

Conquest and Resistance: Poetry of the American West

NEH 2010 “Shifting Power on the Plains”: Lesson plan ideas for teaching perspective, historical context, and the poetry of the American West.

Introduction: This lesson is designed to promote group collaboration and sharing of ideas within the history and English classroom. Each class should be assigned four to five poems that connect to the themes of Power Shifts on the Great Plains, Ecological Change, the Conflict of the Old Ways vs. Assimilation, or other themes that help students find a way into the overarching idea of conquest and resistance.

Method: After selecting a group of related poems, groups of 3-5 students are assigned one poem to study and present to the class at large. While all students will eventually read and notate each poem, each group will be responsible for the following aspects of its assigned selection:

1. Historical context through the study of recommended primary and secondary sources, including archival photographs and maps. Students should pay special attention to the source’s main idea, tone, and bias.
2. The examination of multiple perspectives found in the selection, especially perspectives of conflict that arise from differences in culture, economics, race, gender, and the political arena.
3. The literary elements that contribute to the meaning and the poem’s historical complexities.
4. A formal oral reading of the poem and class discussion that analyzes the meaning and message of the writer, plus a background of the author’s bio and influences.

The presentation, in other words, should include elements that prepare the ground for a deeper understanding of the work, and then conclude with an in-depth discussion of the work itself that examines the literary and historical significance of the group’s selection.

Suggested selections: “Indian Boarding School: The Runaways” by Louise Erdrich, “Trapper’s Report” by Adrien Stoutenberg, “Crazy Horse Monument” by Peter Blue Cloud, “Black Mesa Mine #1” by Gary Snyder, “Good Grease” by Mary Tall Mountain. Also check anthologies of Native American poetry—the possibilities are limitless.

Sample Lesson Plan: “Indian Boarding School: The Runaways”

1. After reading the poem, this group should begin researching the issue of Indian schools and the policy of assimilation promoted by the U.S. government in the late 1880’s. Suggested online resources include the Smithsonian archives of documents and photographs and in particular this link based on the poem:
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/erdrich/boarding/index.htm (American Poetry website--includes bio information on the poet.)

Excellent supplemental sources include selected chapters from the following books:

--The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge by Joe Starita, 1995. (See pages 191-216.)

--The Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee by Jeffrey Ostler, 2004.

2. The group will prepare an introduction to the poem based on boarding school and reservation policies as well as be prepared to point out specific references within the poem that highlight the conflicts of culture and perspective. A richer understanding of the historical and political contexts should open up new possibilities for each poem presented. This part of the presentation should include related photographs, art, primary documents, and maps.
3. A formal, well-rehearsed reading of the poem should follow the discussion of the poem's historical background. A brief biographical overview of Louise Erdrich and her influences precedes the reading in this case.
4. With the teacher's assistance, the group will lead a graded discussion on the poem. Prior to the reading and discussion, questions should be formulated that promote an examination of the poem's connection to the historical context as well as an examination of specific elements of the poem that contribute to its meaning, such as the powerful use of figurative language to elicit a longing for place and lost identity and culture.
5. Grading for each group presentation is based on the effectiveness of each group's collaboration and its success in presenting the background material, the poem, and in promoting the discussion for the class in general. When all poems have been presented, each student should turn in his or her packet of selected poems with historical notes and notations on each poem and poet. The packet grade promotes critical thinking and participation; it should be considered an important aspect of the evaluation of each student.
6. Following the completion of all groups, the teacher should lead a concluding discussion that focuses on the thematic and historical connections uncovered during the process of searching for truths found within and beyond the poems themselves.

Text of selected poem:

Indian Boarding School: The Runaways

BY LOUISE ERDRICH

**Home's the place we head for in our sleep.
Boxcars stumbling north in dreams
don't wait for us. We catch them on the run.**

The rails, old lacerations that we love,
shoot parallel across the face and break
just under Turtle Mountains. Riding scars
you can't get lost. Home is the place they cross.

The lame guard strikes a match and makes the dark
less tolerant. We watch through cracks in boards
as the land starts rolling, rolling till it hurts
to be here, cold in regulation clothes.
We know the sheriff's waiting at midrun
to take us back. His car is dumb and warm.
The highway doesn't rock, it only hums
like a wing of long insults. The worn-down welts
of ancient punishments lead back and forth.

All runaways wear dresses, long green ones,
the color you would think shame was. We scrub
the sidewalks down because it's shameful work.
Our brushes cut the stone in watered arcs
and in the soak frail outlines shiver clear
a moment, things us kids pressed on the dark
face before it hardened, pale, remembering
delicate old injuries, the spines of names and leaves.