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Getting Inside of Literature

Mark Shaheen

Student as Magician: Assessing Poetry Through Performance

Nothing seems to strike fear in my students more than the mention of an upcoming unit in the study of poetry. More than one student has said to me, “ewww” when told we were to begin a unit that includes the study and writing of poetry. Faced with the challenge of engaging students in the prescribed poetry curriculum during my first teaching experience, I can’t say that I felt much different than they felt. Dear Emily Dickinson said she could hear a fly buzz when she died. Well, you could hear a pin drop the first time I asked students to please open their texts to page 43 for a “quick” lesson on Walt Whitman.

Why is it that most American poetry texts seemed to end with the advent of Allen Ginsberg and the Beatniks? How can I engage my students in the richness of our unique American perspective in poetry without offending their sensibilities and my need for active engagement in the classroom? How can I arouse students to move within the landscape of poetry and create meaningful obsessions with the language they encounter? “Look around you,” said a voice early one morning as I darted between instant coffee and yesterday’s oatmeal. “It is all around you.”

So I looked around and saw that American poetry is certainly alive and well in 1995. One only needs to explore the coffee houses of our cities and towns to see that young people are again interested in the word as expression of “one’s soul.” Interestingly, many young people today are looking back to the Beatniks and Allen Ginsberg for inspiration, as well they should. Beatnik poetry was much more than images and figures of speech carefully jumbled onto the page. The Beats attempted to break free from the static conceptions of modern poetry to include jazz, posturing, singing, and performance of the word. It was a way for young people to testify to their vitality, their individuality, their craving for experience, and their need for expression of experi-

ence. Are young people still looking? “Get hip.” Is there anything we can do in the classroom to “tune them in and turn them on?” You bet!

I have discovered that when I hook students into something that’s “cool,” they will generally allow me to take them places they would otherwise banish their enemies to (i.e. Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, et. al.). When I begin teaching poetry, I start with very contemporary writers. I really like the texture of contemporary poetry, because in many ways, it takes the language of the ordinary person and somehow manages to make it become extraordinary (much like Whitman, the father of American poetry, did for his time).

People who take the ordinary and make it extraordinary are called magicians in my classroom. We talk not only of published writers as magicians, but also of the student as magician both for reasons of interpretation and their own experiments in writing. This ordinariness is a great place for students to begin exploring. Much contemporary poetry is written narratively, and so the language reflects concrete, specific imagery while taking risks in subject matter and perspective. This is especially important to note, since most people, young and old alike, think that poetry is written, in some way, to fool or confuse

the reader. After all, people read writing in order to gain some perspective on themselves and the world they live in. Contemporary poetry, especially the narrative styles of Raymond Carver, Jim Daniels, Etheridge Knight, Barbra Drake, and Leslie Marmon Silko, often use storytelling in a variety of postures to create multiple levels of meaning for the reader.

After we decide that poetry is not created solely for the purposes of punishing high school students, we talk about language and experience and what it means to want to write poetry. If students can define for the teacher what it means to write good poetry, then half the trial of fear of poetry is dismissed for insufficient evidence.

One way that I allow my students to define good poetry is by asking them to write the worst poem they possibly can. Here is an excellent worst poem from one of my most promising "bad" writers, "Willy Carlos" (name has been changed to protect the guilty).

WHY I WANT TO CRY

(FOR JIM MORRISON AND SEAN PENN)

I'm so upset
I want to cry
I just can't now
say why.
Actually,
the reason why
I want to cry
is that the world
is not good
just not good at all.
But first I'll sigh
then wave bye bye
before you see me cry.

When I was little
I thought about
rainbows and
clowns and
butterflies and
frogs.
But now all that's left for
me is
my empty self like a
bowling pin that's me that's all.

And so the world
will be even more bad off
than it was before

if I
lower myself
to send
red roses of love.
Because, it's been done
before,
and I'm
just not into
that.

Several issues to note here: this student has told me through his own "bad" writing that poetry that rhymes predictably is boring and not natural. Also, I interpret his mocking of butterflies and clowns and frogs and especially the rainbow as image overuse. What he thinks of Morrison and Penn is open for discussion. He also is saying that what he wants out of poetry is something fresh and original, none of this love stuff with red roses for him. After reading Gary Soto's "Oranges," I asked the students to write what they thought love was in a concrete image. Here is Willy Carlos again:

Love is an
orange slice
you share with someone
knowing that
the moon is orange
when it's full.

The sentiment here is beautiful. The image clear. The metaphor very powerful and wise.

Students, I find, are literally starving for new ideas to help them formulate their own meanings in life. Contemporary poetry allows students to read the freshness of experience from those they can relate to, and models for them ways to encounter their own experiences with words, phrases, imagery, and metaphor that they can imitate.

What is one to do with the classics, once contemporary voices have been traced back to their roots, say, in the Whitman tradition of American poetry? How do we respond to students who cannot fathom the voice, the phrasing, the images, and the content of a nation not yet wrestling with cars and phones and "love at the Egyptian theater?" Again, I have to look to the Beatniks for advice, for their time has arrived in the present forms of **Performance Poetry**, or

poetry of performance. I use the phrases here to compliment each other because I know that a reader's demeanor means almost everything to his words when spoken aloud. And poetry is an **oral tradition**.

Peter Novak, Professor of English and Theater at Santa Clara University, said in a conversation I had with him that "from earliest human existence, movement and words were inextricably linked as a method to reveal a language of wider communication." He has developed a class in the study of poetry through movement that allows students to posture the many and varied shades of meaning brought to poetry through the "performance of images." Certainly, we as English teachers love language, something I refer to at times as "my love affair with the inescapable eagerness of innocence." If we can teach our students to love language for the landscape it creates, the music that is inherent to poetry, then we can teach students to create and alter that landscape and music to their own previous knowledge, making the poetry of "the dead boys" seem as if it were written only yesterday.

Allowing students to perform poetry is allowing students to make the voice of the poet relevant to them. It is also making the poem and poet more universal. I am not asking students to wander from the content of the piece, but rather, to show each other what they think the poet's overall goal was in writing the poem in the first place. Instead of a five paragraph essay based on a persuasive argument, my students battle it out on the floor (and sometimes the desks and walls) of the classroom. Kind of like poetry warfare: it's the Sylvia Plaths vs. the Dorothy Parkers ("pearls before swine," as Miss Parker once told Clare Boothe Luce before entering the Algonquin in front of her). Whose poem has the most arresting "shape?" The most fluent presentation? The most critical awareness of style and content? And the students by and large don't seem to want to act. What they do want to do is present the poem in a way that best represents the voice (or multiple voices) of the poet. Here is an example from Wallace Stevens' "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 not 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 the 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 he 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.

We begin the process of performance by reading the entire poem out loud as a class, writing notes in the margin and underlining strange words and allusions. We then take a few moments to read the poem again to ourselves. We discuss any questions the readers have with the poem, and then begin discussion of content. I generally tend to give a historical perspective of the writer: what was happening in art and music at the time, and where this poem falls in a timeline with other world events. The group that performs the poem will then have one full class hour (generally split between two days) to work together and “produce” the poem. This particular poem was attended to by thirteen students. When I suggested that Stevens might have been imitat-

ing the need by visual artists at the time to create movement in a static space (showing them pictures of Duchamp’s “Lady Descending a Staircase” as an example), they began to uncover the dynamics of language and form from the poem itself.

The end result? Person by person, starting from the floor up, they built a series of bird portraits with their bodies beginning with pre-flight, flight, and ending up on my desk peering down across the room to the last speaker, who was busy composing the thirteenth movement in writing at his desk, the end of the poem representing the beginning of the writer’s thoughts. The common image of the blackbird, in the hands of magicians (Stevens and my students) transformed an otherwise difficult, eastern influenced poem, into a startling revelation about the thought process and the multiple perspectives we all share, if we take the time to acknowledge ourselves and our thoughts.

Allowing students to gaze into the crystal ball of poetic language from a contemporary perspective, I believe, is tantamount to their understanding of the history of poetry in our country. As writers moved across this nation, so too did their language change with the dynamics of the land and experiences they encountered. By allowing students to break free from the constraints of the written word, we encourage them to respond to ideas from a physical and emotional level, thus enabling a more critical response to the many levels to poetry and the language of expression. The choices they make in oral and physical interpretation are the first steps toward a better understanding of the poet’s vision, and indeed their own.