

POETRY IN CLASSROOMS WITH ENGLISH LEARNERS

Robert W. King

WHY USE POETRY IN THE CLASSROOM?

- teaches **vocabulary**
- teaches **syntax**
- teaches **thinking** and **flexibility of thought**
- teaches writing **fluency** (generation of ideas)
- teaches **writing process** (when revision is involved)
- teaches **multicultural world views** through concrete images

STRUCTURE AND THE MODEL POEM:

ONE WAY TO REAL POETRY IN THE CLASSROOM

Sometimes students are given a *topic* for writing ("spring," "my pet," etc.) with no help on how one would write a poem. At other times they are given a *form* (haiku, acrostic, diamante, etc.) with no help on discovering materials for a poem. What I've found works better is to present a **structure** of thought, often through the use of a model poem, to prompt individual thoughts.

The following poems are structured, to various degrees, by two separate methods of organization.

The first three use the structure of parallelism. In a **parallel poem**, each line involves different details about the same subject (thus, the lines are parallel in organization). Often there is a repetition of words in many of the lines so it can be easily identified. The simplest example would be a poem called "Red" in which each line begins "Red is..." but a parallel poem can be fairly complex with its ideas and images.

The fourth and fifth poems use the structure of **concrete details/images** about one particular event.

Both of these structures (and there are many other types of structures in other poems) represent a framework that can be used with students who then supply their own ideas and language. They will therefore experience "poetry-making" in a way that conventional form-oriented or subject-oriented lessons cannot equal.

THE MAGICAL MOUSE
(Kenneth Patchen)

I am the magical mouse
I don't eat cheese
I eat sunsets
And the tops of trees.

I don't wear fur

I wear funnels
Of lost ships and the weather
That's under dead leaves
I am the magical mouse

I don't fear cats

Or wood-owls
I do as I please
Always
I don't eat crusts
I am the magical mouse
I eat
Little birds and maidens

That taste like dust.

* * *

THE DELIGHT SONG OF TSOAI-TALEE
(N. Scott Momaday)

I am a feather on 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 Gods
I stand in good relation to the earth
I stand in good relation to everything that is beautiful
You see, I am alive, I am alive.

- - -

*"white apple" = prairie turnip, breadroot

* * *

LINEAGE
(Margaret Walker)

My grandmothers were strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil.
They moved through fields sowing seed.
They touched earth and grain grew.
They were full of sturdiness and singing.
My grandmothers were strong.
My grandmothers are full of memories
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands.
They have many words to say.
My grandmothers were strong.
Why am I not as they?

EARTHLY PARADISE
(Francisco X. Alarcon)

How I enjoy
coming to el Mercado
with my grandma!

smelling the early
day's freshness
in the cilantro

getting lost
among mangoes
and papayas

flowery
squash buds
and watermelons

so many colors
so many flavors
everywhere

yes, the earth is still
a paradise!

(from *Poems to Dream Together*)

* * *

TROPICAL HURRICANE

I watch clouds darken.
Lightning zigzags across the skies.
Winds strengthen with every gust
breaking branches from the trees.
I tremble when roofs
lift off houses and a cloudburst of rain
makes a galloping river
carrying everything away.
I peep through the shutters
wishing the rains would stop,
anxious to be a barefoot pirate
gathering floating treasures.

(from *Not a Copper Penny in Me House: Poems from the Caribbean*)