

# Lesson Plan: Poems Put to Use

Periods: 1, with an optional take-home project

NCTE standards: 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 12

## INTRODUCTION

In track 2 of the Poetry Out Loud CD (“The Power of Poetry”), poet Dana Gioia spells out 4 practical advantages to be found in studying and reciting poetry:

- Poetry offers mastery of language, and stocks the mind with images and ideas in unforgettable words and phrases
- Poetry trains and develops our emotional intelligence
- Poetry reminds us that language is holistic—that how something is said is part of what is being said, with the literal meaning of words only part of their whole meaning, which is also carried by tone of voice, inflection, rhythm
- Poetry lets us see the world through other eyes, and equips us imaginatively and spiritually to face the joys and challenges of our lives

Later, on track 17, poet Kay Ryan concurs. “Poetry is for desperate occasions,” she says. By memorizing a poem, you have it to pull out when you need it—not necessarily the whole poem, but the scrap of it that comes to mind in a difficult time.

Because students may not have scraps of poetry memorized already, and may never have called one to mind, it may be hard for them to believe Gioia and Ryan. This lesson will help them do so, by getting them to imagine situations in which a scrap or two of poetry—whether recited or simply thought of—can be put to use. Using fiction, letters, or political speech, students will write about poems being put to use and, in the process, imagine the practical advantages that having poems memorized can bring.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this lesson, students will have opportunities to:

- Listen to poems being recited, and to the commentaries of the performers
- Find passages in poems which they find striking or memorable
- Imagine situations in which those passages may be put to use, whether to console, encourage, taunt, flatter, or otherwise make an impact on a listener
- Write short stories, letters, or speeches in which at least three passages could be quoted effectively to move another character or the listener / recipient

## MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

To teach this lesson you will need:

- The Poetry Out Loud CD or access to the online Poetry Out Loud Audio Guide
- A CD player or computer
- The Poetry Out Loud anthology in its print or online version

## ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

**1.** Introduce students to the idea that poems can be useful to recite—the whole poem or just part of it—in a variety of real life situations. Brainstorm with them what some of those situations might be, for example:

- When faced with bad news or difficult times
- At a wedding, funeral, or other life-cycle event
- As a toast or grace before meals
- In a romantic relationship or during a marriage proposal
- During a speech or other effort to move an audience, whether it be voters, colleagues, teammates, or others you wish to lead

To illustrate such moments, you might cite historical examples, such as Winston Churchill’s recitation of the Claude McKay sonnet “If We Must Die…” to rally resistance to the Nazis during World War II. Or you might turn to fiction and movies. Many children’s books and adult novels have scenes where a scrap of poetry is deployed to good effect.

In each book of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, poems are recited by characters; for example, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, there are poems prominently featured in the chapters “The Shadow of the Past,” “The Old Forest,” “Strider,” “A Knife in the Dark,” and elsewhere. In the film of *The Return of the King*, meanwhile, Theoden cries out a short poem to the Rohirrim as they ready their cavalry charge to break the siege of Gondor.

Contemporary films featuring poetry include *Spiderman 2* (Dr. Octavius advises Peter Parker to recite poetry to attract women), *Poetic Justice* (with poems by Maya Angelou), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (W. H. Auden’s “Funeral Blues”), *Il Postino* (various love poems by Pablo Neruda), *Slam* (poems by Saul Williams), *Sylvia* (Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath recite Chaucer and Shakespeare to one another), and *In Her Shoes* (Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art” and “I carry your heart with me” by e. e. cummings). The Academy of American Poets has a useful, annotated list of “Poetry in Film, Radio, and TV” at [www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/195](http://www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/195).

## Lesson Plan: Poems Put to Use

*continued*

**2.** Play tracks 7 and 17 of the CD to illuminate contexts in which poems—whole poems and scraps of them—were recited: by David Mason to his girlfriends, and by Kay Ryan’s grandmother to her, as she grew up. Pose questions to your students about these uses of poetry, for example:

- Why might Mason have wanted to recite Donne to his girlfriends?
- Are there different lines or phrases from the poem that would have been better to recite in different contexts? (Some might work better as a “pick-up line,” perhaps, while others might be better for an apology or an excuse.)
- Why might Kay Ryan’s grandmother have treasured those lines from Longfellow?
- Why might she have wanted her granddaughter to hear them, growing up?

**3.** Now it’s time to get your students searching for their own striking lines and phrases. Send students to the Poetry Out Loud anthology in search of memorable passages. They should gather at least three passages from different poems. The meaning of the passage in its original context is less important than the power the student finds in it, and the student’s ability to imagine each passage being put to use in some situation.

If you wish, you can make this a “treasure hunt” assignment. Go back to the list of situations you brainstormed in step one of the assignment, situations such as:

- When faced with bad news or difficult times
- At a wedding, funeral, or other life-cycle event
- As a toast or grace before meals
- In a romantic relationship or during a marriage proposal
- During a speech or other effort to move an audience, whether it be voters, colleagues, teammates, or others you wish to lead

Give each student a situation, and ask him or her to find three appropriate lines or phrases; or, give the whole list to each student, and tell each to look for one line or phrase that could be of use in each context.

- If students are using the online anthology, you can keep them from being overwhelmed by telling them to look first at poems whose titles begin with a particular letter. Or, if you prefer, suggest they use the “Keyword Search” feature on the website.
- Try not to steer them to particular poems or poets, as one goal here is simply to encourage exploration, helping students discover poems, poets, and lines they might not otherwise have encountered.

To keep students from grabbing lines at random, tell them to justify the choice—either orally or in writing—by briefly imagining a moment when that line or phrase would come in handy. A few sentences will usually do.

4. To make this a full-fledged creative writing assignment, ask each student to bring his or her chosen lines and phrases home and write a short piece of prose—two to three pages, or longer if you prefer—in which the lines or phrases are used. Make sure that students realize that people often quote scraps of poetry totally out of context; they don't need to know the whole poem, or keep the whole poem in mind. The prose they write can take several forms, for example:

- A story, in which one or more characters recite lines of poetry
  - The recitation may be external or internal, as the line or phrase comes to a character's mind
  - The lines or phrases need not and, in fact, should not be the only things that the characters say; rather, they should be used sparingly, and their effect on the main character or on others should somehow be shown
- A letter, in which the author quotes striking lines or phrases from poems in order to move or convince the recipient in some way
- A speech, in which the quotations are used to rally, exhort, encourage, or otherwise persuade listeners to act

In every case, the context can be historical, as in a letter home by a soldier during the Civil War, or contemporary, set in the United States or anywhere in the world. The important goal of this lesson is for students to imagine situations where it can make a difference to know a poem—or even part of a poem—by heart.



*Idaho  
2009 State Champion  
Devin Bean*