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## Of Millionaires and Mariners

by Peter E. Murphy

There's something about Atlantic City that makes teaching Robinson's "Richard Cory" especially pleasing. Perhaps it's because Atlantic City is stuffed with celebrities who "glitter when they walk," and my ninth-grade students are quick to name them: Trump, Griffin, Ross, Cosby, Cher, Rickles, Minelli, Sinatra, and on. Or, like the "people on the pavement," my students are envious of Cory's wealth. Most are shocked when they come to the poem's unexpected ending. They do not understand why he went home "one calm, summer night" and "put a bullet through his head."

"Why would he kill himself?" they protest. "He had everything."

And indeed he did. But in poetry, as in Atlantic City, having everything is not enough.

That's when the talk turns to happiness, what it means and how to get it. Students who had been fixated on Monday night football or the super sale at Macy's begin to talk about wealth and all its synonyms: family, friendship, health, faith, talents, and future dreams. They begin to wonder what makes life meaningful. I love it when this happens.

I remind them of Samuel Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* whose senseless crime against nature brought torture and death to his shipmates and caused him to be punished for eternity. Only after he has suffered intensely does he appreciate nature's gifts. He blesses the "slimy things" that crawled with legs "upon the slimy sea." His remarkable transformation is due to the secret of life which I then offer to share with my students. They are silent, expectant. They want to know.

"The more you suffer," I tell them, "the greater your capacity for happiness."

They don't want to hear this. Neither did I at their age, but these poems tell a truth that is supported by centuries of human experience. Although Cory and the Mariner had very different lives, they were united in anguish. It destroyed Cory; the Mariner benefited from his misery. By the poem's end, the Mariner had become more fully human. Not only does he cherish nature, he is compelled to teach others who need to hear what he learned so painfully.

Many students do hear the lessons of Coleridge and Robinson. Poetry has encouraged many of these kids to rise from the pavement, brush off their bottoms, and get to work. Through poetry, they discover their own voices. And a poem need not be time-honored to strike the right chord. Contemporary poetry, for example, can electrify curricula and excite students in any class, at any level.

John Berryman's poem "Of 1826" is a bizarre inventory of self-important declarations that

is fun to discuss for its historical allusions. Rita Dove's "Flash Cards" subtly shows the pressure on a young girl whose demanding father quizzes her on her sums at too rapid a speed. "Ten," she says retreating from the last question, "I'm only ten." While I would not look to poetry to learn who did what to whom on a particular date or to check two plus two, I have learned at least two lessons from these poems. First, that Jefferson and Adams might not recognize or approve of our nation today, and second, how a father's severity could create math anxiety in a bright daughter.

*The Language of Life* with Bill Moyers provides many opportunities to bring contemporary poetry into the classroom. This eight-hour series was taped at the biennial Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival held at Waterloo Village, New Jersey in September, 1994. More than 6,000 high-school students, teachers, and others spent three days talking with poets and listening to them read and discuss their lives and work.

One reason to teach contemporary poems is that poets from various ethnic and racial backgrounds are only now giving voice to (and having audiences for) their experiences. Students, who are not used to seeing, hearing, and reading writers who look and sound like they do, begin to realize that they too may have something to offer. *The Language of Life* and its predecessor, *Moyers: The Power of the Word*, present poems and interviews with Jimmy Santiago Baca, Marilyn Chin, Lucille Clifton, Victor Hernández Cruz, Joy Harjo, Michael Harper, Li-Young Lee, Mary Tall Mountain, Quincy Troupe, and other poets of color.

Contemporary poems do not necessarily conform to the conscious logic of essays or narrative, which is why they require more than one reading. Even then, their full meanings can remain obscure. The title of e.e. cummings' book, *is five*, suggests the ambiguous logic of poetry. The question, of course, was, "How much is two plus two?"

Whether you choose classic or contemporary poems, the key to fostering an appreciation of poetry is to share your enthusiasm. Find poems that you like read one aloud at the beginning or end of a class without comment or discussion. Students will learn from your enthusiasm. Buy poetry books and anthologies for your classroom library and encourage your students to browse. Have your school library subscribe to literary magazines like *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The American Poetry Review*, and *Poetry*. Invite local poets into your classes to read and discuss their work.

When my students begin to write poems, I encourage them with various assignments. One assignment I call "Dealing with the Facts." We live in a gambling town so they all know the rules of poker. I deal them five small, blank pieces of paper and tell them to write down three early memories and two lies. Then they shuffle their actual memories with the imagined ones, mixing fact, bluff and metaphor into a first draft which is revised into a winning hand, a poem.

As a rule, I do not encourage my students to use end rhyme. It's too hard to sound original. All the good rhymes have been taken.

While poetry has been the traditional domain of English teachers, it is bigger than one "school" subject. Poems are art, history, politics, science, math, physical education. And poetry is reading and writing. Because poetry is the marriage of the imagination to language, students in all classes can write poems.

It used to be that poetry got no respect. It was the Rodney Dangerfield of the Arts, misunderstood and unappreciated, when compared to other literature, music, dance, drama, and the visual arts. While poetry may not provide us with answers that make our lives easier, the questions poems ask can, through the beauty and power of language, illumine the way and lighten our load as we try to understand our particular human suffering. I couldn't think of anything more important or useful to teach, even in Atlantic City.