1998

Kindling a Passion for Poetry: the Aquinas College Coffee House

Pamela Waterbury

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Waterbury, Pamela (1998) "Kindling a Passion for Poetry: the Aquinas College Coffee House," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 16.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1440>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Teaching Teachers

Pamela Waterbury

Kindling a Passion for Poetry: the Aquinas College Coffee House

*"In order to become a lover of poetry, and a maker of poems, it is necessary, first, to love a poem."
Mary Oliver, Blue Pastures*

With enthusiasm I type "Aquinas College Poetry Coffee House" on my course calendar for a new semester of Youth Literature. Poetry hasn't always been on my syllabus. In fact, the issue of how to effectively approach the genre of poetry with future teachers haunted me for years. At first, I ignored the genre, reminding myself that students received enough encounters with poetry in their college literature classes. Unfortunately, I knew from the negative comments they expressed in their free writes about poetry, that that simply wasn't true. Besides, I'd reassure myself, how could I do justice to poetry in two, three, or even four class sessions? The truth was: I knew what to do with short stories, essays, novels, even drama, but poetry—I hadn't a clue.

Background

My own experiences with poetry as a high school student and even as a college student hadn't been spectacular. I read what was assigned and performed well in classes, but poetry never came alive for me. I never memorized lines, explored poetry on my own, attended poetry readings, or even wrote poetry.

As a high school teacher, I had approached teaching poetry gingerly, combining response and analytical approaches I gleaned from theoretical and practical texts by Rosenblatt, Purves and Tchudi. My patchwork method worked, but it was

nothing to brag about or offer up to my students as a model. Most of my success with poetry with high school students came from encouraging them to write and publish their own poetry.

At one point when I taught Children's Literature, I experimented using an anthology of poems for children. At least, I assured myself, I was covering the genre. They were open to the genre, but in reality, the only poets they really responded to were Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky. And if I was honest, when I looked at and listened to the way my students read and responded to the poems by other poets, the genre remained inaccessible. Their responses were flat, much like mine had been at their age. I knew an anthology selected by me wasn't the answer.

Attitudes toward poetry were even worse among my students in Youth Literature. In a typical youth literature class, when I surveyed who liked poetry or even voluntarily read it, only 20 percent of the class raised their hands. In free writes, students shared with me their negative attitudes toward poetry:

"I despise poetry. I'm disappointed that my teachers didn't do a better job turning me on to poetry."

"I had an overall negative experience with poetry. I cannot say that my teachers in high school used any method of teaching that worked."

"When I try to remember my experiences with poetry there are blank spaces in my memory. I did not enjoy studying poetry because the poems we read seemed to have nothing to do with my life. Since I couldn't find any connections in the poetry we were reading, I simply stopped trying."

"In high school, we had such a poor, limited selection of poetry."

"I really dread having to study poetry. I never seem to get the same meaning as my teachers do. And of course, their meaning is the only one!"

"I remember teachers giving us their spiel on how the meaning of each poem is personal and will be different for everyone in the class. Then, in the next breath, they would ask us for the correct answer to a question about the poem's 'true' message."

"I really enjoy poetry, that is, poetry that I select. You know poetry that interests ME. Teachers always pick poetry that THEY think is important or that THEY enjoy. Who cares if it bores their students to death? I always get excited when I see poetry on the syllabus but my hopes are dashed every time."

"I do not have too many great memories of poetry. What I remember most is not being able to understand what the poem was trying to say. I could never relate to the symbols or metaphors used. I remember asking the teacher, 'Why doesn't the poet say what he means?'"

"I think I always loved poetry and poems. I can remember the exact shelf in the Hillcrest Elementary School library where the poetry was located, and I remember spending a lot of time there checking out poetry books. After that, the memories connected with school and poetry were vague."

The Problem

Why are memories of poetry in the secondary school vague at best and dismal at worst? Why do students begin loving poetry as young children and give up as young adults? If our job as English teachers is to inspire a love of literature, including poetry, why and how have we failed so miserably at least according to the free writes of my students, many of whom were English majors or minors?

The answer, I think, is clearly expressed in the students' comments: "School poetry" doesn't touch their lives aesthetically or emotionally. The

content and language of the poetry they encountered in school was too often arid and inaccessible. Further, their experience with poetry was an intellectual exercise, a game of hide and seek: they needed to get the right answers to the poems, answers only their teachers knew. Hearing their responses helped me to see what was wrong, but I still wasn't sure how to change my approach with the limited time I had in teacher education classes. I knew my students loved literature — I heard it in their voices and in their writing when we talked about novels, short stories, and plays — so why not poetry?

One Solution

Insights about kindling a love of poetry in my students came from my own experiences as a reader. Something important had shifted for me as a middle-aged adult reader: I had become a lover of poems. I knew if I analyzed why and how I had become a passionate poetry reader, I might have some answers about approaching poetry with my students. The brevity of poetry meant poems could be read easily in lulls between other demands in a hectic schedule of carpooling or in those few precious moments of night reading before sleep intrudes. But I knew my love affair with poetry was sparked by more than the manageable length of poetry. Poetry had become alive for me for more important reasons. I was exposed to poetry that moved me, and I had the freedom to experience it in my own way. I had found poets whose work spoke to me — Jane Kenyon, Mary Oliver, William Stafford. I was reading these poets because they helped me make sense of life, because they made me see more clearly and deeply, because the beauty of their images and language resonated for me. Further, I had become friends with poets who worked at their craft, and I had begun to work at my own poetry. I had learned to love poems. I had my answer: My students needed to love a poem.

I needed to let my students experience the same meaningful connection with poetry I had found. I had explored poetry in a hunt and peck, random fashion. I surrounded myself with good poets whose works spoke to my developmental stages as a reader through rich content and evocative language. How could I spark the same passion for poetry in my students that I had discovered? The answer, I realized, was to bring to them poetry that resonated. Since you can't love something you don't know, I also needed to design an assignment that would immerse them in meaningful poetry, so that poetry could come alive.

The Assignment

First, I raided the local public libraries' shelves for young adult collections of poems and works by poets I knew to be meaningful for young adults. There are many good collections available now by Janeczko, Nye, Kennedy, Dunnings, and Glenn. (See Appendix A for the menu of poetry resources.) Students were assigned to complete an individual poetry anthology. In addition to finding poems based on Carlsen's stages (See Appendix B) and typical thematic areas covered in young adult literature, they were asked to write an introduction to their anthologies. The categories I used for this assignment linked up to reading we'd done throughout the semester, but these categories could be easily changed. (See Appendix B for the assignment.)

Introducing The Assignment

Students begin by free writing about their experiences with poetry in secondary schools both good and bad. In a discussion, we talk about what hadn't worked for them in their exposure to poetry and then what had. From that discussion we distill some common principles or approaches that are important to consider in introducing poetry to students. Some of their guidelines include: using contemporary poems or poems that are meaningful, giving students freedom to choose poems and poets to study, allowing students to interpret poems from their own personal vantage points, giving students options in responding to poetry. I then share some of the excellent guidelines and activity suggestions offered in Stephen Tchudi and Diana Mitchell's *Explorations in The Teaching of English*. After we discuss these ideas, I challenge my students to construct an anthology of poems that are meaningful to them and would be meaningful to young adults. Students place the collected poems in a notebook or folder and are encouraged to present the poems in a visually appealing manner.

I see a mixture of blank faces and rolled eyes when I hand out the assignment sheet. They often groan silently or mutter quietly to each other, "She wants thirteen poems?" I plunge ahead reassuring them they'll love collecting the poems. I also share with them anthologies completed by previous students who were willing to lend them to me. These beautifully packaged student anthologies help sell the assignment. But I know the assignment has begun to take as they thumb through the poetry collections, sharing poems they've discovered informally. Soon I hear, "You mean I can just include poems I choose?" "This isn't so bad; maybe I can even find some I like," even, "Can I use more than thirteen?"

Students spend the rest of the hour exploring poetry collections I have brought into class. I began bringing in collections because I wanted to stretch their awareness of the wonderful material available for young adults. When I didn't, they relied only on classics they had experienced in college-level literature courses which were often too difficult for young adults. We conclude the hour with a poetry reading: each student reads a poem discovered during the browsing, and all leave class with poetry ringing in their ears.

I keep the poetry collections in my office so they can draw upon them for inspiration while completing their own anthologies. Three weeks after the assignment has been introduced, we celebrate its completion with a Poetry Coffee House.

The Poetry Coffee House

At the Poetry Coffee House, I bring in snacks and coffee and, depending on the season, cider or lemonade. Music, flowers, and candles transform the classroom into a coffee house. Students share their completed anthologies with each other in small groups and then respond to another person's collection in more detail using a guided handout (See Appendix C). The coffee house gathering ends in a poetry reading. Once again, students leave the room with poems ringing in their ears.

It Works

Those same students who despised poetry show me in their anthology introductions and in class evaluations that this project works. Students quoted previously now describe their experiences with poetry enthusiastically:

"I had a hard time choosing which poems to include in this anthology because I found that I wanted to use nearly all the poems I found so I could save them to read them again and again."

"What a great project. Poetry speaks to the heart at every level. It's powerful and can change one's perspective or even one's own life. It's changed mine."

"This project exposed me to new poets and let me peruse old favorites. I felt as though I was getting to know new works and writers. The project also helped me think about the kinds of poems that young adults would find interesting, poems that would make them excited about poetry and not moan and groan, the typical response from most students."

"I have learned that I actually like to think about and analyze poetry, not only to better understand the message the author is trying to con-

vey, but to discover how the poem relates to me and my life."

"I enjoy poetry for the beauty of the language. I like to read it to hear the words flow together and to see them take shape. The language of Nancy Wood's poems is so beautiful that I read them the first time just to savor the words. I read them a second, third, and fourth time to listen to the message."

"I loved making my own unique collection. I could put e.e. cummings and Dr. Seuss and Gwendolyn Brooks all in one book and link them with common themes. Where else can you find that?"

"I see poetry as a creative journey. It is hard to understand or get into at first but once you get it, 'oh, the places you can go.'"

The Legacy

I was convinced that my students had become lovers of poems (of course, a few remain unmoved) but what about their students? Does this learning to love a poem extend beyond my classroom to theirs? A former student came back last week to share how wonderfully the project worked when she used it with tenth-grade students at Rogers High School. "They loved it!" she told me. "It will give you chills when you see how excited they got about poetry. By doing this assignment they got to explore all the different messages poetry has and they could define it for themselves." Just as college students resent the teacher having the only right answer so do high school students. She continued, "It gave them the freedom to decide on their own which poems fit into which category. One student said, 'Mrs. Reynold, is this a coming-of-age poem?' When I said, 'what do you think? Which lines make you think it is?' she couldn't believe it. I was showing her she was capable of making sense of the poem."

Here's what her high school students said about the assignment and poetry:

"Many girls my age have problems about love and friendship. My favorite poems of the ones I chose are exactly about love and friendship, especially, Now That I'm Alone and A Fool Is Born.... This was interesting because I never really looked at poems for what they were really written about. Now I see how many different subjects poems focus on."

"The poems I displayed in my book are related to kids my age. For example, 'Inner Work' is about the issue of rape. We are afraid to talk about it, yet we need to know the facts.... I enjoyed doing

this anthology because it gave me a chance to really learn about poems and have fun at the same time."

"This assignment has taught me that I really do enjoy poetry. Before I thought it was lame and pointless. Now I have a whole new outlook on it. Poetry is a creative way to express your thoughts and feelings on subjects such as love, loss, family, friendship and so on."

Finally, what I've learned in this poetry journey with my students isn't that I need to teach them how to analyze poems more effectively or memorize the backgrounds of poets and their works or what critics have to say about the poetry or even provide them with gimmicky ways to teach poetry: What I need to do is let them "love a poem."

Works Cited

- Carlsen, G. Robert. "Literature IS." *English Journal* 63.2 (Feb. 1974): 23-27.
- Purves, Alan C., ed. *How Porcupines Make Love*. New York: Xerox Corporation, 1972.
- Rosenblatt, Louise. *Literature as Exploration*, 4th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 1938.
- Tchudi, Steven and Diana Mitchell. *Explorations in the Teaching of English*. New York: Harper, 1989.

About the Author

Pamela Waterbury, Writing Specialist and Writing Tutor Coordinator, teacher Children's Literature, Youth Literature, and a Writing Practicum at Aquinas College.

Appendix A

Whet Your Appetite. . .

- Allen, Terry, ed. *The Whispering Wind*. New York: Doubleday, 1972. Poetry written by young American Indians explores themes of dreams, insights, and poetic visions.
- Sears, Peter. *Gonna Bake Me a Rainbow Poem*. New York: Scholastic, 1990. Student poetry selected from Scholastic's Awards Program with a discussion of the assignments that prompted the poems.
- Glenn, Mel. *Class Dismissed*. New York: Clarion, 1982. Poems told through the fictional voices of ordinary high school students about their lives. Other similar collections by Glenn include *Class Dismissed II*, *My Friend's Got this Problem*, *Mr. Chandler*.

- Rylant, Cynthia. *Soda Jerk*. New York: Orchard, 1990. Twenty-eight poems describe what the narrator sees from behind the counter at Maxwell's Drugstore
- Laurie, Dick and Mark Pawiak, eds. *Smart Like Me*. Hanging Loose Press. 1989. Poems by adolescents capturing their complex interests
- Kohl, Herbert, ed. *Stuff*. World Publishing Co., 1970. Poetry written by young adults filled with the rhythm and concerns of their lives, often experimental in form.
- Carlson, Lori, ed. *Cool Salsa*. New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1994. Latino poetry celebrating the joy and pain of living in two cultures.
- Merriam, Eve. *The Inner City Mother Goose*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969. Rewritten Mother Goose rhymes sharply commenting on social and political issues in the inner city. Vibrant paintings by Diaz add to the powerful themes.
- Shange, Ntozake. *Nappy Edges*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972. Poetry, often in dialect, celebrating and commenting on the lives of African American women.

Food For Thought

- Adoff, Arnold. *Slow Dance Heartbreak Blues*. New York: Lorthrup, Lee & Shephard, 1995. Poetry in the beat and rhythm of contemporary music captures the joys and pains of teen experiences.
- Kherdian, David, ed. *Beat Voices*. New York: Henry Holt, 1995. Compilation of beat poems by some of the major poets of the period.
- Janeczko, Paul, ed. *Looking for Your Name*. New York: Orchard Books, 1993. A collection of contemporary poems exploring themes of conflict in our lives, sports, war, families, poverty.
- Rosenberg, Liz, ed. *The Invisible Ladder*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1996. Poems written by distinguished contemporary poets link poetry and childhood. Childhood pictures of the poets add to the book's appeal.
- Oliver, Mary. *New & Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992. Powerful poems, in deceptively simple language, use nature to raise fundamental questions about our lives.
- Dunning, Stephen, Edward Lueders, and Hugh Smith, eds. *Reflections on the Gift of Watermelon Pickle....*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Co., 1966. Beautiful photographs accompany modern poems that speak to young adults. New edition of this classic is available.
- Stafford, William. *Learning to Live in the World*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994. Stafford's direct and conversational language on the theme of earth-loving and earth-keeping has appeal for young adults.
- Hughes, Langston. *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994. Brian Pinkney's beautiful illustrations capture the poignancy and power of Hughes' poems.
- Janeczko, Paul, ed. *Poetspeak: In Their Work About Their Work*. New York: Bradbury Press, 1983. Poetry by modern poets appropriate for young adults accompanied by poets comments about their work.

Second Helping

- Soto, Gary. *Fire in My Hands*. New York: Scholastic, 1990. Poems about the ordinary experiences of growing up, first love, friendship, family by a Mexican American poet.
- Nye, Naomi Shihab, ed. *This Same Sky*. New York: Four Winds Press, 1992. Poems collected from 68 countries thematically arranged around themes of dreams, the earth, losses, and language.
- Meddaris, Angela Shelf. *Skin Deep*. New York: Macmillan, 1995. Black and white realistic drawings accompany these 40 poems on topics of divorce, dating, parents.
- Wood, Nancy. *Many Winters*. New York: Delacorte, 1995. Frank Howell's vibrant paintings enhance the Native American wisdom in these poems by Woods. Other books by the same author include *Dancing the Moons* and *War Cry on a War Feather*.
- Janeczko, Paul, ed. *Going Over to Your Place*. New York: Bradbury Press, 1987. An anthology of celebrated poets writing about love and loss.
- Fletcher, Ralph. *Buried Alive*. New York: Antheum Books, 1996. Fletcher explores the experience of love through the perspectives of several teen voices. Photo collages give visual life to the poems.
- Rylant, Cynthia. *Something Permanent*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994. Black and white photos by Walker Evans enhance poems about ordinary people's lives during the depression.
- Janeczko, Paul, ed. *Postcard Poems*. New York: Bradbury Press, 1979. One hundred brief modern poems the size of a postcard invite sharing.

Thirst Quenchers.

- Kennedy, X. J., Ed. *Messages*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1973. Contemporary poetry grouped along thematic topics of importance to teens: journeys, war, love, lifestyles.
- Lowenfels, Walter, ed. *The Writing on the Wall*. New York: Doubleday, 1969. A collection of 108 protest poems focused on themes of justice, war, civil rights.
- Hearne, Betsy. *Love Lines*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1987. Fifty-nine poems explore the moods of love.
- Angelou, Maya. Shaker, *Why Don't You Sing?* New York: Random House, 1983. Angelou's highly accessible poetry speaks of love, longing, loss, freedom, dreams.
- Janeczko, Paul. *Wherever Home Begins*. New York: Orchard, 1995. 100 contemporary poems capture the importance of place in our lives, including Anne Frank's home.
- Kenyon, Jane. *Constance*. Graywolf Press, 1993. Kenyon's poetry speaks to young adults struggling with issues of loss, death, and depression.

Appendix B

Poetry Anthology

Create an individual poetry anthology made up of poems that resonate for you and would speak to young adults. As you select poems, be conscious of the developmental interests and language abilities of secondary students. Make sure each poem is labeled with category, author, title, collection title, and other bibliographic information.

Write an introduction to the collection discussing your selections and your reasons for including the poems you selected. You might also comment on the discoveries you made about poetry as you compiled the collection.

Package the poems in an inviting and aesthetically appealing notebook that invites a reader to browse. Plan to share your collections with fellow poetry lovers for comments and discussion at our Poetry Coffee House. Be sure to dress appropriately for a poetry reading—chi chi (ostentatiously stylish or showy) attire is preferred.

Collect a poem for each of the following categories which represent students developing concerns in literature:

- Unconscious Delight
- Vicarious Experience
- Seeing Oneself
- Philosophical Questioning
- Aesthetic Appreciation

Collect a poem for each of the following thematic areas:

- Nature or Survival
- Identity or Coming of Age
- Self and Others (Friendship, love, family)
- Self and Society (Conflict)
- Personal Favorite

Find a poem that would appeal to the following audiences:

- Male students
- Female students
- Ethnically diverse students

Appendix C

Response to a Poetry Anthology

Imagine you are a book reviewer assigned to comment on this poetry anthology. Use the following questions as a guide to developing your review.

1. Did this collection of poems appeal to you? Do you think this collection would appeal to young adults? Explain why or why not.

2. What was your favorite poem in this collection? Why?

3. Was there a poem you had trouble identifying with or understanding? Why?

4. As a result of reading this collection, did you discover a new poet? Who? What appealed to you about the poet's work?

5. What discoveries did you make about poetry or your response to poetry by reading this collection? Explain.

6. Was there any category of poems missing for you as a reader?

7. Was the anthology packaged in an appealing manner? Explain.

8. What other comments or observations can you make about this collection of poems?