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Honors Students in the Creative Writing Classroom: Sequence and Community

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It is the end of the semester here at Gasoline Alley in Springfield, Massachusetts, and the creative writing students are about to give their readings. It is an artsy setting, the SEE café and gallery. Some of the students who will read today hope to transfer into the engineering program at the University of Massachusetts. They are computer-wise, bright students. Others are candidates for the nursing program. Three women hope to transfer to Mt. Holyoke or Smith. But here they are today, reading their poems at a gallery they have never visited before, with African masks all around them. The favorites today are blues poems, and Leanne concludes hers, "Sweet thing, I thought you were the one, but now I know that I was wrong./ Yeah, I thought you were the one but now I know I was so wrong/ Cuz baby if that were true, these blues would be a sweet love song." Leanne hopes to be a pharmacy major, but, after some initial fretting about what her grade would be, she enjoys writing poems.

"I can't have a B in this class; I want to transfer to Mt. Holyoke next semester." Honors students often say this in the first days of the class. They sometimes have a difficult time adapting to the creative writing classroom. For those who are unused to arts classes, adjusting to different ways of thinking (including metaphorical thinking) and a different way of being graded (i.e., by portfolio) can be a challenge. Honors students want to do not only well, but brilliantly—in every class they take. The purpose of this essay is to propose some ways of helping honors students feel comfortable in a creative writing course. The following strategies will be discussed: giving the students a chance to adjust to the arts classroom; beginning with exercises that help students understand the strategies of poetry; designing an alternative grading system based on portfolios; and easing into the teaching of poetic structure through the study and creation of list-poems, poetic personae, object-poems, haiku, and various traditional European verse-forms.

My first college class of creative writers taught me that honors students need time to adjust to the arts classroom. Over many years of working as poet-in-the-schools and frequently teaching poetry-writing to gifted children and teenagers, I had already learned that some bright grade-schoolers are made anxious by creative writing, that they are comfortable only with essay writing and its logical content. I did not expect college students to feel so vulnerable.

Stress was palpable on this particular first day. I made things worse by saying that I sometimes revised poems twenty times. Students gasped. They had not

imagined that writing poems would require such attention and diligence. They thought they wanted to be in this classroom, but what was this strange planet anyway? I could hear them hyperventilate. They were so used to their own excellence in nearly every class and so afraid they would get a lower grade than usual that I wondered if they could even hear my instructions. I soon learned that this group of students and nearly every group to follow would feel awkwardness and self-doubt coming into the creative writing classroom. "Everyone else in the class is so talented," students moaned.

I have learned to help honors students feel at ease in a number of ways. In my experience, introducing students right away to free-writing exercises helps them relax and explore a new kind of learning. Every creative writing teacher has her own set of techniques. I try to warm students up to writing and build their self-confidence before I ask them to create anything we might call a poem. An interest in language is important for poetic growth—a love of words and a fearlessness about playing with them. It is my impression that students need to learn playfulness with language before they start writing their own poems and lapse into jingly rhyme or cliché**.** I learned from Madeline DeFrees the use of headlines to get the class thinking about multiple meanings and playfulness in their writing: "Tuna Biting Off Washington Coast," "Drowned Man Seen in Florida Airport," "Robber Holds Up Albert's Hosiery," "Elvis Appears in Holyoke," "Slow Men Working in Trees," "Alarmed Exit." The students surprise themselves at how imaginatively they respond to these titles. I love showing them poet Nancy Willard's "Buffalo Climbs Out of the Cellar," a poem inspired by an accidentally amusing newspaper headline, so they can see for themselves the power of her fresh and exciting use of language: "His breath heats this house all winter./ His heart charges all my rooms with light." I ask them to find their own headlines, ones shot with innuendo or double-meanings. And we do some exercises based on any particularly interesting words we find randomly from magazines or newspapers—"periwinkle," "rant," "prestidigitator," "tryst," "callow"—that get us to discover what effect using every word from the list has on our free-writing. These early exercises stimulate the students' imaginations and help to move them into the world of poetry. In an exercise created by Mark Doty, based on Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, I ask students to draw the floor-plan of the first house they remember, then draw a favorite object in each room. Students begin their free-writing with what is for them the most compelling room and object, then continue to free associate and allow memory and imagination to come into their writing—resulting in the kind of word-flow that is so necessary to the poet's craft. They begin to understand that poetry is not simply about observation and emotion, but also about memories from other times, the potency of familiar places like kitchens, and the stream-of-consciousness of the poet. A natural step from thinking about words and their multiple meanings and free association is to move into metaphor. I've learned in my own writing that sometimes nothing but metaphor can help me understand a complex idea, situation, or relationship. I like the way metaphor stuns us into understanding, and I try to find examples of metaphor very early in the class for students to consider. Sometimes I play magician and bring in a bag of odd things with metaphorical possibilities: a bit of elastic, a mirror, a fork, a

geode. What else does it look like? Are your feet goldfish or sharks? Is she more like a spaceship or Haley's comet? I love reading aloud Charles Simic's "Go Inside a Stone," with its revelation of "star charts on the inner walls," as if the stone were a planetarium; I love the way that the stone can be small as a hand or huge as the world. Reading Neruda's "Ode to a Watermelon" or "Ode to My Socks" startles student poets into the exuberance and transforming power of metaphor: "Violent socks, / my feet were/ two fish made of wool, two long sharks/ sea-blue, shot/ through/ by one golden thread,/ two immense blackbirds, / two cannons…." How they laugh and enjoy Neruda's quick shifts.

We teachers can establish a safe zone in the classroom, a place friendly to experimentation and revision. Students need to know that finding the "right answers" is not the purpose of creative writing. Answers are often shifting and multiple in the arts. More important in the poet's repertoire of skills is a playful, experimental, and metaphorical way of thinking and a flow of images and words. In addition, the teacher can encourage students to create several drafts of each of their works, to look at unfinished poems over a period of time, and to understand the usefulness of a grading system that does not employ letter grades, at least not for every assignment. In my experience, giving grades for drafts reduces the chances that students will revise their work. I prefer to give them ten points for every draft that shows a re-working of a poem but to leave the actual grade to the portfolio, which I evaluate (in coordination with individual student conferences) once at mid-term then again at semester's end. Grading student drafts makes honors students anxious, whereas accumulating points for a variety of drafts rewards experimentation and revision. I emphasize to the class that each student has his or her own voice and that no two responses to an assignment will be the same. Letting them know that all their work is *in progress* and that they can select their best pieces for a midterm portfolio as well as for the final grade eases their tension. Rather than seeing themselves as competitors, they begin to see themselves as a community of writers supporting one another in the challenge of writing poems.

Now that they have some strategies at hand and are comfortable with at least some of the ingredients of poetry, we can begin to think about the architecture of a poem. Our first real foray into poetic structure is the list-poem. I like the list-poem because it is written for the pure pleasure of listing and because it often helps students move into new territory in their writing. Students list what they hate, what they love, rare moments in their lives, what they know how to do, funny or dramatic moments, their favorite places. Very quickly, they come up with some interesting lines. Below is a list-poem from Joe Brainard's *I Remember*, a book-length list of memories about growing up in l950's America (*Teachers and Writers*):

I remember

I remember the first time I saw television. Lucille Ball was taking
ballet lessons.
I remember Aunt Cleora who lived in Hollywood. Every year for
Christmas she sent my brother and me a joint present
of one book.
I remember a very poor boy who used to wear his sister's blouses
to school.
I remember shower curtains with angel fish on them.
I remember very old people when I was very young. Their houses
smelled funny.
I remember daydreams of being a singer all alone on a big stage with
no scenery, just one spotlight on me, singing my heart out,
and moving my audience to total tears of love and affection.
I remember waking up somewhere once and there was a horse
staring me in the face.....
I remember one very hot summer day I put ice cubes in my
aquarium and all the fish died.
I remember opening jars that nobody else could open.
I remember not understanding why people on the other side of
the world didn't fall off.
I remember putting on suntan oil and having the sun go away.

Students are attracted to particular images in the poem. "I remember one very hot summer day I put ice cubes in my aquarium and all the fish died" shocks the students and reminds them of their own childhood experiences with pets. Another great list poem, stunning in its prolific use of metaphor, is Scott Momaday's "I Am Alive":

I am alive

I am a feather in the bright sky.
I am the blue horse that runs in the plain.
I am the fish that rolls, shining, in the water.
I am the shadow that follows a child.
I am the evening light, the luster of meadows.
I am an eagle playing with the wind.
I am a cluster of bright beads.
I am the farthest star.
I am the cold of the dawn.
I am the roaring of the rain.
I am the glitter on the crust of the snow.
I am the long track of the moon in a lake.
I am a flame of four colors.
I am a deer standing away in the dusk.

I am a field of sumac and pomme blanche.
I am an angle of geese in the winter sky.
I am the hunger of a young wolf.
I am the whole dream of these things.

You see, I am alive, I am alive.
I stand in good relation to the earth.
I stand in good relation to the gods.
I stand in good relation to all that is beautiful.
I stand in good relation to the daughter of Tsen-Tainte.
You see, I am alive, I am alive.

Once students read Momaday's poem, most of their own list poems become infused with imagination and metaphor. They try to imitate his list. The turn the poem takes at "You see I am alive, I am alive" is an exciting moment for students, honors or not, for they realize that the reader is suddenly ready for a change of direction and emphasis. Students also see the effect of repetition. All these effects are new to students who haven't written poems before, even though they may have read poetry and noticed certain strategies. I like the immersion in metaphor that the poem offers, and it is exciting to see beginning writers create their own metaphors, often without any overt prompting from me, just from modeling their poems on Momaday's. I tell them that metaphor is the heart of poetry and moreover that Aristotle said so! All of the above initiates a new kind of learning for most honors students, and many start to look forward to the daily exercise of their imaginations in the creative writing classroom. I contend that they will be better engineers, nurses, and astronomers if they can learn to think metaphorically.

One important question that students themselves often raise is how to organize a poem, particularly where to break lines. Discussion of line breaks is ongoing throughout the semester, but it invariably emerges during the reading of list-poems, in which lines are often of assorted lengths. Where do I end this line? Should I have a period at the end of every line? A comma? Should this look like a paragraph or like Momaday's poem? Here is one early exercise that seems to get the students thinking about line breaks and their dramatic effects on a poem. I show them the following four versions of William Carlos Williams's "This Is Just to Say" (sadly enough, most students do not recognize this poem when they come to creative writing class), ask volunteers to read each of them aloud, then take a vote on which version is felt to be the most satisfying to the reader:

1. I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you
   were probably saving for
   breakfast. Forgive
   me they were delicious so sweet and so
   cold
2. I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you
   were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me they were delicious
   so sweet and so cold.

3. I
   have eaten
   the
   plums that
   were in
   the icebox
   and which
   you were probably
   saving
   for
   breakfast. Forgive me
   they
   were
   delicious
   so sweet
   and
   so cold.
4. I have eaten
   the plums
   that were in
   the icebox
   and which
   you were probably
   saving
   for breakfast
   Forgive me
   they were delicious
   so sweet
   and so cold

Though this is a simple exercise, it works dramatically to show beginning writers how essential form is to the way a poem is read and understood.

Often in-class discussion and in-class writing help transform students from frantic doubters of their own abilities into lovers of poetry. Students write surprisingly well in class, and they are at maximum creativity when writing with a time limit. It is fun for the teacher to see these feverish brains at work—though she will want to be writing herself, so enticing is the activity. The in-class exercises I give range in time from 3 to 20 minutes long and often produce some of the best pieces my students write. Whether it is the presence of other scribblers, the excitement and mood of the class, or the assignment itself, something gets them going. Sometimes we base these exercises around selections from *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart*, an anthology of poems edited by Robert Bly. Each day, one student chooses a poem from this volume to discuss with the class, and often we use that poem as a take off for our own exercise. A poem called "I Am Not I," by Juan Ramon Jimenez, for

example, is a good prompt for student self-definition poems, challenging readers and writers to imagine alternate selves—a hidden self or *double*, perhaps, or some ideal self the writer would like to cultivate:

I am not I

I am not I.
I am this one.
Walking beside me whom I do not see,
Whom at times I manage to visit,
And at other times I forget.
The one who remains silent when I talk,
The one who forgives, sweet, when I hate,
The one who takes a walk when I am indoors,
The one who will remain standing when I die.

Students love this poem and the chance it offers them, as they begin to imitate it, to imagine some previously unidentified part of the self.

"Tell all the truth, but tell it slant." Nothing could be more useful for the novice creative writer than Emily Dickinson's advice here, and I make an assignment out of it—before which, however, we spend a lot of time thinking and talking about what it means to "tell it slant." We talk about different kinds of displacement, different points of view, the creation of personae who are not ourselves, how different a poem about Snow White would be, say, if the mirror were to tell it rather than Queen, how different if the glass slipper were to tell it rather than Cinderella. Or perhaps the writer can displace the energy of his or poem by only *seeming* to write about an object, as Tess Gallagher does in her poem "The Shirt," which is really not about a shirt so much as about tenderness and devotion and grief for the husband she loved and lost.

If writing in an alternate voice allows writers to don personae that free them from inhibitions and over-immersion in autobiography, addressing a poem to an object or taking on the voice of an object frees the writer to use hyperbole, to experiment with wild metaphors, to seem to be writing about an onion, or about salt, yet really writing about something else entirely, like love or loss. Neruda's odes to the watermelon and his pair of socks are great examples of poems written to objects. Object-poems excite the class because of the freedom the use of personae allows. Here are some student examples:

Cigarette

Lips wrap around me
Sucking my poisons away
Deep breath in
Intense breath out
My white quilted body
Stained with fuchsia lipstick
Clenched between trembling fingers
Stranger's hand
Flicking,
Flicking my ashes to the floor
Rising
Stained yellow teeth
Hot rancid breath
Complete darkness
I am trapped
Fingers unbend
Falling to the ground
Flames scatter
Only to be stomped on
Crushed
Crooked
Broken
Bent
I'll get her in the end.

—Paige

In a second example, a student's fantastic identification with an object, this time an article of clothing, takes the poem and the reader into a haunting political realm:

Innocent

I am innocent
Please forgive me
I have no choice

I am white
I am not superior

I am innocent
Please forgive me
I have no choice

Those who hide behind me
Have hate in their hearts
Evil in their souls
Darkness in their minds

I am innocent
Please forgive me
I have no choice

I am simply
Bleached threads
Strung together
To form a cloak and a hood

I am innocent
Please forgive me
I have no choice.

I am made impure
Soiled, forsaken
Watching an innocent child's

Terrified eyes by torchlight
While her father hangs
From nearby tree.
—Jeannette

And a final object-poem with an unexpected bite at the end:

There's safety in light bulbs
And groups of three or more
And hands
Empty
Of doorknobs and alien flesh
Clenched to hide hangnails and fingerprints
And .1% of germs
Hands are easy
We sell mittens and gloves
And scarves for our necks
And hats for ears that blush and ring
Hands can hold on to each other
And rest safely in laps and pockets
But shoulders get lonely
Exposed and exploited
Shawls went out of style, leaving them naked
In scoop necks and tank tops
The sins of our shoulders
Erode the chastity of hands.
—Corinne

The object is full of possibilities for the student. Shirt, chair, light bulb, potato, empty spool, mirror—objects offer students a strategy for saying what they want to say while veiling their autobiographical selves. Honors students, often self-conscious

about creative writing, appreciate the opportunity to write through an objective correlative. And sometimes they write better in disguise.

Formal verse presents yet another method of leading anxious students into the surprise of real poetry. Students long for structure and don't yet know—despite our experiments with pruning and shaping free verse—how to invent their own. Haiku is a good way to begin the formal part of the semester. Working on haiku helps students understand the power of form to influence meaning and also helps them look carefully at the world around them. Sometimes all the students in the class feel more comfortable when we enter the world of form. I show them haiku from the masters as well as by former students. Below are a group of student haiku:

Ice on bare branches
Held captive on the inside
A prison much like my own
—Mathew

The smoky stench
bad breath—
Papa smoking his pipe.
—Amanda

When the night falls
and dreams begin, daylight
rises all over again.
—Michael

The winter moon
aglow with pale light
brings life to the night.
—Dan

Writing haiku strengthens student writing. Students are better at using images and at compressing their work after this assignment. They are appreciative of structure and the way it supports them as a net supports the trapeze artist. After a week or two of haiku, the class is ready to attempt poetic forms of a more elaborate sort: sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, pantoums, and ghazals. I find that most students welcome these highly structured forms and are pleased at their own successes with them. Here's a poem in rhymed couplets by Sean:

The Jungle

Men march through the midst of me.
Their machetes hack down my canopy.
White men stalk their yellow threat.
A high body count is what they expect.

A man with stripes signals to his men.
They lie still, ready to defend.
Shots ring out, fire flashes flare,
bombs explode, this is not rare.

Ambush was set, a total surprise.
They took aim on slanted eyes.
The enemy so quick, so stealthy, so tough,
so young, so dead, yet not enough.

Grenades fly, torches lit,
V.C. run, the innocent submit.
Troops from the west entered me with their flag,
most left my domain in a body bag.

My people took prisoners and locked them away,
Claimed they died and their men ran away.
I was a lush jungle of South Vietnam,
now the charred remnant of napalm bomb.

—Sean

My students needed many models of and much practice with formal verse before they felt confident in experimenting on their own**.** For example, when teaching villanelles, I give them models, but I also give them partially complete, less familiar villanelles, which I ask them to finish. One that I used with interesting results was "The Rapist's Villanelle," by Thomas Disch. I gave the students the skeleton-form of a villanelle, along with some particular lines from Disch's version of it. They filled in the blanks on their own and puzzled over the point of view. The challenge was not only following the form but picking up on the tone as well. After this exercise and a group discussion in which we compared student poems to the complete original, one student wrote the following—a villanelle entirely of her own making:

I Know He's Not You

I know he's not you.
He's a gentleman.
He doesn't leave me black and blue.

He wants more than a screw.
A wedding in June is our plan.
I know he's not you.

He is more than a boyfriend.
He does what he can.
He doesn't leave me black and blue.

I cringe, whenever I hear your name.
I crumple and he helps me stand.
I know he's not you.

I am more than his "girlfriend."
He makes me feel like a beautiful woman.
He doesn't leave me black and blue.

I smile, whenever I hear his name.
He is my angel. He is my man.
I know he's not you.
He doesn't leave me black and blue.

—Jen

I appreciate the energy and passion for writing that appears when these young poets write in form. By the end of the course, they are composing sonnets, ghazals, sestinas, pantoums, and villanelles. They have come a long way from the nervous students that walked into the class on the first day. Working at creative writing has helped them explore and develop their imaginations. With a supportive class setting and tactics learned from in-class exercises focusing on metaphor, personae, formal and experimental verse, and found poems, these students have begun to write with enthusiasm. They have edited the literary magazine, served as members of the editorial board, organized the final class reading, and created books of their own poems.

At the end of the semester, I'll see my honors students pour over their magazine, practice for the class readings, and congratulate each other on their poems. They have practiced giving readings for the class throughout the year, but the final reading for family and friends is a celebration. How far they've come from their early self-doubts! They have surprised themselves with their own good writing. I'm delighted to see how they have become more inventive, more open, more willing to experiment. Best of all, though, they now think of themselves not as isolated honors students striving only for A's, but as poets, part of the community of writers.

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