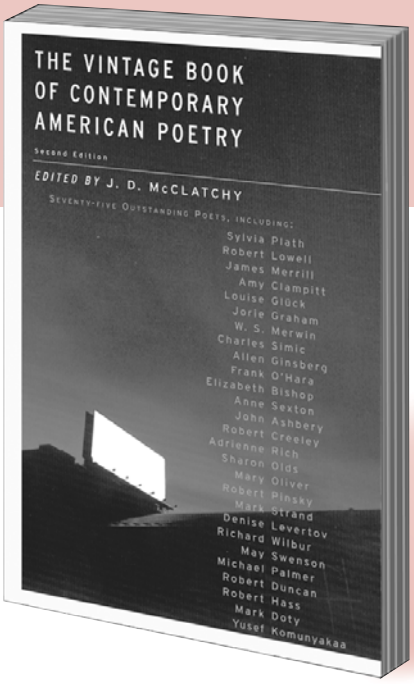
Teacher's Guide



The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry

Edited by J.D. McClatchy

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About this Guide

Dazzling in its range, exhilarating in its immediacy and grace, *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* gathers together seventy-five of the past half century's best poets and the poems that continue to shape our imaginations. From Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery and Adrienne Rich, to Allen Ginsberg and Audre Lorde, this anthology takes the full measure of our poetry's daring energies and its tender understandings.

Not only is poetry a valuable tool for teaching students poetic language structure, literary style and the elements of literary movements, but also poems make students feel, transport them to another place, and expose them to rich language. Writing poetry creates the unique opportunity for students to express themselves with words, without limits.

The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry can be taught in a wide variety of curriculum and can be used as a text in a week-long unit, larger semester unit or even an entire school year. This guide has been formulated for flexibility. Each section can be individualized per your students' interests, adapted to meet curriculum demands or simply assigned to an entire class. With minimal alteration, a section can be accomplished in one class period or in several.

"Teaching Ideas" suggests ways for your students to learn poetic techniques from their daily lives. "Theme and Style" develops issues in American identity and connections between poems. "Poets" focuses on three poets for more detailed consideration. "Essays" ask for well-supported arguments rooted in careful observation; these topics can be completed in three to fifteen pages depending on the desired level of specificity. "Beyond the Book" mines other sources to build comprehension skills.

Teaching Ideas:

1: Several of these poems address moral crises (e.g., Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turrett Gunner" (58), Plath's "Daddy" (370), Dove's "Parsley" (558), and Ginsberg's "Howl" (225-29)). Choose several and discuss how they convince that there is a problem. How does the structure of the poem reflect the nature of the crisis? Why are these poems necessary even though the problems have passed? What makes them great, the problems they address or the poetry? Give your students a handout explaining different rhymes (e.g., end-rhyme, internal, feminine, etc.) and different meters (e.g., iambic, trochaic, anapestic, etc.). Then, let them discover the techniques poets use to create crisis poems. Which rhymes and meters work? Which do not? Why? Once you've identified some 'problem' techniques, test them by having your students form small groups and write poems about crises they find significant.

2: Discuss when your students created precise effects with only a few written words (e.g., when they sent a note (e-mail, text message) to someone they had a crush on). How did they do it? Tone? Word choice? Compare their methods with those used by poets who communicate a lot with a little (e.g., Simic's "Watermelons" (435), Kinnell's "The Vow" (302), Creeley's "I Know a Man" (218), or Ammons "Reflective" (271)). Discuss different types of short poems like haiku, epigram, and limerick. (Short poems in general and limericks in particular can be fun, economical ways to get your students to learn about poetic meter and form.) Using the selections from Cunningham's "A Century of Epigrams" (81-2), analyze how rhyme and balance contribute to a short poem's success. How do surprise and predictability interact to make a memorable point?

Contrast saying a lot with a little against saying a lot with a lot (e.g., Ginsberg's "Howl" (225-29))? Which is more powerful, poetic economy or poetic expansiveness? What subjects lend themselves to one form rather than the other?

3: Pick several poems that derive from everyday things (e.g., Schnackenberg's "The Paperweight" (571), Clampitt's "Beach Glass" (467), O'Hara's "Having a Coke With You" (209-10), or Pinsky's "Poem About People" (453)). As a class, list which details are included in the poem and which are excluded. What principles govern inclusion or exclusion? Why did the authors choose to write about one everyday object rather than another? For example, why did Pinsky write about a shirt instead of a jacket (459)?

1: Doty's "A Display of Mackerel" (532-34) and Wright's "At the Executed Murderer's Grave" (285-88) play out the tension—implicit in our nation's name—of shared values united for the common good versus fiercely held independence. Examine other poets to see how they resolve this tension by fashioning an American identity that simultaneously values an individual's viewpoint with an individual's sacrifice for the greater good (e.g., Lowell's "Memories of West Street and Lepke" (8-9), Hayden's "Frederic Douglass" (85), Jarrell's "90 North" (56-7), or Wagoner's "The Naval Trainees Learn How to Jump Overboard" (213-4)).

Also, explore how other poems treat foreign identity (e.g., Van Duyn's "Into Mexico" (137-38), Bishop's "Under the Window: Ouro Prêto" (30-31), Howard's "Venetian Interior, 1889" (338), or Garrigue's "Amsterdam Letter" (91-93)).

2: Develop a handout listing characteristics associated with groups of American poets. Then, have your students match schools of poetry with poets in the book. You might, for example, write that Black Mountain Poets emphasized energy, colloquial speech, and the natural speaking breath and then have students find poems which fit. (Other major schools include Confessional Poets (e.g., Lowell and Berryman), The New York School (e.g., Ashbery and O'Hara), and Beat Poets (e.g., Ginsberg and Snyder).)

3: The introduction judges Lowell and Bishop "the strongest poets" in the collection (xxviii). Have your students agree or disagree with this ranking. Start by developing a definition of "poetic strength" discussions by excluding what makes for bad poetry. (If you have any bad poetry around, bring some samples in. There are several collections online and in bookstores.) Have your students focus on how one arrangement of words succeeds where another fails.

James Merrill (1926 - 1995)

An early book of Merrill's poetry was chosen by W. H. Auden for publication in 1951 *(First Poems)*. Merrill also wrote plays (e.g., *The Immortal Husband,* 1955) and novels (e.g., *The Seraglio,* 1957). Over the course of twenty years, with the help of a Ouija board, Merrill created *The Changing Light at Sandover*—a poem that wheels through styles, speakers, and universes. He excelled at other forms of writing but is remembered for his mastery of the lyric.

1. "Lost in Translation" (249-53)

- **a.** What use does Merrill make of the puzzle image throughout the poem?
- **b.** How does the poem connect translation and memory?
- **c.** Why does the poem's form change from stanza to stanza. For example, why does Merrill switch from blank verse to quatrains?
- **d.** How does it change the poem to translate the foreign words and phrases into English? In other words, what gets lost in translation?
- **e.** Who narrates the poem? How does his or her viewpoint (looking back in time) determine the structure of the poem?

2. "Voices from the Other World" (245-46)

- **a.** How does the rhyme scheme establish the poem's cohesiveness?
- **b.** Why does life reflected through the dead become "more full, more real" (246) to the Ouija board readers?
- **c.** Where does the poem establish a parallel between our reading of Merrill's poem and his reading of dead voices?
- **d.** Who are Goethe, Will, and Otto Von Thurn? Why are their names mentioned while the other presences are only "voices"?
- **e.** The poem twice mentions that the dog, "Rover" is blind. Why is this important?

Charles Olson (1910 - 1970)

A teacher and editor at Black Mountain College, Olson gave much to many poets collected here (e.g., Creely, Dorn, and Levertov). He began as a critic of American fiction (*Call Me Ishmael*, 1947) and became a theoretician of poetry (*Projective Verse* 1950). With "Kingfishers" and *The Maximus Poems* (1983), Olson did what few can; he put theory into practice.

1. "Kingfishers" (73-79)

- **a.** How does the poem's form transfer energy to the reader (a goal of projective verse) better than another arrangement of words like a sonnet?
- **b.** What does the "E" represent?
- **c.** Why does Olson break up individual lines of poetry with solidus (/)"? What purpose does the solidus serve?
- **d.** How many different creation myths are referred to in the poem? Which ones are most significant? Which ones least?
- **e.** Why does the poem use "shall" instead of the more common 'will' for the last question? What answer does the poem suggest to the question: "shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?"

Audre Lorde (1934 - 1992)

Describing her early life, Lorde says "I was born in the middle of New York City of West Indian parents & raised to know that America was not my home." Lorde's subsequent work maintains the position of an involved outsider. A black feminist, she wrote about the racism she encountered from other feminists and the sexism she encountered from other black artists (*Sister Outsider,* 1984). A poet, she made poetry the medium for politics. *Coal* (1976) was her first book to be released by a major publisher. Other landmarks include *Black Unicorn* (1978) considered her most fulfilled poetry, and *The Cancer Journals* (1980) which detail her fight with breast cancer.

1. "Coal" (402)

- **a.** What is the relation between race and writing developed in this poem?
- **b.** Which metaphors help the poem transform "total black" (402) into "open light" (403).
- **c.** How many different kinds of "open" are there in the poem? How does each contribute to the poem's meaning?
- **d.** Why does Lorde employ different images of birth throughout the poem? Is the narrator the one giving birth, being born, or simply describing process of creation?
- **e.** How does the second stanza relate to the first? What formal characteristics of each justify the claim that the second stanza is born out of the first?

2. "Movement Song" (403)

- **a.** Why is the poem called "Movement Song" instead of "Movement *Poem*"? What elements of singing appear in the formal design?
- **b.** What led to the end of the relationship in the poem?
- **c.** Why does the narrator say "I am the fellow rider in cattle cars" (404)? What do cattle have to do with moving apart in the poem?
- **d.** Why does the narrator not want to be remembered in certain ways? How does the narrator want to be remembered?
- **e.** What is significant about the length of the lines Lorde employs? How do one or two word lines, for example, affect the poem's meaning differently than longer lines? What other rhythmic possibilities does the poem explore?

Essays

1. Read David Wagoner's "The Best Slow Dancer" (212) out loud while slow dancing. Or go out on a starry night and declaim Sexton's "Starry Night" (307). Then, answer these questions. How did the poem contribute to your experience? What became clearer about the poem as you did the activity? Which aspects did the poem capture well? Poorly?

2. Lowell dedicated "Skunk Hour" (10-12) to Bishop. Bishop responded with "The Armadillo" (32). How does Bishop's poem reply to Lowell's? Closely compare the lines they employ, the rhythms animating those lines, and the syllables embodying those rhythms. (You can try a version of this essay with poems like Ginsberg's "My Sad Self" (231-33) dedicated to O'Hara, or Warren's "Rattlesnake Country" (66-71) dedicated to Dickey.)

3. Whitman said of Emerson, "I was simmering. Simmering. Simmering. Emerson brought me to a boil." Which poem in this collection brought you to a boil? How did the poem do it? Why did this poem affect you while another left you cold? Be specific.

4. In his introduction, McClatchy writes: "Beneath the landscape of trends and school and movements run underground streams of sympathy and influence" (xxiv). Pick two very different poems and write an essay showing how they connect. Or, find two similar poems and show how they differ. Use examples and demonstrate how the examples prove your claims.

5. What is the difference between poetry and prose? Find a poem that is clearly poetry and one that seems more like prose. Identify what elements make them like poetry or prose. Make well-supported claims and compare your arguments with Nemerov's in "Because You Asked about the Line between Prose and Poetry" (122).

6. How does *The Vintage Book's* typeface affect the poems? To begin answering, retype a poem in a different font or handwrite it. Look closely at the poem's context. How would the poem change on different paper or in different relations with other poems? What would change about the poem if you found it scratched in the sand at the beach? Point to precise ways in which the medium influences the message.

7. The word 'negro' shows up in three poems by Lowell. What effect does Lowell create with the word? Replace "negro" with "African-American," "black," "Latino," or "Asian." How do these changes influence the poem's structure? Meaning?

8. According to Joy Harjo, Roethke has "a sideways manner of speaking." What does she mean by that? Examine other poems that speak "sideways" instead of directly. Why don't poets write what they mean instead of using indirect techniques like irony, symbol, allusion, metaphor, etc.? You may want to begin by thinking about why you say things indirectly rather than directly.

Beyond the Book

1. Have your students find recordings of a poet reading his or her own work. Ask your students to practice reading like the poet at home. Designate a 'reading' day where the students read as the poets and also listen to the recordings of the poets. To provide focus, ask them what differences they found in poets' reading voices and their own. Do the emphases fall in different spots? How does their understanding develop in response to different voices? Good resources are the *Voices of the Poet* series (see Related Titles below). Also, *www.poets.org* provides audio of some of the poets collected here reading their poems. There are also films of many of the poets reading in various biographies and documentaries.

2. If you or your students are fluent in another language, bring in translations of some of the poems. As a class, compare the poem and its translation. (Even if all the students don't speak the other language, they can contribute a surprising amount just by listening to the sound patterns and seeing similar words.) Ask your students why some things sound better (or worse) in one language than another. What meanings are difficult to express in the other language but easy in English? You can also reverse the exercise and have your students translate one poem at home into whatever language they speak.

3. Check your local listings for poetry readings or poetry events in the community and invite students to attend alone or in your company. Alternatively, host an "open mike" night at your school for students to share their poetry with others.

4. At one point in time, all of the poets collected here were unknown and yet to be published by a major publisher. Invite your students to seek out contemporary unpublished poetry of their own. Possible sources include self-published chapbooks, online sites maintained by the poet, or even poems by family members that have been boxed away. (They may be pleasantly surprised to find that a parent, aunt, or even a sibling, once displayed considerable poetic talent.) Have your class bring in the best of what they find and design, edit, and publish (a set of copies on colorful paper will do well) your own book of contemporary American poetry. (CAUTION: You must obtain the author's permission before distributing the copies beyond the classroom.)

Related Titles

How to Read a Poem, Edward Hirsch (Harvest Books, 2000)

Poemcrazy, Susan Goldsmith Wooldridge (Crown, 1997)

Spilling Open, Sabrina Ward Harrison (Random House, 2001)

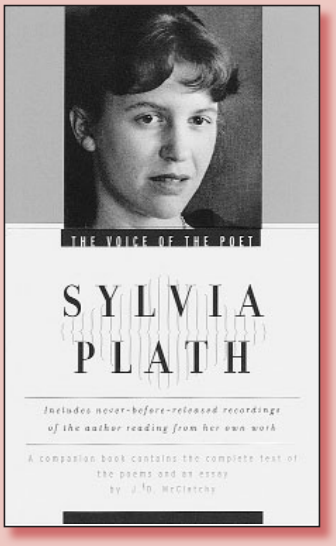
Rose Where Did You Get That Red?, Kenneth Koch (Vintage, 1990)

Making Your Own Days, Kenneth Koch (Simon and Schuster, 1999)

A Poetry Handbook, Mary Oliver (Harvest, 1995)

The Making of a Poem, Mark Strand and Eavan Boland (eds.) (Norton, 2001)

Voice of the Poet series, edited by J.D. McClatchy



The exclusive *The Voice of the Poet series*, comprised of rare archival recordings, some never before released, featuring acclaimed poets. This audio production is accompanied by a book containing the text to the poems and a commentary by J.D. McClatchy.

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- Wallace Stevens
- Richard Wilbur
- American Wits: Ogden Nash, Dorothy Parker, Phyllis McGinley
- Five American Women: Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Louise Bogan, Muriel Rukeyser

About the Editor

J. D. McClatchy is the author of five collections of poems: *Scenes From Another Life*, *Stars Principal*, *The Rest of the Way*, *Ten Commandments*, and *Hazmat*. He has also written two books of essays: *White Paper* and *Twenty Questions*. He has edited many other books, including *The Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry*, *Poets on Painters*, and *Horace: The Odes*. In addition, he edits The Voice of the Poet series for Random House AudioBooks, and has written seven opera libretti. He is a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has taught at Princeton, UCLA, and Johns Hopkins, and is now a professor at Yale, where since 1991 he has edited The Yale Review. He lives in Stonington, Connecticut.

About the Author of this Guide

Darryl Stephens is a graduate Ph.D. student at U. C. Berkeley. He has taught high-school English and Theater and several college courses. Currently, he is examining how the brain realizes literature.