CONFigURE PROCEEDINGS

College for Continuing Education
Gallaudet University
Mirror Images: ASL and English Poetry as Reflections of a Language and Culture

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"At the foundation of the imaginative use of language is poetry. From the earliest times poems have captured the cries of the human heart, as well as our visions of a perfect society."

(Johnson, 1990, p. x).

Poetry is a reflection of the times in which people live. It is a reflection of our struggles, achievements, experiences, and emotions. It is also language in its "highest form," artistic and abstract, designed for the expression and sharing of our deepest thoughts and feelings.

Poetry has a rich history in America and is an ever-expanding avenue of expression in American Deaf culture. The study of poetry reveals much about the structure of a language and the values of a people. We feel that it is the right of our Deaf and hard of hearing students to have access to this rich form of expression. We also feel that it is the responsibility of educators to expose students to sophisticated language use and profound ideas.

In keeping with this spirit, and after two years of discussing the possibilities, we were afforded the opportunity to team-teach a junior literature/composition class. We set out to design a unit of study that would allow students to explore poetry over a three-month period. We wanted to plan a unit that was both stimulating and enlightening, as any study of an art form should be. Our most important goal was to show respect for and develop understanding and appreciation of both American Sign Language (ASL) and written American poetry.

We agreed to teach one 45-minute period of ASL poetry and one 45-minute period of written American poetry daily. Although we were both excited about the unit, we were also apprehensive. Neither of us had extensive experience with poetry in our own educational backgrounds. Both of us admitted to feeling guilty about the limited role poetry had always played in our teaching. We were also fairly nervous about teaching the poetry unit for three months to our 12 Deaf students without any curriculum guidelines.
Fortunately, team teaching was the ideal approach for this unit. Dee brought to our students her native ASL skills, her extensive knowledge of Deaf Studies, and her experience as a Deaf person studying poetry. Laura brought her native English skills and her knowledge of the structure of poetry written in English. We were careful to keep our message to our students clear: ASL poetry is a linguistically-complex genre that is shaped by the features of a visual language and is rooted in the experiences of the Deaf community; classic American poetry is a linguistically-complex genre that is shaped by the features of a sound-based language and has undergone changes during various literary periods.

Armed with textbooks of American literature, notes from presentations by Clayton Valli (1994), and a stack of ASL poetry videotapes, we began the unit. The unit was structured in the following order: an historical overview of poetry development and literary periods; a study of rhythm and rhyme; a study of refrain; an analysis of special features used by various poets; and an analysis of individual poems to determine how their various features affect their structures, their literal meanings, and their figurative meanings. To the extent possible, written poems were presented in chronological order so that students could see stylistic evolutions. The unit culminated with three activities. The students were asked to (a) explicate an ASL poem and do a signed presentation, (b) explicate an English poem and write an essay, and (c) create an original poem in either ASL or English.

**Historical Overview**

The unit began with an overview of periods of American history and corresponding literary movements. For each movement, we emphasized key historical events, authors’ purposes for writing during that time, famous authors, and typical themes and writing styles during each period. Literary periods included: 1) religious writings of colonists before 1750, 2) political writing during the Revolutionary period, 3) the Romantic period from 1800 to 1840, 4) Transcendentalist writers of the New England Renaissance, 5) political writing during the Civil War and Reconciliation, and 6) the Realism movement from 1865 to 1915 (Thompson, 1994). Students were asked to read and identify poems of each literary period. We felt this type of analysis was crucial in helping students to see writers as real people who use poetry to deal with the times in which they live, just as many teens today use the lyrics of rap music to deal with the stresses of life in the 1990s.

After developing in our students an understanding of the impact of each literary period on the poetry produced during that period, we
shifted our focus to a timeline in American Deaf history and studied events that helped to shape the literary works of ASL poetry. Our timeline began in the year 1816, when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet sailed back to America with Laurent Clerc, and ended in 1998 when we celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Deaf President Now movement. Pivotal events affecting the literary development of Deaf people in America included the 1880 Milan Conference, the presentation of George Veditz’s “The Preservation of the Sign Language,” the ASL translation of “Jabberwocky” by Eric Malzkuhn, the recognition of ASL as a full-fledged language by Dr. William Stokoe, the founding of the National Theatre of the Deaf, and ultimately the emergence of ASL poets during the late 1970s (Gannon, 1981; Padden & Humphries, 1988). Just as the works during each American literary period reflected the times during which they were created, the literary works of Deaf people have reflected the times during which they lived. For instance, the emergence of ASL poets during the 1970s was a direct result of the recognition of ASL as a language in its own right and the liberation of Deaf people following this recognition. Studying about their own history and the works of poets from their own culture helped our students to be more enthusiastic and open in their learning and discussions of written American poetry. The undisputable fact that ASL poems possess all the features commonly found in written poetry (Valli, 1994) and, therefore, command equal reverence and respect as those enjoyed by written American poems, empowered the students to fully appreciate this unit.

Rhythm and Rhyme

The unit continued with a study of poetic features found in written American poetry and ASL poetry. Now things started to get interesting! We first tackled rhythm and rhyme. We began by talking about natural rhythms: heartbeats, tides, and seasons. From this, we began to tap out rhyme patterns on our desks. Although our students were a bit sheepish, they stayed with us at this point. We then began to study metrical patterns in written poetry and to practice scansion (Tucker, 1992). After a few sessions dealing with iambic, spondaic, dactylic, trochaic, and anapestic feet, our students threatened mutiny. For most of them, this was a laborious exercise in dictionary skills. Our aim during this part of the unit had to be very clear. Our goal was that the students would understand the structure of a poem written in English and appreciate why grammatical conventions of prose are systematically violated. Fortunately, George Kannapel and Odeen Rasmussen came to the rescue.
During the 45-minute “ASL period,” the students discovered rhythm to be very much a part of the earliest ASL poetry. We first studied “songs” such as those created by Kannapell and Rasmussen (Padden & Humphries, 1988). Fortunately, the library of videotapes in our Deaf Studies Resource Center yielded old but remarkable footage of a similar song with the “one, two, one-two-three” rhythm. On this tape, Kannapell signed:

Boat, Boat, BoatBoatBoat
Drink, Drink, DrinkDrinkDrink
Fun, Fun, FunFunFun
Enjoy, Enjoy, EnjoyEnjoyEnjoy
(Padden & Humphries, 1988; Supalla, 1994)

Although this particular rhythm enjoyed a period of popularity during the early years of ASL poetry, the only “living” song with this rhythm is found in Gallaudet University’s fight song (Padden & Humphries, 1988).

After watching this videotape, we gleefully signed these poems in unison. For homework, each student had to create a five-line poem in the “one, two, one-two-three” rhythm, which we then videotaped. Simple as the task may have seemed at first, it was not. Students were astonished to find they had to don their creative-thinking caps to compose the lines. However, they rose to the occasion.

During the “American lit period,” students continued to analyze metrical patterns. As a class, we began to look at individual lines and to discuss why traditional English word order is sometimes altered to fit the metrical scheme. Although tedious at first, this exercise gained momentum as students began to understand why words appear in the order they do and began to gain insight as to authors’ craft. Poems analyzed included Anne Bradstreet’s “Upon the Burning of Our House” (Thompson, 1994), Robert Frost’s “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” (Washington Square Press, 1971), and Langston Hughes’ “Dream Variation” (Bennett, 1981). Through the analysis of these poems and many others, students began to see how rhythm has changed through the history of American literature. The older poems tended to be much more structured with more consistent metrical patterns (Mayes, 1987).

Study of metrical patterns led to discussion of stanza structure, which led to the study of rhyme. While our emphasis during the study of metrical patterns in written English was on word-order choices that authors make, our emphasis during the study of rhyme was on word choices. Students analyzed classic American poems for alliteration,
consonance, and end rhyme. To avoid an unnecessary and frustrating focus on diacritical markings in the dictionary, poems were selected in which rhymes were primarily based on easily-detected spelling patterns.

Analysis of end rhyme led to study of stanza structure. Again, the earlier the literary period, the more consistent and patterned the structure. Students noted fixed rhyme patterns, such as couplets and quatrains, in poems by authors such as Lewis Carroll, selected because he appeared on the American Deaf history timeline as the author of “Jabberwocky”; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a New England poet; and Robert Frost, a modern poet who remained true to traditional form (Thompson, 1994). Again, the emphasis was on understanding and appreciation.

A dramatic result occurred in this part of the unit when we held up a copy of Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare. After exercises in which our students attempted to write lines of poetry to fit metrical patterns, they were astounded to learn that Shakespeare’s plays are written in pages and pages of iambic pentameter (Rygiel, 1992). Student commentary about poetry being “hard” or “strange” began to be replaced with comments about author care and skill.

Study of ASL poetry also continued as we sought to detect different rhythms in the more recent ASL poems. Students viewed videotapes of Ella Mae Lentz’s “Travels with Malz: The Next Generation” (The Treasure, 1995) and Valli’s “Hands” (Poetry in Motion, 1990). In the first poem, Lentz told of the student-astronauts sitting wide-eyed and spellbound as the masterful storyteller Malzkuhn created the rhythm of the soft sway of the flying spaceship. This rhythm was obvious to our students. They also noted, however, that this particular rhythm was not continuous but rather appeared sporadically throughout the poem.

An analysis of “Hands” revealed to our students how Valli incorporated rhythm—the grammatical repetition of topicalization, non-manual markers, and body movements—into his short but dense poem. However, debate soon ensued as to whether these features were in fact rhythm or rhyme. In English, the distinction is an easy one to make—rhythm refers to patterns at the syllabic level while rhyme refers to patterns at the phonologic level. But what is the difference between rhythm and rhyme in ASL? Class consensus was reached that we needed the assistance of an expert poet or linguist to help us understand the distinction.

Coming up with a definitive description of rhythm in ASL poetry presented a challenge we were willing to forego when we shifted to the
study of rhymes. An exciting world of possibilities opened up when we defined an ASL rhyme as anything that is visually repeated in an ASL poem. It presented a wholly new way of viewing the poetry, and the students plunged into it with delight and ardor. We began by studying the four parameters of ASL signs: handshape, movement, location, and palm orientation (Baker-Shenk & Cokely, 1980). The students had to come up with 10 signs for each parameter and jot down their English glosses. While the assignment seemed relatively easy at first, the students struggled with the fourth parameter, palm orientation. The purpose was for the students to develop skills in recognizing repetitions of similar parameters in ASL poems. From there we re-examined the ASL poems previously studied for rhymes using these parameters. Students were also introduced to ASL non-manual grammatical markers and use of space. With a list of rhymes employed in existing ASL poems (studied and identified by Valli for his doctoral dissertation) and the ASL poems we glossed, the students identified and documented rhymes and shared their discoveries with each other. It was fascinating to see how aptly the native ASL signers detected these patterns.

For example, students again reviewed the poem “Hands” by Valli. For classroom purposes, we glossed the poem as follows:

HANDS WHAT
SNOW DRIZZLE
FLOWERS BLOSSOM
GRASS SWAY
TREE LEAF-FALL
WHOLE EXPRESS

Our students identified the following rhymes: the number of signs in each “line,” the use of the “5” handshape (as in HANDS, WHAT, SNOW, DRIZZLE), the alternating use of raised eyebrows (topicalization) and puckered lips, and the downward movement for the second sign in each line.

Students then further analyzed and studied the work of such poets as Debbie Rennie, Ella Mae Lentz, and Patrick Graybill. The Poetry in Motion series (1990) proved invaluable during this work. In this series, the poets give brief narratives to introduce selected poems. Our students gained insight as to the intentions and creative processes of the poets. Poems analyzed by our students included: “Veal Boycott” and “Black Hole; Color ASL” by Rennie (Poetry in Motion, 1990); “The Cow and Rooster” (Valli, 1994), “Dandelions,” “Season’s Greetings,” and “Pawns” by Valli (Poetry in Motion, 1990); “The Baseball Game,” “Eye Music,” “The Dogs,” “The Door,” and “The
Treasure" by Lentz (The Treasure, 1995); and "Liberation" and "Reflection" by Graybill (Poetry in Motion, 1990).

It was during the discussions of "Veal Boycott" by Rennie that the students began to make deeper connections between the structure of a poem and its tone and meaning. Upon first viewing, our students expressed confusion about the poem. None of them were able to identify the overall structure and rhyme scheme. After repeated viewings, a student jumped out of his chair signing, "I understand!" With the hint, "C," one more viewing was all it took for the structure of the poem to become clear to the class. In this poem, the poet deftly chooses signs to weave her powerful message about the needless slaughter of calves: "CALF" is spelled out in each of the three signed stanzas. The first line in the first stanza, for example, is signed with the "C" handshape, and the next line is signed with "A," and so on. Soon the students were jumping with disbelief at the skill of the poet and the impact of the message. Other rhymes discussed included the use of "F" in the last line of each stanza to mean "eyes," the number of signs in each stanza—four, and the two major spatial locations.

Our real breakthrough as a class came, however, when we began to discuss the message of this poem. We noted that there is a dramatic shift in tone and mood in each stanza of "Veal Boycott." This led our students to an interest in examining the meaning of each stanza in a variety of poems. Eventually, this led to a study of refrain in both ASL and written American poems.

Refrain

The unit took a new turn as we became interested in poems with a refrain, especially those in which the repeated word or line took on a different shade of meaning with each stanza. For written American literature, our favorite example was "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe (Thompson, 1994). With each repetition of the word "Nevermore," the reader gains a deeper understanding of the state of mind of the writer. ASL poems that we studied included Lentz's "The Treasure," in which two refrains are identifiable. The first refrain occurs as the poet "digs up" various features of ASL. The next refrain occurs as the poet makes repeated attempts to call attention to the "treasure" of ASL. Each repetition of the refrain describes actions by various members of the community that stifle the find. The audience's understanding of the metaphor deepens with each repetition.

Our students were also fascinated by Valli's "Season's Greetings," a poem about the homeless. Although Valli employs other poetic features that also drive home the message, the refrain merits special
consideration. Refrains of “his heart warms when he sees...” and “feeling satisfied” (our loose English translations) close each stanza in the poem. Every time the homeless person discovers a small treasure, whether in the form of a coin, a used cigarette, or food in the trash can, his heart is warmed and he is contented. However, after the fourth discovery, warmth from a street grate, the last stanza is left open without the final “feeling satisfied” refrain. This compels the viewers to pause and contemplate the meaning of the omission. When the class realized the poet’s intended meaning, it left them stunned. They appreciated the powerful role that a refrain can play in an ASL poem.

Other ASL poems we analyzed for refrain included Lentz’s “The Baseball Game” and Valli’s “Pawns.” For a clever and powerful example of how a refrain can change in meaning from the beginning of a poem to the end, we looked to Rennie’s “Missing Children” (Poetry in Motion, 1990).

**Literal and Figurative Meaning**

A word now needs to be said about the content of the poems we chose. Many of the poems, both signed in ASL and written in English, use literary devices to represent their figurative meanings. As we studied each poem throughout the unit, we set aside time for in-depth discussions of the meaning and tone of the poem and the choices that the poet made to enhance the message. Students discussed the use of metaphor, simile, symbol, and specific ASL sign or English word choice.

These discussions are some of our most cherished memories in teaching this unit. In the context of analyzing a poet’s message, we were able to reflect on several themes. An analysis of “O Captain! My Captain!” written by Walt Whitman (Bennett, 1981) allowed us to discuss poetry composed in response to major historical events in American history. Whitman’s use of the metaphorical death of a ship captain to express his emotions about the death of President Lincoln was a powerful example of figurative meaning. Frost’s “A Road Not Taken” (Washington Square Press, 1971) led to a discussion of critical life choices. We were able to talk candidly about such topics as grades, drug use, sex, and friend and family relationships.

But our most enlightening lessons took place during discussions of Deaf poets and their themes. We previewed ASL poems by Lentz, Valli, Graybill, and Rennie and selected those that fell into two categories: poems that deal with the theme of ASL as a language and poems that deal with issues within the Deaf community. We felt that both merited in-depth study and discussion. The foremost task in our
minds was to impart to our students a sense of their own community's literary history now in the making. We wanted them to appreciate the fact that many of the ASL poems were created because of the experiences and struggles of the Deaf poets whose times were not too distant from our students' own lives. Empowered with information about the history of ASL oppression, our students came to understand that Deaf poets have used their newly validated art form to grapple with issues of importance to Deaf individuals and the Deaf community. Most of these themes remain immediate today.

The poems dealing with the theme of ASL recognition that we selected were Valli's "Hands," Rennie's "Black Hole: Color ASL," Lentz's "The Treasure," and Graybill's "Liberation." The first three use metaphors to enhance their messages. Valli's "Hands" uses a figurative description of the seasons to declare that ASL can be used to express anything in the world. In six simple lines, and using only one handshape, Valli challenges us to see that ASL is just as eloquent a language as any other and to acknowledge its beauty and complexity. Rennie in her "Black Hole: Color ASL" uses paint as a metaphor as she takes us through her discovery of the vibrancy of ASL and her determination to fully embrace it, thus freeing herself from the dark restraints of the American mainstream society. Lentz in "The Treasure" tells of a priceless and recently unburied treasure, a metaphor for ASL. And then, faced with skeptics in the Deaf community who doubt its authenticity as a language, she entrusts to the viewers the honorable responsibility to cherish it as such: a true treasure. The last of the poems we selected was "Liberation" by Graybill. In this piece, the poet describes his efforts to assert himself as an ASL user and demand equal respect for his language. The students related on a profound level to this theme and shared with each other their experiences, both negative and positive, with ASL and English.

The poems we selected that deal with issues within the Deaf community were Valli's "Dandelions" and "Pawns," and Lentz's "The Door" and "The Dogs." "Dandelions" exemplifies the Deaf community's resolve to stake out for itself a respected place in American mainstream society, a struggle that still plays a role in Deaf people's lives today. The dandelions represent the resiliency of Deaf people. Similarly, Lentz, in "The Door," cautions the Deaf community not to fall prey to well-meaning but ignorant people who attempt to take ASL and thus the Deaf identity away from Deaf people. It also emphasizes the importance of the Deaf community uniting to fight together, thus preventing dilution of the values and strength of the community. The door serves as a powerful symbol of both the oppres-
sion and the unity of Deaf people. In “Pawns,” Valli deals with an issue that is within the community. It concerns the blatant disregard for the cries for help from the “pawns,” Deaf people suffering from AIDS. The poet attempts to strike a chord in the hearts of the “kings and queens” of the Deaf community to help those who are Deaf like themselves by blending powerful images of a chess board, flags, and the AIDS quilt. In a similar vein, “The Dogs” brings to surface the petty disagreements and lack of respect between factions of the Deaf community, the “Dobermans” and the “Mutts.” Although some of these issues were familiar to our students within the context of the residential school, others were broader community and political concerns that were eye-openers for them.

**Special Features**

With several weeks of studying the basic components of poetry behind us, and with final examination week looming, we took a week to examine some creative techniques that poets use. In written American poetry, we discussed the experimentation by Modernist poets in the early 1900s. We were especially interested in the work of e. e. cummings, a poet who creatively used capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and the visual appearance of his poems to reinforce meaning (Thompson, 1994). For in-depth study, we chose “old age sticks”:

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old age sticks
up Keep
Off
signs)&
youth yanks them
down(old
age
cries No

Tres)&(pas)
Youth laughs
(sing
old age

scolds Forbid
den Stop
Must
n’t Don’t
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Our students discussed how cummings' use of mechanics reinforces the tension and conflict in the theme. In ASL poetry, we focused on two features: transformed signs and simultaneous signs. For classroom purposes, we defined transformed signs as those in which the poet begins with one sign, then alters the movement and/or location to form another sign with the same handshape, all in one continuous motion. We examined the transformed signs found in Valli's “Pawns;” Lentz's “The Treasure,” “The Dogs,” and “The Door;” and Rennie’s “Black Hole: Color ASL.” These signs are something to behold.

In one example, “The Treasure,” by Lentz, shows a fascinating and clever transformation when the poet blends the classifier describing “falling dirt” into the sign for “dejection.” She masterfully ends the metamorphosis with the “oppression” sign. In this way, the poet dramatically describes her feelings as the community rebuffs her attempts to share the treasure of ASL and tries to rebury her precious find. Also, in “Black Hole: Color ASL,” Rennie uses the transformation of a “bent 5” handshape as her sign for “splattering paint” becomes the sign for “fluent signing in ASL.” This powerful transformation symbolizes how Rennie’s experimentation with “color”—ASL—leads her to rejoice in her new-found fluency and eloquence.

Simultaneous signs were defined as two different signs signed at the same time. Several examples of this particular feature are seen in Graybill’s “Reflection.” One example occurs when the poet describes the plummeting rocket Challenger with his left hand and simultaneously depicts his heart sinking with his right hand. Several other examples occur as Graybill creates a mirror effect, comparing the space shuttle Challenger disaster with the assassination of President Kennedy: historical events with one hand and his emotional reactions with his other. It is only the versatility of sign language that makes this special and unique feature possible.

Culminating Projects

The culminating projects were threefold: (a) to choose an ASL poem and give a class presentation analyzing its features, (b) to choose
a poem written in English and write an explication essay, and (c) to create a poem either in ASL or English.

For the ASL poetry presentations, students were asked to choose a poem and a partner. They prepared individual speeches that included biographical information about the poets, summaries of the poems, analyses of rhythm, rhyme, and special features, and complete explanations of figurative meanings. They were also required to design posters and include personal responses. These presentations were scored according to a teacher-designed rubric.

For the essay, we asked the students to choose a famous poem from American literature. They then chose a partner, analyzed the poem, and wrote about its rhythm, rhyme, stanza structure, literal meaning, figurative meaning, historical period, and any special features. The students were also required to include biographical information about the poet and personal responses. Again, their essays were scored with a teacher-designed rubric.

Perhaps the most interesting of the projects was the creation of the students’ own poetry. They had to create an original poem, either in English or in ASL, and incorporate as many elements as they could. They were given a sheet with points for English poetry features and points for ASL poetry features. For example, the use of a rhyme scheme in a written poem would earn 3 points. A transformed sign used in an ASL poem would earn 2 points. The total number of points earned determined their grades. We held a series of class sessions for student and teacher feedback on first drafts. These helped the students tremendously and spurred them to be more ambitious and creative. They also received help with their clarity and structure. We enjoyed this collaborative process immensely. Finally, the day came for the unveiling of their work. It was amazing and gratifying to see how the students incorporated class lessons and the models of famous poets into their own poetry.

The last activity of the unit was a much-anticipated class visit from the ASL poet Ella Mae Lentz who graciously visited to allow the students to show off and discuss their work, as well as to ask questions.

Conclusion

As all good things must, the trimester had to end. As part of their final examination, students were asked to reflect on the unit. One wrote, “Before I learned about poetry, I must admit, I didn’t know much about it. After learning, I felt so educated and smart. It was the greatest feeling.” Another wrote, “Although I am not the romantic
type, I learned a lot because poetry helped me understand the literal and figurative meaning of things better.” One of the highest compliments we received as teachers was when another student wrote, “I appreciate ASL poems a lot more, and it makes me proud of our people.”
References


