

Where do we fit in history?

Cross-curricular lesson – History OR English

The subject of history can often feel distant and irrelevant to students. Creative students may struggle with its rigidity while STEM-leaning students may find the writing history requires to be amorphous. Archival poetry opens a door to both these groups. It is at once largely personal and creative, and yet it also draws from hard-and-fast primary resources that can be plugged into and extracted from poems like variables in an equation. And in a way, archival poetry is a better representation of history than most historical documents. It's constructed from a human viewpoint and thus deeply shaped by the person who relates it.

With this perspective in mind, Megan Snyder-Camp's *Wintering* offers a unique opportunity to teach across disciplines and learning styles. *Wintering* is steeped in two narratives that will be familiar to American students. Both the voyage of Lewis and Clark and the experience of raising a child are conceptually accessible yet contain emotional and informational depth that few students have begun to touch. As such, the opportunity for learning is high while the barrier to entry is relatively low.

This lesson fulfills the following objectives:

1. Students will be able to identify a narrative in a poem.
2. Students will be able to identify archival text in a poem.
3. Students will be able to analyze the purpose of archival text in a poem by summarizing its content, examining its relationship to other text within a poem, and evaluating the placement of both types of texts within the space.
4. Students will be able to identify a historical topic with thematic or temporal significance in the context of their own life and diagram the relationship between the topic and their personal experience.
5. Students will be able to construct a poem that contains personal narrative and archival text.

Homework assigned to prepare for this class:

Each student must bring in an artifact from their own life that contains a significant amount of words (a book, magazine, old assignment, letter, etc.)

Lesson Structure:

1. **Opening Journal:** Heads-up – you will be sharing this journal with a friend. Now, look at your artifact. Find the most interesting piece of language in the artifact and write it down. Then, write a paragraph explaining what the piece of language means in the context of the artifact – what is the language trying to communicate? Is it attached to any of your own personal memories? Why do you find the language interesting? (~10 minutes)

2. **Creative Writing Warm-Up:** Swap your journal with a friend. Read your friend's journal. Copy their chosen piece of language in your own journal. This is the title of your new poem. Write an eight-line poem using the information you know. (~7 minutes) Students may share their poems in front of the class with the consent of their friend. (~3 minutes)
3. **Creative Writing: Archival Poem 1:** Now, take your favorite line from your friend's poem. That is the title of your new poem. Write an eight-line poem to accompany it. (~7 minutes) Students may share their poems in front of the class with the consent of their friend. (~3 minutes)

RUNNING TIME UP TO THIS POINT: 30 MINUTES

4. **Archival Poem Reflection:** Look over your poem and compare it to the paragraph you originally wrote. What's different? What has stayed the same? List two differences and two similarities. (~5 minutes)
5. **Introduction to *Wintering*:** Class retrieves and opens *Wintering* to "Preface" and reads the first paragraph. Short discussion: What do you think we can expect from this poetry? (~5 minutes)
6. **Reading *Wintering*:** Class turns to page 10 of *Wintering* and read independently through page 11. (~7 minutes) (**Excerpt included at end of lesson plan**)
7. **Deconstructive Analysis:** Divide class into seven groups, each of which gets one stanza. Each group discusses what is occurring over the course of their stanza. The first italicized section is ignored for now while the two stanzas of two lines in length are included as parts of their preceding paragraphs. Students are directed to read endings of preceding stanzas / beginnings of succeeding stanzas if they can't figure out what is happening in their stanza. (~5 minutes) Groups share their interpretations in chronological order. (~8 minutes) Under the heading "Themes," keep a running list of the themes or concepts that come up on a board / projector at the front of the room.

RUNNING TIME UP TO THIS POINT: 1 HOUR

8. **Archival Text Discussion:** Students present their ideas on what the italicized text is / where it comes from. Direct students to page 78 – explain back material in poetry books (acknowledgements and notes). Discussion question: how much do we need to know to appreciate the poem? (~5 minutes)
9. **Archival Text Analysis:** Ask students to look at the running list of themes and concepts. Discuss: How does the archival text seem to fit into the rest of the poem? What does it add to the poem? (~8 minutes)
10. **Assign Homework:** Students will take the artifact they've brought to class and write an archival poem – or multiple – totaling at least twenty lines. They must use at least one, but no more than seven, line(s) of text from the artifact in their poem. They must write a reflection that explains why they chose the lines of archival text that they did.

*and the roreing or noise
made by the wakes brakeing on the rocky Shores
(as I Suppose) may be heard*

The river a yellow-gray impossibility, the sign tentative in its claim to the explorer's camp. Somewhere near here, a few miles perhaps, this spot from which they saw the ocean or did not. All the shore lined with young trees. Our son another tree, pocketing the tiny pinecones that scabble in the wind. This time I've gotten the day right and we're here on the day they were here, but today following their path feels more distant than staying home and reading their journals: I can't imagine myself alongside them, can't imagine why they kept moving forward. I'm nervous when H climbs all the way to the top tunnel of the McDonald's PlayPlace where we stop for lunch. The other mother there has four children, who lead H up and coax him down. They're used to these fears. The mother says every morning she releases them into one room or another; they've driven half an hour for this one in which we can barely hear their calls through the tubing and the hammer of rain against the windows. One explorer, the boy George Shannon, was lost twice along the route, separated from the others for days at a time, and both times as he slept by a river he was found. H, I notice, is never sad about the same thing twice, though his handful of fears stays constant. There are two windows above our borrowed bed, offering thin slices of the same pine. Three walls of bare drywall, streaks of paint from paintings that are gone.

No streetlights here, no moon. I can hear geese, and sometimes a car a mile away. We can't find a flashlight in our borrowed house. Once a car pulled onto the beach behind us, turned its headlights off, and raced past. We heard it everywhere, turning and I made us stand in the water until it drove away. Today I finger the split of my days, the mind of mothering and the mind of poems. Outside the air is still. Water bells the lichen on a fir tree. The wood beams of this room have loosed their knots and stand open-jawed. I am afraid of loss as I have never been.

water passing with great velocity forming & boiling in a most horrible manner

The explorers row past a single, tremendous pillar of basalt in the river, though for days they won't write of it. The black rock, origin of the last recorded myth of a tribe dead of smallpox, now carved to hold a radio tower. Either to put words down on paper is to map: tuning the radio, you hear in the darkness something coming, warning. Or writing is creation, and I am the fool folding open the door.