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Lesson Plan For Teaching Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Poet"

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Lesson Plan for Teaching Emerson's "The Poet" (1844)

Key quotations, with reading notes and discussion questions
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Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Poet," written between 1841 and 1843 and published in *Essays: Second Series* (1844). Both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson loved and learned from this essay. Paragraph references are to the online edition of the essay cited below:

If you'd like to read the full text of the essay from an Emerson website, see <http://www.emersoncentral.com/poet.htm>

Paragraphs 1, 6:

"We were put into our bodies, as fire is put into a pan, to be carried about.... But the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or, shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact: Orpheus, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Plato, Plutarch, Dante, Swedenborg, and the masters of sculpture, picture, and poetry. For we are not pans and barrows, nor even porters of the fire and torch-bearers, but children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted, and at two or three removes, when we know least about it."

"poetry was all written before time was"

Introductory Points. These are astonishing claims: think about them. Emerson suggests that poetry comes to us from the world of Platonic forms, outside of time and history. It may profoundly interact with history but it is not *of* it; it precedes it or transcends it. A poetic utterance for Emerson is also profoundly like a human soul, also outside of time before being born into history and a particular body (a particular poetic form). The claim also suggests that there is something profoundly strange about the poetry that individual poets write: though they live *in* time, the words they write come from a timeless world, speaking through them, using them as an instrument. Elsewhere in "The Poet" (see below) Emerson stresses that strong poets must intensely live in the *present* world, attending carefully and receiving inspiration from the world that surrounds them—the doings of the day, the objects that they see, the people they interact with. There's thus a fascinating paradox at the heart of Emerson's vision here: inspired by the present, occurring *in* time, the poem also exists *outside* of time, giving us a glimpse of a timeless spiritual power intersecting with the present material world. Thus Emerson's emphasis later in this essay on the poet as a liberating god, aiding the growth of the soul into higher forms and possibilities.

Emerson's transcendental idealism, inspired by both Plato and *Genesis*, expresses itself very strongly here: in the beginning was the Idea; a form in nature or in art embodies its generative Idea only temporarily and is "dependent" upon it. A parallel is the soul/body distinction, memorably captured in E's comparison of the soul in the

Lesson Plan for Teaching Emerson's "The Poet" (1844)

body to a fire carried in a pan. God is the primary mover here, the prime creator, and will be an analog for the similar fiery acts of genesis created by poets (poet in Greek means *maker*). That's why Emerson says that we are "children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted, and at two or three removes...."

Discussion. Emerson suggests in the last sentence in the paragraph 1 quotation above that we've *lost* this perception that the material world is secondary, the spiritual world primary—why? He suggests that we have forgotten we are "children of the fire" (wonderful phrase!) and now know "least about it," being at two or three "removes." What do you think he means?

Emerson's ambitious claims for poetry are not uncontroversial. Some feel they are pretentious, or just wrong. A recent book, Ben Lerner's *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016), says that such inflated claims are one of the reasons why many people are turned off or intimidated by poetry, or resent it. He says poetry's claim to give us access to Eternal Truth and infinity always fails; we're much more comfortable in the normal world of finitude and understandable, everyday truths and experiences. What do you think of Lerner's points? Do you agree more with him or with Emerson? How do you think Emerson would respond to Lerner's criticism?

Paragraph 2

"The breadth of the problem is great, for the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common-wealth."

Discussion topics. Ignore for a moment Emerson's dated, gendered language (his use of "man" to mean all human beings: this was commonplace in the nineteenth century, and not only then). Focus instead on Emerson's somewhat odd and intriguing use of the word *representative*: Emerson says that the strong poet represents not us "partial" imperfect people but the "complete" person with all his or her faculties and potential fully developed. Emerson is claiming that great art shouldn't just represent or name what is; it should allow us to see what could be or should be. It's not fundamentally mimetic, imitating things as they are (and language as we currently use it), but is prophetic and transformative: it gives us new possibilities, including making language living rather than merely dead or repetitive.

Representative of course also has other connotations for a representative democracy and Emerson's ideas of the role that art, especially poetry, should play in a democracy—an issue he will turn to directly at the very end of his essay, when he says that as of the year 1844 no strong American poet had yet appeared, only ones weakly imitating European models. What does this passage suggest about the role the ancient art of poetry should play in the brave new (and imperfect) world of U.S. democracy of the 1840s? Arguably, Emerson's representative poet should not accept a flawed democracy of "partial men" and a petty idea of "wealth" (much of it generated by slavery, both in the plantation South and in the textile mills of the North,

Lesson Plan for Teaching Emerson's "The Poet" (1844)

which bough slave-harvested cotton). Rather, Emerson says strong poets give us a vision of our unrealized possibilities as both individuals and citizens—what Emerson, punning, calls the “commonwealth.” What do you think of Emerson’s idea that the best poets don’t just represent things as they are, but inspire us how to have a better and more just working society, and a different idea of what true “wealth” is?

Poetry, Science, Religion

Paragraph 16: “As the eyes of Lyncaeus were said to see through the earth, so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For, through that better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and, following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature. All the facts of the animal economy, sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change, and reappear a new and higher fact. He uses forms according to the life, and not according to the form. This is true science.”

Paragraph 19: “nature has a higher end, in the production of new individuals, than security, namely, *ascension*, or, the passage of the soul into higher forms.”

Comments and Discussion Questions. Wow—what a vision! Comment on Emerson’s conception of transparency here (the “glass” metaphor), and also on his notion that such a vision involves glimpsing and understanding not stability but “flowing or metamorphosis, . . . a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form.” Emerson’s sources of inspiration here include not just contemporary science and perhaps certain elements in Christian thought, but also Emerson’s reading in Eastern philosophy and religion, particularly Persian poetry (one of Emerson’s alter egos he called Saadi) and the Hindu *Vishnu Purana*, *Vedas*, and *Upanishads*, all of which had been newly translated into English in the 19th century. If students are interested, introduce yourself to these Hindu texts in a modern translation, or summaries of them and some of their most famous stories, parables, and teachings. To what degree do you see parallels between any of these ancient texts and Emerson’s comments that visionary “thought is multiform,” and that “within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form”?

Next, consider these two striking quotations from near the end of Emerson’s essay:

“If the imagination intoxicates the poet, it is not inactive in other men. The metamorphosis excites in the beholder an emotion of joy. The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men. We seem to be touched by a wand, which makes us dance and run about happily, like children. We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air. This is the effect on us of tropes, fables, oracles, and all poetic forms. Poets are thus liberating gods. Men have really got a

Lesson Plan for Teaching Emerson's "The Poet" (1844)

new sense, and found within their world, another world, or nest of worlds; for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop." [Note: if you don't know the word "trope," look it up; it's fascinating. Basically it means any figure of speech or turn of phrase (trope means *turn*), especially metaphor.]

"There is good reason why we should prize this liberation [that the poet gives us]. The fate of the poor shepherd, who, blinded and lost in the snow-storm, perishes in a drift within a few feet of his cottage door, is an emblem of the state of man. On the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying. The inaccessibility of every thought but that we are in, is wonderful. What if you come near to it, — you are as remote, when you are nearest, as when you are farthest. Every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison. Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene."

Discussion Questions:

In this part of the essay Emerson moves to exploring how a strong poet, by having his imaginative powers more fully developed, may also help normal human beings realize the more limited potential of their faculties. To what degree is Emerson's language highly *democratic*, despite its elitism (his emphasis on the poet's unique powers)?

For a man who so celebrates the liberating powers of thought, why does Emerson claim that "every thought is also a prison," and that, "on the brink of the waters of life and of truth we are miserably dying"? (Think also of Thoreau's famous sentence from *Walden*: "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.") What in Emerson's conception is poetry's role in liberating us from the prisons we make for ourselves?

Finally, here are two famous passages to read and discuss, from the conclusion to Emerson's "The Poet":

"I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance. If we filled the day with bravery, we should not shrink from celebrating it. Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await. Dante's praise is, that he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher, or into universality. We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer; then in the middle age; then in Calvinism. Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, methodism and unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy, and the temple of Delphos, and are as swiftly passing away. Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern

Lesson Plan for Teaching Emerson's "The Poet" (1844)

planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres."

"Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say, 'It is in me, and shall out.' Stand there, baulked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity. Nothing walks, or creeps, or grows, or exists, which must not in turn arise and walk before him as exponent of his meaning. Comes he to that power, his genius is no longer exhaustible. All the creatures, by pairs and by tribes, pour into his mind as into a Noah's ark, to come forth again to people a new world."

These paragraphs were particularly inspirational for two of the best readers of this essay, the young Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

Here are 4 examples of how Emerson's language as well as ideas are echoed and elaborated in Whitman and Dickinson. Many more examples could be cited.

From Whitman, "Song of Myself," section 25:

Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself,
It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically,
Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?

And "Song of Myself," section 51:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Or consider Dickinson's #613 and #883, the sarcastic "They shut me up in Prose" and her reverential view of how great poets illuminate the future: "The Poets light but Lamps" (both available online).

Discussion Topics:

What similarities do you see between Emerson and Whitman and Dickinson? To what degree could they be said to put Emerson's prose "theory" into practice—into poems? Consider also whether Whitman and Dickinson don't just follow Emerson, but also respond to and change, critique, and/or surpass his ideas about what "the poet" does. Discuss some examples of this, while exploring how *different* Whitman and Dickinson sound and feel on the page, or when read aloud. Emerson's theories seem to have inspired poets very different from each other, not poets who all sound alike: discuss this paradox.

The poet "peoples a new world," like Noah's creatures streaming from the Ark: how does this image and other ideas from Emerson help you understand more deeply your own favorite poet, and/or contemporary developments in poetry and poetry-in-performance (such as Spoken Word)?