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ABSTRACT

Anthologists and editors prepare the way for poetry readers, selecting works that reward close reading and assisting interpretation through annotation. But on the Internet people can return to poetry in its native state--one set of words among many others competing for appreciation--and read with fresh eyes. The learning objectives of this lesson plan are: to analyze the verbal devices through which poems make meaning; to compare one's personal interpretation of a poem with the personal interpretations of others; and to develop standards of literary judgment. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (10-12), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

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Practical Criticism [Lesson Plan].

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Practical Criticism

Introduction

Anthologists and editors prepare the way for poetry readers, selecting works that reward close reading and assisting interpretation through annotation. But on the Internet we can return to poetry in its native state -- one set of words among many others competing for appreciation -- and read with fresh eyes.

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Lesson Plans

SEARCH EDSITEMENT

Learning Objectives

To analyze the verbal devices through which poems make meaning; to compare one's personal interpretation of a poem with the personal interpretations of others; to develop standards of literary judgment.

Lesson Plan

1 During the early decades of this century, the British critic I. A. Richards conducted a famous series of experiments in reading that he reported in his book *Practical Criticism*. Interested primarily in the ways poems affect a reader, he regularly gave his students a selection of anonymous poems and asked for a commentary on each. The exercise led him to propose a step-by-step process for interpreting poetry, which formed the basis for the discipline we now call "close reading." Begin this lesson by explaining to your students that they will recreate the Richard's experiment, using the unfiltered poetry available on the Internet as their raw material.

2 Have small groups of students browse the Victorian Women Writers Project website to select 2 to 4 poems for commentary. Ask students: What draws you to a poem? As they browse, students should be aware of what factors affect their choices. The title of a collection of poetry, the author's name and dates, the size of the collection, all have a subjective influence on the kind of poetry we read and enjoy. Have students reflect on these influences as they browse the site and keep a journal of their selection process. Once students have completed their selections, but before they begin their commentaries on each poem, compare notes as a class on the factors that led them to their choices.

3 Have students comment on one or two of the poems they have selected, following an adaptation of the procedure outlined by I. A. Richards:

- First, they should write a paraphrase of the poem, expressing in their own words its plain prose meaning.
- Second, they should comment on the imagery used in the poem. Have them explain how the imagery enhances the poem by adding emotional color or associations to the plain

SUBJECT AREAS ▶

Literature: British

Literature: Poetry

GRADE LEVELS ▶

10-12

SKILLS ▶

- close reading
- comparative analysis
- literary interpretation
- critical thinking
- Internet research

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT ▶

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; (more)
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. (more)
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)

sense. Have them note also whether the poet's use of imagery is consistent.

- Third, have students describe the overall tone or mood of the poem, the "feeling" that it communicates to them as readers. A poem leaves an impression, and while this impression may be complex (who could summarize the "feeling" imparted by Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"?), it will always be distinct for the alert reader.
- Finally, have students express an opinion about the poem: is it good or bad poetry, and why? This may be the most popular part of the exercise, since we generally present students with poems that have been certified "good" by generations of venerated readers and rarely give them an opportunity to pass an unbiased judgment of their own.

4 When they have completed their commentaries, have students discuss in small groups what they learned from the experience. Which stage in the process was most difficult? Which was most revealing? How did the exercise make them more self-aware as readers of poetry? How did it sharpen their understanding of how poems work? Divide the class into small groups for comparison of their individual commentaries. Have each group report on these discussions. What are two or three qualities in each poem that they liked? Have students make a list of qualities and share them with the class.

Extending the Lesson

To conclude the lesson, work as a class to apply the Richards reading procedure to a frequently anthologized poem, such as "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth (available on the [Romantic Circles](#) website). Through discussion, arrive at a consensus paraphrase of the poem, a common interpretation of its imagery, a shared sense of the "feeling" it imparts, and a consensus judgment of its literary quality.



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