**“Situational Poetry”**

Shared by Erin Edgington, University of Nevada, Reno

This activity may be used at any point of the term as an applied reading technique and/or as the basis for a more substantial midterm or final project. The poems chosen may be from any period and written in any form/style that is in focus in the course or module.

Each student selects (or is assigned) a poem that has some connection to the environment. Depending upon the level and focus of the course or module, examples could be more or less explicitly connected to the environment. (For example, students in bridge or introductory literature courses might work with Romantic poetry that incorporates clear nature imagery while more advanced students might consider poems featuring altered, obscured, or implied environments.) No matter the poem, the goal of the activity is for students to connect their texts, first, to the literary historical context(s) they are studying and, second, to their own local environments. In sharing their findings with their peers via presentations – which may be formal or informal – students are able to go beyond explaining what the language means, either literally or figuratively, and discuss the meaning(s) they make of their poems.

In addition to providing students with a technique to help them engage more deeply with poetic texts, completing this activity also encourages them to recognize poetry as a genre that is connected to, rather than abstracted from, everyday life.

As a teacher of French language and literature in the western United States, my students are often concerned to know how French connects to their lived experiences. As a specialist of nineteenth-century French(-Canadian) poetry, I face the additional challenge of helping students to relate to literature written more than a century ago. Most of my students are also studying another subject in combination with French, which may or may not be another humanities discipline. In fact, as Nevada’s land-grant institution, my university offer majors in agriculture and mining as well as in related disciplines like forest and rangeland management. This activity offers the flexibility to accommodate students with multiple interests and encourages them to bring related knowledge from other disciplines to bear on their study of literature.

For example, were I to assign students poems by the French-Canadian poet William Chapman on the topics of logging and agriculture, students with any combination of interests and academic majors could trace productive connections. On the notion of the frontier, for instance, students might compare Chapman’s interest in clearing areas of the forest for settlement in Québec to similar activities undertaken in Nevada and California around the same time (anthropology, economics, history) as well as today when cities in the west continue to expand, encroaching on natural environments and straining natural resources (political science, rangeland management). Similarly, in his several poems representing forest fires, students would find readymade comparisons to their own experiences of late summer and fall in Nevada (environmental science, geography) and could consider how Chapman’s positive interpretation of fire as making way for crops compares to our perception of fire as dangerous to our built environments including farm and ranchlands but also regenerative (philosophy, fire science).

If this activity is assigned as a midterm or final project, the rubric below may be useful in assessing student learning. In instances where students have not been asked to write papers, the fifth criterion may be modified or excluded.

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|  | Does Not Meet Standards (US <60, UK <40) | Meets Standards (US 60+, UK 50+) | Exceeds Standards (US 90+, UK 70+) |
| Literary historical context (25%) | There is no attempt to connect the poem to its literary historical context or the context is misunderstood and/or misrepresented. | Several aspects of the poem’s literary historical context are presented, enhancing understanding of the text somewhat. Audience members may not fully understand the connections made between the text and its context. | Multiple aspects of the poem’s literary historical context are presented and explained with clear reference to the text, leading to an enhanced understanding of the text. |
| Local context (25%) | There is no attempt to connect the poem to our local environment or the context is misunderstood and/or misrepresented. | Several connections are traced between the poem and our local environment, enhancing understanding of the text somewhat. Audience members may not fully understand the connections made between the text and our environment. | Multiple clear connections are traced between the poem and our local environment, leading to an enhanced understanding of the text. |
| Analysis of the text (20%) | There is no effort to demonstrate understanding of the text or to elucidate potential points of confusion related to syntax, meter, vocabulary, etc. | Presenter offers an analysis of the text, elucidating several potential points of confusion related to syntax, meter, vocabulary, etc.. | Presenter offers a clear, incisive analysis of the text, elucidating any potential points of confusion related to syntax, meter, vocabulary, etc. |
| Quality of presentation (15%) | Presenter does not use (appropriate) supports (visual, auditory, etc.) and does not engage the audience in the presentation. Presenter is unable to respond to questions and comments or does so in a negative manner. | Presenter uses appropriate supports (visual, auditory, etc.) and engages the audience in the presentation. Presenter responds to questions and comments. | Presenter uses a variety of appropriate supports (visual, auditory, etc.) and engages the audience fully in the presentation. Presenter handles questions and comments in a positive, collaborative manner. |
| Quality of written work (15%) | Written components (including text on slides and handouts) are unclear and/or disorganized. Multiple linguistic or typographical errors are present, including serious errors. | Written components (including text on slides and handouts) are clear and well organized. A few linguistic or typographical errors are present of which one or two may be serious. | Written components (including text on slides and handouts) are clear and well organized. They support the author’s claims. No serious linguistic or typographical errors are present. |