

POETRY OUT LOUD

LESSON PLAN

Lincoln in the House! **(“Name-Dropping” Poems and the Power of Connotation)**

Introduction

Mention a famous person—an artist, a musician, a political figure—and a host of associations will come to mind. Some are biographical: the life lived, and perhaps an unexpected death. For other figures, the associations are moral. They center on the values or beliefs or ideals the figure embodied or espoused. Over time, the meanings of a famous name may grow smooth and standardized. Few Americans now have sharply negative associations with Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Delano Roosevelt, even though the two were once not only loved, but fiercely hated. Other names continue to call radically contrasting attributes. Think of how differently a British reader and an Irish one might react to a poem that mentions Oliver Cromwell; or, closer to home, think of the opposite reactions that different readers might have to a poem that features Pancho Villa, Ethel Rosenberg, or Ronald Reagan.

Poems that “name-drop”—whether by talking *about* a famous figure, or by talking *to* him or her—thus rely on the power of **allusion** and **connotation**. The poets who write them bet that you, the reader, will bring enough background knowledge to the poem to recognize the person who is named, and enough relevant associations with that name to make its presence meaningful, powerful, memorable, or surprising. But because the connotations of a famous name can vary so widely, these poems can also leave a great deal open for interpretation, discussion, and even lively, thoughtful debate.

This lesson plan will teach your students how to talk about the use of historical figures in poems, and invite them to write poems that “name-drop” in resonant, open-ended, and intriguing ways.

The lesson starts with poems about Abraham Lincoln: a figure that students will have heard about many times, both formally and informally, and one with many links to the art of poetry. (Lincoln loved to reciting poems in public, wrote poems himself, and he has been mourned, invoked, and celebrated by poets ever since his assassination.)

Students will have many associations with Lincoln, and some of the poems they will read draw on those associations in comfortable and familiar ways. Others, though, mention him more briefly or mysteriously, and students will learn to grow comfortable with the irreducible plurality of meanings his name brings into the poem. There will be many “right answers” in this discussion—and probably a few that seem odd or idiosyncratic. This, too, will offer a useful lesson to students. Sometimes our associations with a name are public, broadly shared, and sometimes they are intensely individual. That latter set of

associations may be valid for the person who has them, but they are unlikely to add much to the general cultural conversation that surrounds a poem.

By comparing and contrasting poems about Lincoln, students will learn to recognize some of the most common “moves” that poets use when writing about historical figures. With these in mind, students will then hunt up and present other poems about historical figures—some from political history, and some from the arts—chosen from the Poetry Out Loud archive.

Periods: 1, with an optional take-home project

NCTE standards: 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 12

Learning Objectives:

In this lesson, students will have opportunities to

- Read and discuss poems that invoke Abraham Lincoln
- Decide which associations with that name are relevant to the poem (there will not be a single “right answer,” but several)
- Learn several contrasting rhetorical “moves” that poets make by invoking famous figures
- Find, present, and discuss comparable “name-dropping” poems from the Poetry Out Loud website
- Write a “name-dropping” poem themselves, using one or more of the rhetorical moves they have learned

Materials and Resources:

To teach this lesson you will need:

- Access for students to the Poetry Out Loud anthology in its print or on-line versions, preferably both

Activity Description

1. Introduce students to the idea that poems use the names of famous historical figures—politicians, performers, explorers, etc.—as a kind of shorthand. Readers are not just supposed to recognize the names, but also to have associations with those names that are somehow relevant to the poem.

2. Ask students to brainstorm the ideas, values, or events that they *or other people* might associate with the name “Abraham Lincoln.” (Including “other people” is helpful, as students can often imagine someone else having associations that they don’t actually have themselves.) Students might come up with associations like these:

- “Freed the slaves” (this may provoke some argument)

- Civil War, or “Saved the Union”
- Gettysburg Address
- Assassinated, died before his time, before he could bring the country back together
- A self-made man: went from log-cabin to White House
- A sad man, or a melancholy one
- On the penny and the five-dollar bill

3. Hand out copies of the Vachel Lindsay poem “Lincoln” from the Poetry Out Loud website. This poem is a good place to start because it focuses directly on Lincoln, and because it mixes associations that the students might already have with some other ideas they might not have thought of.

Pose questions to your students about what the poet is doing with the figure of the president: for example, you might ask

- Which of their associations with Lincoln does Lindsay call to mind, and where?
- Are there any new, surprising associations or ideas that Lindsay attaches to the figure of the president? (“Imperial” is a word to think about here; also that “weedy stream” and those “ghosts of buffaloes.”)
- How much time does the poem spend on each of its ideas, and what order do they come in?
 - They may focus on the fact that this poem ends with a very familiar association: Lincoln had in him a “Fire that freed the slave.” Make sure that they notice how Lindsay holds off on that idea, and brings it up only after spending much more time on *geographical* associations: Lincoln as coming from the “wilderness,” and “From lonely prairies”; indeed, that fire in him is specifically a “prairie-fire.”
 - Why might these seem so important to the poet? What difference does it make to our sense of Lincoln to add these new associations into the mix?

After talking through “Lincoln,” have students compare and contrast it with one slightly longer poem that invokes the president. Choose either Vachel Lindsay’s other famous poem about the president: “Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight,” or Carl Sandburg’s “Knucks,” which is about buying brass knuckles (hence the title) in Lincoln’s home city of Springfield, Illinois. You might ask many of the same questions for either poem, or do both, if time permits:

- Which of their associations with Lincoln does the poet call to mind in this second poem, and where does that happen?
 - In the Lindsay, the third stanza is particularly rich, containing both physical associations—what Lincoln looked like, in life and on the penny—and geographical ones.
 - In the Sandburg, the first and last stanzas recall the president’s life and death, while the phrase “malice to none,” found in the middle of the poem, calls to mind his [Second Inaugural Address](#).

- Are there any associations students already have that the poet plays with, or changes in surprising ways?
 - In the Lindsay poem, for example, Lincoln is “mourning” for the town he walks through and for the world at large, rather than being mourned for by others after his assassination.
 - The Lindsay poem mentions “black” and “white”—“black terror” and “white peace”—but does it seem to have race in mind? If so, is it being a little racist itself with that dream of “white peace”?
 - The Sandburg poem seems awfully cynical about what has become of Lincoln’s dream of a nation undertaking social reform “with malice toward none, with charity for all.” He changes how we hear those noble words by putting them in this new context.
- Are there any surprising new associations in the poem?
 - Before reading the Lindsay, would they have pictured Lincoln as caring about “peasants fight[ing],” or about “the sins of all the war-lords,” or about “kings” who “murder”? Would they imagine him caring about Europe, or about “the Worker’s Earth”? (It may help to point out that the poem was written during the First World War, and that Lindsay once wrote another poem called “Why I Voted the Socialist Ticket.”)
 - Before reading the Sandburg, would they have connected Lincoln with a world of strikers and strike-breakers, gunmen and policemen? Is Lincoln on anyone’s “side” in this poem?
- Is it fair of the poets to hitch Lincoln to these later causes? If not, why not? What other, contemporary causes could a poet link to Lincoln?

4. Now that students have read two or three poems that use Lincoln in fairly straightforward ways, they are ready to explore a poem that uses the president more obliquely. This will be the model for their own poems—although the impact of reading the direct poems will probably linger in their minds.

Hand out Langston Hughes’s sonnet “Lincoln Theatre,” and have the students brainstorm answers to questions like these:

- What associations with Lincoln does the poem bring up, and where?
- How far *away* from Lincoln does the poem get? Does it move on to themes or ideas that we *don’t* connect with the president? If so, when and where does that happen?
- Does anything we associate with Lincoln come back into the poem by the end?
- Given this mix of material, what difference does it make to the poem that it is set at the “Lincoln Theatre”? Is there an argument implied by setting the poem there? If so, what might it be?
 - There are many good answers to that final question. As long as students take the material from all parts of the poem into account, they can all be good, well-supported responses.

5. To give students an enduring understanding of this lesson in allusion and connotation, choose one of these final projects.

“Name-Drop” Poem Presentation

Working individually or in groups, have your students look for a “name-dropping” poem that speaks to them from the Poetry Out Loud archive.

- They will find a number of relevant poems there, including poems about well-known musicians (John Coltrane, John Lennon, Charles Mingus, Ma Rainey), famous political figures (Martin Luther King, Jr., Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois; Crazy Horse), some artists and poets (William Stieglitz, Allen Ginsberg), and even a long-overlooked scientist the poet believes *should* be more famous (Benjamin Banneker).

Each student or group of students should prepare a brief introduction to the poem (one or two paragraphs) that explains what associations the famous name has or should have for readers and what interesting or surprising use the poem makes of those associations. They should then perform the poem for their classmates, with relevant music in the background or overhead / LCD projector slides of the person as an option.

“Name-Drop” Poem Writing

Now that they’ve read some name-dropping poems, it’s time to get your students writing! Their challenge is to write a poem that follows one of the models they have gone over in class. That is, they can write a poem that

- wants to invoke the “FAMOUS NAME” in a reader; or
- pictures that figure “walking at midnight” through a relevant place, thinking about relevant topics from the contemporary world; or
- takes place in a setting that is explicitly connected to that person, by name, in the poem, even if everything else in the poem is only indirectly related to that famous person’s life or work.

Remind students that they can be subtle, as long as they’re not being secretive. For example, a student “name-dropping” Abraham Lincoln could

- set the poem in some public place named after Lincoln, like a theater, a school, a library, or a park
- quote a bit of one of Lincoln’s famous speeches, but only as something engraved on a building or showing up on a poster
- mention the president’s face on a penny or five-dollar bill
- use the name of a business or product with “Lincoln” in it, like the Lincoln automobile, the children’s toy Lincoln Logs, and so on, in an eye-catching way that gets the reader thinking about the name itself. (Perhaps, like Sandburg or Hughes, the poem will have to use the name more than once to do this.)

In the next class, have students share and discuss their “name-dropping” poems, using the same sorts of questions they used to discuss the original Lincoln poems as a group.

If you’d like a follow-up assignment, have each author reflect in a brief journal entry on how satisfied he or she was with the range of responses his or her poem elicited. Did the name in the poem produce any unexpected associations (or lack of them)? Did any sparks fly when that name was put in an unexpected setting, or linked to unexpected topics or ideas? How might the author want to change his or her poem in order to control the responses more—or set them even freer for the reader?