*On Word at a Time*

A lesson on density in poetry

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Even though its most famous pieces range widely in length, poetry is often associated with brevity. It is common for poets to dodge words with strictly grammatical functions – especially articles and non-descriptive verbs – to create enjambed, impactful lines. It is similarly common for poets to reach for highly obscure, precise words that communicate complex or technical ideas efficiently. The magic of a good poem is often its ability to overachieve: it strives to contain a chapter’s worth of content in the space of a page or two.

However, the resulting density can make poetry intimidating. While some poems are relatively accessible due to their use of familiar vocabulary and phrasing, others can seem like they are written in a language that only resembles English. It takes a very dedicated, patient reader to unravel the intricacies of such poems. For readers who take the time to unravel a work like Amy Munson’s *Yes, Thorn,* the rewards are rich and many – very few poets are able to span the intense demands and joys of a spiritual life over the course of a page. If we are taking the time to lead students into the world of poetry, it seems only right to put enough faith in them to take them to its most treasured reaches. In the classroom where reading ability and interest is spread across a wide range, we can still approach dense poetry. The key is to give students a clear route to do so.

This lesson fulfills the following objectives:

1. Students will be able to comprehend dense poems by:
   1. Identifying unfamiliar vocabulary and using reference materials to gain understanding.
   2. Isolating difficult lines for analysis.
   3. Identifying multiple possible meanings for words and phrases.
   4. Identifying patterns within a poem as a whole.
   5. Using identified patterns to determine the meaning of isolated words, lines and phrases.
2. Students will be able to analyze meaning and importance of individual words in a poem.

Homework assigned to prepare for this class:

N/A

Lesson Structure:

1. **Opening Journal:** What do you do when you read a word you don’t know in a book and why? (**~2 minutes**)
2. **Creative Writing Warm-Up:** Go to Merriam Webster and click on Word of the Day. If you already know the Word of the Day, scroll back to previous words of the day until you hit a word you don’t know. Using that word as a title, write a new poem of at least ten lines in length. Do not use the word in the poem itself (**~10 minutes**)
3. **Creative Writing Analysis:** 
   1. Rip the title off the top of the poem and swap poems with a partner. Read the poem. What does the poem seem to mean? Write a short paragraph on your interpretation of the poem. (**~5 minutes**)
   2. Give your ripped-off title to the partner reading your poem. If you need to, look up the title you’ve been given. How does the meaning of the poem change when you have a new title? What is the importance of the world in the poem? Brainstorm and discuss. (**~3 minutes)**
   3. Re-read the poem and circle the word that is, in your opinion, the most important. Why is that word important? Cross out the word. How does the poem change when the word is gone? Brainstorm and discuss. (**~5 minutes)**
   4. Class share / discussion: Who had a poem whose meaning changed a lot when the title was gone? How about when a different word is removed? How did the meaning change? Is every word important for a poem’s meaning? If not, which words are important? (**~5 minutes**)

**RUNNING TIME UP TO THIS POINT: 30 MINUTES**

1. **Introduction to “Yes Thorn”**
   1. Read aloud “Altricial.” Discuss: How does the poem sound? Which lines sound especially weird or powerful? (**~2 minutes**)
   2. What do you think the poem might mean? Which words would it be helpful to know in order to confirm this meaning? Can any of them be figured out from context? (**~3 minutes**)
   3. Divide the class into four groups. Each group will take one section of the poem (1: “What offers…carapace and wing.” 2: “A holiness…radiant beneath.” 3: “All hollow…vestigial investment.” 4: “If the sky…wide-open mouth.”) First, each member will write down a guess at what the meaning of their section is without looking any words up. (**~2 minutes**). Then, each group will try to unravel the meaning of their section by first looking up all unknown words, and then paraphrasing the action of their section. (**~8 minutes**)
   4. Each group will present their section (in order, from section 1 to 2) by reading it aloud, sharing some of their first impressions of the section’s meaning, and then explaining what they think their section actually means while noting words that are especially important in determining that meaning. (~**15 minutes**)
   5. Discuss the meaning of the entire piece given each group’s work. Which section is the most important? Were any difficult words especially key to the work’s meaning? (**5 minutes**)

**RUNNING TIME UP TO THIS POINT: 65 MINUTES**

1. Browse Yes Thorn for a piece you find especially intriguing. Without looking up any words, note what you enjoy about the poem. What do you get out of the poem on first glance? (**~5 minutes**)
2. **Closing Journal:** Do you always need to understand something’s meaning to enjoy it? Is being confused ever a good or fun feeling? What are the advantages to having a deep versus a surface level experience of art? (**~5 minutes**)

**Critical Essay: *Yes Thorn***

*Yes Thorn* is an emotionally, conceptually and linguistic dense text that’s very well-suited to a single-poem analysis. For this essay, you will dive deep into the poem of your choice for a close reading. To guide yourself through this process, follow the steps below:

1. **Read through the poem three to five times. Jot down your feelings towards and ideas regarding the poem.** These initial ideas will be convenient to reference throughout the process of writing the essay.
2. **Identify any words or sections of the poem where you are unclear about basic meaning.** Use a dictionary to research difficult words, and if the poem still doesn’t make sense, use a database like the Oxford English Dictionary to explore possible alternative meanings. If much of the poem is difficult to understand, you might want to consider switching poems.
3. **Identify patterns within the poem.** Are there any themes that are focused on or literary elements that are used repeatedly? Are any of these patterns related? For example, you might look to see if the author uses one type of literary element to repeatedly describe or objects related to the same theme.
4. **Brainstorm possible meanings of the poem.** What does author seem to think is true about the world? What gives you that impression? Are there any patterns or words you’ve identified that backs up your meaning? Are there any that contradict your meaning, and how can you shift your hypothetical meaning to avoid that contradiction?
5. **Establish a thesis.** Once you’ve found a meaning that is well supported by evidence throughout the poem, write it down and edit it for clarity and concision.
6. **Structure and outline your essay.** Your goal is to guide the reader through your interpretation of the poem. You should establish your main point, or thesis, early in the essay and then structure your sub-points and textual evidence to gradually build a fluent, solid case.
7. **Write the essay.** Using your outline as a roadmap, draft the essay. Give yourself the flexibility to go back and look for more evidence when you come up with new ideas, but try to stick with your outline to make your draft as clear and focused as possible. Try not to worry too much about phrasing and editing while writing; that’s what the next step is for.
8. **Revise the essay.** In addition to using a spell check and reading back through the essay for errors, use read-aloud and peer editing to get a more thorough, distanced perspective on your work.
9. **Turn in the essay and pat yourself on the back.** Good luck!

**Assignment Rubric:**

**Presence of a strong, clear thesis: \_\_\_\_ / 15**

**Provision of relevant evidence: \_\_\_\_ / 25**

**Analysis & defense of evidence: \_\_\_\_ / 35**

**Structure: \_\_\_\_ / 15**

**Grammar & Mechanics: \_\_\_\_ / 10**

**Total: \_\_\_\_ / 100**

**Creative Assignment: *Yes Thorn***

The type of thematic and linguistic density of Amy Munson’s work isn’t achieved through a single draft. Poetry is often honed from sprawling, rough beginnings into much cleaner works, but often the pressure of academic writing doesn’t allow students to take this time-intensive process. For this assignment, you’ll continuously hone a poem into shorter and shorter versions while saving your drafts across the way; make sure your edits are high-effort and not just versions with more and more lines of the original deleted. Then, you’ll write reflections on the process and results, identifying differences between drafts and identifying which you view as the ideal version of the poem and why. You will be expected to turn in:

1. One draft of the poem of at least 30 lines in length.
2. One draft of the poem from 20 to 24 lines in length.
3. One draft of the poem from 16 to 19 lines in length.
4. One draft of the poem from 12 to 15 lines in length.
5. One draft of the poem from 8 to 11 lines in length.
6. One draft of the poem from 4 to 7 lines in length.
7. One draft of the poem from 2 to 3 lines in length.
8. One draft of the poem 1 line in length.
9. A one-page reflection on the process of writing the poem that addresses your feeling about editing, poem length, and having to condense phrases and ideas in the story.
10. A one-page evaluation of the drafts that includes a clear indication of a favorite / best draft and reasoning for why some drafts are stronger than others.

**Assignment Rubric:**

**Presence of all required materials:** \_\_\_\_ / **35**

**Poetry Effort & Polish:** \_\_\_\_ / **35**

**Reflection Content: \_\_\_\_ / 20**

Reflection on Writing & Editing Process \_\_\_\_ / 10

Evaluation of Relative Draft Quality \_\_\_\_ / 10

**Overall Grammar & Mechanics: \_\_\_\_ / 10**

**Total: \_\_\_\_ / 100**