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The "Purposes" of Poetry

Tracy A. Townsend

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, ttownse@imsa.edu

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Tracy Townsend

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Understanding Poetry

The “Purposes” of Poetry

The “Purposes” of Poetry

Abstract:

This classroom discussion-oriented lesson, which takes between sixty to seventy minutes, exposes students to two very different poetic styles and voices (William Carlos Williams and T.S. Eliot) and challenges them to think about their own relationship to poetry. This is a useful lesson to work into the beginning of a longer unit on poetry, and can be used as a preparatory discussion for unveiling the Laureate Project assessment to your students (also available on the Digital Commons). This lesson is suitable for grades 9-12.

Standards:

SL.9-10.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.9-10.4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

L.9-10.6. Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

L.11-12.3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

RL.9-10.5. Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

RL.11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

Procedure:

Begin class by presenting your students with a brief summary of the philosophical differences espoused by poets William Carlos Williams and T.S. Eliot. While many online summaries and criticisms of their work specify their different opinions of what a reader's relationship to a poem should be like are available, it may be useful to offer this generalized characterization: Williams believed that poetry should be accessible to the reader; Eliot, on the other hand, felt that poetry should challenge the reader's mind and senses, confuse them, and even strive to confound them.

Provide your students with brief examples of Williams and Eliot's work. A single page from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and the entirety of "The Red Wheelbarrow" are effective counter-points. Ask the students to read each briefly, to mark elements of the poems they find interesting or surprising, but not to worry about comprehension or interpretation so much as their own reaction to the poems. They should ask themselves:

- 1.) Do I like this poem? Why or why not?
- 2.) Given what I've been told about this poet's philosophy of poetry, do I think I would like other things they have written?
- 3.) When I enjoy poetry, does it tend to be the more accessible kind (Williams-like) or the more challenging and complex kind (Eliot-like)? Why do I have this preference? (Or do I have such a preference at all?)

As your students read the sample poetry and consider these things (give them a few minutes, perhaps five or ten), draw a spectrum up on the board, with Williams' name at one end and Eliot's at the other. Once your spectrum is ready, have your students place themselves on it by drawing a line on the board with their name or initials labeling it. The goal is to mark by proximity to Williams or Eliot the degree to which one vision or the other of poetry appeals to them. Alternatively, if you have space and want to get your students moving around more, make a tape line on the floor of the classroom and mark it in a similar fashion. Your students can arrange themselves on that line and actually be able to see one another gathered into "camps" of sorts based on their poetic preferences.

Outliers are a great place to start asking for explanations; middle of the pack students need to articulate what they mean by being in the middle – do they understand and respect equally these two different ways of writing? Do they see each as too extreme, and somehow lacking an important nuance? Students often start talking about past experiences reading or being taught poetry, and how that has influenced their view of the genre. Some possible discussion questions are:

- Think of an example of a poem you like that is more or less "lined up" with where you have put yourself on this spectrum. (Students with internet access might search for that poem and share it with the class.) What aspects of the poem signal to you accessibility versus challenge?
- Poetry is an art form, and art ranges from the representational and clear to the abstract and strange. In what sense is each approach to art "good"?
- What turns you off to poetry? Alternatively, what appeals to you?

- If you don't generally read poetry, why not?
- How has the way you've been taught poetry in the past influenced your feelings about it?
- Do certain subjects, stories, or emotions lend themselves more to certain styles of poetry, in your opinion? Why or why not?

In the past, I have used this exercise and the resulting discussion to help identify student's experiences with and anxieties about poetry, which can help me arrange more effective work groups for the Laureate Project (see the Digital Commons), both for presenting groups and the Senate panel group. This discussion framework also provides some visible information (in the form of the spectrum) about all the students in the classroom and can be used to get generally nonparticipant students engaged in the discussion. Handing out a packet of poems to read for the following class, with the instructions to think about whether the poems represented are more "Williams-like" or "Eliot-like" is a useful way to conclude the discussion, tie in valuable reading for a subsequent class, and extend the discussion about different styles and philosophies of poetry into future classes.

Materials:

A classroom with a chalk or white board, or duct/masking tape and two signs labeled "Eliot" and "Williams."

Photocopies of example poems by William Carlos Williams and T.S. Eliot.