he published his long poem *The Waste Land* in 1922; *The Waste Land*'s erudite, European inflected style with its many classical references was just the opposite of what Williams had hoped modern poetry would become. Although he spent much of his life unremarked by the wider public, and although his final years were marred by a series of heart attacks and strokes, he also at last gained the wider recognition he had craved: his prizes included the National Book Award (1950), the Bollingen Prize (1953) and the Pulitzer Prize (1962). Today Williams' work and the commonplace style he inspired are firmly ensconced in the American modernist canon.

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

by William Carlos Williams
(written 1934, first published in *Collected Poems: 1921-1939*)

Introduction to "This Is Just to Say"

"This is Just to Say" is one of William's best known and most beloved pieces. Discussion of the poem inevitably leads to the questions: **"What makes something a poem, anyway?** Isn't this just a note of apology left to a loved one or a roommate?" If you haven't already had this discussion with your students about Sandburg's poem "Fog," reading this poem together gives you another opportunity to do so. For William's brilliance here is that he creates something amusing, memorable, and even thought-provoking while making it look easy. In fact, the poem is highly crafted, and if your students don't think it ought to be called a poem, here are some of the elements you might put before them. Written in **free verse**, "This is Just to Say" doesn't offer a regular rhyme scheme or metered pattern but instead captures and plays with the sounds and cadences of **American vernacular speech**; for example, the stressed content words "plums," "icebox," "saving" and "breakfast" appear in the second and fourth lines of stanzas one and two, which serves to lend an added air of surprise and emphasis when the stressed "Forgive Me" appears in line one of the third stanza, breaking that pattern. Further, the **alliterative** "S" sounds help tie the poem together aurally: "saving," "breakfast," "delicious," "so sweet," and "so cold."

William's reliance on the **visual elements of modernism** also makes this a consciously composed poem rather than the happenstance it might appear to be. In most of the poetry of the nineteenth century and earlier, the aural aspects of verse were the chief elements qualifying something as "poetic." With the rise of photography and increasingly cheap ways to reproduce images in newspapers, magazines, and books, America became a more visually-based culture, and poets began to use visual space to carry their meanings in ways just as important as sounds do. In "This Is Just to Say," Williams is innovating in several ways: the title is also the first line of the poem, there is no punctuation, only two capitalized words indicate where

sentences presumably begin, and the lines are extremely short, with only two or three words each. (You might also notice that he uses a pattern for his word count and consider whether this has any relation to his meanings: stanza one is 3/2/3/2, stanza two is 2/3/1/2, and stanza three is 2/3/2/3). Each of these choices — and the extra blank space on the page — gives us internal pause as we are reading, slowing us down and serving to highlight the words as words, almost as if they were individual specimens in a museum exhibit. The poem, which at first seems so straightforward, also in its brevity lends itself to multiple interpretations. Is the speaker really asking for forgiveness or "just" justifying an act he or she doesn't regret? What does the poem imply about the relationship between the speaker and the implied recipient? Like many modernist poems, one could argue that there is no one right answer and that the experience of **ambiguity**, or the dramatization of ambiguousness in relationships, are also valid interpretations. Finally, there is something about the humor and the naturalness of "This Is Just to Say" that makes us want to get in on its action. There are numerous web sites and feeds dedicated to making **parodies** of the poem (there is even an episode of *This American Life* about this) — some of them are quite funny (but also risqué), so be forewarned before you look them up and share them with your students.

Previewing the Poem

Individual free writing to small group discussion:

- Have you ever had someone apologize to you in a way that you didn't think was honest? On your own paper, write for ten minutes about that experience and/or what you think makes a good apology.

- On your own piece of paper, brainstorm a list of things that someone might do wrong and then have to apologize about to a roommate or to someone else that he or she is living with (for example, "I ate your Doritos," or "I ran over your bike with my car"). [After a few minutes, ask students to pass their paper to the person on their right. Then have them choose at least three of the things from the list on the new paper and write 3-5 sentence notes of apology, trying to sound really sorry (or not). Students may share their notes in small groups afterwards.]

Use the white board to list elicited responses from the class:

- What makes something a poem? [If you need to prime the pump, you might discuss genres of poems such narrative, lyric, haiku or limerick; you might quickly demonstrate the elements of a poem such as lines, stanzas, and **enjambment** (line breaks in the middle of a thought), rhythm, rhyme, etc.]

- Have you ever had to memorize a poem? Examples? [I always use the first four lines of "Sea Fever" by John Masefield as an example of a poem I had to memorize. I still remember the first four lines because of its very strong iambic beat and abab rhyme scheme. Students may identify with the pain of poem memorization from their own elementary or high school years! You may ask them "why do teachers make us do that?"]

Grammatical review:

- Construction and uses of past, past progressive, and present perfect tenses

Video introduction to the poem:

[Students could mark the stress and intonation on their own copies of the poem for these two videos and afterward compare interpretive differences that they heard.]

- Here is a short video of actor Matthew Macfadyen dramatizing the poem:

http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0d5bLf0gq2Q

- Here is a short video featuring Williams himself reading the poem, along with a picture of the poet:

http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcTfsG-k_58

Activities with the Poem

Continue the preview activity on "what makes this a poem?":

- Based on our preview discussion, is this poem "just" a note that anyone could write or is it a poem? What makes this a poem? [Refer here to the **Introduction to "This Is Just to Say"** to demonstrate some of the constructed aspects of the poem such as: the title as the first line, the lack of punctuation, the pattern of words per line, the use of space and line breaks, and the recurring "s" sounds.]

Discussion for pairs, then to be shared with the broader class:

- Is the speaker of this poem really sorry for eating the plums? On your paper, make two lists—one list for the things in the poem that you think show that he or she is truthfully apologizing and one list for things that make you think the speaker is really glad he or she ate the plums. Do you think it is possible to interpret the poems both ways?

Imitate the poem:

- [Give students the pattern on the following page to complete in order to compose their own poem. Begin by composing one example together on the board, and then ask students to write several on their own to share in groups and/or with the class. If you did the earlier preview exercise, students can draw upon their own notes of apology for ideas for their poem.]

This is Just to Say

I_____ [present perfect]

the_____ [noun]

that were_____ [preposition]

the _____[noun]

and which
you were probably

_____[past progressive]

_____[preposition] [noun]

Forgive me

[it/they] _____[past tense] [adjective]

so_____ [adjective]

and so_____ [adjective]

Poem Lesson Assessments

Oral interpretation:

✓ Watch the video of Matthew Macfadyen interpreting the poem again. Then, mark the words that <u>you</u> would like to emphasize in the poem and memorize it. You will perform it for the class (or in a large group subset of the class) at our next meeting.

Sentence-level prompts:

✓ Write at least ten sentences to answer the following questions about the poem: Who is the speaker and who will be receiving the note? What are some things that you can guess about their relationship? What do you think might happen after the person reads the note?

✓ Using your ideas and/or writings from class, write three notes of apology of at least five sentences each. In each note correctly use the past, past progressive, and present perfect tenses. <u>Underline</u> and label those verb tenses.

Paragraph-level prompts:

✓ Based on our class discussions, write a paragraph to give your opinion about William Carlos William's poem "This Is Just to Say." In your topic sentence state directly whether you think it is a "real" or successful poem or not. In the body of your paragraph give two or three specific reasons why or why not and use some of the elements of poetry that we discussed to support your opinion. In your concluding sentence, sum up your main point.

✓ Based on our class discussions, write a paragraph to defend what you think is a main message of "This Is Just to Say." For example, is the poem about the importance of living in the moment? Is it about the need for asking forgiveness in relationships? Is it trying to show that often we are not really

sorry for how we treat others? Or does the poem purposefully portray a mixed message? In your topic sentence, state the poem's title, author, and the message you will describe. In the body of your paragraph give specific evidence from the poem to support your topic sentence. End the paragraph with a concluding thought about the message you have explained from the poem.

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

by William Carlos Williams
(first published in *Spring and All,* 1923)

Introduction to "The Red Wheelbarrow"

"The Red Wheelbarrow" is the toolbox's second poem that comes out of the **Imagist** movement (see both the **Introduction to "Fog"** and the introduction to **William Carlos Williams** for some of the basics about imagism). Thus, the eponymous wheelbarrow is not meant to be a symbol or metaphor representing something else, but rather a picture of surface details—an icon, if you will—that can open up to us a glimpse of more abstract or existential realities if we allow it. The poem turns on our guess as to *what*, exactly, does the "so much" in the poem's first line refer to: *what* "depends upon" the red wheelbarrow? Is it the farm? All civilization? Something else entirely? By careful ordering of syntax, choice of diction, and use of line breaks, Williams has constructed a poem that could be meaningfully construed to be "about" many things: about the importance of noticing the every day details that we take for granted but upon which "so much depends," about the relationship of civilization (the wheelbarrow) to nature (chickens and rain), about the loneliness of the individual modern person shouldering the weight of the world on his or her own (the lone red wheelbarrow), or even just about the experience of perception, without a traditional "meaning" at all. If any of these readings feel far-fetched to you, not to worry—lasting poetry offers individual readers leeway to make meaningful sense of its art, as long as interpretations fall within the bounds of what has been called "the broader community of readers"; in other words, an interpretation is a valid one if you can convince others by your persuasive evidence. While this kind of freedom to take leaps of faith with linguistic ambiguity may not be some of your students' cup of tea (there are other poems that such students would feel more comfortable with), others might enjoy being given permission to guess intuitively at possible meanings and then have fun looking for evidence in the poem that would support their theories.

If your students have a hard time believing that this example of **free verse** is really a poem, you could easily point out to them that the shape of each two-line stanza is a picture of the wheelbarrow itself, with the three word first line sticking out like handles beyond the narrow, one word "wheel" of the second line. Williams has subtly unified the four stanzas by repeating sounds. There is the **assonance** (repetition of vowel sounds) of "so" and "barrow"; "much" and "upon"; "a," "glazed," and "rain"; and "beside" and "white"; and there is **consonance** (repetition of consonant sounds) with "chickens" "much," tying the first and last lines of the poem together.   Professor Daniel Candel Bormann has posted a lovely video with helpful diagrams and visuals about how to explicate the poem here http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yM_nNZak2os. The video runs approximately six and half minutes and would be worth viewing before you teach the poem. Some students might benefit from it as well, but his speech rate, concepts, and vocabulary are definitely at an advanced level.

Previewing the Poem

Individual free writing to small group discussion:

- Think of a simple object in your home that is ordinary but is very useful and/or has great meaning to you, such as a tool or a dish you use that belonged to your grandparent. Free write for ten minutes about that object—what does it look like? When do you use it? What person does it make you think of or what memories do you connect with it? Be prepared to share your thoughts with the members of your small discussion group.

Use the white board to list elicited responses from the class:

- What makes something a poem? [If you need to prime the pump, you might discuss genres of poems such narrative, lyric, haiku or limerick; you might quickly demonstrate the elements of a poem such as lines, stanzas, and **enjambment** (line breaks in the middle of a thought), rhythm, rhyme, etc.]

- Have you ever had to memorize a poem? Examples? [I always use the first four lines of "Sea Fever" by John Masefield as an example of a poem I had to memorize. I still remember the first four lines because of its very strong iambic beat and abab rhyme scheme. Students may identify with the pain of poem memorization from their own elementary or high school years! You may ask them "why do teachers make us do that?"]

Grammar review:

- prepositional phrases, adverbial and adjectival participles

Video introduction to the poem (students will need a copy of the poem to follow along with both of these):

- Video one is an artful, 1:30 animation of the poem with text and music (no reading). It works well to demonstrate clearly what a "wheelbarrow" is, in case the word is unfamiliar to your students:

  http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PqRhDdeKDA

- Video two features the voice of Williams reading the poem over a photograph of him in his younger days:

  http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqIl3oX_44s

Activities with the Poem

Continue the preview activity on "what makes this a poem?":

- Based on our preview discussion, is this poem just a long sentence about a wheelbarrow that anyone could write or is it a poem? What makes this a poem? [Refer here to the **Introduction to "The Red Wheelbarrow"** to demonstrate some of the constructed aspects of the poem such as the lineation and the assonance and consonance.]

Vocabulary investigation—Define "glaze":

- With a partner, use your mobile device, a classroom dictionary, or your personal English/English dictionary to look up the word "glaze." When you find the word, write the part of the definition that the instructor assigns you on the white board. Be prepared to read what you wrote out loud to the class. [This assignment will work especially well if you have a class set of the same dictionary or ask students to look at the same online dictionary. The word has at least three different noun definitions and three different verb definitions, as well as a Middle English origin from "glase," meaning "glass." Depending on your number of students, you could designate 7-10 spaces on the white board for each pair to write part of the definition: e.g. "Noun Definition #2:" (again, this will be easier to delineate if everyone is looking at the same dictionaries). After going over the definitions, ask the students to identify the ones that inform the meaning of "glazed" in the poem and show how the denotations of glazed pottery add an artistic double or triple meaning to the word.]

Discussion with a partner as lead-in to class-wide discussion:

- Mark your copy of the poem with your partner and answer these questions —

(1) Write "S" and "V" over the main subject and verb of the sentence poem.

(2) Circle the three prepositional phrases and put a check mark over the objects of the prepositions (nouns). Underline the adjectives.

(3) Now that you have marked the poem's grammatical elements, what do you notice about the poem's overall structure?

(4) In your opinion, what do you think is the "so much" that "depends upon" or needs the wheelbarrow? What makes you think that?

Imitate the poem:

- [Write the pattern below on the board for students to complete in order to compose their own poem. Begin by composing one together on the board, and then ask students to write several on their own to share in groups and/or the class. If you did the earlier preview exercise, students can draw upon their own notes of important objects for ideas for their poem.]

Title of object

so much depends
upon

a/an **[adjective]** **[noun]**

[past participle] **[preposition]** **[noun]**

[preposition] the **[adjective]** **[noun]**

Poem Lesson Assessments

Oral interpretation:

✓ Listen to the video of William Carlos Williams reading his own poem again. Then, mark the words that <u>you</u> would like to emphasize in the poem and memorize it. You will perform it for the class (or in a large group subset of the class) at our next meeting.

Sentence-level prompts:

✓ Using your ideas and/or writings from class if you like, choose three different ordinary objects that are important to you. Write at least five sentences to describe each object. Try to use concrete details to show us that the object is important without telling us directly. Try to use as many different prepositional phrases as you can in these sentences and <u>underline them</u>.

✓ Using your imagination, write at least ten sentences to describe the setting of "The Red Wheelbarrow": To whom does the wheelbarrow belong to and where does he/she/they live? What does the person's home, farm or etc. look like? What does the person use the wheelbarrow for? Why? Try to use as many different prepositional phrases as you can in these sentences and <u>underline them</u>.

Paragraph-level prompts:

✓ Based on our class discussions, write a paragraph to give your opinion about William Carlos William's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow." In your topic sentence state directly whether you think it is a "real" or successful poem or not. In the body of your paragraph give two or three specific reasons why or why not and use some of the elements of poetry that we discussed to support your opinion. In your concluding sentence, sum up your main point.

✓ Write a paragraph of at least eight sentences to paraphrase and explain William Carlos William's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow." In your topic sentence(s), give the name of the poet, the title of the poem, and the overall idea of the poem. In your paragraph explain the entire poem in your own words. In your concluding sentence, sum up what you think is William's main point in the poem.

Gwendolyn Brooks, 1917--2000

Gwendolyn Brooks' distinctive style is a fusion of elements taken from traditional poetics (strongly stressed verse with end rhymes, patterned rhyme schemes, and frequent alliteration) and from black culture (jazz, folk ballads, the Blues, and common idioms of black speech and humor). She was born in Kansas but grew up in Chicago in a somewhat middle class and mixed neighborhood, later moving to a more racially segregated and impoverished area in the early days of her marriage. Her poetry focuses on issues of race consciousness, on the blatant and subtle racism endured by the black urban poor, on political issues such as segregation and the Civil Rights movement, and on the importance of family and community in the face of ghetto life and its hardships. Brooks' first book of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville*, derives its name from the moniker given by journalists to the black ghetto in Chicago's South Side; it includes perhaps America's first poem on abortion, entitled "The Mother." Many of her poems are character studies featuring not only anger but also humane and pragmatic responses to oppressive conditions.

Brooks' talent was recognized early, as she published poetry as a child and was mentored by important figures of the Harlem Renaissance such as James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes. In addition to publishing her work in numerous literary journals and in many books of poems, she established her own imprint especially for black poets. She taught many poetry workshops in schools, prisons, and libraries; later in life she became a beloved mentor to many younger black poets. Brooks' resume includes many firsts—including being the first black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize (1950) and being the first black woman to become Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. Like Carl Sandburg, she also became the poet laureate of Illinois (1968).

We Real Cool

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

by Gwendolyn Brooks
(first published 1960 in *The Bean Eaters)*

Introduction to "We Real Cool"

Gwendolyn Brooks' well-known, frequently anthologized poem was inspired by her work with Chicago gang members; it is characteristic of her poetry in the sense that much of her work attempts to chronicle the lives of the black urban poor of Chicago and to portray their environment and choices with dignity. In "We Real Cool" Brooks makes use of Black English to speak from the point of view of disenfranchised youths; consequently the poem tries to walk the fine line between giving voice to the voiceless without reinforcing stereotypes or presuming to entirely comprehend their point of view. As a result, the poem lends itself to discussions of the differences between **mood** (the feeling of the characters in the poem—in this case, bravado? Rebelliousness? Resignation?— and the emotion the poem inspires in us) and **tone** (the poet's attitude toward her subject—is Brooks patronizing or accepting of the youths?). Brooks careful selection of the **connotations** of the monosyllabic words in each stanza is important to examine, as well, because she has picked words that feel at once "jazz[y]," sinister, and sad.

The poem is especially remarkable for its **musicality**: Brooks has a finely tuned ear for sound and rhythm and drew consciously from jazz and (particularly in this case) Bebop. Each line of the poem has three stressed and then one unstressed beat—the last "We," coming after the period, is read after a slight pause and is an upbeat, as you will hear from the recording poet's own reading. The two line stanzas feature both **internal rhyme** (e.g. "cool" and "school") and **alliteration** (e.g. "Lurk" and "late"). These aspects lend the poem the "cool," breezy energy of the kids in the pool hall, as well as add to our surprised shock at the last sentence, "We / Die soon." In retrospect, these same aural elements seem to give the fate of the pool players a sense of inevitability. If you are interested in dance, in addition to the jazz resource given in the following "Previewing the Poem" section (and depending on your tolerance for the clothes and hair styles of the

eighties), you may wish to view a ten minute dance interpretation of the poem; the 1987 film was made by the National Dance Institute and directed by the same man who directed *Dirty Dancing* and *Sister Act:* http://movingpoems.com/poet/gwendolyn-brooks/ .

Previewing the Poem

Brief introduction to bebop jazz:

- Using this excellent web page (or another that you know of, if you are a jazz aficionado), play the students the clips from Ella Fitzgerald and /or Thelonious Monk: http://www.jazzinamerica.org/LessonPlan/5/5/230

- Brainstorm on the board together the answers to these questions: What instruments do you hear? How would you describe this music? What are its rhythms? How does it make you feel? [The web site also has some pictures, short and clear definitions of bebop, an explanation of its history, and more musical examples. The definitions are at an easily comprehensible level. You could go over the definitions together with your students if you have a projector for your computer screen or print the page as a handout.]

- Define for the students the idioms "all that jazz" and "jazz something up" and the adjective "jazzy"

Vocabulary preview:
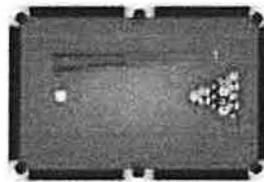
- pool (billiards) and pool halls [You might ask, is pool a popular game in your country? If so, where do people play it? In the United States, video game parlors replaced pool halls as a place for rebellious teens to get together with friends: do we have places like that now? Or do people just meet on the internet?]

Video introduction to the poem (students will need a copy of the poem to follow along with this):

- Pre-teach students the meanings of **alliteration** and **internal rhyme**
- The video is just over a minute long and features two readings of the poem, the first by Gwendolyn Brooks (text of the poem superimposed over her picture), and the second by Morgan Freeman:

http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBpxJb24O8A

Activities with the Poem

Free writing—initial impressions:

- Spend ten minutes to write your answers to the following questions: What can you guess about the seven pool players who are the "We" in the poem—what are their lives like? Where do they live? What kinds of things do they do? Also, were you surprised by ending of the poem? How does the poem make you feel? Be prepared to talk about your thoughts with a small group of your classmates.

Listening and speaking practice:

- Play the video again and ask students to mark the alliteration at the beginnings and endings of words and internal rhyme they hear (and see) in the video to the poem. Ask them what they notice about the stresses. Students may compare notes in pairs before a class discussion.
- Perform a choral reading—divide the class into two halves and have each half read every other line.
- How do the poem's musical elements affect its mood?

Amplifying the poem's connotations:

- [Instructors can annotate the lines of the poem as they discuss it with the students, marking on their own copy of the poem if the classroom has an overhead projector or on the whiteboard. Or, you could use padlet.com, which lets you easily build visual annotations with your students as they watch. See the example on page 107.]

  Subtitle—the setting is important and the opening lines could be considered stage directions; golden = lucky but shovel=death and burial

  Stanza one—what do they mean by "cool"? Is it ironic that the poem is being read by *un*-cool people *in* school?

<u>Stanza two</u>—explain the connotations of "lurk"; "straight" pool is a form of the game when players state which pocket they will shoot the ball into, so "strike" could be both violence or pool-related

<u>Stanza three</u>—what is "sin"? To "thin" alcohol is to make it last longer by adding water; kids might also add water to their parents' bottles of alcohol so it won't look like they have taken any

<u>Stanza four</u> —"jazz" as verb means to play or dance to jazz music, and jazz was the gangster rap of its day; "jazz" also gives a sense of the impromptu to their goalless lives; "June" could indicate the speakers are spring of their lives; "Die soon"—does the fact that the youths are saying this about themselves mean that they don't have any agency or that they are wisely prophetic? Or both?

Free writing—second response:

- Now that you have thought more deeply about the connotations of many of the poem's words (the feelings behind the words) and noticed the sounds of the poem, how has your understanding of the poem changed? Be prepared to discuss your ideas with the class.

padlet.com/wall/hplc2lqx9tru

Poetry Foundation   Azar Interactive   Claremont C...ges Library   En
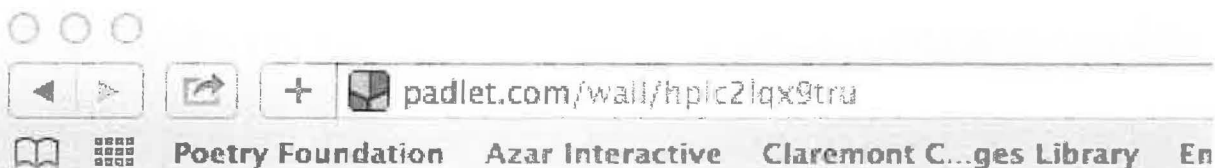
We Real Cool   The Pool Players.   Seven at the Golden Sho

We real cool. We Left school.

School is where we are.

We Strike straight.

"straight pool" is when the player say

Poem Lesson Assessments

Oral interpretation:

✓ Listen to the video of Gwendolyn Brooks and Morgan Freeman reading the poem again. Then, mark the words that <u>you</u> would like to emphasize in the poem and memorize it. You will perform it for the class (or in a large group subset of the class) at our next meeting.

Sentence-level prompts:

✓ Using your ideas from our two sessions of free writing in class, write at least ten sentences about what you think the lives of the "We" (the seven pool players) are like. Explain, for example, where they live and what they do each day. Why did they quit school? Do they have parents? If so, what do their parents think about their lives?

✓ Using the poem as your model, write at least ten sentences with alliteration. You could write your sentences as a single message and make your own version of the poem, or you could write ten separate sentences. <u>Underline</u> the alliteration in your sentences.

Paragraph-level prompts:

✓ Write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to paraphrase and explain Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool." In your topic sentence(s), give the name of the poet, the title of the poem, and the overall idea of the poem. In your paragraph explain the entire poem in your own words. In your concluding sentence, sum up what you think is Brook's main point in the poem.

✓ Based on our class practice with the poem, write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to explain how your understanding of the poem changed from when you first read the poem until now. In your topic sentences, state the poem's title, author, and what the poem is about. In the body of your paragraph explain your

first thoughts about the poem and then explain some of the
specific words or sounds of the poem (with quotes "like this")
that made you change your mind after we pointed them out in
class. End the paragraph with a concluding thought about the
message you have understood in the poem.

Charles Simic, b. 1938

A poet born in Yugoslavia who didn't start learning English until the age of 15, Charles Simic is an acclaimed writer of poetry and prose who became the 2007 Poet Laureate of the United States; he has won many other prestigious awards, including a 1990 Pulitzer Prize and a MacArthur Foundation genius grant. Simic's life and work is marked by his early experiences as a refugee during World War II. His family fled Yugoslavia when Belgrade was repeatedly bombed by the Germans; after undergoing poverty, hunger, and forced separations from both of his parents, the family eventually was reunited, immigrating first to New York and then to Chicago.

Simic published his first poems while he was in his early twenties and has enjoyed early and sustained critical praise throughout his career. He is noted for his ability to fashion lyric complexities in a free verse style that retains accessible grammar and diction. His chief figurative strategies are metaphor and image rather than symbolism, and he has attributed influence to both imagism and surrealism. The tone of Simic's poetry is a unique mélange of East European folk or fairy tales, gallows humor, and the absurd and tragic. At the same time, his irony and satire are mixed with a hope for meaning that artistic creation might bring. Some of his poems are dramatic monologues, while others (like "Stone" included here) focus on the importance, mystery, or strangeness of everyday objects. One of Simic's frequent techniques is to highlight vivid details that might stand out in memory and thus would carry great significance, like a child's traumatic glimpses of war. In this manner, Simic protests the physical and spiritual devastation wrought by militaristic and totalitarian governments throughout history and searches for meaning for the human suffering caused by their wars and edicts.

Simic is a very prolific writer and has published more than eighteen books of his own English poetry, as well as translations of poems of Eastern and Central European writers, books of essays and a memoir.

He is long-time resident of New Hampshire where he lives today as a professor emeritus of English at the University of New Hampshire.

Stone

Go inside a stone
That would be my way.
Let somebody else become a dove
Or gnash with a tiger's tooth.
I am happy to be a stone.

From the outside the stone is a riddle:
No one knows how to answer it.
Yet within, it must be cool and quiet
Even though a cow steps on it full weight,
Even though a child throws it in a river;
The stone sinks, slow, unperturbed
To the river bottom
Where the fishes come to knock on it
And listen.

I have see sparks fly out
When two stones are rubbed,
So perhaps it is not dark inside after all;
Perhaps there is a moon shining
From somewhere, as though behind a hill —
Just enough light to make out
The strange writings, the star-charts
On the inner walls.

by Charles Simic
(in *What the Grass Says*, 1967)

Introduction to "Stone"

"Stone" is an example of one of Simic's object poems in which the item he describes takes on surreal, fairy-tale like qualities and, in so doing, piques our imaginations about the ordinary world around us. The poem is written in **free verse** and colloquial English and makes less use of sound to convey its meanings than the other five poems in the introductory section of the poetry toolbox. Instead, the speaker addresses us in a friendly, almost nonchalant **voice** and explains his thinking mostly through short evocations of **imagery** that would be at home in a child's storybook — the dove, the gnashing tiger, the obtuse cow, the moon shining beyond the hill, and the child and his or her river with the fish swimming in it. The poem's **tone** is likewise gentle and non-directive; its opening imperative ("Go inside a stone") is immediately mediated by the qualifying "that would be *my* way / Let somebody else become a dove" (emphasis mine). Thus the speaker is encouraging his audience to listen to his musings but also to imagine their own "way" in life.

The poem is arranged in three stanzas that operate by contrast: the first stanza offers a surprising contrast between the speaker's choice of a self **metaphor** and seemingly more exciting choices that others might make; the second begins the contrast between the placid outward surface of a stone and its inner life, and the third finishes the contrast, ending with a surprising turn that transforms our idea of the "stone" from something that is static and mundane to something that is filled with mysterious, intelligent purpose. For me personally, the stone with its "strange writings, the star-charts / On the inner walls" reminds me of the Tardis in the BBC science fiction series *Dr. Who*; from the outside, the Tardis is a small London police call box, but on the inside it is a time-warping intergalactic spaceship (apologies to any fans of the show if I haven't worded that precisely). In other words, the inside of the stone, with its allusion to mysterious adventure, feels bigger to me than its outside. Perhaps then one of the **themes** of the poem is that

even though we may not always be able to escape or explain suffering or oppression (here depicted in the forms of the cow and the child), we can create for ourselves an inner universe of great vastness and beauty.

Previewing the Poem

Free writing:

- If a genie were to give you the power to turn into one specific animal, plant, or object in nature whenever you felt like it, what would you choose? Write without stopping for ten minutes to describe and explain your choice. Be ready to share your ideas with classmates afterwards.

Video introductions to the poem (students will need a copy of the poem to follow along with all but the first of these):

- Video 1 is 1:16 live recording of the poet reading with words of the text superimposed:

http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/pe11.rla.genre.poetry.si mstone/stone-by-charles-simic/

- Video 2 is slightly over a minute; poet David J. Bauman reads the poem with a more animated interpretation than does Simic in video 1. Bauman filmed this by a river holding a stone, so this actually does give the poem a bit more concreteness. There is no text projected:

https://dadpoet.wordpress.com/2012/04/15/day-15-30-days-30-readings-stone-by-charles-simic/

- Video 3 is a 2:53 oral interpretation of the poem accompanied by flute and mandolins(?) and/or lutes(?). I like the music and think the speaker nicely articulates, but I find watching him a bit distracting and so prefer to listen to this rather than view it:

http://movingpoems.com/2010/04/stone-by-charles-simic/

Video interview of the poet with note-taking practice:

- "Charles Simic: From Belgrade to Poet Laureate"—This is a nine minute, PBS interview and video essay with Simic. He talks about his escape from WWII Europe, his life as an American immigrant and his process of writing poetry, and he reads two of

his poems about war. The video might be particularly meaningful to students in light of the fact that Simic is a non-native speaker of English:
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/video/13

- Beginning students will not be able to catch all the English in the interview, but the images are informative and the questions below will help them to concentrate; they could be used for a listening/note taking exercise. Write the questions on the board before showing the video and ask students to check their answers with a partner afterward:
1) How old was Simic when he first learned to speak English? [15]
2) Where was Simic born? [Yugoslavia]
3) Why did his family leave his country to come to the U.S.? [WW II refugees]
4) What is the name of the first poem he reads? ["Dec. 21"]
5) Where does he live now? [in New Hampshire; in a house by a lake]
(Bonus question) What does Simic think poetry good for? ["to remind people of their own humanity . . . . I am mortal, I exist"]

Activities with the Poem

Free writing:

- How do your thoughts from our pre-writing exercise ("If a genie were to give you the power to turn into one specific animal, plant, or object in nature whenever you felt like it, what would you choose?") compare with Simic's in his poem "Stone"? Do you want to be the same sort of thing or different? Be prepared to talk about your thoughts with a small group of your classmates.

- **Reading comprehension hand-out for pair work, followed by class discussion** [Encourage students at this stage to guess with their partners at unfamiliar words instead of using their dictionaries. Tell them you will help with vocabulary when you go over the poem and handout as a class—see next pages]

"The Stone" by Charles Simic

Answer these questions with your partner. You may continue your answers on the back.

Stanza one:

1) Why do you think that someone would want to be a dove or a tiger?

2) Guessing from the poem only, what do you think "gnash" might mean?

Stanza two:

3) Here is an example of what the word "riddle" means—What gets wetter the more it dries? Answer: a towel. How is the outside of the stone in the poem a "riddle"?

4) Starting with line 4 of the stanza, there are four sets of noun/verb pairings describing what happens to stones. List them here.

5) From the outside, what is life like for stones?

6) List the four adjectives in this stanza that describe the "inside" of the stone. What is the stone's inner world or emotions like, even though bad things happen to it?

7) Do fish really knock on stones and listen to them? What does this image make you think of or imagine?

Stanza three:

8) Write all the words and phrases that you see in this stanza that have to do with light and dark.

9) Explain in your own words what Simic imagines the inside of the stone is like.

10) Why do you think Simic's speaker wants to be a stone? What do you think is a possible message of the poem?

Poem Lesson Assessments

Sentence-level prompts:
- ✓ Using your ideas from your pre-writing exercise about becoming a plant, animal, or object, write at least ten sentences to compare the life of Simic's stone with your life as the magical object you chose. What would be similar and what would be different? In your sentences, use comparison phrases such as "Being an X is like being a Y because they both . . . " and "Being an X is different from being a Y because X does this but Y does that . . ." Use quotation marks ("like this") when you use words directly from the poem.
- ✓ Write two or three sentences to describe the stone from the point of view of each of the following characters in the poem: a dove, a tiger, a cow, a child, a river, a fish, a moon, and another stone. Use this first person sentence model: "I am a dove, and to me a stone is . . . . " Try to use only your own words, not quotes from the poem.

Paragraph-level prompts:
- ✓ After reading Simic's poem, would you also like to be a stone? Write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to explain why or why not. In the body of your paragraph, list your reasons for or against becoming a stone. Use references to the poem (with quotes "like this") to support your ideas. In your concluding sentence, sum up what your main point about whether it would be good to be a stone or not.
- ✓ Write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to compare and contrast the inside and the outside of the stone in Charles Simic's poem. In your topic sentence(s), give the name of the poet, the title of the poem, and the overall idea of the poem. In the body of your paragraph, explain three or four main similarities and/or differences. Use references to the poem (with quotes "like this")

to support your ideas. In your concluding sentence, sum up
what you think is Simic's main reason for comparing the inside
and outside of a stone in his poem.

A Note about the Intermediate Level:

The written assessments at this level call for single paragraphs to paragraph clusters (conceived by me as related body paragraphs with topic sentences but without need for a formal thesis statement, introduction or conclusion); they are based on the California CB 21 ESL rubric at three levels below Eng 1A and would be appropriate for students in AmLa 42, AmLa 32, and ESL 5 and 6 (see Appendix B).

There are at least two thematic poem pairings possible at this level. First, Pastan's "To a Daughter Leaving Home" and Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" both feature a parent or a child nostalgically looking back through time to analyze their filial relationship. Second, Bishop's "Sandpiper" and Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" could be compared as nature poems that specifically use birds to also make statements about art. Like the intermediate level itself, the difficulty of the poems here vary greatly, so consider carefully the approximate English levels of your individual class; while the subject of each poem is concrete, vocabulary and syntax ramp up a great deal between Pastan and Stevens.

The assignments with Bishop's poem, unlike any of the others in the poetry toolbox, are an example of how some professors are currently using poetry in other subject areas outside of language and literature (see the report "The Research is In" for more on this). Science professors, for instance, are using poetry writing assignments with their students not for literary explication but to give them practice with data collection and research reporting, with illustrating a scientific phenomenon, and with synthesizing observations and making new associations to understand what is familiar in a novel way. The activities here for "Sandpiper" allow students to practice listening, reading for main ideas, note taking, and writing as preparation for participating in an informational content area class instead of for a literature class.

Linda Pastan, b. 1932

Linda Pastan's poems illuminate the importance and poignancy of women's lives, their roles in the family, and their feminist insight. Domestic life and the experiences of childhood, marriage, birth, parenting, midlife, grief, death, and loss are the themes of much of her work. Her poems are written in free verse and known for their direct, narrative style. Students are often tempted to confuse a poem's speaker with the actual poet; in this case, and unlike her contemporary poet **Charles Simic**, who uses narrative masks in his poems, Pastan does plum the biographical material of her own life, making the first person speaker in her poems closely aligned with the "I" of the poet herself.

Pastan was born in the Bronx, New York City, and is of Jewish descent, but she spent most of her adult life in Maryland. She successfully wrote poetry in college (in fact, when she was a senior at Radcliff College in 1954 she won a poetry award from *Mademoiselle* magazine, famously beating Sylvia Plath in doing so), but she gave up writing poems for more than ten years to raise her family, a decision she later regretted. She has written many essays and more than twelve books of poetry and was named the 1991 poet laureate of Maryland. In recent years she has earned many other major awards and prizes. Incidentally, Rachel Pastan, her daughter who inspired the poem included here ("To a Daughter Leaving Home"), has become a successful writer in her own right with three published novels to date.

To a Daughter Leaving Home

When I taught you
at eight to ride
a bicycle, loping along
beside you
as you wobbled away
on two round wheels,
my own mouth rounding
in surprise when you pulled
ahead down the curved
path of the park,
I kept waiting
for the thud
of your crash as I
sprinted to catch up,
while you grew
smaller, more breakable
with distance,
pumping, pumping
for your life, screaming
with laughter,
the hair flapping
behind you like a
handkerchief waving
goodbye.

by Linda Pastan
(1988, *The Imperfect Paradise*)

Introduction to "To a Daughter Leaving Home"

This lyric poem makes a very accessible introduction to poetry for the intermediate level student: although the emotions it evokes are subtle and complex, the **extended metaphor** of learning to ride a bicycle as a figure for gaining adult freedom and independence is connected to a concrete, recognizable parent-child interaction that many students will be able to identify with. Pastan's poem is in **free verse** but is unified by gentle elements of **alliteration** (repetition of initial sounds, e.g. "path of the park"), **assonance** (repetition of vowel sounds, e.g. "I," "ride," and "bicycle" of lns. 1-3), **consonance** (repetition of consonant sounds, e.g. "loping along" and "wobbled" of lns. 3 and 5) and **inner rhyme** (rhymed words inside lines, e.g. "my mouth rounding") that give the poem as a whole a sense of "rightness of fit." The poem is one long, grammatically correct sentence, with the line "I kept waiting" at the center of the poem being the independent clause around which the entire piece is built. Pastan's use of **enjambment** (lines broken in grammatically unusual places rather than at the end of clauses) gives a meditative feel to each short line and helps imbue the poem with a greater sense of import than the mere retelling of a story about a child learning to ride a bicycle would carry alone.

Unlike **William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost,** or other poets of "high" modernism, the poet doesn't try to cloak the true object of her meditation under layers of ambiguity or irony; she tells us in her title— "To a Daughter Leaving Home"—that this is a message purportedly directed to a child who is taking the large step of leaving her family of origin. Consequently, we can easily infer that the poem will probably carry emotional elements of reminiscence, advice, celebration, and/or loss. In this directness, I think that Pastan's art shows in the way that she overlays the simple memory of a child's joy at learning to ride the bike with the parent's own, more complex **point of view**. As the action takes on symbolic weight in retrospect, Pastan avoids mawkish

sentiment by contrasting the daughter's rising exhilaration with the mother's own anxiety and dawning awareness of the passing of time. The phrases "pumping / for your life, screaming / with laughter" carry connotations of both the terrors and of the ecstasies the daughter will find in her new life beyond her mother's home, while the **simile** at the end of the poem ("the hair flapping / behind you like a / handkerchief waving / goodbye") closes the lyric with a surprising and memorable image. This image is doubly nostalgic because it refers back to a time when people had handkerchiefs to wave goodbye with from more "romantic" conveyances of train or ship rather than car, bus, or airplane.

Previewing the Poem

Free writing:

- The title of this poem is "To a Daughter Leaving Home." Although we all "leave home" every time we go somewhere, in English often the phrase "leaving home" means the specific time when a grown child moves out of his or her parents' house in order to go to college, to move to another city for work, to get married, etc. What kind of thoughts, feelings, and/or advice do you think that a poem with this title might contain? Write about this for ten minutes without stopping and be ready to share your ideas with your classmates afterwards.

- [Almost 5 minutes long, this video is worth it because this dad's got a sense of humor and does a pretty good job of filming and editing, as he puts it, "The trials and tribulations of learning to ride a bike. Crying included": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qTVa92mJeE] Free write for ten minutes about this video to answer one or more of the following questions: What did the video make you think about or feel? What did it remind you of from your own life? What do you think the poem we are going to read will be about? Be prepared to share your ideas with classmates when you are done.

Vocabulary exercise:

- Students could certain guess these words from context, but you may wish to pre-teach the following words: loping, wobbled, thud, sprinted, pumping (in the bicycle riding sense), flapping and handkerchief. If you have time, you could give one of each of these vocabulary words on an index card to a team of students; then, the team looks up its word and acts it out or draws it on board while the class guesses the word by choosing from a master list of the words which you have written on the board.

Grammatical review:

- adverbial clauses and participial phrases

Video introductions to the poem:

- Video one is a lovely "kinetic typographic" rendition of the poem—unfortunately, it leaves out several lines and has short section where there appears to be a technical error and we are left with a gap; nevertheless, I think it still makes a very nice introduction to the feeling of the poem; the class could watch it first before looking at the text of the poem:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cs125nm1mw

- Video two is an audio clip of Garrison Keillor reading the poem on his *Writer's Almanac* radio program at the 3:30 mark; students could follow along with their own copy of the poem and/or look at your screen projection of the poem on the *Writer's Almanac* page:

http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2013/05/24

Activities with the Poem

Free writing:

- Look back at your ideas about what kinds of thoughts, feelings and advice would be in a poem called "To a Daughter Leaving Home." Write for ten minutes to compare your predictions with what happens in Pastan's poem.

Pair work to class discussion:

- [Give students the grammar handout on pages 131-2. When they have finished, use the whiteboard or overhead projector to fill in the blanks with them, eliciting the general meanings of the individual clauses and phrases as you go.]

- With your partner, make verb chart listing the actions taken by (or implied) by the mother and by the daughter. What do you notice when you compare the verbs? [By my count, there are five actions by the mother and six or seven actions that can be attributed to the daughter.] For example:

Mother	Daughter
taught	wobbled away
loped	pulled ahead

- Answer these questions with your partner and give some words from the poem for each question to show how you came up with your answer:

1) How does the daughter feel?

2) How does the mother feel?

3) What bigger ideas might the bicycle represent?

4) If you were the daughter given this poem, how would you feel?

5) If there is secret (not obvious) advice from the mother to the daughter in this poem, what do you think that it is?

Listening practice:

- Listen several times to the recording of Garrison Keillor reading the poem. Circle two examples of each of the following on your copy of the poem:

  1) alliteration (repetition of initial sounds, e.g. "path of the park")

  2) assonance (repetition of vowel sounds, e.g. "I," "ride," and "bicycle" of lns. 1-3)

  3) consonance (repetition of consonant sounds, e.g. "loping along" and "wobbled" of lns. 3 and 5)

"To a Daughter Leaving Home" by Linda Pastan

Copy the lines of the poem in order below:

1) adverbial clause and prepositional phrase

_____

2) participial phrase

_____

3) adverbial clause and prepositional phrase

_____

4) participial phrase

_____

5) adverbial clause and prepositional phrase

_____

[I kept waiting / for the thud / of your crash]

6) adverbial clause

_____

7) adverbial clause

_____

8) participial phrase

_____

9) participial phrase

_____

10) participial phrase

_____

11) participial phrase

_____

12) participial phrase

_____

13) participial phrase

_____

Poem Lesson Assessments

Paragraph-level prompts:

✓ Write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to paraphrase and explain Linda Pastan's poem "To a Daughter Leaving Home." In your topic sentence(s), give the name of the poet, the title of the poem, and the overall idea of the poem. In your paragraph explain the entire poem in your own words. In your concluding sentence, sum up what you think is Pastan's main point in the poem.

✓ Based on our class discussions, write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to defend what you think is a main message of "To a Daughter Leaving Home." For example, is the poem a warning about the way that time passes quickly? Is it about the fact that growing up is both happy and sad? Or that children and parents often view the same event from different points of view? In your topic sentence, state the poem's title, author, and the message you will describe. In the body of your paragraph give specific evidence from the poem to support your topic sentence. Evidence could be taken from the poet's word choices, grammar, images, or even sounds. End the paragraph with a concluding thought about the message you have explained from the poem.

Paragraph cluster prompts:

✓ Write two paragraphs of at least eight sentences each to contrast the points of view of the mother and daughter in Linda Pastan's poem. In the topic sentence(s) of your first paragraph, give the name of the poet, the title of the poem and the overall idea of the poem; then name the person whose point of view you will be explaining first. In the topic sentence of your second paragraph, you need only state the identity of the second person. Support your ideas with specific references to the poem (using quotes

"like this"). In your concluding sentence of the second paragraph, sum up how you think the mother's and daughter's points of view are different.

✓ Write two paragraphs of at least eight sentences each to respond to the indirect advice given by the mother to the daughter in Linda Pastan's poem. In the topic sentences of your first paragraph, give the name of the poet, the title of the poem and the overall idea of the poem. Then explain your own thoughts and feelings about what it might feel like if you were the daughter given the poem "To a Daughter Leaving Home." In your second paragraph, give your thoughts and ideas about what sorts of things you would like such a poem from your own parent to say or what you would like to write in such a note to your own child.

Robert Hayden, 1913-1980

Robert Hayden is an African-American poet known for his elegiac, lyrical poems that use collective and personal history to bring a sense of the past meaningfully into the present. One of his most well-known longer poems, "Middle Passage," retells the stories of slave ships, including the rebellion on the *Amistad*. Typically blending classical allusions (in the case of "Middle Passage," hymns and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) with formal structure and imaginative attempts to give voice to those who have been voiceless, Hayden strove to give American black identity a sense of its own past, to correct racial stereotypes, and to open his readers to a sense of universal connection with those different from themselves.

Hayden has achieved what is likely a lasting place in the canon of American poets, but he was somewhat neglected by critics during most of his lifetime. Raised in the Detroit area, his mother and father were largely absent, and he was brought up by adoptive parents (to whom the included poem "Those Winter Sundays" is a personal tribute). Immediately after college in the Depression years, he worked for the WPA (Federal Writers Project) and researched the Underground Railroad and anti-slavery figures in Michigan. His continuing interest in this topic can be seen in his many later poems celebrating such African American figures as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Bessie Smith. Hayden won a few poetry awards (and in 1976 was the first African American to be chosen as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress—what would later be termed Poet Laureate), but he also toiled in obscurity for much of his career, teaching English full-time at Fisk University in Nashville and then at the University of Michigan until the end of his life. In 2013, however, the publisher Liveright brought out an edition of *Collected Poems* in recognition of Hayden's 100· birthday. It seems likely that Hayden's poetry will continue to find an appreciative audience in the twenty-first century.

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

by Robert Hayden
(first published 1962, *Ballad of Remembrance*)

Introduction to "Those Winter Sundays"

Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" is surely one of the loveliest lyrics in the American poetry canon. Like **Linda Pastan**'s "To a Daughter Leaving Home," the poem encapsulates a complexity of emotions that arise in parent/child relationships; also like Pastan's poem, one of the main challenges "Those Winter Sundays" will present to the intermediate-level student is untangling the intricacies of its syntax. The poem's three stanzas take the audience on a more convoluted emotional journey than Pastan's poem does, however. Stanza one enlists our sympathies for a hardworking father who performs the thankless job of warming the house before the rest of the family wakes, while in stanza two, the hint of violence in the "blueblack" (black and blue?) cold of the earlier stanza is made more vivid by the "chronic angers of that house," and our sympathies are also extended to the younger version of the speaker. Finally, stanza three presents the poignant sense of the speaker's belated realization of his own youthful callousness and of his father's love that was expressed in consistent self-sacrifice rather than, perhaps, words. The father remains an imperfect figure, but so does the ungrateful younger self, and we are left with a palpable sense of regret that may cause us to remember the ways that we also were "indifferent" to those who took care of us.

Hayden's poem is in **free verse**, but he has used a myriad of poetic devices to make the sounds and themes of this poem cohere and these elements can help you illustrate the ways poets marry sound to sense. There are a number of qualities that make the lyric sonnet-like and lend it a formal tone: 1) it has 14 lines, 2) its lines are ten syllables and tend towards the **iambic** (accented syllable followed by unaccented syllable), and 3) it ends with a couplet, of sorts, that pulls the poem together in an epiphanic revelation. The tendency towards iambic beats serves to emphasize moments where Hayden swerves from the pattern, such as the three stressed syllables in a row in the "banked fires blaze" at the end of the first stanza. The **consonance** of the hard

"k" sound through the first two stanzas of the poem might mimic the sound of a crackling fire, and there is **alliteration** throughout the poem as well (e.g. the above "banked . . . blaze," and "weekday weather"). Students could be introduced to the idea of **synesthesia** (words generally associated with one of the five senses used to describe a sensation that would come from another) with the phrases "blueblack cold" and "cold splintering, blazing" and to **metonymy** (a word substituted for something else that it is closely associated with) with the "house" in line 9 indicating the family that inhabits it. Very careful readers might note the religious allusions in the hints "Sundays," the "polished . . . good shoes," and "love's austere and lonely offices" (in reference to the formal, liturgical actions performed by a priest) that gently align the father's actions with that of a minister going about his or her religious duties. Even Hayden's common diction, such as the small word "too" coming after the word "Sundays" in the first line, carries meaningful import that could illustrate for your students the poet's careful craft (the father got up early on days one through six of the week as well, thus increasing our respect for him). You will not have time, of course, to uncover every aspect of this poem with your students, but Hayden's verse is a wonderful example of the ways a poem can yield great riches of insight to careful readers.

Previewing the Poem

Free writing:

- Think of one or more things that a parent, grandparent, sibling or other older person did for you often when you were a child. Were you always thankful for the things they did, or did you sometimes not pay attention or even care very much about what they did? If you could, would you express thanks to them for their help in the past now that you are older? What would you say? Write for ten minutes about this topic and be ready to share some of your ideas with a classmate.

Vocabulary exercise:

- [Write a brief definition of the following words on one side of the board and make a list of the words in a different order next to them. Give students a few moments in groups with their dictionaries or mobile devices to figure out how to match the words and definitions: to bank (to pile up a fire so that the inside wood or coals will burn slowly but not go out during the night), to blaze (to burn brightly), chronic (serious and lasting a long time), indifferent (not being interested or concerned), austere (difficult), and offices (religious duties performed in a church service by a priest). Leave the matched words and definitions on the board throughout the discussion.]

Video introduction to the poem:

- This one minute animation with text is a sensitive interpretation that will help your students to grasp the overall meaning of the poem even if they don't recognize some of the more advanced vocabulary. It's worth playing more than once: https://vimeo.com/7441917

Activities with the Poem

■ **Reading comprehension hand-out for pair work, followed by class discussion** [See handout on page 141—encourage students at this stage to guess with their partners at unfamiliar words (those in addition to the key vocabulary you have already previewed on the board) instead of using their dictionaries. Tell them you will help with vocabulary when you go over the poem and handout as a class].

Class activity:

■ [Going deeper—After students read the poem and go over the reading comprehension handout with a partner, work through the poem as a class by paraphrasing the poem's four sentences into shorter units of meaning on the whiteboard, making the syntax conform to regular spoken English. If you wish to point out **synesthesia, metonymy** or religious **allusion**, now would be a good opportunity.]

Listening practice:

■ [As a class, listen several times to Hayden reading the poem: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/audioitem/2778 .]

■ Circle two examples of each of the following on your copy of the poem:

1) alliteration (repetition of initial sounds, e.g. "<u>w</u>eekday <u>w</u>eather")

2) consonance(repetition of consonant sounds, e.g. "<u>cra</u><u>ck</u>ed hands that a<u>ch</u>ed")

3) strongly stressed or emphasized words (the poets voice gets louder or stays longer on those syllables)

"Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden

Answer these questions with your partner. You may continue your answers on the back.

Stanza one:

1) In your own words, write some sentences to explain what you think the father did in the mornings.

2) What words or phrases in this stanza show that what the father did was difficult?

Stanza two:

3) In your own words, write some sentences about how you think the son acted in the mornings.

4) What words or phrases in this stanza give you an idea about what the son's feelings were?

Stanza three:

5) What two things did the father do for the child?

6) How did the child respond to what the father did?

7) How does the speaker feel and think *now* about his father and himself as a child? What words in the poem make you think that?

8) Looking at the whole poem, what are some details we can guess about (a) the father, (b) the speaker as a boy, and (c) the speaker now?

9) Looking at the whole poem, what do you think might be one of the messages that Hayden is trying to tell us through this poem?

Poem Lesson Assessments

Oral interpretation:

✓ Listen to the recording of Robert Hayden reading the poem again and/or to the animated video interpretation. Then, mark the words that <u>you</u> would like to emphasize in the poem. You will perform it for the class (or in a large group subset of the class) at our next meeting.

Paragraph-level prompts:

✓ Write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to paraphrase and explain Robert Hayden's poem "Those Winter Sundays." In your topic sentence(s), give the name of the poet, the title of the poem, and the overall idea of the poem. In your paragraph explain the entire poem in your own words. In your concluding sentence, sum up what you think is Hayden's main point in the poem.

✓ Based on our class discussions, write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to defend what you think is a main message of "Those Winter Sundays." For example, is the poem about the importance of being thankful? Is it about the ways that love can be shown in faithful action instead of words? Or is it a sadder message, such as the fact that we can't understand or truly appreciate our parents until it's too late? In your topic sentence, state the poem's title, author, and the message you will describe. In the body of your paragraph give specific evidence from the poem to support your topic sentence. Evidence could be taken from the poet's word choices, grammar, images, figurative language or even sounds. End the paragraph with a concluding thought about the message you have explained from the poem.

Paragraph cluster prompts:

✓ Write two paragraphs of at least eight sentences each to contrast the point of view of the son as a child and the point of view of the son as the adult speaker in Robert Hayden's poem. In the topic sentence(s) of your first paragraph, give the name of the poet, the title of the poem and the overall idea of the poem; then begin to explain how the son viewed his father when he was a boy. In the topic sentence of your second paragraph, you need only begin with the grown up son's perspective on the father. Support your ideas with specific references to the poem (using quotes "like this"). In your concluding sentence of the second paragraph, sum up how you think the older and younger versions of the son see the father differently.

✓ Write two paragraphs of at least eight sentences each to summarize and respond to Robert Hayden's poem "Those Winter Sundays." In the topic sentences of your first paragraph, give the name of the poet, the title of the poem and the overall idea of the poem. Then explain what happens in the poem and some of the main techniques that Hayden uses to communicate his meanings to us (for example, certain word choices, synesthesia, the repetition of particular sounds, etc.). Support your ideas with specific references to the poem (using quotes "like this"). In your second paragraph, give your thoughts and ideas about the poem. Tell how reading the poem made you feel and what it made you think about. In your concluding sentence of the second paragraph, sum up what you think is one of the most important messages of "Those Winter Sundays."

Elizabeth Bishop, 1911-1979

Although she published only 101 poems during her lifetime, Elizabeth Bishop's acclaim has grown steadily since the 1970s, and she is now considered one of our finest—and likely to be one of the most long lasting, canonically-speaking—modernist poets. She was the United States Poet Laureate in 1949 (then called Consultant in Poetry), and winner of a 1955 Pulitzer Prize and 1969 National Book Award, among other recognitions. Her continued rise in esteem is attributable to several facts; among these facts are: 1) the re-examination of poetry by women that came about with the rise of feminism, 2) her similarities with **Robert Frost** in terms of formal structure, vernacular language, and sensibility of the lone individual attempting to make sense of nature outside the bounds of religious thought, and 3) her tragic and sometimes controversial life. Most importantly, however, Bishop's poems continue to strike a chord in her readers of the twenty-first century because they encapsulate what we unconsciously recognize as a kind of contemporary stance; they contain: precise but approachable diction in formal but also subtle rhyme and meter (in other words they *feel* like poems, but not in a musty, heavy-handed way), observation of particular details presented through an understated lens of matter-of-fact commentary, and a gesture towards interpretive meaning and insight that does not (as references to nature in devotional or Romantic poetry would) reach for a broadly transcendent or final meaning.

Bishop lived in many places during her lifetime, and the motifs of travel, exile, dislocation and even loneliness are apparent throughout her poems, along with the lush tropical beauties of Brazil (where she made her home for nearly twenty years) and the austere natural worlds of Nova Scotia and the Atlantic seaboard (where she was born, spent parts of her childhood, and the last decade of her life). She did indeed have a life particularly marked by sadness. Before she was school-aged, her father died and her mother was committed to a mental

institution, so she was raised by two sets of grandparents and an aunt, as she shuttled between Nova Scotia and Massachusetts. She attended college at Vassar and afterward was famously mentored by the modernist poet Marianne Moore, who provided her a model of how to be an independent women poet. Unlike Moore, however, Bishop had a small pension that enabled her to work primarily as a poet without having to earn a living at teaching or other jobs. She lived in New York and Key West and traveled extensively through places like Italy, Ireland, Spain, North Africa, France, and Mexico. Despite her serious alcoholism, she found some stability in Brazil during her relationship with Maria Carlota Soares, a famed Brazilian architect; sadly, Soares committed suicide just as Bishop was beginning to gain serious critical acclaim. Bishop returned to Massachusetts and taught at Harvard in her final years, continuing to garner praise and notice as a poet until her death from an aneurism at age 68.

Sandpiper

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet
of interrupting water comes and goes
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

—Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,
he stares at the dragging grains.

The world is a mist. And then the world is
minute and vast and clear. The tide
is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.
His beak is focussed; he is preoccupied,

looking for something, something, something.
Poor bird, he is obsessed!
The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray,
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

by Elizabeth Bishop
(published 1965, *Questions of Travel*)

Introduction to "Sandpiper"

"Sandpiper" is quintessential Bishop: the poem focuses on the details of the sandpiper's daily existence as it constantly runs along the shoreline looking for microscopic insects and animals while avoiding being swept out to sea by the waves. Through the accretion of sharp images of this creature's life, Bishop suggests possible associations with our own lives without transfiguring the sandpiper into a symbol; that is to say, biological observation of detail from both the poet's and the bird's (supposed) points of view remain paramount in the verse, and the work of constructing a particular theme or message is greatly left up to the reader. Thus, unlike the clear messages strongly suggesting how we should think or feel that poets **Pastan** and **Hayden** left for us at the end of their poems, "Sandpiper" concludes only with a detailed image: "The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray, / mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst." Of course, Bishop does leave us interpretive clues by way of **personification** throughout the poem. Her sandpiper lives a life of "controlled panic," looking for food at the ocean's edge, a "world" that continually alternates between being "a mist" and is then "minute and vast and clear." In its "focus," "preoccu[pation]" and "obsess[ion]" in its unending battle with the waves, we might draw a comparision with the human work of making meaning in a chaotic, constantly changing world, with the importance of being sensitive to the beauty of minute details around us, or even read it as a wry comment by Bishop about herself as a practicing poet.

"Sandpiper" is much more formally constructed than one might guess at first glance. Its five stanzas follow closely to an **abab rhyme scheme**, and each of the first four stanzas follows a pattern of first describing the sandpiper's habitat, then describing the bird's response to it (e.g. "he runs . . . ."); the final stanza reverses this pattern. Bishop's poem also makes a joking **literary allusion** to William Blake's line "to see a world in a grain of sand" in his poem "Auguries of Innocence." She calls the sandpiper "a student of Blake" in line four

and uses the words "world" and "grain" three times each in the poem. Her final image of the grains could be a refusal to "see a world in a grain of sand" and instead to insist upon seeing each detail ("no detail too small") precisely as the thing that it is instead of letting it be subsumed in favor of a larger, superimposed generality (Romantic generalities tended to erase details—such as matters of race, gender and class—that failed to conform to its overall harmonious vision).

Caveat: Unlike the plans for the other poems in the toolbox, I have used this poem as an opportunity for students to practice some broader, nonfiction reading and writing skills rather than focusing solely on the literary critical skills they will need in higher level English courses. The material includes a good deal of introduction to the topic of sandpipers (along with homework and a quiz before the poem is introduced) so that by the time you read the poem in class, students will have a broad context to draw from. The poem itself will be treated more as a piece of literary description than as a poem, per se. Students will practice reading for main ideas, taking notes on details they observe, and writing descriptions in a consistently correct present tense. These ideas were inspired by the research on poetry and science education by Kane and Rule, and by Hanauer ("Poetry").

Previewing the Poem

Grammatical review:

- Consistent present tense for descriptive writing

Pre-writing:

- [Pick an image from the "Grain of Sand Picture Gallery" and show it to the class with captions covered or outside the margins of the projector. Go over several of the pictures and captions when they are finished: http://geology.com/articles/sand-grains.shtml] For ten minutes, free write without stopping to describe what you see in this picture. Be as descriptive as possible and use only present tense. What do you think this is a picture of? Be prepared to talk to a classmate about what you write afterward.

Video introductions to the topic—practicing note taking and using the consistent present tense:

- Video one, "How Nature Works: Barrier Island Foraging Strategies," is from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website. It is seven minutes long and is a great introduction to the concept of shore birds and their habitats. If you wish, you could stop the video around 4:23 to point out to students that this is the bird we will be especially working with. You can merely have the students watch the video, or you could write some of the vocabulary on the board while they watch and ask students to use it in some present tense sentences to describe the action in the video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56eU3KLIKZo
- Video two is simply five minutes of footage of birds (sanderlings, a kind of sandpiper) running back and forth along the waves, doing precisely what Bishop describes in her poem. Tell students to take notes on as many details as they observe about the birds and the ocean. Then ask them to shape their notes into

eight to ten sentences (all in the present tense) to share with classmates. After their group discussions, you could ask for several volunteers to share their sentences on the board: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uh71ExBEXfI

Pre-assignment—practice with reading for the main idea and taking notes (homework and quiz):

- Give each student one large index card and write this URL on the board (or post it if you have a class web page)— http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Sanderling/id. Tell students that they will have a quiz at the next class period over the information on the sanderling on the web page (by Cornell Lab of Ornithology). They are not to try to understand every word but to take notes on what they think are <u>the main ideas</u> about sanderlings, thinking about what kinds of general information they might be asked to know if they were taking a class on biology or ornithology. Tell them they don't need to memorize anything; they can use the notes they wrote on the index card for the quiz. Explain to them that the quiz is really about their ability to find main ideas and take notes, not on what they know about birds!

- At your next class period, give the students the simple quiz below, allowing them to use only the index card they prepared. I recommend you give the students a fairly short amount of time for the quiz (they wrote it down or happen to remember it or they don't). The quiz is meant to be an easy confidence builder as most students will panic and write far too many details. After the quiz, you could briefly go over the answers by showing where they could find the answers to each (most can be found in multiple places) on the web site via the overhead.

Sanderlings Quiz

1) Are scientists worried about the number of sanderlings going down in the world? [No, they are very common]

2) What three colors are sanderlings? [black, white and grey]

3) Where in the world do they breed (makes their nests/lay their eggs)? [high Arctic tundra]

4) Where in the world do they live most of the year? [sandy beaches throughout the New World]

5) What do they eat? [lots of things! different kinds of insects, small crustaceans, and sometimes even plants]

Pre-teach vocabulary:

- Although there are quite a few challenging words, some of them are unimportant in the sense that their broad meanings might be guessed from context. The following eight words are important to Bishop's personification and message but would be extremely difficult to guess from the poem alone: finical, awkward, controlled, panic, drains, focused, preoccupied, obsessed. Students could look them up as part of their homework above or you could designate eight students in class to use English-English dictionaries and write the definitions on the board immediately before going over the poem.

Activities with the Poem

Video introduction of the poem:

- "Where's My Dinner? It Was Here a Second Ago—The Sandpiper's Dilemma"—This is an artistic interpretation of the entire poem with footage of sandpipers at the beach. It is on the NPR science page and features a helpful write-up, as well. It is four minutes long and worth watching more than once. Students will need their own copies of the poem to follow along: http://www.npr.org/sections/krulwich/2013/07/08/200032179/wheres-my-dinner-it-was-here-a-second-ago-the-sandpiper-s-dilemma?utm_source=npr&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=20130708

Reading comprehension hand-out for pair work, followed by class discussion:

- [See page 155—encourage students at this stage to guess with their partners at unfamiliar words (those in addition to the key vocabulary you have already previewed on the board) instead of using their dictionaries. Tell them you will help with vocabulary when you go over the poem and handout as a class].

Pair work to class discussion:

- Take out the notes that you took to describe sand in our pre-writing exercise and the notes you took to describe the sanderling (one kind of sandpiper) in the two videos from yesterday and in your homework on the sanderling website. With your partner, compare the details that you recorded with the details that Bishop includes in her poem. What is similar about your observations? What aspects of the sandpiper's life are most interesting to her? In what ways has Bishop included emotions along with her observations (note the words defined on the board)? Can you make any guesses about the overall

meaning of the poem by thinking about the emotions that Bishop adds to her descriptions?

"Sandpiper" by Elizabeth Bishop

Answer these questions with your partner. You may continue your answers on the back.

Stanza one:

1) What do the first two lines of the stanza describe?

2) Who is "he" and what does "he" do?

Stanza two:

3) Explain in your own words what the first two sentences of this stanza are describing.

4) What does the sandpiper do? Why?

Stanza three:

5) What details does this stanza give about the water, the sand, and the bird? What three things are happening at the same time?

Stanza four:

6) What is Bishop mean when she uses the word "world" in this stanza? What is she describing?

7) What is the sandpiper doing here?

Stanza five:

8) What are/is the "something" the sandpiper is looking for? Why doesn't Bishop use a specific word?

9) What do the last two lines of the poem describe? Why do you think Bishop ends the poem this way instead of with the sandpiper?

10) Looking at the whole poem, what things about this make "Sandpiper" a poem and not just a prose paragraph?

Poem Lesson Assessments

Paragraph-level prompts:

✓ For this assignment, use: 1) the notes that you took to describe sand in our pre-writing exercise, 2) the notes you took to describe the sanderling (one kind of sandpiper) in the two videos from yesterday, and 3) the notes you took for your homework on the sanderling website. Write a twelve sentence paragraph to describe sanderlings and their habitat (where they live). Use only your own notes and words and do not copy from the internet—doing extra research is not needed or desired by your professor. Begin with a topic sentence stating what you will describe. Write your entire paragraph in the present tense. Attach your class notes to your paragraph when you turn it in.

✓ Write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to paraphrase and explain Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Sandpiper." In your topic sentence(s), give the name of the poet, the title of the poem, and the overall idea of the poem. In your paragraph explain the entire poem in your own words. In your concluding sentence, sum up what you think is Bishop's main point in the poem.

Paragraph cluster prompts:

✓ For this assignment, use: 1) the notes that you took to describe sand in our pre-writing exercise, 2) the notes you took to describe the sanderling (one kind of sandpiper) in the two videos from yesterday, and 3) the notes you took for your homework on the sanderling website. Write two paragraphs of at least eight sentences each to compare the details that you recorded with the details that Bishop includes in her poem. In the topic sentences of your first paragraph, give the name of the poet, the title of the poem and the overall idea of the poem. What is similar about your observations? What is different about your observations? Support your ideas with specific references to the poem (using

quotes "like this"). In your second paragraph, explain what emotions you would add to your observations if you were turning your own notes on sanderlings into a poem. End your paragraph with a concluding thought about the value of using emotions when describing something that is factual.

✓ Summarize and respond to Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Sandpiper." In the topic sentences of your first paragraph, give the name of the poet, the title of the poem and the overall idea of the poem. Then explain what happens in the poem and tell what aspects of the sandpiper's life are most interesting to Bishop. In what ways has Bishop included emotions along with her observations? Support your ideas with specific references to the poem (using quotes "like this"). In your second paragraph, give your thoughts and ideas about the poem. Tell how reading the poem made you feel and what it made you think about. In your concluding sentence of the second paragraph, sum up what you think is one of the most important messages of "Sandpiper."

Wallace Stevens, 1879-1955

Like his friend **William Carlos Williams**, Wallace Stevens was the rare poet who enjoyed success in two careers simultaneously. While becoming one of the most critically respected and influential modernist American poets (and winning both the 1955 Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award in doing so), he also had a successful career in the insurance industry, eventually becoming a vice president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Born in Pennsylvania to an artistic but also career-minded family (his father was a lawyer), Stevens studied literature at Harvard and went on to law school in New York before eventually settling on insurance. He became a part of the poetry scene in New York City during his years of study there, making lifelong friendships with other influential poets such as **Williams**, Ezra Pound, and Marianne Moore. Later these friendships were carried on mostly through correspondence, as he married and settled in Hartford, Connecticut, for the rest of his adult life. (And, like **William's** local community of Rutherford, New Jersey, his insurance colleagues had no idea of his poetic endeavors).

Williams can be at times a difficult poet: his subjects are often heady and abstract meditations on perennially classic themes such as the function of poetry, the supreme power of imagination to shape our perspectives, and the importance of finding the beautiful despite the inevitable decay of mortality (he also wrote successful plays and influential essays about poetry). He was a secularist who believed that the promises of religion were alluring but ultimately false and that poetry could be a new kind of religion to give insight and meaning to people's lives. In this sense, he bears some similarity to one of his own chief poetic influences, **Walt Whitman**. Yet Stevens also writes poems filled with visual imagery, unusual words, and musical sounds meant to draw our attention to the surface beauty of physical detail. He tended to write in blank verse or with long, unrhymed sentences and had a wry sense of humor that comes out at unexpected moments. Chiefly he

wished his poetry to help express the importance of acknowledging our desires even though they can never be completely fulfilled. Perhaps one of the reasons he has been so acclaimed by poetry critics is his use of evocative imagery to suggest the range of human hopes and despairs.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V
I do knot know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI
Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird

Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII
O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII
I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX
When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X
At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI
He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.

Once a fear pierced him,
In that the mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

by Wallace Stevens
(first published 1923, *Harmonium*)

Introduction to "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" shows influences of both Japanese **haiku** and of the modernist poetry movement known as **imagism** (see the **Introduction to "Fog,"** the introduction to **William Carlos Williams**, and the **Introduction to "The Red Wheelbarrow"** for some of the basics about imagism). Although we may be tempted as readers to construct a linear narrative out of these thirteen vignettes, this cluster of poems is truly meant to be experienced as a series of images or sensations that tell neither a coherent story nor point to any overarching symbolic meaning. Instead, Stevens presents thirteen perspectives of a very commonplace bird to encourage us to view the world from a stance that is open to a variety of view points and to the multiple and shifting possibilities that art and imagination can reveal to us. Rather than prioritizing or valorizing one perspective, Stevens challenges us with shifting points of view, a mixture of high and low poetic diction and conceits, abrupt juxtapositions of concrete images with abstract ideas, and appeals to the various senses and emotions (including humor). Although the blackbird is not a stable symbol, by the end of the thirteen small pieces it does accrete discoverable traits that can be traced to recurring elements throughout the whole.

So, what are some ideas that become associated with the blackbird? First, the poem seems to indicate that the blackbird is omnipresent throughout the whole range of human experience; this tempts me to make the easy guess that one of its allusions could be to death—the one constant in life and one of many associations Stevens is obviously playing with in his choice of the unlucky number thirteen and of a bird with the doleful color of black. Yet the bird could just as easily point towards some other, unnamable, mysterious (and secular, knowing Stevens) element running through all things. The poem is replete with references to what is known ("I know noble accents"), what is

unknown ("I do not know which to prefer"), and to things on the very edge of what we can perceive (section IX reads, "When the blackbird flew out of sight, / It marked the edge / Of one of many circles"; in section VI the blackbird is a "shadow" and "an indecipherable cause"). The blackbird also seems to be an element of disruption coming from the natural world to trouble human autonomy—for example, in the famous section IV it enters into the unity of "A man and a woman" and in section IX it is a "shadow" again, this time causing a "fear that pierced" the unnamed man riding in a protective "glass coach" that allows him to see nature but keeps him safe from it, as well. Finally, the blackbird could be a reprimand of our human tendency to privilege the ideally beautiful over the mundane beauties all around us (a common theme among poets—see also **William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow"** and **Elizabeth Bishop's "Sandpiper"** for examples of poems that celebrate the mundane). Sections V and VII particularly contrast the "beauty" of an everyday blackbird versus the beauty of "golden birds" we might "imagine" (and VII descries "thin men of Haddam," a town in Stevens' home state of Connecticut and also sounding a bit like "Adam" in Genesis). Consequently, this poem is "about" our process of finding and creating meaning from language and the world as much as it is about an overarching theme or message that the blackbird might represent. If you can convey that to your students, teaching "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" could be an opportunity to empower them with some creative freedom, especially if they have previously associated poetry with the old, zero sum game of "guess what's in the professor's head."

Caveat: This is the longest poem in the toolbox. Even if you don't do all the preview activities, reading and discussing the poem will certainly take two class periods, if not three.

Previewing the Poem

Free writing (pairs to class discussion):

- Write for ten minutes without stopping about the bird in this picture. What do you see? How does the image make you feel? What ideas do you associate with it? Be ready to share your ideas with classmates. [When students have finished, create a brainstormed list on the board of the physical details, thoughts, and feelings that students have associated with the picture. This could lead to a discussion of the way one image could be viewed from multiple perspectives.]

- [Show the students the first stanza of the poem ONLY. Tell them that it somewhat corresponds to the form of the English version of the haiku—roughly 7/5/7 syllables per its three lines, focusing on nature and the seasons, and featuring a contrast between two differing images (in this case the still and white snowy mountains and the black and moving eye of the blackbird).] Look at your classmates' ideas about the picture of the blackbird that your teacher wrote on the whiteboard. Using

the first stanza of Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" as a model, compose another haiku-type poem about the blackbird. If you can, try to make it a different "way of looking" at the blackbird than the first stanza. Be prepared to share your haiku with classmates.

Video introductions to the poem:

- Video one is approximately 2:30. It presents a very clear reading interpretation over a stylized text with small illustrations. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaIX2VMBlcY
- Video two is approximately 4 minutes. It is a well-produced slide show with interpretive pictures for each stanza; the slow and very dramatic reading presents a good sense of the emotions of the poem, but there is no text, so students will have to follow along with their own copies of the poem. http://www.thelarkascending.org/TLA2_BoB/BoB_Assets/BoBmovieFrame.html

Activities with the Poem

Activity for group work, followed by class discussion:

- After initial readings of the poem, divide the class into thirteen groups of two or three (perhaps putting three people into some of the more difficult and abstract stanzas, such as V-VIII). Give every student thirteen copies of the blank annotation handout (printed front to back) on the pagesn169-70. If you have a set of class dictionaries, hand those out as well. In their groups, they will fill in the handout for their assigned stanza. You will probably need to assist a few of the groups as they are working, but try to remind them that they can be creative in their interpretations. Then, ask each group to use the white board or overhead to teach the other groups their stanza. (This works best if you have an overhead; make sure to tell the students they'll be doing this and ask for the student with the best handwriting to be the one to show the group's work). As students listen to the other groups' presentations, ask them to fill in their blank handouts for each stanza. Thus at the end of the exercise students will have their own annotated copy of every stanza.

Class activity:

- [Going deeper—Keep a list of the groups' guesses about different meanings of the blackbird for question (F) on their handout. When all thirteen groups have finished their presentations, write the guesses on the whiteboard and invite students to re-read the poem as a whole again. Then ask students to point out recurring images and sensations in the poem, leading the discussion back to the list of ideas from question F and trying to add more possibilities.]

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens
Stanza # _____ (Accurately copy your stanza line by line below and then follow the directions on the back. Some lines may be left blank.)

1)_____

2)_____

3)_____

4)_____

5)_____

6)_____

7)_____

A) <u>Underline</u> each new word. Write a definition of each new word under the line where it appears.

B) Make an X over words that might connect to time or to a season.

C) What is the blackbird doing in your stanza?

D) In your own words below, write a brief description of what is happening in this stanza.

E) What emotions do you feel in this stanza?

F) Looking at the clues you found from A-E above, make some guesses about what idea or feeling the blackbird might be referring to in this stanza.

Poem Lesson Assessments

Paragraph-level prompts:

✓ Write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to paraphrase and explain Wallace Steven's poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." In your topic sentence(s), give the name of the poet, the title of the poem, and the overall idea of the poem. Don't try to mention all thirteen stanzas, but talk about some of the different kinds of stanzas and the effect of the whole. In your concluding sentence, sum up what you think is Stevens' main point in the poem.

✓ Based on our class discussions and the notes you took on each stanza of the poem, write a paragraph of at least twelve sentences to defend what you think is a main message of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." For example, is the poem about the different ways that we can see the same thing? Is it about how death, or the passing of time, or something even more mysterious is always a part of our lives? Or is it about how important it is to notice the beauty and power in the everyday things around us that we may not think are valuable? In your topic sentence, state the poem's title, author, and the message you will describe. In the body of your paragraph give specific evidence from the poem to support your topic sentence. Evidence could be taken from the poet's word choices, grammar, images, figurative language, or even sounds. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem. End the paragraph with a concluding thought about the message you have explained from the poem.

Paragraph cluster prompts:

✓ Choose two of your favorite stanzas in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Based on our class discussions and the notes you took on each stanza of the poem, write a paragraph of at least ten sentences for <u>each</u> stanza. In the topic sentences of

your first paragraph, give the name of the poet, the title of the poem and the overall idea of the poem. In each paragraph, explain the main image of one stanza and why you like it. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem. End the second paragraph with a concluding thought about the poem as a whole.

✓ Choose one stanza from "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" that you don't like very much. Write a paragraph of at least eight sentences to explain what happens in the stanza, its feelings and images, and why you don't like it. Then, write a second paragraph of at least eight sentences in which you argue why the stanza is well written, even if you don't personally like it. Evidence could be taken from the poet's word choices, grammar, images, figurative language, or even sounds. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem. End the paragraph with a concluding thought about the whole poem.

A Note About the Advanced Level:

The poems their activities at this level are arranged so they might be taught in two thematic sets: Stalling's "Fairy-Tale Logic" and Haymon's "The Witch Has Told You a Story" are treated together and focus on the topic of fairy tales and the cultural lessons they teach (particularly to women); Frost's "Design" and Dickinson's "A Spider Sewed at Night" and "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball" are included separately but share some activities so that they might easily be taught back to back. All three poems treat spiders as metaphors for art and use spiders as the vehicle for questions about the existence and purposes of God. The level also contains a poem that could be dropped into a course singly, Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." Generally, the advanced poems are similar in syntactical and vocabulary levels to those in the intermediate section, but they are more abstract in themes, e.g. dealing with existential fear, identifying trustworthiness or ambivalence in point of view, asking philosophical and religious questions as to the existence of God, and adding the interpretive, meta-cognitive level of considering the role of art and the artist.

The written assessments at this level call for paragraph clusters (conceived by me as related body paragraphs with topic sentences but without need for a formal thesis statement, introduction or conclusion) to standard essays; they are based on the California ESL CB 21 rubric at one or two levels below Eng 1A and would be appropriate for students in AmLa 43, AmLa 33, and English 67 and 68 (see Appendix B). Since the essay options are available for practice with academic writing, I have designed the paragraph clusters at this level to allow for a bit more freedom of expression and creativity in students' responses to the poems (while still tying them closely to poem response and interpretation). They may also be useful for students who are advanced readers but have not received instruction in essay composition yet.

Walt Whitman, 1819-1892

Along with **Emily Dickinson**, Walt Whitman is considered one of our two greatest American poets of the nineteenth-century (if not of all time). Whitman's characteristic style of addressing his readers directly, his long catalogs of persons, places, and events, his romantic lyricism and expansiveness coupled with vernacular diction, irregular verse form, and explicit sexual references are all usually hailed by critics as the first instances of what would become literary modernism. Poets as diverse as **Wallace Stevens**, Ezra Pound, and **William Carlos Williams** all cite his poetry as central to their own.

Whitman worked at many jobs over the course of his lifetime, and, while his poems were considered too coarse by most of his fellow poets and the reading public during much of his life, he perceived his central calling to be America's poet and remained prolific until his death at the age of 71. Whitman grew up in a poor, working class family in Brooklyn, New York, and drifted in and out of such jobs as journalism, type setting, political lobbying, carpentry and government clerkships in New York and Washington D.C. Self-educated after the age of twelve, he was particularly influenced by subjects as diverse as Egyptology, astronomy, the writings of Emerson and other Transcendentalists, Quakerism, and the opera. In 1855, he self-published his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The volume also contained what would become known as the "1855 Preface," the very influential essay in which he set forth a poetic manifesto that he remained faithful to over the course of the next forty years. In short, Whitman believed the poet should be a priest of sorts for the common people, with the goal of liberating their spirits so that they would become their own priests. Over the course of his lifetime Whitman continually expanded the list of poems included in *Leaves of Grass*, publishing five editions and expanding the volume's length by fourfold.

Whitman served as a volunteer nurse in Washington D.C. during the Civil War, and some of his most iconic poems deal with his

rejection of slavery, with the suffering of the soldiers that he observed, and with the assassination of President Lincoln (in particular, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and "O Captain! My Captain!"). Other well-known poems celebrate nineteenth-century advances in connective technology (for instance, "Passage to India" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"), the sensual joys of the human body and sexuality, and the importance of individual, lived experience over second-hand knowledge. Ultimately, the freedom and potential of what he hoped would be an increasingly democratic American society was his greatest theme.

"When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
    measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much
    applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

by Walt Whitman
(1865, *Leaves of Grass*)

Introduction to "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"

Given Whitman's frequent recourse to archaic, nineteenth-century diction and convoluted, literary syntax (not to mention the astonishing length of many of his poems), "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" is one of his shortest and most straightforward pieces that will still give students a sense of some of the poet's best known traits. The eight line poem features his typical use of **anaphora** (repetition of words or phrases, often at the beginning of clauses—in this case, "When I"), his declamatory style (though no apostrophe, or address to the reader in this one), and his biblical-sounding cadence and sonorous, **assonance** (repetition of vowel sounds), **consonance** (repetition of consonant sounds) and **alliteration** (repetition of initial sounds). (Note, for example, the "proofs," and "figures" "before me" in line two, the "diagrams, to add, divide, and measure" in line three, and the recurring "I" sound in "rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself" of line six.)

Whitman sets the stage of the dull astronomy lecture in his first four lines, burying the independent clause—"I became tired and sick"—of the one sentence poem in the very middle. The speaking "I" of the poem is the usual Whitmanian, **Transcendentalist** speaker who valorizes the infinitely preferable "mystical moist night air" and the "perfect silence" of the "stars" over the noisy, stuffy "lecture-room" of the "learn'd astronomer." Thus the poem is a study in contrasts between the first four lines and the second: civilization vs. the natural world, formal education (or, book learning, as Huckleberry Finn would put it) vs. personal experience, and controlled order vs. "mystical" disorder, to name a few. I suspect that Whitman even slips in a few **puns** in this small poem. In line 5, "How soon unac*count*able I became" (emphasis mine) could refer to all the counting going on in the "proofs" and "figures" and math of lines 3 and 4. The "moist" air of the

speaker's walk under the stars could be a rebuke to the implicitly dry, or dull, lecture room. In any case, Whitman's short comparative poem begins with "the learn'd astronomer" and his applauding admirers and concludes with the speaker's awed response to the "silence" and the "stars" themselves. His message is an entirely un-ironic, unambiguous, and non-ambivalent (this means YOU, **Robert Frost** and **Emily Dickinson**) invitation for his readers to likewise reject what he believed to be the narrow confines of accepted norms and to lose (and thus find) themselves in natural beauties of the world.

Previewing the Poem

Free Writing:

- Write for ten minutes without stopping about the last time you saw something in nature that you thought was amazing. You can write about a personal experience (such as visiting the ocean or the desert) or something that you saw in film or video (such as a nature program). Be prepared to share your ideas with classmates.

- In school, what role do you think emotions should play in learning something new? Should teachers focus only on facts, or is it sometimes good to involve the students' emotions? What are some examples of subjects or situations when emotions should or shouldn't be appealed to during a lesson? Write for ten minutes without stopping to answer these questions and be prepared to share your ideas with classmates.

Grammar review:

- adverbial clauses
- passive voice

Vocabulary preview:

- Most new words may be guessed from context. The words "astronomy (+ -er)" and "mystical" (mysterious and spiritual) are important enough to warrant a few minutes eliciting general definitions from classmates for the whiteboard. (You could ask if anyone has taken astronomy and let them tell about what they did in the class.) You could also point out that "learn'd" is a contraction for "learned" and help them guess the meaning of that adjective, as well.

Video introductions to the poem:

- Video one was made by the American Museum of Natural History. Neal deGrasse Tyson reads the poem over music and with animated views of the stars (no text): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3r_HVGFI6fM
- Video two is a well-constructed, animated interpretation of the poem featuring the text with visual examples of graphs and background sounds of a lecture hall: https://vimeo.com/36368823

Activities with the Poem

Responsive writing:

- Free write for ten minutes to answer these questions about the poem—What do you think about the "I" who speaks in this poem? Do you sympathize with him? On the other hand what might you say to the speaker if you were his mom or dad and paying for the college lectures that he "wanders" out of? Be ready to share these thoughts with a partner.

Reading comprehension for pair work (to class discussion):

- Ask the students to work with a partner to fill in the comparison chart on page 183 and to draw some conclusions from their chart about what Whitman's speaker prefers and why. Some contrasting parallels between the first and second four lines of the poem might be: "lecture-room" vs. "night air"; "sitting" vs. "rising" and "gliding"; "heard," "lectured," and "applause" vs. "silent"; the passive "was shown" vs. (implied I) "look'd up"; "much applause" (implied audience) vs. "by myself"; the orderly "[ar]ranged columns" vs. the spontaneous "wander'd" and "mystical"; and so on. The concluding discussion should lead easily into a discussion of the poem's theme.

Listening and speaking practice:

- Play one of the videos or read the poem out loud again and ask students to mark the alliteration, consonance and assonance they hear. Students may compare notes in pairs before you demonstrate to the class.
- Next, ask students to listen for and mark words that they hear strong stress given to and discuss how we tend to stress important words with rising/falling intonation.
- Working in small groups, have students decide and mark which words they believe should be emphasized. When the groups are

finished, have them perform choral readings for the rest of the class. Ask the class to determine which words the groups particularly stressed.

- Or, perform a choral reading—divide the class into two halves and have each half read every other line.
- Ask the class, how do the poem's musical elements affect its mood in each stanza?

"When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" by Walt Whitman

Write as many matching opposites as you can. <u>On the back</u> write some sentences about what theses opposites suggest that Whitman's message or theme for the poem might be: what does the speaker prefer and why?

Lines 1-4	Lines 5-8
(example) "learn'd"	(example) "mystical"

Poem Lesson Assessments

Paragraph cluster prompts:

✓ Compose two replies to the speaker of "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." In your first paragraph of at least eight sentences, explain your personal thoughts and feelings about his decision and reasons for leaving the astronomy lecture. Use at least three adverbial clauses in your response and <u>underline</u> them. In your second paragraph of at least eight sentences, take the point of view of a parent paying for the speaker's expensive college education. Use at least three sentences with the passive voice and <u>underline</u> them.

✓ Have you ever had an experience similar to Whitman's speaker? Write your own prose version of Walt Whitman's poem "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." Write four or five sentences beginning with the anaphora "When I" that describe a setting that was dull or overwhelming for you. Make sure that your adverbial clauses are correct and paired with independent clauses. Try to use passive voice in your second and third sentences. Then write four or five sentences to describe the effect on you, what you did, and the new setting that you went to. Try to use alliteration and/or consonance and/or assonance in your second four sentences.

Essay prompts:

✓ Poet Walt Whitman believed that the most important things in life are best learned from personal experience rather than from a classroom, books (and here we could add videos and the internet), or even other people. Write an essay of at least five paragraphs to show how Whitman conveys that message in a poem of only eight lines, "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." In your introduction to the poem, give the name of the poet, the title, and an overall description of the poem. In

your thesis statement, state what you believe is the poet's main message. Prove your thesis in the body of your essay by analyzing specific elements of Whitman's poem, such as sound, parallel phrasing and diction, anaphora, and syntax. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem. In your conclusion, restate your thesis and end with a message about life that you believe the poem suggests.

✓ Look at the comparison chart you completed in class for "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer." Write an essay of at least five paragraphs to show how Whitman contrasts the speaker's experience in the lecture room in lines one through four with the speaker's experience under the night sky in lines five through eight. In your introduction to the poem, give the name of the poet, the title, and an overall description of the poem. In your thesis statement, state what you believe is the poet's main message. Prove your thesis in the body of your essay by analyzing specific contrasting elements of Whitman's poem, and conclude your essay with an explanation of how Whitman's contrasts communicate his message or theme in the poem. Use quotes ("like this") any place in your paragraphs where you write words or phrases from the poem.

A. E. (Alicia) Stallings, b. 1968
Ava Leavell Haymon, b. 19??

These two contemporary, Southern women writers who are less well known than other poets in this collection, but I believe students will find their poems engaging and suggestive. Their work uses common American diction, wry humor, and recognizable rhyme and meter. **A. E. Stallings** is a prolific poet, a translator of Greek and Latin classical poetry, and writer of poetry criticism, essays, and blogs. She grew up in the Atlanta, Georgia area and began publishing poems while still a teenager. She majored in the classics in college and came to early critical success with the first of her volumes of poetry in 1999. She lives in Greece and has garnered multiple and major awards, including a MacArthur Foundation genius grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and recognition for being a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for her collection *Olives* in 2012. **Ava Leavell Haymon**, while less nationally recognized than **Stallings**, is also the author of four collections of poetry, as well as being a playwright, poetry teacher, and editor. Born in Missouri, she grew up in Texas and has resided in Louisiana for most of her adult life. She has won a number of poetry awards and is the current (2013-2015) poet laureate of Louisiana.

The Witch Has Told You a Story

You are food.
You are here for me
to eat. Fatten up,
and I will like you better.

Your brother will be first,
you must wait your turn.
Feed him yourself, you will
learn to do it. You will take him

eggs with yellow sauce, muffins
torn apart and leaking butter, fried meats
late in the morning, and always sweets
in a sticky parade from the kitchen.

His vigilance, an ice pick of hunger
pricking his insides, will melt
in the unctuous cream fillings.
He will forget. He will thank you

for it. His little finger stuck every day
through cracks in the bars
will grow sleek and round,
his hollow face swell

like the moon. He will stop dreaming
about fear in the woods without food.
He will lean toward the maw
of the oven as it opens

every afternoon, sighing
better and better smells.

    by Ava Leavell Haymon
    (2010, *Why the House is Made of Gingerbread*)

Fairy-tale Logic

Fairy tales are full of impossible tasks:
Gather the chin hairs of a man-eating goat,
Or cross a sulphuric lake in a leaky boat,
Select the prince from a row of identical masks,
Tiptoe up to a dragon where it basks
And snatch its bone; count dust specks, mote by mote,
Or learn the phone directory by rote.
Always it's impossible what someone asks—

You have to fight magic with magic. You have to believe
That you have something impossible up your sleeve,
The language of snakes, perhaps, an invisible cloak,
An army of ants at your beck, or a lethal joke,
The will to do whatever must be done:
Marry a monster. Hand over your firstborn son.

by A. E. Stallings
(2010, *Poetry* magazine)

Introduction to "The Witch Has Told You a Story" and "Fairy-tale Logic"

These two poems, by Ava Haymon and A. E. Stallings, respectively, pair well together since both use the vehicle of **fairy or folk tales** to convey their themes (obviously) and both undercut their fairy tale scripts with subversive messages of their own (less obviously). Although the vocabulary in each poem will be a challenge (particularly in "Fairy-tale Logic"), students will be able to guess the gist of many words based on their own understanding of the story of Hansel and Gretel ("Witch") and of the sorts of magical quests that often occur in these stories ("Fairy-tale"). If you like moving ideationally from the general to the more specific (as I usually do), you may wish to present "Fairy-tale Logic" first; however, "The Witch Has Told You a Story" is a narrative that will be much easier for students to follow, so here I present the exercises beginning with that poem as a precursor to the more abstract (but more emotionally charged) "Fairy-tale."

"The Witch Has Told You a Story" was chosen by Lemony Snicket (author of the popular, macabre children's books *A Series of Unfortunate Events*) to be included in his edited volume *Poetry Not Written for Children that Children Might Nevertheless Enjoy*. Presenting the witch's version of the Hansel and Gretel tale, Haymon begins the poem by addressing us directly as if we were Gretel: "You are food. / You are here for me / to eat." The witch proceeds to instruct us that she will eat our brother Hansel first ("you must wait your turn") and that it will be our job to feed him. She describes the buttery dishes we "will learn" how to make (she's practically a fairy tale Paula Deen!). The second half of the poem focuses on poor Hansel and how, in his growing addiction to the fattening food we will make each day, "he will forget. / He will thank you / for it." At the end of the poem the witch imagines "he will lean toward the maw / of the oven as it opens / every afternoon, sighing / better and better smells." As an amusing re-telling of the tale from the

perspective of one its villains (the other being the wicked stepmother, of course), the poem is a great example of the way art allows us to imagine life from multiple points of view. If you wish to push the class toward more subtle readings, however, Haymon has certainly littered clues for more uncomfortable interpretations throughout the narrative like bread crumbs (sorry, I couldn't resist that one!). Key is the title of the poem, which we may forget as we are caught up in the poem itself—"The Witch Has Told You a *Story*." Story here is both the tale by the Brothers Grimm but also a story in the colloquial (and Southern?) sense, as in someone "has told you a story," or lied to you. Thus, everything about the Witch's presumptions is to be questioned, despite their air of finality. We can choose not to believe her assertions as to our duties and to our final end, and we should question her definition of us as a commodity. That the witch tells us we should "fatten up, / and I will like you better"—a reversal of the message that women generally get from the media (i.e. slim down and you will be loved)—makes me wonder if there is a particularly feminist reading we are meant to take from the poem: the media tells us stories about what we should consume and what our roles as women are when in fact the Media or Corporations or Big Government or what have you is really only fattening us up, so to speak, to consume us. That the poem creepily dictates to us our role in colluding to tempt and destroy Hansel at the Witch's command could be taken as a riff on the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, with the Witch reminiscent of Satan instructing Eve to feed Adam the apple that led to being cast out of the Garden of Eden.

Stalling's "Fairy-tale Logic" is written as a **Petrarchan sonnet** (not surprising given Stalling's training in the Classics and her translation work)—it is displayed as a rhymed **octave (abbaabba)** and a **sestet (ccddee)** and is metered in loose **iambic pentameter**. The octave presents the problem for meditation in a fairly light-hearted manner ("Fairy tales are full of impossible tasks") and the sestet replies to the problem, introducing a more serious, emotionally laden tone ("You have to fight magic with magic"). The poem's final lines resolve the

poem in such a sudden and deadly earnest way that it causes us to reappraise our first impressions of the verse as a light and humorous re-imagining of the fairy tale genre: we must have, the poet tells us, "The will to do whatever must be done: / Marry a monster. Hand over your firstborn son." Stalling's "impossible tasks" of the first stanza do not come from any one fairy tale but present some of the typical magical assignments that young men and women must accomplish to fulfill their destinies and come of age in these stories (with the humorous twentieth century addition of "learn the phone directory by rote"). In her second stanza she expounds further on the "logic" of fairy tales (and here I think the idea of "logic" is to be questioned as much as the "story" the witch tells in Haymon's poem), explaining that to do the impossible "you have to believe / That you have something impossible up your sleeve." By the end of this stanza it becomes clear that the poem is not about coming of age or cheerfully facing problems; it is about the folly of believing "Fairy-tale Logic" and the ugly choices that must be made if you "fight magic with magic" — "Marry a monster. Hand over your first born son" — i.e. choose survival at any cost. The poem makes me wonder what Stallings has in mind with the term "magic." Is it an allusion to magical thinking, the belief that if I wish something to be so (or fear it will be so), I can make it happen? Or does it have something to do with coercive power or violence and replying to such power in kind instead of overcoming injustice with love? In this second sense the poem could be considered in the light of the teachings of Gandhi, of Martin Luther King, or of Christ himself when he adjured, "Those who live by the sword, die by the sword" (Mt. 26:52).

Previewing the Poems

Video introductions to the topic of fairy tales:

- Video one is a five minute animated version of the story of Hansel and Gretel. The narration moves quickly, but students will be able to follow the story and probably recognize it: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSoAUQl62K0

- Video two is a funny 1 minute Bugs Bunny/Looney Tunes clip in which Bugs arrives and saves the children from the witch. If you don't want to give five minutes the version above, there's enough here for students to recognize the poem's reference: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWXEqHUx-6o

- Video three is a terrific 11 minute animation of "Rumplestiltskin" by Encyclopedia Britannica. This story is not referred to by name in either poem but it's a good example of "impossible tasks" and the dangers of magic in fairy tales: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=805tYJqWilw

Prose versions of fairy tales for in-class reading or as a pre-homework assignment:

- The story of "Hansel and Gretel"—short enough to read during class time and without dictionaries:
http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/HanGre.shtml

- The story of "Rumplestiltskin" (short, but probably too long to read in class). This story is not referred to by name in either poem but it's a good example of "impossible tasks" and the dangers of magic in fairy tales:
http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/Rum.shtml

Questions for pair discussion (to write on the board):

- Please take notes on your ideas to share with the class—
1) Now that you have read/seen examples of fairy tales, how would you define "fairy tale"? What sorts of things often happen

in these stories and what are some special qualities that many fairy tales have?

2) Why do cultures have fairy tales for children that are scary? What values do you think kids were supposed to learn from the stories "Hansel and Gretel" and "Rumplestiltskin"?

3) Think of a few fairy tales from your own culture that you liked as a kid and take a few moments to describe the stories to your classmates.

4) What values do the fairy tales you just described teach children in your culture?

Activities with the Poems
("The Witch Has Told You a Story")

Audio recording of Haymon reading "The Witch Has Told You a Story":

- This is from Haymon's web page; the page also has videos of Haymon as well as her own short explanation of the poem (the Hansel and Gretel story and why she likes it) that you could also play for the students. Ask students to follow along with their copies of the poem as she reads: http://avahaymon.com/gallery/

Writing response to "The Witch":

- Write without stopping for ten minutes to answer these questions: How would you feel if you were Gretel and the Witch said this to you? What would you do? If you were Hansel, would you be able to resist all the food? Be prepared to share your answers with a classmate.

Pair reading comprehension questions for the board:

- Answer these questions with your partner.
  Stanzas 1-3:
  1) How does the witch define Gretel and Gretel's purpose?
  2) What are the five commands that the witch gives Gretel?

  Stanzas 4-6:
  3) Use an English-English dictionary to define these three words—"vigilance," "maw," and "sigh."
  4) What six things does the witch predict about (tell the future about) Hansel?
  5) In the last two lines, who or what is "sighing / better and better smells"? Hint: think about the first line of the poem.

Vocabulary investigation: — define "story":

- With a partner, use your mobile device, a classroom dictionary, or your personal English/English dictionary to look up the word "story." When you find the word, write the part of the definition that the instructor assigns you on the white board. Be prepared to read what you wrote out loud to the class. [This assignment will work especially well if you have a class set of the same dictionary. The word has at least eight different noun definitions and three different verb definitions, as well as a multiple idiomatic uses (e.g. "it's a long story"). Depending on your number of students, you could designate 7-10 spaces on the white board for each pair to write part of the definition: e.g. "Noun Definition #2:" (again, this will be easier to delineate if everyone has the same set of class dictionaries or uses the same internet dictionary). After going over the definitions, ask the students to identify the ones that inform the meaning of "story" in the poem's title and show how the denotations of plot and "telling a story," i.e. a lie, add several possible layers of meaning to our interpretation. You could also point out how Haymon's use of the present perfect instead of the present tense increases the possibility that the poet is winking at us as if to say, "You've been told a story—this isn't the truth."]

("Fairy-tale Logic")

[The activities for "Fairy-tale Logic" are based on pedagogy by Sowder (see Works Cited).]

Pair or small group work to class discussion:

- [BEFORE DISTRIBUTING THE POEM OR ANNOUNCING ITS TITLE, distribute the handout on pages 197-98 that gives an outline of the poem and asks students to identify patterns. (A following exercise will involve revealing the poem's title.) After you have discussed the poem's patterns as

revealed by the outline (if you wish to discuss the poem's **Petrarchan sonnet** form, now is a good point to do so), read the poem out loud to them a couple of times while students listen with only the outline to follow. Finally, distribute copies of the poem WITHOUT ITS TITLE for them to read silently on their own.]

- [After students have had a few minutes to read the poem to themselves, ask small groups of students to come up with a title to the poem. Give each group an index card to write their title. When you have collected all the cards, write the suggested titles on the board, along with the real title mixed in. Ask students to vote for the best title, then to share with the class why they picked the title they did. Finally, reveal Stalling's title and discuss the meaning of "logic" and what that title adds to our understanding of the poem as a whole.]

Listening and Speaking Practice:
- [See **Emily Dickinson, Activities with the Poems,** for a technique to teach iambic beats]

■ This poem is related to <u>fairy tales</u>. With your partner, look at the outline of the poem on the back of this sheet and answer the questions below. You may use your English-English dictionary.

1) What are two things that you notice about the punctuation?

2) What are two other patterns you notice about the poem?

3) Write at least four sentences guessing what you think this poem is about.

4) Ask two questions about the poem.

Poem by A.E. Stallings (see directions on other side)

Stanza #	# Syllables	Internal Punctuation	End of Line
1	11		tasks;
	11		goat,
	12		boat,
	13		masks,
	10		basks
	10	;	mote,
	10		rote.
	11		asks—
2	14		believe
	12		sleeve,
	13	, ,	cloak,
	13	,	joke,
	10		done:
	12	.	son.

Poem Lesson Assessments

Paragraph cluster prompts:

✓ Compose Gretel's reply to "The Witch Has Told You a Story." First, write a paragraph of at least eight sentences to make new predictions about what you and Hansel will do. Use the simple future tense. Next, write a second paragraph of at least eight sentences to command the witch and predict her future, using the simple future tense and the imperative "you." Make sure that you use sentence variety in your paragraphs by including compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences in your paragraphs. You may be as poetic as you like in your address to the witch.

✓ Analyze Stalling's diction in "Fairy-tale Logic" and explain how her special and unusual word choices (a) give her poem the tone and feeling of a fairy tale and (b) contribute to the overall message of the poem. Write a paragraph of at least ten sentences for each of the two stanzas. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem.

Essay prompts:

✓ Is it always good to be liked? Is it always bad to be hungry? Write an essay of at least five paragraphs to answer these questions based on your interpretation of Haymon's poem "The Witch Has Told You a Story." In your introduction to the poem, give the name of the poet, the title, and an overall description of the poem. In your thesis statement, state what you believe is the poem's answer to the two questions. Prove your thesis in the body of your essay by analyzing specific elements of Haymon's poem, such as diction, imagery, point of view, and the title. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem. In your conclusion, restate your thesis and end with a message about life that you believe the poem suggests.

✓ What are the cultural purposes of fairy tales? Why are they often frightening, and what are they supposed to teach children? Write an essay of at least five paragraphs to answer these questions based on your interpretation of Haymon's "The Witch Has Told You a Story" <u>and</u> Stalling's "Fairy-tale Logic." In your introduction paragraph, give the names of the poet, the titles, and overall descriptions of the poem. In your thesis statement, state what you believe is answer to at least one of the above three questions. Prove your thesis in the body of your essay by analyzing specific elements of both poems, such as rhyme, diction, imagery, point of view, and the titles. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem. In your conclusion, restate your thesis and end with a message about life that you believe the poems suggest.

Robert Frost, 1875-1963

Robert Frost is one of a very short number of American poets of whom many non-English majors could recall a specific line or even a complete poem if asked—especially, "The Road Less Taken" with its "road less traveled by" that "has made all the difference" and the "miles to go and promises to keep" of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," often-quoted lines from two of his most well-loved and anthologized poems. Frost's typical blend of New England colloquial speech with strongly rhymed and metered lines makes his poems memorable, but also makes them seem more simple and obviously straight-forward than they actually are. (This is a fact I was reminded of when I began trying to include "The Road Less Taken" at the intermediate level of this poetry toolbox. In fact, Frost's poems are rife with difficult vocabulary, inverted syntax, and nuanced vernacular speech that make them quite difficult for non-native speakers.) Further, readers who have not examined Frost since their school years may remember him as an affable old New England farmer. In actuality, however, Frost's narrative first person in his poems is as carefully wrought as his sounds and rhythms: the characteristic voice of a compassionate and down-to-earth country speaker that we often identify with Frost himself is actually a persona he crafted to convey his desired tone of homespun truth.

Frost's early life was very impoverished, and he did not achieve success with his poetry until he was forty. Born in San Francisco and then raised in the factory town of Lawrence, Massachusetts, after his father died, Frost began writing poetry early and barely scraped by as a young man on the farm in New Hampshire that his grandfather bought for him, along with doing some teaching and other odd jobs. In his late thirties, he traveled to England with the hopes of being better appreciated there and was discovered by Ezra Pound, who gave a strong review of his first book of poems. When he and his family returned from England, he was able to support himself by giving

readings, lectures, and being a poet in residence at various colleges and universities for the rest of his life. He won four Pulitzer Prizes over the course of his lifetime, replacing Carl Sandburg as America's celebrity poet. Two years before Frost's death in 1963, he read one of his poems at John F. Kennedy's inauguration.

Two of the most common genres of Frost poems are the lyrical nature poems and the dramatic monologue or narrative poems. In his lyric poems, Frost uses recurring metaphors and images such as landscapes, New England flora and fauna, and the change of seasons to make comparison of inner, psychological states with the outward, physical realm. Frost also wrote many dramatic narrative poems about country life, such as "Mending Wall" and "The Death of the Hired Hand," that depict bleak realities of disappointment, alienation and death. Frost's masterful ability to make his highly crafted poems seem simple was nearly too successful: for a short period he began to drop out of serious graduate school poetry curriculum until re-examinations of his work began to underscore the dark complexities of his poetry. (Indeed, far from being a happy nature poet, his nihilist philosophizing, his misanthropy, and his sardonic humor are comparable to the agnostic prose writing of Thomas Hardy and Mark Twain). Although Frost wrote at the same time as modernists such as Marianne Moore, T.S. Eliot, **William Carlos Williams,** and **Wallace Stevens**, he was not innovative in the formal sense, and his work is now appraised as a fairly unique bridge between the formal lyricism and conventional metric forms of the nineteenth century and the modernist poetry of his peers.

Design

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth —
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth —
A snow-drop spider, a flower like froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall? —
If design govern in a thing so small.

by Robert Frost
(1936, *A Further Route*)

Introduction to "Design"

Robert Frost's **Petrarchan sonnet** "Design" is one of the poet's typically dark meditations on nature in which he questions whether there is any purpose or "design" behind a world of predation, suffering, and death. The poem follows a nearly perfect **iambic pentameter** metrical pattern (the exceptions being lines 2, 3 and 14) and uses the rhyme scheme **abbaabba acaacc**. As is prescribed for the Petrarchan sonnet, Frost's octave sets up a scene for meditation, in this case a convergence of three conspicuous and unusually white colored entities—a spider, a dead moth and a flower of the heal-all plant (which is usually blue). The speaker makes his observations in a strange "mix" of "innocent" (e.g. "dimpled" and "kite") and more sinister diction (not only "blight" and "witches' broth" but also the corpse-like "rigid satin cloth" and "flower like froth" which suggests among its associations a response to being poisoned) that foreshadows the darker philosophical/theological questions in the sestet. In the sestet, the speaker's three questions about the nature of coincidence or of the divine "steer[ing]" hand that brought about this miniature vignette of death build to the implied pause after the thirteenth line and to stressed word "If" at the start of the fourteenth: "What but design of darkness to appall? — / If design govern a thing so small." Hence, Frost's poem attempts to question the nineteenth-century "argument from design" that one could find in the finely-tuned natural world evidence for creation by a good and omnipotent God.

As a very formally-crafted sonnet, "Design" exemplifies quite a few of the elements of poetry that students will be expected to be familiar with in future assignments calling for poetry explication. In addition to his formal rhythm and rhyme scheme, Frost makes use of **alliteration** (e.g. "design of darkness"). The poem uses four **similes** in the first stanza as a way to set its tone of confronting the mixed and **ambivalent** "ingredients" in the natural world, elements in the aforementioned "witches' broth" as opposed to a well-ordered universe run by a

benevolent God. Whiteness functions ironically throughout the poem to indicate "darkness" instead of the usual light; the word is used four times, along with other pale **imagery** such as "snow-drop" and "froth." Consequently, by the end of the poem the color white has accreted an almost **symbolic** relationship to death. Other instances of **irony** include the "heal-all" plant that becomes a place for "blight," the scene of nighttime death "mixed ready to begin the morning right," "dead wings" compared to the child-like associations of a "kite," a spider that is "kindred" to its prey, and the poem's highly designed structure that contrasts with its questioning of natural design.

Much of the vocabulary of this poem will be new to students—and its overall **theme** is quite abstract—so I have created a number of activities to contextualize both the situation of the poem and its diction to familiarize students before they initially hear or read the sonnet.

Previewing the Poem

Free writing (pairs to class discussion):

- Write for ten minutes without stopping about the spider and moth in this picture. What do you see? How does the image make you feel? What ideas do you associate with it? Be ready to share your ideas with classmates. [When students have finished, create a brainstormed list on the board of the physical details, thoughts, and—especially—the feelings that students have associated with the picture. Leave this list on the board for use with the vocabulary preview exercise below.]

Vocabulary preview:

- Remind the students that words have both **denotative** and **connotative** meanings. Give each student a copy of the vocabulary chart on pages 208-9 and ask the class to break into pairs or groups of three. Assign each group one of the words on the chart. If you have a class set of English-English dictionaries, use them; if not, students may look up words on their mobile devices but must find easily understandable English definitions. When groups are finished, ask each group to show their definition and picture, allowing the rest of the class to fill in their charts.

Predicting meaning:

- Based on the picture and the vocabulary words you and your classmates have defined, what do you think the poem we are about to read will be about? What mood do you think it will

have? Write for five minutes without stopping and be ready to share your ideas with classmates.

Listening/note-taking practice:

- Give the students the cloze version of the poem (on page 210). Play the students video 2 below (stopping it between lines) or read the poem yourself to them twice, slowly enough for them to catch the words, but not so slowly that your speech loses the normal rhythm of reading the poem. Afterwards, they can compare with each other before you show the poem and allow them to check words they missed and their spelling. [This activity will be difficult and will demonstrate to students their need for continued exposure to spoken English. It also has the advantage of getting students to actively write the words of the poem instead of just passively listening and reading.]

Video introductions to the poem:

- Video one presents the text on top of appropriate slides from nature and with dramatic music that captures the mood of the poem fairly well:
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WbcOQdUPjE
- Video two is a very clearly articulated reading of the poem that displays pictures of Frost (no text):
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvVH0CkhfEU
- Video three purports to be the voice of Frost reading the poem; there are no pictures, only the text of the poem:
  https://vimeo.com/70279307

"Design" by Robert Frost

Word	Part(s) of Speech	Very Short Definition
design		
dimpled		
rigid		
satin		
blight		
broth		
froth		
kite		
to have to do with something		

innocent		
kindred		
steer		
appall		
govern		

Draw a picture to illustrate your word here, OR find a picture on your mobile device to put under the overhead to show the class.

"Design" by Robert Frost

I _____ dimpled _____,

On a _____

_____ rigid satin _____—

_____ blight

Mixed _____,

_____ broth—

_____ froth,

_____ kite.

What had _____ to do with _____,

_____ innocent heal-all?

_____ kindred _____,

Then steered _____ thither _____?

_____ design _____ appall?—

_____ design govern _____.

by Robert Frost (1936, *A Further Route*)

Activities with the Poem

Reading comprehension for pair work (to class discussion):
(see handout on pages 212-13).

Free writing response:
- How was the poem similar to and/or different from your predictions before you read it? How does the poem make you feel and what do you think about the speaker's suggestion that a world with death and suffering doesn't seem likely to be controlled by a good God? Write without stopping for ten minutes and be ready to discuss your ideas with a partner.

Listening/speaking practice:
- [See **Emily Dickinson, Activities with the Poems,** for a technique to teach iambic beats]

"Design" by Robert Frost

- Answer these questions with your partner. Use the vocabulary chart we completed as a class instead of a dictionary. Continue your writing on the back:

Stanza one:

1) What are the three elements of nature that the speaker observes? What quality do they all have in common?

2) There are four similes (using "like" or "as" to compare one thing to another) in this stanza. List the four things that are being compared and write next to them what they are being compared to.

3) What words in this stanza seem friendly? What words seem dark or frightening?

Stanza two:

4) In this stanza and the one before, how many times does the word "white" appear? What other words or phrases in the poem also refer to whiteness? By the end of the poem what does whiteness start to mean?

4) Paraphrase in your own words the three questions in this stanza. (The third question is tough: try adding the word "us" after the word "appall.")

5) "Design" is the title of the poem, and the word is repeated in lines thirteen and fourteen. Why?

6) Look at the poem as a whole. What do you notice about the "design" of the rhyme pattern? What is the repeated stressed/unstressed syllable pattern in most of the lines?

7) The first word of line fourteen is a very important clue to what the speaker thinks about suffering and the existence of a good God. Try to paraphrase the poem's overall religious or philosophical questions in your own words.

Poem Lesson Assessments

Paragraph cluster prompts:

✓ The speaker of Frost's "Design" assumes that we identify with the caught moth. But what would be the spider's point of view of the event the speaker observes? Write a two paragraph of at least eight sentences each to respond to "Design" from the first person "I," as if you were the spider who had caught his or her dinner. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem.

✓ Do you agree with the logical dilemma (an argument that tries to force someone to chose between two bad alternatives) that "Design" suggests—either God is cruel and doesn't care about our suffering OR there is no God and/or design for the universe and/or purpose to our suffering? Write two paragraphs of at least ten sentences each to compare your beliefs and ideas with those you believe to be expressed in "Design." Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem.

Essay prompts:

✓ Modern poets often give their subject matter a tone of ambivalence—mixed and sometimes opposite feelings—to portray a subject that stirs many complex emotions in people. Write an essay of at least five paragraphs to explain how and why Frost creates a tone of ambivalence in his poem "Design." In your introduction to the poem, give the name of the poet, the title, and an overall description of the poem. In your thesis statement, state what you believe is the poet's main purpose in using ambivalence to convey his message(s). Prove your thesis in the body of your essay by analyzing specific elements of Frost's poem, such as diction, imagery, simile, rhythm and rhyme, syntax, and the title and closing lines. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem. In

your conclusion, restate your thesis and end with a message about life that you believe the poem suggests.

✓ [For an essay prompt pairing "Design" with **Emily Dickinson's "A Spider Sewed at Night"** see the **Poem Lesson Assessments** page for **Dickinson.**]

Emily Dickinson, 1830-1886

Along with **Walt Whitman**, Emily Dickinson is considered one of the greatest poets in the English language. As is often pointed out, both poets re-invented what poetry looks and sounds like, yet their styles are nearly opposite. Dickinson's writing is terse, condensed, and suggestive, where **Whitman** composes all-encompassing lists and strives for democratic inclusivity in his enthusiastic declarations. His lines are long and organized around rhythmic cadences and internal rhyme rather than upon the variations upon hymn or ballad meter and multiple rhyme schemes Dickinson uses. Her trademark dashes and irregular capitalization, her ambiguous line endings and indirect references, her occasional additional word choices at the bottom of her poems—all leave much up to her readers in tracing out the multiple implications of her nearly 2,000 poems. These come in a great variety of voices, moods, and subjects.

Dickinson's interest in nature, love, and spirituality, in the way the mind works and states of extreme consciousness, in resurrection and immortality are influenced by the Bible and the Protestantism of her family culture, the Transcendentalism of Emerson, and her education in science and scientific inquiry. She was also greatly influenced by Longfellow and other American fireside poets, by the legal concepts and terminology used by her father and brother (both lawyers), and by her favorite British writers—Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot. In addition to classical, or serious works, she also read widely in the popular culture newspapers, periodicals, and novels of her day. Her wide tastes can be seen in the varied tones of her poems, which are witty, dark, sentimental, whimsical, philosophical, or questioning by turns.

Much is made of Dickinson's spinsterhood and eccentric choices to wear a white dress and live in seclusion from the rest of her community. In truth, Dickinson grew up in a well-to-do family in a college town where she was very socially engaged until her early

thirties. She was well-educated, attending Amherst Academy as a youth and then one year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (later, College), and she did leave Amherst, Mass., as a young adult to make visits to Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. Even after she withdrew from society for unknown reasons she maintained a wide circle of intimate relationships via correspondence, and she continued to live with her sister in the family home next door to her brother and sister-in-law after their parents' deaths.

It is also true that Dickinson only published about twelve poems during her lifetime. However, after her death no one was astonished that she wrote poetry, as she had been sending poems in notes and letters to friends for years. In fact, had she wished to, she could have published her work through personal and family friendships with a number of editors and writers, some of whom strongly encouraged her to make her poetry known to the public. Instead, Dickinson shied away from such attention and chose to self-publish via the aforementioned letters and also in self-sewn packets, called fascicles, that she kept in her room. Although the first heavily edited book of some her poems was published a few years after her death, due to family disputes over the possession of her poetry, it was not until 1955 that the entirety of her poems were published in one collected edition (and 1986 when what remained of her extensive correspondence was collected).

The Spider Holds a Silver Ball

The Spider holds a Silver Ball
In unperceived Hands -
And dancing softly to Himself   [softly] as He knits
His Yarn of Pearl - unwinds -*

He plies from nought to nought -
In unsubstantial Trade -
Supplants our Tapestries with His -
In half the period -

An Hour to rear supreme
His Continents of Light -   [His] theories
Then dangle from the Housewife's Broom -   [Then] perish by
His Boundaries - forgot -   [His] sophistries -

*Three alternate versions of line 4:
- [His Yarn of Pearl] expends -
- [His] Coil - [of Pearl - unwinds -]
- Pursues his pearly strands

    by Emily Dickinson
    (circa 1863, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*)

A Spider Sewed at Night

A Spider sewed at Night
Without a Light
Upon an Arc of White -

If Ruff it was of Dame
Or Shroud of Gnome
Himself himself inform -

Of Immortality
His strategy
Was physiognomy -

by Emily Dickinson
(circa 1869, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*)

Introduction to "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball" and "A Spider Sewed at Night"

When paired, these two poems reflect in interesting ways upon each other and also make a fruitful contrast with Frost's "Design" should you wish to teach all three poems. Both of these Dickinson poems use the household **metaphors** of sewing or knitting to depict a spider spinning a web. The spider (in both poems gendered "he") is an alternately playful or mysterious figure that industriously "plies" his "unsubstantial Trade" despite the dangers of "the Housewife's Broom" ("Silver Ball"). His motives for creating his artful "Tapestries" ("Silver Ball") or "Ruff . . . of Dame / Or Shroud of Gnome" ("Night") are not, for Dickinson's literary purposes, ostensibly to catch prey but rather to give beautiful form to an inner vision, even though his creations will soon be "forgot" ("Silver Ball"). The spider creates to please himself, and of the meaning of his art, ultimately only "Himself himself inform" ("Night"). Consequently for Dickinson the spider comes to symbolize — among other referents — the artist (i.e. the poet) herself.

"The Spider Holds a Silver Ball" is one of many Dickinson poems in which she sets out her rhythms in a variation of **common** or **hymn meter** (alternating lines of 4/3/4/3 beats, as in many well-known hymns, like "Amazing Grace"). In this case Dickinson's first stanza follows this form, and then she inverts the pattern to 3/4/3/4 in the second two stanzas. This **personified** spider knits with "Yarn" of "Silver" or "Pearl"; as he jumps from anchor point to anchor point he "plies" (in the archaic sense of traveling from one place to another to sell ones wares) from what appears to the human speaker's eyes to be "nought to nought." With her characteristically wry sense of humor, the spinning/knitting of the spider becomes an economic metaphor: the "Trade" he "plies" is "unsubstantial" but at the same time is both speedier and more intricate than our human work, and so he "Supplants our Tapestries with His — / In half the period." In the third

stanza, Dickinson shifts the metaphor from household crafts to map making: now the spider "rear[s]" (in the sense of building up, as in a house) "Continents of Light" with "Boundaries" that will be "forgot" once they "dangle from the Housewife's Broom—." "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball" also presents an example of one of the poems in which Dickinson didn't make a final choice on some words or lines (called **variants**) on her final, clean copies. These variants are shown on the poem next to the lines where they could be substituted and following a bracket (e.g. in line three after the word "softly," one could substitute "as He knits" for "to Himself"). Additionally, Dickinson provided three alternative versions of line four, which are shown at the bottom of the poem. Dickinson's variants can add further layers of meaning to her poems; in this case, I think the possible substitutions in stanza three in which "theories" could replace "Continents" and "sophistries" replace "Boundaries" substantially changes the supposed comparison, making the reference to art more self-deprecatory. (Then one could make the argument that the "Yarn" in line four could also mean "tall tale".)

"A Spider Sewed at Night" is much more gnomic (to play on one of Dickinson's words in the poem) in its condensed inscrutability than "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball," but I think we can be informed by the theme of the longer poem and bring some of our interpretive conclusions about the meaning of the spider to bear on this more slight but later poem. In this poem Dickinson uses a **regular syllabic count** of 6/4/6 throughout the stanzas, as well as a **rhyme scheme** of aaa/bbb (**eye rhymes**)/ccc. Moreover, the last word of each line in the final stanza has the unsettling characteristic of ending on an unstressed beat (tending toward the **dactyl**). Each of these "strateg[ies]" of prosody contribute to the overall sense in the poem that, unlike Frost's strong supposition in "Design," there *is* indeed an overall plan in nature; as humans, however, we can't know what it is. In contrast with the more playful, "dancing" spider in the earlier poem, this spider is chiefly described in terms of mystery. He "sewed at Night / Without a Light";

the speaker can only guess, as if the spider were a spinning Rumplestiltskin, whether he is making a Shakespearean "Ruff . . . of Dame / Or Shroud of Gnome." Whatever the spider's unknown purposes, only "Himself himself inform." This strange repetition of pronouns is reminiscent of the Trinitarian talking among the Godhead in the Genesis creation narrative ("Let us make man in Our own image") and, in fact, sets us up for the final stanza when we learn that this spider has a "strategy" for "Immortality." Whereas the web dangling at the end of a broom in "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball" serves as an image to remind us of the brevity of life and art, here Dickinson offers no self-deprecating humor. Instead, the poet's art, like the art of nature itself, is mysteriously self-sufficient in a way reminiscent of God's creative acts. The poem's final word, "Physiognomy," could be a reference to the nineteenth-century pseudo-science of measuring and interpreting peoples' facial characteristics as a way to predict their traits and moral character. Or, it could be meant more generally, as in the overall appearance of something like a landscape. Could it also refer to Jesus, as the human face of the Trinity? And what does all that have to do with the spider's or poet's "strategy"? I admit to being stumped on this one: perhaps Dickinson herself meant this last line to be ambiguous so that we are left with only the physiognomy of the poem itself, i.e. to end up with multiple possible referents based on the poem's exterior clues.

Previewing the Poems

Video introduction to the topic:

- This website offers an animation of and information about the way spiders actually build their webs. Encourage students to take notes for the free writing assignment below: http://animals.howstuffworks.com/arachnids/spider5.htm

- This is a 3:30 min nature video clip of David Attenborough narrating how a spider makes its web: http://www.wimp.com/spidersweb/

Free writing and working with metaphor or simile (individuals, to groups to class discussion):

- (1) Using your notes from the web site and the nature video, write for five minutes without stopping to explain the way that spiders make their webs. (2) After you compare your ideas with a partner, spend another five minutes to free write about how the images of spiders making a web make you feel and what ideas you associate that process with. (3) Next, make a group of three or four and compare what you've each written. (4) Finally, complete the following assignment:

  Imagine that you must write a poem in which you compare a spider making a web to something else. With your group, brainstorm at least three things that a spider making a web could be like (e.g. like a cruel professor setting a trap for a student with a difficult test). Be prepared to share your ideas with the class.

Vocabulary preview:

- Both of the poems have quite a few words that will be unfamiliar to students. Because the poems are short and some of the words have more than one meaning that could apply, the activities with the poems on the next pages allow time for students to work with English-English dictionaries in class as groups to identify definitions.

Activities with the Poems
("The Spider Holds a Silver Ball")

Reading the poem and identifying vocabulary:

- Tell the students that you will talk later about the variants on the side and bottom of the poem. Then, read the poem to the students twice while they follow along with their own copy. Give the students a few minutes then to read the poem silently, asking them to circle any words they do not know. Generate a list of these words on the board, then assign one word apiece to different students to look up in an English-English dictionary. Ask the students to read the definitions while you copy the definitions next to the words.

Reading comprehension for pair work (to class discussion):

(see handout on page 227)

Considering Dickinson's variants (small group to class discussion):

- Have you ever had a hard time making a final choice about a word or sentence in your writing? In her poem "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball," Dickinson decided not to choose. Instead, she wrote other word and phrase choices beside the poem. With your group, talk about the variants in lines 3-4 and 10-12. Be prepared to share your ideas with the class.

  1) Do the variants change the meanings of their lines and/or the whole poem? If so, how?

  2) If you were the editor of a book of poetry and could not print variants, which phrases would you choose and why?

  3) What do you think about Dickinson refusing to make a final choice for some parts of her poem?

Listening and speaking practice/introduction to iambic beats:

- Introduce students to the sound of the unstressed/stressed iambic beat. I suggest using a version of a teaching technique the Folger Shakespeare Library calls "Living Iambic Pentameter" (see 2:30 minute classroom teaching example here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9H2htG2bv20).

  When using this technique, the instructor asks for a row of ten students to come to the front of the class (in our case we would ask eight students since we are dealing with tetrameter not pentameter). Each student is given a card with either an unstressed syllable ("ta") or a stressed syllable ("TUM"), then these students read their syllables out loud in a row, with the "TUM" students stamping their feet as they read. This is followed by giving each of the students a card with one syllable of the first line of the poem—in our case that would mean eight cards looking something like this: "the" "SPI" "der" "HOLDS" "a" "SIL" "ver" "BALL."

- Read the poem out loud again and ask students to listen for and mark the iambic beats.

- Working in small groups, have students decide and mark which words they believe should be emphasized. When the groups are finished, have them perform choral readings for the rest of the class. Ask the class to determine which words the groups particularly stressed.

- Or, perform a choral reading—divide the class into two halves and have each half read every other line.

- Ask the class, how does the poem's regular rhythm affect its message or theme?

"The Spider Holds a Silver Ball" by Emily Dickinson

- Answer the following questions with your partner. Use the definitions of words written on the board instead of your translation dictionary. Continue your answers on the back.

Stanza one:

1) What three actions is the spider performing in this stanza?

2) In what ways is this spider personified (described as if it were human)?

3) What action is Dickinson comparing the spider's process of spinning a web to (her metaphor)?

Stanza two:

4) In your own words, what is the spider doing in this stanza?

5) What kind of economic metaphor for the spider spinning a web does Dickinson use here?

Stanza three:

6) What happens to the spider and its web?

7) What topic does the words "Continents" and "Boundaries" remind you of?

8) Looking at the whole poem, what do you notice about the way Dickinson uses capitalization?

9) Looking at the whole poem, what do you notice about the way Dickinson uses dashes (—)?

10) Brainstorm some ideas about what the spider might symbolize.

("A Spider Sewed at Night")

Reading the poem and identifying vocabulary:

▪ Read the poem to the students at least twice while they follow along with their own copy. Ask the students to mark the iambic beats they hear (and warn them that this poem is purposely less regular than "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball"). Then give the students a few minutes to read the poem silently, asking them to circle any words they do not know. Generate a list of these words on the board, then assign one word apiece to different students to look up in an English-English dictionary. Ask the students to read the definitions while you copy the definitions next to the words.

Making an argument for a poetic interpretation:

[This activity for "A Spider Sewed at Night" is based on pedagogy by Knapp (see Works Cited).]

▪ Place students in groups of three and give each group a paper with the three following possible interpretive hypotheses of the poem:

• Unlike Frost's poem "Design," this poem suggests that the natural world *does* give clues that there is a God who created the universe; however, these clues are mysterious and can't be interpreted clearly by humans.

• The best art (including poetry) can be interpreted many ways.

• Even the smallest and most average and most unimportant things can be beautiful and magical when looked at through a creative imagination.

Ask each student to choose one of the interpretations (students must each choose a different one) and then to individually spend some time finding specific evidence in the poem that supports their chosen hypothesis.

When time is up, each student presents his or her evidence in favor of their chosen interpretation to their group. Ask students to vote after everyone has spoken to see if any one interpretation has emerged as the best. If students change their minds, they should explain what particular evidence caused them to do this. At this point, the group may also decide on its own interpretation that is not one of the three suggestions. At the end of their group time, each group will present their group decisions to the class. If the group cannot all agree on one interpretation, they should explain why.

[In fact, each of these three readings is plausible: once all groups have made their presentations and you have filled in any clues in the poem that students have overlooked, the exercise can show that recognizing **indeterminacy** and offering more than one possible reading is very acceptable in poetic interpretation.]

Poem Lesson Assessments

Paragraph cluster prompts:

✓ Look at your reading comprehension questions and the notes you took from the class discussion of Dickinson's variants in "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball." Write two paragraphs of at least ten sentences to answer the following numbered questions (write one paragraph for <u>each</u> question): (1) What do you think about Dickinson's decision to include variants and how do they influence the meaning of the poem? (2) If you were the editor of a book of Dickinson's poems and had to choose only one phrase for each line, which variants would you pick and why? Use quotes ("like this") whenever you refer to lines or sentences from the poem.

✓ Many of Dickinson's poems have been set to music by composers. Listen to the following one minute composition for flute and piano by Vivian Fine that was inspired by "A Spider Sewed at Night": http://imslp.org/wiki/Emily%27s_Images_%28Fine,_Vivian%29. Write two paragraphs of at least eight sentences each to describe Fine's composition and to give your personal response to it. What does the music make you picture, and how well do you think she captures the spirit of Dickinson's poem?

Essay prompts:

✓ In "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball," Dickinson describes the spider's activity with at least three different metaphors (one per stanza). Write an essay of at least five paragraphs to explain these metaphors and how they contribute to our overall understanding of what the spider represents. In your introduction to the poem, give the name of the poet, the title, and an overall description of the poem. In your thesis statement, state what you believe is the poet's main purpose in using

multiple metaphors to convey her message(s). Prove your thesis in the body of your essay by analyzing specific elements of Dickinson's metaphors, such as diction, imagery, personification, rhythm, humor, irregular capitalization and use of the dash, and syntax. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem. In your conclusion, restate your thesis and end with some ideas about what you think Dickinson wishes the spider to represent.

✓ Compare and contrast Robert Frost's spider poem "Design" with Emily Dickinson's "A Spider Sewed at Night." Both poems use the metaphor of a spider to make a suggestion about whether there is a divine "design" or "strategy" for the universe, but they come to somewhat different conclusions. Write an essay of at least five paragraphs to explain each poet's main message about whether or not God has ordered the universe (and, by implication, our own lives) and whether or not we can understand what God might be saying to us through nature. In your introduction, give the names of the poets, the titles, and quick, overall descriptions of the poems. In your thesis statement, state what you believe are the main points of similarity and difference in Frost's and Dickinson's messages. Prove your thesis in the body of your essay by analyzing specific elements of the two poems, such as diction, simile, metaphor and personification, imagery, rhythm and rhyme, irony and humor, irregular capitalization and use of the dash, and syntax. Use quotes (like "this") whenever you use words or phrases from the poem. In your conclusion, restate your thesis and end with some ideas about what you think Dickinson wishes the spider to represent.

Appendix A
Quick Reference Outline of The Barrett Taxonomy
1.0 Literal Comprehension

    1.1 Recognition

        1.1.1 Recognition of Details

        1.1.2 Recognition of Main Ideas

        1.1.3 Recognition of a Sequence

        1.1.4 Recognition of Comparison

        1.1.5 Recognition of Cause and Effect Relationships

        1.1.6 Recognition of Character Traits

    1.2 Recall

        1.2.1 Recall of Details

        1.2.2 Recall of Main Ideas

        1.2.3 Recall of a Sequence

        1.2.4 Recall of Comparison

        1.2.5 Recall of Cause and Effect Relationships

        1.2.6 Recall of Character Traits

2.0 Reorganization

    2.1 Classifying

    2.2 Outlining

    2.3 Summarizing

    2.4 Synthesizing

3.0 Inferential Comprehension

    3.1 Inferring Supporting Details

    3.2 Inferring Main Ideas

    3.3 Inferring Sequence

    3.4 Inferring Comparisons

    3.5 Inferring Cause and Effect Relationships

    3.6 Inferring Character Traits

    3.7 Predicting Outcomes

    3.8 Interpreting Figurative Language

4.0 Evaluation

    4.1 Judgments of Reality or Fantasy

    4.2 Judgments of Fact or Opinion

    4.3 Judgments of Adequacy and Validity

    4.4 Judgments of Appropriateness

    4.5 Judgments of Worth, Desirability and Acceptability

5.0 Appreciation

    5.1 Emotional Response to the Content

    5.2 Identification with Characters or Incidents

    5.3 Reactions to the Author's Use of Language

    5.4 Imagery

<div align="right">(unpublished, cited in Hudson, 86-87)</div>

Appendix B
ESL Writing Rubric to inform CB 21 Coding
[Columns: writing type/organization/development/vocabulary/sentence structure]

Freshman Composition or English 1A	Write expository essays which reference outside sources, including non-fiction, using a variety of rhetorical strategies. (500-750 words)	Organize paragraphs into a logical sequence, developing the central idea of the essay to a logical conclusion.	Integrate the ideas of others through paraphrase, summary, and quotation into a paper that expresses the writer's own opinion, position, or analysis as developed through multiple revisions.	Utilize a wide range of vocabulary, including academic vocabulary.	Use sentences of varying structure and type, including subordination, coordination, and transitional devices.
CB21 1 level below	Write essays with clear thesis statements using various rhetorical modes. (350+ words).	Write an essay including introduction, body, and conclusion.	Write well developed essays based on their emerging competence in writing.	Attempt a wide range of vocabulary; word choice sometimes interferes with meaning.	Correctly use a variety of sentence structures, including mastery of perfect tenses.
CB21 2 levels below	Write one or more paragraphs with a clear topic sentence.	Organize paragraphs that have a clear, beginning, middle, and end exhibiting paragraph mastery.	Write topic sentences with relevant support, main points and specific supporting details and examples.	Utilize core vocabulary with emerging accuracy.	Attempt a variety of sentence structures with emerging control over perfect tenses.
CB21 3 levels below	Write one paragraph on familiar topics.	Write a focused, unified paragraph,	Demonstrate emerging control of supporting	Use general vocabulary on familiar topics.	Correctly use simple and compound sentences,

		including a topic sentence.	details.		including simple and continuous tenses, with regular and irregular verbs.
CB21 **4 levels below**	Write brief text in paragraph-like form on one topic.	Write sentences which relate to each other in meaning.	Write sentences containing descriptive language.	Use basic everyday vocabulary.	Exhibit control over simple sentences, including sentence boundaries and mechanics. Produce simple sentences in the simple tenses and the correct use of the verb "to be." Identify parts of speech.
CB21 **5 levels below**	Write several simple sentences, primarily biographical, with guidance.	Write individual sentences which demonstrate standard word order.	Write simple sentences that contain subjects, verbs and objects.	Use very limited vocabulary.	Demonstrate emerging control over simple sentences with frequent punctuation and spelling errors. Produce simple sentences in the present tenses.

4/28/09

Basic Skills CB 21 Rubric

Appendix C

Web Vocabulary Profiler:

www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/r21270/textools/web_vp.html

After you enter your text, the web program will indicate which of the following categories each word falls into:

(1) The most frequent 1,000 word families

(2) The second most frequent 1,000 word families

(3) The Academic Word List

(4) Words not on any of above lists

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