

Creating “Golden Shovel” Poems
Developed by Peter Kahn
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Total Number of Sessions

2 – 4, depending on whether the teacher wants students to revise and present their poems.

NCTE Standards

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12

Introduction

Many teens are reluctant to write and share their own poetry. They often find the idea quite intimidating. This lesson plan, developed by a twenty-year teaching veteran, NCTE Featured Speaker, and *Louder Than a Bomb* Coach of the Year, helps reduce student apprehension by allowing them to borrow the writing of “master” poets of their choice. It has been successfully utilized with students in the United States and England. After sharing their own writing, students will gain insights to help them with selection for, and recitation of, poems for the Poetry Out Loud competition.

To grow as an artist, it’s important to study the work of other artists. This certainly applies to the craft of poetry. Memorization and imitation are two essential kinds of familiarity. Reiterations of “form” poems such as sonnets, pantoums, ghazals, etc. have pushed the bounds of contemporary poetry and provided inspiration in classrooms. For fledgling writers, in particular, form can liberate, providing a scaffold and giving them the confidence to begin writing. With an entirely new form, young writers can feel like they’re on the ground level of something and are less intimidated by history and the weight of Shakespeare, Donne, Frost, Dickinson, and Rumi, etc. Experimentation with new models can level the playing field to some extent—quite an exciting prospect for students and teachers alike.

In the 2010 National Book Award-winning *Lighthouse*, Terrance Hayes includes a poem entitled, “The Golden Shovel” (<http://www.poetryoutloud.org/poem/244278>) followed by “after Gwendolyn Brooks.” The title and epigraph provide hints to the new form that Hayes creates with his poem. One notices that the line endings in “The Golden Shovel” constitute Brooks’s “We Real Cool” in its entirety. (He goes on to repeat the process in part II of the piece.) “We Real Cool,” which first appeared in *Poetry* magazine, is seminal not only to the literary canon, but also to the classroom. The Golden Shovel is a form that forces one to borrow in order to create.

This models the idea of “something borrowed, something new” that is at the heart of Poetry Out Loud. It allows students to take ownership of the line they most want to resonate with their audience when reciting the borrowed poem. Sharing ownership with one of the poets in the Poetry Out Loud anthology will create a kinship that should help students connect with the poems they will recite for the competition.

Learning Objectives

In this unit, students will have opportunities to:

- Read a wide range of poems from the Poetry Out Loud website
- Discuss what makes language interesting and surprising (i.e., what makes a “striking line”)
- Discuss the importance of word choice in poetry and what makes an intriguing or memorable word choice
- Learn a new poetic form—the Golden Shovel
- Read and discuss sample “Golden Shovel” poems
- Apply a “borrowed” line from a poem to create one’s own Golden Shovel poem
- Learn and apply public speaking skills
- Read a Poetry Out Loud poem, along with an original poem for his/her classmates in a supportive environment

Resources and Materials

To teach this unit you will need:

- Copies of the poems provided at the end of this lesson
- Student access to the Poetry Out Loud website
- Lots of whiteboard or chalkboard space
- Paper and writing utensils

Session One

This session will help students determine what lines and word choices stand out in good poetry and will provide background for writing their original poetry. It will also introduce the Golden Shovel form.

1. Discuss what makes a “striking line” in literature (i.e., a line that is especially interesting, surprising and original; that jumps out at the reader; and/or that makes the reader think).
2. Read Jane Cooper’s “Hunger Moon” aloud. Then have students read it silently, while underlining striking lines. For example:

“The last full moon of February / stalks the fields”
“barbed wire casts a shadow.”
“it advances on my pillow”
“with the cocked gun of silence.”
“The moon, in pale buckskins, crouches”
“all the fences thrum”

3. Next, discuss the importance of surprising/unusual word choices in poetry. Have students underline those words from the striking lines on the board (i.e., “stalks,” “barbed,” “crouches” and “thrum”).

4. Repeat the process using sections from Gwendolyn Brooks's "*The Blackstone Rangers*."
5. Read Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool." If you have time, you may play Ms. Brooks reciting the original poem: (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/audioitem/2264>). Then have the students read Terrance Hayes's "The Golden Shovel" aloud. Ask students to look for anything unusual about the form and see if anyone notices that Brooks's poem, "We Real Cool," is laid out vertically at the end of each of Hayes's lines. If no one figures it out without a hint, point out that it is "after Gwendolyn Brooks" and explain what *enjambment* means ("unnatural" line breaks, or "The running-over of a sentence or phrase from one poetic line to the next, without terminal punctuation; the opposite of end-stopped" (per the Poetry Foundation website). After a few minutes, point out the form that Hayes has created.
6. Finally, students should read at least three poems of their own from the Poetry Out Loud website and make note of striking lines that include surprising word choices. They should complete for homework, if need be.

Session Two

This session will allow students to put their “borrowed” lines to use in their own original poems, applying what they learned in Session One.

1. Referring back to Terrance Hayes’s “The Golden Shovel,” explain the Golden Shovel form:

- In its purest form, one should find a poem and create his/her own with the borrowed poem laid out vertically on the right margin of the created poem.
- For this assignment, students borrow a striking line from a poem and create his/her own with the borrowed line laid out vertically on the right margin of the created poem.
- Recommended length—six to 24 words (i.e., six to 24 lines in the poem one creates).
- The theme or topic of the created poem may or may not be linked to the borrowed poem/line.
- It is recommended to choose a striking line that contains some unusual word choices.
- An advanced challenge is to make the line lengths consistent.

2. Look at the sample poems by Nova Venerable, based on a striking line from the Jane Cooper poem; and by Hannah Srajer, based on a striking line from the Gwendolyn Brooks poem. Nova was a three-time member of Oak Park and River Forest High School’s *Louder Than a Bomb* slam team, is featured in the documentary of the same name, and recently graduated from Smith College. Hannah is a senior at Oak Park and River Forest High School and a member of the slam team.

3. Ask students to determine where Nova “cheats” in terms of the form? (Possible answer—she writes “stalk” instead of “stalks” and her last line is much longer than the other lines in the poem.) Then, discuss where Hannah “cheats.” (Possible answer—she writes “know,” instead of “no.”)

4. Students should then select one of their “found” striking lines selected from poems from the Poetry Out Loud website and/or anthology to use for their own Golden Shovel poem.

5. They should write out the line vertically down the right margin.

6. Next, they should begin writing their Golden Shovel poem.

Note: This form allows students to write without having to brainstorm for topics. A sort of creative “magic” tends to occur. Students often gravitate towards those things that are on their minds. If students struggle, you may recommend that they write about recent thoughts. If that doesn’t work, have them consider people, places and things that are important to them. Finally, if all else fails, have them try writing about their favorite or least favorite memories.

Session Three

This session will first allow students to apply the skills learned in the previous sessions to help their classmates improve their writing. Students will pay greater attention to language and form, giving them a more layered understanding of the poems they select for Poetry Out Loud. The session will then encourage students to evaluate various approaches to presenting poems.

1. Put students in pairs or groups of three for peer editing:

- Does the poem follow the Golden Shovel form?
- Does the poem make sense?
- Are there any surprising word choices?
- Are there ways of making the line lengths more consistent?
- What is the intent of the writer?

Students should revise accordingly.

2. Discuss performance/public speaking skills, focusing on the perceived intent of the poet, as well as one's feelings about the poem he/she is presenting. You may discuss tone as it applies to the original Golden Shovel poems that students wrote, as well to the poems that students will present for Poetry Out Loud. By thinking about intent and tone as both a writer and a reader, a student gains new insights into his/her performance.

3. Brainstorm possible tones that a presenter could utilize to convey his/her feelings about the poem. For instance: ironic, humorous, sarcastic, heartfelt, tongue-in-cheek, bitter, mocking, etc.

4. Show the three video clips from the Poetry Out Loud website listed below. After each clip, ask students to write down the tone conveyed by the presenter. Ask them to discuss what about the performance prompted their observations. Then, ask them what they felt the presenter did to engage the audience. Facial expressions, body language, gestures, volume shifts, pacing shifts, tone shifts, gestures, etc may all be discussed. Have students discuss what the presentations have in common. Note what they bring up on the board and use it as a basis for what they should practice for their own presentations.

<http://www.poetryoutloud.org/poems-and-performance/video-recitation-series>

- Sophia Elena Soberon, *Bilingual/Bilingüe*, by Rhina P. Espaillat
- Jackson Hille, *Forgetfulness*, by Billy Collins
- Shawntay A. Henry, *Frederick Douglass*, by Robert E. Hayden

5. With remaining time, students could pair up to practice reading their Golden Shovel poems and their Poetry Out Loud poems.

Optional Concluding Session: The Poetry Café

1. Go over ground rules for the Poetry Café. (1. Everyone should “respect the stage and/or mic”—pay full attention to the presenter; 2. Do not cause any distractions by rustling through papers, tapping a foot, etc.; 3. Clap when students are called up to present and when they are finished; 4. Do not “mean mug” the presenter. In other words, don’t look angry or annoyed when a poet is reading; 5. Students may snap during a poem if they hear a striking line that they want to celebrate.)

2. Students are to present the poem from which they borrowed the striking line (with special emphasis given to that line), followed by their original Golden Shovel poem. They should consider their intended tone when performing their original poem, as well as the tone they want to convey about their Poetry Out Loud selection.

Resources

- “Hunger Moon” by Jane Cooper (<http://www.poetryoutloud.org/poem/242454>)
- Sections from “The Blackstone Rangers” by Gwendolyn Brooks (<http://www.poetryoutloud.org/poem/172095>)
- Sample Golden Shovel poems by Nova Venerable, Hannah Srajer and Lexus Valentine (an extra example of the form)

“Hunger Moon” by Jane Cooper

The last full moon of February
stalks the fields; barbed wire casts a shadow.
Rising slowly, a beam moved toward the west
stealthily changing position

until now, in the small hours, across the snow
it advances on my pillow
to wake me, not rudely like the sun
but with the cocked gun of silence.

I am alone in a vast room
where a vain woman once slept.
The moon, in pale buckskins, crouches
on guard beside her bed.

Slowly the light wanes, the snow will melt
and all the fences thrum in the spring breeze
but not until that sleeper, trapped
in my body, turns and turns.

Jane Cooper, “Hunger Moon” from *The Flashboat: Poems Collected and Reclaimed*. Copyright
© 2000 by Jane Cooper. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Source: *The Flashboat: Poems Collected and Reclaimed* (W. W. Norton and Company, Inc.,
2000)

“The Blackstone Rangers” by Gwendolyn Brooks

I

AS SEEN BY DISCIPLINES

There they are.
Thirty at the corner.
Black, raw, ready.
Sores in the city
that do not want to heal.

III

GANG GIRLS

A Rangerette

Gang Girls are sweet exotics.
Mary Ann
uses the nutrients of her orient,
but sometimes sighs for Cities of blue and jewel
beyond her Ranger rim of Cottage Grove.
(Bowery Boys, Disciples, Whip-Birds will
dissolve no margins, stop no savory sanctities.)

Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Blackstone Rangers,” from *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987). Reprinted by consent of Brooks Permissions.

Source: *Blacks* (Third World Press, 1987)

“The Last Full Moon of February” by Nova Venerable (Oak Park and River Forest High School, Class of 2007; Smith College graduate; featured in the *Louder Than a Bomb* documentary). Used by permission of the author.

After Jane Cooper

From “Hunger Moon” (“The last full moon of February stalks the fields.”)

My little brother draws on my door every morning with his fists, **the**
words he makes are meshed between his tongue and my **last**

prayer asking God if I am being too selfish, if my hands are too **full**
of psychology books, too laced with Boston air to follow the **moon**

back home. My eyes are as moist as the spit on his lips, thoughts **of**
his funeral come as often as snowfalls in **February**.

I ask God how soon my fingertips will have to **stalk**
his casket, for a sign to tell me if the moon will be **the**

brightest path to follow before he is alone & my fingers lose him in a gravestoned **field**.

“**My Twin Brother Becoming a Man**” by Hannah Srajer (Oak Park and River Forest High School senior). Used by permission of the author.

After Gwendolyn Brooks

(from “The Blackstone Rangers”-- “...dissolve no margins, stop no savoring sanctities.”)

Once laid out like dinner plates, my brother’s bare hands **dissolve**
into meat-ened fists. He and the boy whose face I do not k(**no**)w

are seconds away from springing, circling at Chicago & Park’s **margins**
like seagulls over silvered fish. The dive comes. He cannot **stop**

until a glinted knife raws into skin like he is a box with heavy tape **no**
one can open. Street’s an unfurled tongue, black & wet, **savoring**

the hothead blood of men, lapping clean all trace of **sanctities**.

“Sores in the city that do not want to heal” by Lexus Valentine (Oak Park and River Forest High School junior). Used by permission of the author.

After Gwendolyn Brooks

(From “The Blackstone Rangers”—“Sores in the city that do not want to heal”)

I’ve become **sores**,
netted into your scalp from missing pieces **in**
my wide tooth comb, sitting in **the**
Panera bread over soup bowls. The **city**
never changed. Since you left, I can recognize **that**
you lift up your tips on what to **&** what not to **do**
when I reach college. You say, “Never believe in what I’m **not.**”
But what I **want--**
shifting your goodbyes in my pocket. Giving up is something I’m not used **to.**
With your advice we’ll never **heal.**