

Poetry Unveiled

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Abstract: The poetry unit is one of the least anticipated and enjoyed units in education, but poetry is still relevant to education. When teachers and students can connect a poem to both the *how* and *why* of language, it ceases to be such an uphill struggle. This paper introduces the UnVEIL approach to understanding poetry, a step-by-step consideration of **UN**derstanding language, **Vo**ice, **E**vents, **I**nterpretation of techniques, and **L**ook/Listen/Lesson, serving to take some of the mystery out of poetry while maintaining all the magic of the language.

Ask students why so many of them hate poetry, and you will get some typical answers of “It’s stupid” or “It’s boring.” But dig a little deeper and you will find that students are really feeling frustration. They have come to understand poetry as a guessing game: even when they’re right about the message of a poem, they don’t really know why. We’ve found this to be equally true of English instructors who have decided that poetry isn’t relevant. Some have given up the practice entirely because they were never given the proper tools. This is why we launched The Poetry Professors in September of 2017 to help teachers provide students with the ability to authentically connect and read poetry, or as we like to say, “Less Guessing, More Accessing.”

Why Poetry?

While poetry may seem absent from the Common Core due to its focus on nonfiction, poetry is still essential. For instance, standard RL10 says that students need to be able to read literature of complexity, including poetry, appropriate for their grade level. Now, imagine a scenario in which students are asked to read a novel such as *1984* their senior

year, when all they've read previously is a few primers in elementary school and a mid-level Chris Crutcher novel without studying characterization, symbolism, and theme development. What chance do those students have of uncovering the nuances of dystopian literature present in Orwell's masterpiece? This is the state of poetry for many high school students, and the Common Core tells us it must be otherwise.

The Common Core also emphasizes a multitude of approaches to and high repetitions of each skill. The length of the typical poem allows significantly more repetition of several language and word choice standards. Additionally, no other type of literature heightens skill development like poetry. Words are at a premium, and a poem often turns on the interpretation of a single word.

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Now that we've talked about the what and the why, let's get into the details of the how. Without a doubt, make sure you aren't forcing your students into one "right" answer. If they can back up their thoughts with evidence, let them hold onto it for that layer. Students already approach poetry with trepidation, and the more you tell them they are wrong "because the book says so," the more quickly they will go back to hating it. We're giving you the tools to woo them out of that attitude, but it will take time.

We wouldn't be real English teachers if our methodology didn't contain an acronym which walks students through five steps--"UnVEIL": Understanding, Voice, Events, Interpret Techniques, and Look/Listen/Lesson.

Un: Understand. The first step is understanding the words used and then understanding *how* the words are used in the poem. Poetry is not the time to do vocabulary. Most students are going to approach this process tentatively, so don't make them memorize new words. Instead, give them access to resources that will make them confident in the denotation of each word. Only then will they feel free to explore the connotations. For instance, let's look at this verse from "Judith" By D. H. Skogen:

not with expectant eyes
not need for validation
but by this divine clarity
the stricken always show

The underlined words could all cause students to trip up. In this case, they might conclude on that the clarity itself is holy. But it is supposed to be understanding at the same level as God in His omnipotence. The words each student readily understands will vary widely, especially those in ELL programs. Make the process of looking up new words a standard so students aren't intimidated to ask.

V: Voice. The second layer is to learn about the voice of the poem. In this step of the process, students use character inquiry tools to explore the speaker of the poem to determine perspective, tone, location, and other literary devices and techniques. The human inclination is to read something in our own voice because ours is the only head we live in. In a novel, short story, or epic poem, you have lots of time to get to know the narrator. Most of the time in poetry you don't. You get ten or twenty lines, and students will naturally believe the voice to be either themselves or the author, which is why we frequently start poetry units with something very engaging and non-threatening, like Shel Silverstein's "If I Had a Brontosaurus":

If I had a brontosaurus
I would name him Morris or Horace;
But if suddenly one day he had a lot of little brontosauri
I would change his name to Laurie.

After reading this poem, we ask what the voice of the poem is and generally get ... crickets, so, we start asking a set of guiding questions. The first conversation goes something like this:

Instructor: Is the voice young or old?

Student: I don't know.

Instructor: Are they 47?

Student: No.

Instructor: Why?

Student: Because they think they could own a dinosaur.

Instructor: At what age are humans obsessed with owning dinosaurs?

Student: Like 4 or 5 or 6. Oh, like my cousin Tanner who has an entire collection and can tell you all their features.

Instructor: What else are kids in the 4-6 range just starting to understand that we see in this poem?

Student: *Crickets*

Instructor: Why would they change the dino's name?

Student: *Lightbulb*

Instructor: Right. They are just starting to understand the difference between mommy dinosaurs and daddy dinosaurs. How does this little voice feel about that?

Student: They think it's funny.

Instructor: Yes. This has the tone of two little kids giggling in the bathroom about how boys and girls are different.

Now, instead of this poem being “dumb” as viewed from a teen perspective, students can see these thoughts as the precious, adorable insights of a young child. And just that easily we've gotten into some questions that will continue to guide us through the voice layer, which is always the starting point:

Who are you?

Where are you?

When are you?

What do you look like?

How do you feel about what's happening?

Instructors and students will rarely be able to answer all of these questions, and sometimes you'll want to dive into one of them more deeply. The value is not in being able to answer every single question; the value is in exploring all of them and digging out that which you and your students can dig out.

Let's explore these questions in the Emily Dickinson classic "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died":

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable - and then it was
There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -
And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

So, let's ask this voice our questions:

1. **Who are you?** An older woman, someone who has taken time to get all of her affairs in order: "Signed away / What portion of me be / Assignable."

2. **Where are you?** On her deathbed with her family gathered around. They've already done all their mourning because "The Eyes around - had wrung them dry." She's been dying for a while.
3. **When are you?** Some of the words here indicate this is taking place in an older America. It's also daytime because there is light outside the window.
4. **What do you look like?** An older lady; we don't have anything more.
5. **How do you feel about what's happening?** She has clearly prepared for death and has gathered everyone around to witness her last big moment. This is now being interrupted by a fly. She is annoyed by its lack of manners.

We use some fun techniques, including a game we call "Lines and Voices," where you can print a variety of poetic lines and a variety of voices so students can experiment with how using a different voice changes the meaning of the poem. Sometimes we have students fill out a dating profile or a police report for a voice.

Working through the Voice layer, you can get students first to a place where they understand the who and the where of what is happening in this poem. Having those tools in place immediately makes it easier to start exploring the layer that they want to jump to: What is happening in this poem?

E: Events. After digging into voice, we start exploring what is happening, and, again, face the dreaded crickets:

Instructor: What is happening in this poem?

Student: Nothing.

Instructor: Nothing?

Student: No, it's just a guy sitting around thinking.

Instructor: Exactly.

If we tell our students we will “think about” allowing them to use their notes on their exam, they expect we will engage in deep, existential contemplation over this question, right? Close reading techniques allow them to find and piece together those events into a picture or a story. We classify events as a voice performing actions, having thoughts, or expressing emotions, or as physical events, intellectual events, and emotional events.

There is a lot of internal dialogue in poetry. Voices frequently ponder, think, consider, and reflect. We sometimes get caught up in the fact that we believe analyzing is the opposite of poetic. Not true. Voices are always evaluating their choices and analyzing their decisions. When did I see signs you weren’t mine? Why did I let you go?

We find it helpful to access events by finding the first event and then asking “newspaper style” questions:

1. What is happening?
2. To whom is it happening?
3. Where is it happening? (Which can be different from “Where is the voice?”)
4. When is it happening?
5. Why is it happening?
6. How is it happening?

Again, you will not be able to answer every question about every event in every poem. That’s not the point. The point is to explore them all and see what you find. Let’s take a look at this section from Maxwell Bodenheim’s poem “Thoughts While Walking”:

A steel hush freezes the trees.
It is my mind stretched to stiff lace,
And draped on high wide thoughts.

First event

1. What is happening? Freezing
2. To whom is it happening? Trees
3. How is it happening? By a steel hush

Next event

1. What is happening? Mind stretched
2. To whom is it happening? The voice
3. How is it happening? To lace - stretched so thin it now has holes in it

Next event

1. What is happening? Mind draped
2. To whom is it happening? The voice
3. Where is it happening? On high, wide thoughts

Sometimes you will ask a question for which the poem has no answer. This is actually good; the more frequently you ask students those questions, the more they trust that this really is a process and will explore and play with language. In the event examples above, we intentionally left out “When is it happening” because there is no answer for that, and in the first two examples we can answer “how,” but not in the third. These inquiries also help detect figurative language when we get to our next step. In this poem, the event is the mind being stretched like lace and draped on deep thoughts, and it would be really gruesome if that were a literal, physical event. It is an intellectual event during which the voice is struggling to wrap his or her mind around some concepts that are lofty. What does all that mean? We don’t know yet. We haven’t gotten to that part. This is a great time to let your students start spinning some ideas, but they will want to jump right to the final layer: “The poem means_____.” It is not time to land on an interpretation yet. We’ve only just begun.

I: Interpret Techniques. Note the title of this section is not “Interpret the poem.” Students will want to interpret the poem, but they don’t have all the information they need to make an informed declaration. Poetry isn’t just about what is happening to whom, but also *how* those events are shaped through literary devices and techniques, such as parallelism, rhyme, metaphor, and personification, that do more than sculpt pretty language. Merely finding them does little to enhance student understanding. Studying author’s craft in poetry allows students to move beyond being able to label a technique

and into understanding the reasons techniques are used. Then, students can see how these elements contribute to the poem as a whole.

This is probably the least understood and most important layer. Techniques are like Easter eggs in movies, like how we had to go back and re-watch that entire season of *Dr. Who* to find the “Bad Wolf” in every episode. When you find the cool thing, you get excited. They are things that don’t always affect the plot at the moment, but they enhance the overall meaning. Continuing our television metaphor, the words of the poem are the plot and the script while the rhyme scheme, rhythm, and assonance are the lighting, costumes, and set dressing. Just as a camera angle directs audience attention to a certain actor, so techniques highlight where the poet wants the reader to pay attention. These are all the things in between the words that make the poetry.

When it comes to poetic technique, educators have talked about it with students since elementary school, so they will be familiar concepts. However, things get a little more challenging when we dive into helping students understand why a particular technique is used. The classroom conversation usually goes like this:

Instructor: Find the metaphor.

Student: There?

Instructor: Good job. Five points.

The question that rarely gets answered for the student is: Why did I find the metaphor? That question can be expanded to include: Why do I care about how long the stanzas are? Why do I care about alliteration? Why do I care about one piece of punctuation?

We’ve divided techniques into three different categories:

Figurative Language: What do we read?

Sound Devices: What do we hear?

Grammatical Devices: What do we see?

To make it easier for students to access, we post a chart with some of the big ones and then add to it as a class throughout the year as we study poetry. For example:

| Figurative Language | Sound Devices | Grammatical Devices |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Simile/Metaphor – compare things positively to intensify or help us relate to the unfamiliar</p> <p>Personification – give human traits to something to help us empathize</p> | <p>Rhyme scheme – words that rhyme help us anticipate and speed up the poem. Near or off rhymes do the opposite</p> <p>Parallelism – long lists or similar structure can draw attention and intensify the importance of an image</p> | <p>Capitalizations – noting where words are capitalized where they shouldn't be or aren't where they should be makes us question why</p> <p>Word Order – when a poem starts sounding like Yoda because of an unusual word order. Unusual word order changes the rhythm of a line or emphasizes a word that isn't usually highlighted.</p> |

Then, as we work through a poem, we ask students to answer three questions:

1. What is the technique?
2. What does that technique do in language on a regular basis?
3. What is that trait doing in this poem specifically?

Let's look at an example from Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est":

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,

1. **What is the technique?** Simile – a simile compares the traits of two things positively using *like* or *as*. There are two similes in this stanza: “Bent double, like old beggars” and “coughing like hags.”
2. **What does that technique do in language on a regular basis?** A simile helps us relate to something more familiar or intensify something we might relate to so closely that it’s no longer powerful.
3. **What is that trait doing in this poem specifically?** “Bent double, like old beggars” When I think of bending over I generally go straight to looking for socks under the couch. Yes, I feel like I have a hard time straightening up sometimes, but this isn’t a hardship in my world. Students are even younger and can stand right up again after being bent double. But even those spry young people will get a feel for the weight of being bent like “old beggars,” and then it intensifies with “under sacks.” Sacks implies weighty things full of flour or wheat, and the heft of those sacks can be understood. Then we have “coughing like hags.” This isn’t a Delores Umbridge little throat-clear. This is the hacking of someone with a long-term lung disease, and most of your students will be able to think of someone in their lives who has a smoker’s cough and can come close to hearing this cough in their minds.

Let’s look at a grammatical device example from Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” because these can be a little trickier:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

In this case we are going to talk about that pesky colon in the final stanza:

1. **What is the technique?** That pesky colon in the final stanza.
2. **What does that technique do in language on a regular basis?** “A colon instead of a semicolon may be used between independent clauses when the second sentence explains, illustrates, paraphrases, or expands on the first sentence” (“Colons”).
3. **What is that trait doing in this poem specifically?** If its purpose is to “expand on the first sentence,” we can say that everything after the colon expands on the two lines preceding it. In other words, even though the rest of the poem indicates that the two paths he encountered that day were really the same, he’s going to tell this story in his old age and embellish it, as our grandparents are inclined to do, and say that he took the one less traveled by (even though neither really was less traveled) and it made all the difference in his life (even though it didn’t really).

That little colon will crush all the dreams of your American Lit students who were so excited to finally say the message of this poem is to “be yourself” when, in actuality, the message of this poem might be closer to: “old people embellish the truth.”

L: Look/Listen/Lesson. Ah, the moment you’ve all been waiting for. And the moment you will find your students wanting to jump to. They want to read a poem once and say, “This is the message.” It’s our job to help them use these layers to come to a supportable determination of what the final takeaway of any given poem is.

Contrary to popular student belief, not every poem means “be yourself,” “follow your dreams,” or “don’t let others tell you what to do.” In fact, sometimes a poem doesn’t teach a lesson at all. Sometimes the poet simply wants to freeze a moment in time and study it. “If I Had a Brontosaurus” communicated no great mysteries of life message. Silverstein is

the master of freezing these moments of childhood and embracing their playfulness in a way that even adult readers can enjoy.

Sometimes a poet wants to embrace a singular sound and examine it more closely. Lewis Carroll’s “The Jabberwocky” does not have a deep meaning, but it does demonstrate how we can take language that we don’t understand and yet fully understand the events. Sometimes a poem like “Night Mail” by W.H. Auden works to embody the sounds of its subject:

This is the night mail crossing the Border,
Bringing the cheque and the postal order,

Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
The shop at the corner, the girl next door.

These first two stanzas feel like a train chugging along the track. When the train reaches the top of the hill and begins its descent, however:

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
Letters of joy from girl and boy,
Receipted bills and invitations
To inspect new stock or to visit relations,

The fact that these lines are closer together and start playing with internal rhyme (see how we used the information from a previous layer to justify our answer?) speeds up how we read this poem, which leads us to feel the train going faster and faster down the hill. The author wants us to hear the train while he discusses its cargo.

Once students are open to the fact that sometimes an author’s message isn’t a message, they can feel more confident using all the evidence they collected to come to a conclusion about the poem’s “Look” at a moment, its “Listen” of a sound technique, or its “Lesson.” The UnVEIL approach provides the scaffolding for this literary analysis through the V, E, and I layers so all of their evidence is there in the work they’ve already done.

Let's walk through an abbreviated version of the whole process with this poem from Neil Hilborn's "Fabric Swatches, Paint Samples":

I will, in all my hereditary optimism,
try to be honest my dear, not just
about where I am and particularly
with whom, but also where I am in the vast,
melodramatic plane that is my feelings
and where I have placed you
and how exactly to cross
the Stupid Desert to find me.
There is quicksand in the Stupid
Desert that I call my exes—they don't
hate you but, my darling, they also
do not know you, which is not to say
I don't speak of you, because I do,
I do, to my therapist
who I fired, to the women
at bars and at work and
at Roller Derby bouts who confuse
me for an exit sign, darling,
I use you, yes, to feel secure or loved,
or like a tire wrapped in chains,
so let us say at least that I do not
use you abnormally. All of this
is to say that, should you move here
to live with me and the mental
disorders, I will not lie to you. The sea
is so wide and our boat is so small.

Voice - We have a younger, awkward adult with some mental disorders he's trying to manage. At the same time, he is trying to love. Our evidence: We know this is a younger

adult because he hasn't settled down yet. He hangs out at bars and roller derby bouts where he goes largely unnoticed. We know he struggles with some mental disorders because he talks about his therapist. We also know he's awkward because he uses images like "a tire wrapped in chains" and "The Stupid Desert" which are not your typical, warm and fuzzy images in love poetry. If we were to ask how this voice feels about what's happening, we would easily get to: he is eager for success, but so afraid it won't work out.

Events – using our newspaper question technique, we start at the top of the poem:

1. What is happening? The voice will be honest
2. To whom is it happening? My dear
3. How is it happening? In optimism
4. About what? Where I am, who I'm with, feelings, where I put you, how to cross the Stupid Desert

The fact that the last question is such a long list is something we note with students. You can hear the awkwardness as he rambles on. Awkward nerds who have mental disorders tend to be pretty afraid that the people who love them will eventually stop loving them. Deciding the right time to share which piece of oneself is terrifying and we get this from our poor voice. He's warning "you" (a woman he loves) about how hard it will be for them to come together and be together, but he wants to try.

1. What is happening? Voice - speaks of "you"
2. To whom is it happening? fired therapist, women
3. Where is it happening? at bars, at work, at Roller Derby
4. When is it happening? Presumably all the time, because those locations pretty much sum up everywhere our voice is going to go

Perhaps when you looked at that poem, you arranged the events a little differently. That's fine. Your students might do the same. The key isn't to be perfect, the key is to build a scaffold where you can figure out what is happening here.

Interpret techniques – "Stupid Desert" and wrapped like a "tire in chains" are both unusual images when it comes to love poetry. We're already deep into wondering what

these images mean when the voice says the way he loves is not “abnormally.” The fact that he has to say, “This is not abnormal” indicates it is entirely “abnormal” while at the same time asking “what is normal?” when it comes to love. These images are all designed to make the reader feel a little off-kilter, like the voice himself is.

Look/Listen/Lesson - the message of this poem is encompassed in the last line: Love is a wide sea and their boat is so small. It is a difficult navigation, but he wants so desperately to try to make the journey with the woman he loves. Since the message is clarified in the last line, students may not have trouble guessing it. But push further by asking them, “How do you know?” and you’ll find they’re still guessing and struggling. The notes from the V, E, and I layers above give them the material they need to answer the deeper questions and feel confident in doing so.

Make the Teaching of Poetry Great Again

As we look back on why poetry fell out of our good graces so many years ago, it wasn’t because we lost our love for the art form, but because, as readers, we lost our ability to access it and just started guessing as to why we thought a poem meant what it did. We, as a culture of educators, stopped teaching it through a lens of author’s craft and how poets wove words into dense snippets of creative brilliance; it became a unit to “just get through.” That frustration has now trickled down from instructor to student for years.

All is not lost. Poetry is not irrelevant. We just need a new system to restore student confidence in the process. We encourage you to join us in lifting the VEIL on poetry so students can marvel at the beauty in words again.

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