

POETRY OUT LOUD

LESSON PLAN

News that Stays News

Introduction

Ezra Pound said that poetry was “news that stays news.” William Carlos Williams added a warning: “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / But men and women die every day / for lack / of what is found there.” This lesson will teach your students some of the ways that poets get the news *into* their poems—and, thus, how to get more out of the poems they read about current events and about men and women who have made history, both recently and in the past.

When poets write about well-known events and figures—presidents, scientists, artists, musicians, activists—they face the same sorts of choices that any journalist does.

- Should the poem teach new facts, or celebrate what the audience already knows?
- Should the poem praise its subject, stay studiously neutral, or challenge and undercut it?
- Should the poem use a formal, public tone, or take an intimate, more personal approach?
- How should the poem sequence its material? Simple chronology, past to present? From the present back into the past? With a bang, in the middle, with a dramatic anecdote?

Because poets are not writing “the news” as such, they face one additional decision:

- Should the poem stick with the facts, or make things up for the sake of art?

Inventive poets, who often claim poetic license, will say that they are after a deeper, more emotional truth, the news *behind* the news. (They will sometimes quote the great Renaissance poet Sir Philip Sidney, who wrote that “the poet nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth.”) Other poets insist on rigorous research. The modernist lawyer-poet Charles Reznikoff wrote two books of poems (*Testimony: The United States, 1885-1915* and *Holocaust*) derived entirely from courtroom testimony given under oath: as close to the truth as he could get.

Some of the questions your students should ask about news-based poems, then, are the same questions they should ask about any piece of reporting. The media literacy skills that they have honed through years of media exposure will thus come in handy when reading poems—often a very empowering realization. But poets also have a few special tricks and techniques for getting the news into poems, and it’s helpful for students to have a list of those in hand, too, as they read.

As Harvard professor Helen Vendler explains in her book *Poems, Poets, Poetry*, poets who want to write about the news—a war, a battle, a civil rights struggle, or the men and women involved in them—must work in a kind of shorthand. She lists six techniques that students can easily learn to recognize:

VENDLER’S SIX TECHNIQUES

1. Focusing on an underlying problem rather than on specific incidents
2. Finding an “emblematic scene or scenes” that can stand for the event as a whole
3. Finding a “symbolic or mythological equivalent for a historical episode”
 - This can draw on an established source, like the Bible, Greek mythology, etc.
 - It can also be a symbol of the poet’s own devising, like the “stone in the midst of a stream” that symbolizes Irish revolutionaries and their struggle in the middle of Yeats’s “Easter, 1916”
4. Seeing “the human inside of the event”—what an individual character or speaker thinks or feels—as “corresponding to the historical outside”
5. Presenting the poet or speaker as someone with a “prophetic or philosophic view” of the event, rather than a “mere eyewitness”
6. And, finally, offering an “epigrammatic summation”: a short, memorable phrase that sums up what the event means or amounts to, in the end.
 - Think of Yeats’s “Easter, 1916” again, with its repeated claim that, because of the revolt, “A terrible beauty is born.”

This lesson will give your students a chance to explore poetry as “news that stays news” by using both sets of tools: the familiar ones they would use for any newspaper article or historical account; and these six new ones, which are somewhat more common in poems, although they can turn up elsewhere.

It starts with poems about Abraham Lincoln. The “news” about Lincoln will be familiar to students, and he is probably the American president with the most connections to the art of poetry. He loved to recite poems in public, wrote poems himself, and he has been mourned, invoked, and celebrated by poets ever since his assassination.

By comparing and contrasting poems about Lincoln, students will learn to recognize some of the most common “moves” that poets use when writing “news that stays news.” With these in mind, students either write news-based poems themselves, using the same techniques, or investigate and present poems about other newsworthy figures—some from politics, some science, some from the arts—chosen from the Poetry Out Loud archive.

Periods: 1, with an optional take-home project

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

Learning Objectives:

In this lesson, students will have opportunities to

- Read biographical poems about Abraham Lincoln
- Discuss contrasting approaches to the topic chosen in very different poems
- Discuss the selection and arrangement of material in each poem
- Spot one or more of Vendler’s “six techniques” in action
- As a final project, either
 - present a final poem on Lincoln; or
 - Find and present a poem about some other newsworthy figure from the Poetry Out Loud website; or
 - Write a news-based poem themselves, along with a one-paragraph discussion of the core approach and selection / arrangement of material that they chose for it

Materials and Resources:

To teach this lesson you will need:

- Access for students to the Poetry Out Loud anthology in its print or on-line versions

Activity Description

1. Introduce students to the idea that poetry is “news that stays news”—but that it can’t ever tell the whole story. Poets have to select their material, choose an approach (celebratory or debunking, realistic or mythic, etc.) and decide on how to sequence that material. They use some techniques that you could find in journalistic media—radio, TV, historical nonfiction—and some that are more common in poetry.
2. Hand out Vendler’s list of six common techniques, and explain that you will be looking for these in the poems of the day: three contrasting poems about Abraham Lincoln. You and the students will work together to spot where and when each of these poems use one or more of these typical poetic techniques to get “the news” into poetry.
3. Hand out Edwin Markham’s “Lincoln, The Man of the People” (1922); Witter Bynner’s “A Farmer Remembers Lincoln” (1913); and “Anne Rutledge,” by Edgar Lee Masters (1916).
4. Begin by looking at the Markham poem, which was chosen out of a pool of 250 submissions to be read at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. (<http://www.wagner.edu/library/lincoln>). Draw your students’ attention first to the choices made by the poet in approaching Lincoln’s life and arranging his material; as you do, see if they can spot any of Vendler’s techniques being put to use as well.

Section of the Poem	Approach and Arrangement	Poetic Techniques
<p>When the Norn Mother saw the Whirlwind Hour Greatening and darkening as it hurried on, She left the Heaven of Heroes and came down To make a man to meet the mortal need. She took the tried clay of the common road— Clay warm yet with the genial heat of Earth, Dashed through it all a strain of prophecy; Tempered the heap with thrill of human tears; Then mixed a laughter with the serious stuff. Into the shape she breathed a flame to light That tender, tragic, ever-changing face. Here was a man to hold against the world, A man to match the mountains and the sea.</p>	<p>Markham could have started with Lincoln’s birth; instead, he starts <i>before</i> that birth, with Lincoln as a mythic figure. He could have used Christian imagery; instead, he chooses a pagan myth: the “Norn Mother” comes from Norse mythology, and is essentially one of the Fates.</p>	<p>We can see two of the techniques listed by Vendler here: a <u>focus on the underlying problem rather than on incidents (#1)</u> and the <u>adoption of a prophetic or philosophical viewpoint (#5)</u> rather than that of an eyewitness. The poem asks “who was this man? what was his fate and destiny?” not “where and when was Abraham Lincoln born?”</p>
<p>The color of the ground was in him, the red earth; The smack and tang of elemental things; The rectitude and patience of the cliff; The good-will of the rain that loves all leaves; The friendly welcome of the wayside well; The courage of the bird that dares the sea; The gladness of the wind that shakes the corn; The pity of the snow that hides all scars; The secrecy of streams that make their way Beneath the mountain to the rifted rock; The tolerance and equity of light That gives as freely to the shrinking flower As to the great oak flaring to the wind— To the grave’s low hill as to the Matterhorn That shoulders out the sky.</p>	<p>We’re still in the realm of myth here, although it’s now a myth about Lincoln as embodying the best of American nature. What “natural” qualities does the poem list, and what about Lincoln’s life or work might they call to mind?</p> <p>Notice also how the “grave” at the end of this stanza reminds us of Lincoln’s assassination. The poem doesn’t go over his life—there’s no “biography” as such—but it does hint at his death in those lines.</p>	<p>Notice how Markham refuses to move forward chronologically, to “tell the story.” Instead, he uses the technique Vendler calls <u>seeing the human inside...as corresponding to the historical outside (#4)</u>. That explains why “the tolerance and equity of light” was chosen as the last in the list: it’s the human quality, drawn from nature, that will shape the president’s public legacy.</p>
<p>Sprung from the West, The strength of virgin forests braced his mind, The hush of spacious prairies stilled his soul. Up from log cabin to the Capitol, One fire was on his spirit, one resolve— To send the keen ax to the root of wrong, Clearing a free way for the feet of God.</p>	<p>Only now, halfway through the poem, does Markham start to offer biographical particulars. He sticks with famous ones that can be evoked in a single word or</p>	<p>The poem began with pagan mythology, but now it echoes the Bible: “clearing a free way for the feet of God” sounds like the prophetic verse</p>

<p>And evermore he burned to do his deed With the fine stroke and gesture of a king: He built the rail-pile as he built the State, Pouring his splendid strength through every blow, The conscience of him testing every stroke, To make his deed the measure of a man.</p>	<p>phrase: “prairies,” “log cabin,” “Capitol,” Lincoln as the Illinois rail-splitter who turns his “keen ax” to the task of rebuilding the nation (“He built the rail-pile as he built the State”).</p>	<p>“Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3). The poem thus uses the technique Vendler calls “<u>finding a symbolic or mythological equivalent</u>” (#3) for a historical event. Rather than tell a narrative of Lincoln saving the Union, it offers a symbolic version of that.</p>
<p>So came the Captain with the mighty heart; And when the judgment thunders split the house, Wrenching the rafters from their ancient rest, He held the ridgepole up, and spiked again The rafters of the Home. He held his place— Held the long purpose like a growing tree— Held on through blame and faltered not at praise. And when he fell in whirlwind, he went down As when a lordly cedar, green with boughs, Goes down with a great shout upon the hills, And leaves a lonesome place against the sky.</p>	<p>Notice how indirectly Markham describes Lincoln’s assassination, almost as though it were a natural event or a tree cut down by loggers (who would give “a great shout,” although that could also be the sound of the tree falling). And with this, the poem ends: Markham offers no forecast of the future of the country, no vision of Lincoln’s legacy or of Lincoln in heaven. Is this a surprising way to end the poem? Is it satisfying? Effective? How else might he have ended it, given the mythic and Biblical material that came before?</p>	<p>Markham could have ended the poem by using technique #5—adopting a prophetic viewpoint to think about Lincoln’s legacy—or with #6, an epigrammatic summation. Instead, in this final stanza he goes back to <u>symbolic or mythological equivalents</u> (#3). The poem reminds us of Lincoln’s famous “House Divided” <u>speech</u>—a speech whose famous declaration that “a house divided cannot stand” comes from the Bible (Matthew 12:15)—and presents Lincoln saving the Union as a matter of holding up the “ridgepole” of a house and putting its “rafters” back into place.</p>

3. Now, for contrast, hand out Witter Bynner's "A Farmer Remembers Lincoln" and "Anne Rutledge," by Edgar Lee Masters. Have your students try their hands at annotating the selection and arrangement of materials used in each poem, along with the "poetic techniques" from Vendler's numbered list.

Make sure that students notice the sharp contrast between Bynner's approach and Markham's.

- Markham uses an omniscient narrator who speaks in noble, mythological tones. Bynner's speaker is a farmer from Maine responding to someone's question. He speaks in dialect ("I ain't never ben to the theayter in my life") and uses slang ("I didn't get the butt of the clip" meaning "I didn't get the worst assignment"). There is no mythology in evidence.
- Markham starts before Lincoln's birth, and doesn't get to his life until halfway through the poem; he ends with the assassination. Bynner starts with the Maine farmer talking about his own life; then, in the second stanza, gets to Lincoln, but right at the moment of the assassination. Then he doubles back to reminisce about the president, not as a figure out of scripture or mythology, but as "an old farmer."
- Markham gives us the "human inside" of Lincoln, his character traits, to suggest the "historical outside" of his actions in the world. Bynner gives a physical description of him (a "human outside," we might call it) in stanza 3 and then describes Lincoln in action, walking and talking, in stanza 4. Instead of using Vendler's techniques 3, 4, and 5, that is to say, Bynner focuses on technique 2: finding an "emblematic scene or scenes" that can stand for Lincoln's life as a whole. That technique never showed up in the Markham poem.
- Is there an "epigrammatic summary" (technique #6) of Lincoln's life or work in the Bynner? Perhaps "he was my neighbor, anybody's neighbor" counts, or even "That's why I call him a farmer," as though by visiting and encouraging the wounded soldiers Lincoln were planting or tending the nation's populace, helping the Union to grow.
- Let your students debate which of these first two poems is most moving, most effective. Open the question: effective for what? Would they have chosen the Bynner to read at the dedication of a public memorial? For what occasion would "A Farmer Remembers Lincoln" be more appropriate?

When you turn to Edgar Lee Masters' "Anne Rutledge," you may want to have some biographical material handy. The poem tells you much of what you need to know, but students will be curious to learn more about this mysterious "first love" who died in Lincoln's youth, plunging him into depression. The story began to circulate in 1866, and has been told and debated ever since; a solid essay reviewing the facts and the legend,

first published in the Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association, can be found here: <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jala/11/simon.html>.

What approach to the material and what techniques can your students find in this short poem?

Here are some things they might notice:

- Masters starts with an oblique angle of approach: a poem not directly about Lincoln, but about an “unworthy and unknown” figure connected with him.
- Masters *makes things up*, putting words into the mouth of Ann Rutledge. Is that a troubling thing to do? Is it any worse than quoting a fictional “farmer”? Is it worse than making up a myth about the “Norn Mother”? Rutledge was a real woman: do different rules apply?
- Masters also takes a much more *revisionist* approach to his topic than the other poems. Markham and Bynner retell the news we know, even if they do so in a new order or from a new, surprising perspective. Masters tells a story we do *not* necessarily know, and from Lincoln’s private life he draws very unexpected, perhaps implausible conclusions about Lincoln’s public agenda.

<p>Out of me unworthy and unknown The vibrations of deathless music; “With malice toward none, with charity for all.”</p>	<p>This first stanza suggests that one of the most famous lines and ideas of Lincoln—the “deathless music” of the line “with malice toward none, with charity for all,” from the Second Inaugural Address—is actually somehow grounded in this woman from the President’s past. This is Vendler’s <u>technique #4</u>, in which the <u>human inside of history</u> corresponds with its public outside, in a very dramatic way! Like Bynner, Masters writes a dramatic monologue; but unlike Bynner, and very much like Markham, he lets that speaker adopt a <u>prophetic or philosophical approach</u> to the material.</p>
<p>Out of me the forgiveness of millions toward millions,</p>	<p>The second sentence of the</p>

<p>And the beneficent face of a nation Shining with justice and truth.</p>	<p>poem amplifies and expands this equation of the human inside and historical outside. It has Anne Rutledge claim, that the public greatness of Lincoln—refusing vengeance, offering “forgiveness” to the rebellious South after defeat—somehow came “out of” her. But who is she? How could this be true? The poem has not yet said.</p>
<p>I am Anne Rutledge who sleep beneath these weeds, Beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln, Wedded to him, not through union, But through separation.</p>	<p>Only now, in the third sentence, does the speaker introduce herself. Not only is she “Anne Rutledge”; she is an Anne Rutledge speaking from beyond the grave. The “historical outside” of the Civil War—fought by Lincoln to save the Union—becomes the expression of a longed-for “human inside”: marital union between himself and Rutledge. He couldn’t save their love, so he saved the Union: the logic is something like that.</p>
<p>Bloom forever, O Republic, From the dust of my bosom!</p>	<p>Here we have our “<u>epigrammatic summation</u>” as the poem shifts into a <u>prophetic</u> outlook, looking forward into the future (“forever”). The American republic will root down in this woman’s “dust,” and in the love that Lincoln had for her. What do students think of this account of his motivations? Is it convincing? Unconvincing, but moving even so?</p>

10. As a final project for this lesson, choose one of the following options.

- If you want to continue with poems about Lincoln, there are many more to choose from. Hand out a fourth biographical poem about Lincoln, or several of the options below, and have students work in groups to annotate its approach and techniques. Each group should then perform their poem for the class, either together (dividing up the stanzas, for example) or with a chosen “performer” leading the way. Before they perform their poem, they should introduce it to their classmates by explaining its overall approach and asking them to listen for the various “techniques” explored in this lesson. After the recitation, students should respond by telling the performer where and when they heard the various techniques at work. At least one or two of Vendler’s techniques can be found in each of the following poems; many will feature even more of them.
 - For 19th-century options—poems from the days when Lincoln really was “in the news,” try Julia Ward Howe’s “Poem (Through the Dim Pageant of the Years),” Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “Lincoln,” and Herman Melville’s “The Martyr.”
 - If you want something more modern, “Lincoln” by John Gould Fletcher is a familiar, straightforward poem, while Delmore Schwartz’s “Lincoln” offers a more unsettling, revisionist take on the president and his legacy.
 - Contemporary African American poet E. Ethelbert Miller has a poem that builds on the example of Edgar Lee Masters: “Elizabeth Keckley: 30 Years A Slave And 4 Years In The White House.” Students who like poems written from a new point of view will find much to say about it.
- If you want to shift focus away from Lincoln, there are many poems in the Poetry Out Loud [anthology](#) to choose from. Have students go to the anthology and find a poem about recent news or a newsworthy figure that they wish to recite. At home, each student should create a three-column table for his or her poem: the first column for the poem, divided into sections; the second with notes about its overall approach to the material; the third pointing out the “techniques” it uses in each section, if it does, for getting the broad expanse of a life onto the small canvas of a poem. Before they perform their poems, they should introduce it to their classmates by explaining its overall approach and asking them to listen for the various techniques. After the recitation, classmates should respond by telling the performer where and when they heard the various techniques at work.
 - For a moving poem about a news event that students have all lived through, try “Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100,” by Martín Espada, a moving poem about September 11th. It can prompt excellent discussions about how this poet chose to approach such an overwhelming event, and about various “roads not taken” that other poets might try in writing about the terrorist attacks.

- Students who wish to focus on poems about older news can find them in the anthology as well. There are poems about wars they have heard of (the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, World Wars 1 and 2, and Vietnam) and about battles they have probably never heard of (“The Charge of the Light Brigade”); there are also poems in the anthology about debates within the early push for African American rights (“Booker T. and W.E.B.”)
- If students want to treat “the news” more broadly, there are poems in the anthology about cultural and political struggle by Native Americans, South Africans fighting apartheid, and many others. Each offers students the chance to discuss how the poet selected and arranged his or her material, and about other approaches—in tone, in pacing, or in technique—that he or she could have taken.
- For a creative writing assignment, have students choose a figure from the news—recent or older, but well-known, familiar to everyone—who strikes them as worthy of a poem. Have them go home and write a poem that makes the news “stay news” through its approach to the facts of the material and through its use of at least two of Vendler’s techniques. (The Lincoln poems you have studied together are a handy series of models.) The next day, have students exchange poems and write a short response—one or two paragraphs—to each others’ poems. The response should try to explain what approach the poet took to his or her topic, how he or she sequenced the material in the poem, and which of Vendler’s techniques are on display in it.
 - This assignment can be particularly interesting if you have the whole class write about the same figure or news event. Find a single story from the New York Times or another well-reported newspaper and have the students use this story as the springboard for their poems. They will be startled at the widely different selections and arrangement of materials their poems reveal, especially if they use different poetic techniques from the Vendler list.

News that Stays News: Six Poetic Techniques

1. Focusing on an underlying problem rather than on specific incidents
2. Finding an “emblematic scene or scenes” that can stand for the event as a whole
3. Finding a “symbolic or mythological equivalent for a historical episode”
 - This can draw on an established source, like the Bible, Greek mythology, etc.
 - It can also be a symbol of the poet’s own devising
4. Seeing “the human inside of the event”—what an individual character or speaker thinks or feels—as “corresponding to the historical outside”
5. Presenting the poet or speaker as someone with a “prophetic or philosophic view” of the event, rather than a “mere eyewitness”
6. Offering an “epigrammatic summation”: a short, memorable phrase that sums up what the event means or amounts to, in the end.

A poem about the news may use some or all of these, and each of them can happen more than once, in any order. No two poems about the same event will select exactly the same material, arrange it in the same order, or use the same mix of techniques. The art of the poem lies as much in those choices as in its images, rhythms, and words.

Adapted from Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry* (Bedford / St. Martin’s, 2002): 242.