

Emmanuel Solorzano
Dr. Mary Warner
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Unit of Study: “The Hollow Men” as a Bridge into Modernism and Poetry

Why Teach Modernism and Poetry Together

The turn of the century presented writers with a variety of changes. Intellectual life was rapidly changing. Freud proposed a new, unsettling psychoanalytic method of understanding the self. His work undermined cultural and religious conceptions about human nature. Sir James Frazer’s anthropology in *Golden Bough* also challenged cultural and religious stability. Frazer undermined a Eurocentric view of religion by comparing Christ to the pagan fertility gods that died and resurrected to usher in the seasons. In philosophy Nietzsche pronounced God dead and encouraged people to accept their inability to change reality and stoically affirm their fate. Spiritually, intellectually, and culturally, the West was changing fast (Stallworthy and Ramazani 1828-29).

Everyday life changed too. Increasing urbanization and the spread of new technologies such as cinema, electricity, and the radio made information more readily available, as did the widespread literacy that many gained as a result of compulsory education (Stallworthy and Ramazani 1827-29). Encouraged by so many changes, early modernist writers had a utopian view of the future (“modernism”). However, their optimism was shattered. From 1914 to 1918, Europe lost a generation of young men to the First World War. The times were new, and they required a new art, one that could speak meaningfully to such a tumultuous age.

Modernist poetry attempted to provide a voice to the bewildered West during the first half of the 20th century. Modernist poets sought to account for the rapid changes and disruption of conventional life that occurred at the turn of the century by departing from many poetic

conventions of the previous century. Due to its rejection of conventions, modernist poetry can be difficult to understand and enjoy, as it often lacks regular rhyme, storyline, meter, and form. Nevertheless, it is this very rejection of poetic conventions that makes modernist poetry so fit to raise and explore the question: what is poetry? This unit of study is designed to introduce students to literary modernism through T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" while encouraging them to consider the nature of poetry in a wider, more comprehensive sense.

Launching the Unit: The Nature of Poetry

The unit would begin with the class' watching the lyric video for David Bowie's "Five Years" on youtube.

After watching the video, I would ask the students to comment on lyrics that they liked, disliked, or that simply caught their attention. I would then discuss with students the link between poetry and music. After some discussion, I would submit to the students that music lyrics are a form of poetry.

After the discussion, I would pass out the poem titled "How to Eat a Poem" by Eve Merriam. I would ask students for reactions to this poem also. With this poem, I would ask what the students think it means.

Pointing out that poetry is very diverse, I would ask students then to shout out (in an orderly manner) what words or phrases come to mind when they think of poetry. Both factual and opinion statements would be welcome. I would write the terms that students associate with poetry in a list on a small white board. I would leave the whiteboard out on display through the duration of the "Modernism and Poetry" unit. That way, students would be able to see how true their observations about poetry were, as well as what misconceptions about poetry our study of it challenged.

Studying the Text: “The Hollow Men”

I would then provide copies of T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men” for everyone. I would give students a chance to read the poem at home.

At the next class meeting, we would read the poem together. I would assign a stanza to each volunteer and take one for myself.

After the reading, I would then ask the students for reactions, like with Bowie: what lines, words, moments were interesting to you in the poem? What do you think the poem means?

Following our introductory discussion to “The Hollow Men” I would briefly introduce modernism in historical context, emphasizing its search for a voice to make sense of the times and a style to react against Romanticism and Victorianism. Then I would put up a slide that listed a few devices common in modernist poetry; the things that make it ‘tick.’ I would point out to students that in addition to better-known devices—such as rhyme, meter, etc.—the modernist poets created a voice for their era by using devices like the ones of the slide.

It would look something like this:

Some Characteristics of Modernist poetry:

- Ezra Pound: “Make it new”
- **Wit**—word play and conceptual thinking that calls attention to itself and requires consideration (e.i. paradoxes, etc.)
- **Irony**—in modernism, often produced by a shift from formal to casual language, from “high art” culture to pop culture; oblique *allusions* to writings that seem to contradict with the surface meaning of the text

- **Imagism**—many poets at the time wanted to portray objects and images without descriptions and generalizations and let the object affect the reader
- **Vorticism**—imagism, but with motion
- **Puns**—had been “banished from serious literature for two-hundred years”
- **Increase in free verse** (Greenblatt 1827-37)

I would take the time to explain these terms to the students, and I would prompt students to make observations and ask questions about the poetic devices in the above list and how they function in “The Hollow Men.”

To ensure that students do not lose interest in modernism, poetry, and “The Hollow Men,” I would not dwell on this poem for too long. At this point, I would introduce the YA work that would carry the modernism and poetry unit: Margarita Engle’s *Hurricane Dancers*.

Hurricane Dancers is a great YA poetry resource. It has a lexile rating of 1170L, which means that it is fit for readers ages 12 and up. Because the language is so accessible, students will be free to focus on the effects of the formal elements of the poem without having to worry about vocabulary. Moreover, students at all reading levels will be able to comprehend the text with ease and grapple with its rich psychological, cultural, and moral themes.

Hurricane Dancers is a narrative poem, so it will not intimidate students inexperienced in reading literature without a “story.” Like much YA poetry, it is in free verse, so it bears testament to the influence of modernism in all contemporary poetry.

At the beginning of each class period, I would pose students a question about *Hurricane Dancer* to reflect and write on silently for ten minutes. That way, when the time to discuss arrived, students would already have some thoughts on their minds: judgments, opinions, observations, etc. about the narrative or poetic qualities of the text. Students would write

about and discuss *Hurricane Dancers* until we were through the poem, which would not take too long, since it is a relatively short read.

To conclude the unit, I would turn their attention to the list of terms that they associated with poetry at the beginning of the unit. We would discuss what they reaffirmed through the unit and what they learned for the first time. I would also return to “The Hollow Men,” but this time I would encourage a less subjective, more analytical class discussion. Rather than, “What line caught your attention?” the question would be “How does this line create its meaning and effect? What devices does it use? How does the poem create meaning? What is ‘modernist’ about this poem?” After an analytical class discussion, students would be required to write a short (2 page) essay analyzing any aspect(s) of the poem they chose.

Beyond “The Hollow Men”: Reading and Writing

1. Have students write impromptu “We are” poems in whatever form they want: free verse, blank verse, sonnet, haiku, etc. “We are” poems would function similarly to the “I am” poems we wrote in class. The main difference is that in the “We are” poems, students would be encouraged to reflect on the situation of a whole group: their generation, their family, their friends, their classmates, or a group to which they do not belong. Then volunteers would read their poems aloud to the class. This would serve to end the poetry unit on a creative, expressive note, as is fitting.
2. Recommend poems and collections of poems to students, both YA and canonical. Below are some recommendations:
 - a. *Paint Me Like I am: Teen Poems from Writerscorps*

This book includes the poems of real teenagers along with exercises on how to write poetry. This would be a wonderful recommendation for a student who gained any interest in poetry through the unit of study.

b. *A Fire in my Hands* by Gary Soto

This book features poems set in Soto's childhood and adolescence. It is great because of its multicultural characters. Its humor is rich, its situations are quaint, and its verse is insightful.

c. *Dizzy in Your Eyes: Poems About Love* by Pat Mora

Every classroom will have a hopeless romantic in it. This book is there to satisfy the longing of every Romeo and Juliet in the classroom.

d. *Poems from Home Room: A Writer's Place to Start* by Kathi Appelt

This is another wonderful book of poems and poetry exercises and ideas for the aspiring writer. All the future Shakespeares, Wordsworths, and Eliots in the classroom should be given the opportunity to grab a copy, so I would keep a few around the classroom.

e. *T. S. Eliot: Collected Poems, 1909-1962 (The Centenary Edition)*

f. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (Vintage Classics)*

g. *Highway 61 Revisited* by Bob Dylan

Works Cited

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Modernism and Poetry

“The Hollow Men”

Rationale

- Modernist poets sought to reinvent poetry to account for all the changes that occurred at the turn of the century
- Many of them rejected many of the conventions of their time
- This makes them hard to understand
- By studying “The Hollow Men,” students will become acquainted with modernism and have an opportunity to reflect on the fundamental nature of poetry.

Launching the Unit

- Discussion: “What comes to mind when you think about poetry?”
- Poetry and Music

Poetry and Music

And all the fat-skinny people
And all the tall-short people
And all the nobody people
And all the somebody people
I never thought I'd need
So many people



The Turn of the Century

Many Changes:

- Psychoanalysis
- Anthropology
- Philosophy

At first, poets were optimistic, but with WWI people became disillusioned.

Modernist poetry sought to speak to and makes sense of the whole situation.



The Hollow Men

- Discussion
- Reactions:
- What did you like? What didn't you like.
- *Literature for Today's Young Adults* says to give students the freedom to dislike great poetry, and I think this is beneficial because it allows students to develop a subjective relationship to poetry, which is crucial to understanding and enjoying it.

Some Qualities of Modernist Poetry

- Characteristics of Modernist poetry:
- Ezra Pound: “Make it new”
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- **Imagism**—many poets at the time wanted to portray objects and images without descriptions and generalizations and let the object affect the reader
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Hurricane Dancers

- Story in Free Verse Poems
- Many speakers
- Psychological, Race, and Moral themes
- Discuss verse/narrative

Closing the Unit

- Discuss “The Hollow Men” more analytically than at first.
- Write a short paper analyzing any aspect(s) of “The Hollow Men” (imagery, allusion, irony, its relationship to modernism, etc.)
- Write “We are” poems to share in class

Recommendations

- *Paint Me Like I am: Teen Poems from Writerscorps*
- *A Fire in my Hands* by Gary Soto
- *Dizzy in Your Eyes: Poems About Love* by Pat Mora
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