

**Reading like a Tourist and Other Activities:
Billy Collins in the AP Classroom**
by Danell Jones

"Poetry is my cheap means of transportation. By the end of the poem the reader should be in a different place from where he started. I would like him to be slightly disoriented at the end, like I drove him outside of town at night and dropped him off in a cornfield."

<http://www.bigsnap.com/g-nyt01.html>

In a 2001 interview at the Poetry Center in Chicago, poet Billy Collins used a travel metaphor to describe his idea of the experience of reading poetry. He told Ira Glass that he hoped his poetry "might take [the reader] on an imaginative journey." (www.poetrycenter.org/involved/news/billyandira.html)

Using Collins's idea of a poem as a "bit of imaginative travel," I've put together some activities for AP teachers to use in their classrooms. Please feel free to adapt these materials to the needs of your students. I would ask you to keep only one thing in mind as you go with your students on this imaginative journey: one of the essential goals of a tourist is to have a good time.

READING LIKE A TOURIST

First Journeys

Billy Collins poems to explore in this section include:

"Canada"
"Scotland"
"An Afternoon with Irish Cows"
"Budapest"

Try introducing students to Billy Collins's work by reading poems whose titles seem to be about traveling to other countries: "Canada," "Scotland," "An Afternoon with Irish Cows," and "Budapest." You might begin with "Canada," which transports the reader to another country and includes details of place as it explores questions of memory and identity. As they read through these poems, however, students will soon realize that these are not travelogues full of charming details about the landscape as they might have expected. With each poem, the idea of place becomes less literal and more figurative, less travelogue and more poetry. Ask your students to approach each poem as a tourist even if the journey seems odd or unexpected.

The questions below can serve as a kind of travel guide. Not all of them will apply to every poem, so invite students to figure out which questions are fitting for which poems. Once they've worked through the four poems mentioned earlier, students will begin to see that they can use this idea of "reading like a tourist" for other Billy Collins poems and for a lot of other poetry as well.

Questions for Tourists

1. Where are we going? Whom will we visit?
2. Who seems to be taking this trip with us? What is this person like? Does our impression change during the journey?
3. What sights do we see on our trip?
4. Whom do we meet along the way? Do we like these people? What do the people seem to spend their time doing? Do we meet animals? What are they doing? Do we like them?
5. Along our journey, do we travel in time? What time do you suppose we've come to?
6. What is the climate like? Does the weather change during our journey or does it stay the same throughout?
7. Do we need special clothes? What kind? Are they comfortable?
8. Where do we go next?
9. Are there unfamiliar words we need to translate during this trip?
10. Where do we arrive at the end? Have we moved? Arrived at a new place? Returned home?

Activities for Tourists

1. If you were charting out this journey on a map, what would it look like? Where do we begin? Where do we end?
2. If you were writing a postcard home, how would you describe this journey?
3. If you were creating a travel poster for this journey, what images would it include? What words?

Reading like a Tourist: Billy Collins's "Snow Day"

The dialogue below provides an example showing how "Questions a Tourist Might Ask" could be used to explore a poem. The responses provided are only illustrations of possible answers. Your students' answers will reflect their own imaginative journeys through Collins's poem. Although you may want to augment questions or make your own observations about the poem, I would encourage you to function as much as possible as a guide whose main role is less to point out important sights and more to guide your students back to the travel metaphor when they've wandered astray.

After reading the title, where do you think we are going? What sort of trip do you think this will be? Does it sound fun?

I'm expecting to visit someplace very cold and very snowy. So snowy that all the schools will be closed.

After reading the first stanza, where do we seem to be going?

It's funny, but in a way, we don't know where we are going. It has snowed so much "the landscape vanished." I'm not sure we are going anywhere; we are just looking out the window.

What sights do we see?

From the window, we can see lots of places around town, especially public buildings: government buildings, schools and libraries, even the post office. We can no longer see train tracks, and we can't see small things, like mice, that might be out there. (I wonder why he mentions the mouse.) The snow has made everything still and blank.

Where will we go next?

Not right now, but "in a while," we'll go outside. Or at least we think we might.

Do we need special clothes?

We definitely need boots.

Whom do we meet on our way or who goes with us?

The dog goes! I love the dog. He "will porpoise" through the drifts. It sounds like he's a sea creature. The snow is so deep it's like being under water. I like this dog. He is having fun in the snow. And the speaker seems to be having fun, too. He plays with the dog by shaking the tree branch, "sending a cold shower down on us both." They seem to be enjoying themselves, enjoying the snow.

Do we travel in time?

Actually, we do. The trip out into the snow with the dog was just an imaginary trip. A trip in the future. One that might or might not happen.

Where do we arrive next? What is the next place like? Is it fun?

Actually, we haven't really moved: we're still at home. But it seems good. The speaker seems content, a "willing prisoner." This is a comfortable spot, a place to make tea and

listen to the news on the radio. Nothing seems to be too pressing or urgent. He doesn't seem to have to go to work or anywhere else. Everything is closed because of the snow.

Whom do we meet here?

We don't really meet anyone, literally, but we do hear about the schools closed because of the snow. The speaker lists all of their names, so they seem sort of like characters we might meet or places we might see. The names are funny. "Ding-Dong School," "Hi-Ho Nursery," "Peas-and-Carrots Day School." I wonder if these are real names or if he made them up. I notice that they are places for little kids by their names and by the way he says, "clap your hands" (as if he were a teacher in one of them) when he announces the "Peanuts Play School." He calls the schools "nests," which makes me think that the children are very warm and safe inside.

What do the people seem to be doing?

The speaker imagines them drawing and practicing their letters inside and then putting on their "miniature jackets" (this makes them sound like dolls or playthings themselves) and going out to the playground where they are "darting" and "climbing" and "sliding." Even though he doesn't name the equipment, I can see the kids climbing the jungle gym and sliding down the slide.

But, at the very end, I notice the speaker focuses on three girls near the fence who capture his attention. We're focusing on another place, a microcosm of the schoolyard.

Do we like the people here? What do they seem to be doing?

I'm not sure if we like the girls near the fence. The speaker is "listening hard," as if he is having trouble hearing what they are saying. They must be whispering. He says they're "plotting" and that "riot is afoot." This activity seems different from the rest of the schoolyard. Here the people are "plotting" rather than "darting." Talking, instead of playing. The talk of riots and bringing down a small queen sounds a little dangerous or a little mean. I think the small queen must be another girl in their class who thinks she should be in charge, perhaps, or who thinks she's better than they are. Or perhaps they think they are better than she is.

Where have we arrived at the end? What kind of place is this? How does it compare to the place where we began?

Although we haven't moved literally from our room, it feels like we've moved very far imaginatively. The snow is still here, and we have moved imaginatively outside and to a local schoolyard. The feeling of surrender at the beginning (the white flag waving) has changed to a feeling of tension by the end. The girls in the yard are a little mean, a bit cruel, and they certainly are intent on having their way -- even if it means a riot. (Or is this all in the speaker's imagination?) At least from the speaker's point of view, this corner of the schoolyard seems very different from the rest of the world on this snow day. All the government offices and public services are closed. The speaker is quiet and alone with nothing to do but imagine a walk or have a cup of tea. By contrast, the girls' world seems active and intense. They aren't about to surrender.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Billy Collins and Guy Noir

1. Read William Carlos Williams's "This Is Just to Say."
Earlier in your poetry unit, you will probably have read William Carlos Williams's famous poem "This Is Just to Say."
<http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmID=1380>. (For two very brief but interesting observations about this poem from Stephen Matterson and Marjorie Perloff look at http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/williams/just.htm.) If you haven't read it with your class, try to introduce it into your discussions a week or two before you read Collins. It will be important for students to have it in their repertoire when they get to this activity.
2. Have students write their own "This Is Just to Say" poems. One way to do this is to ask students to begin their poem with the words "This is just to say," and then to follow Williams's form by using the same number of words per line and the same stanza breaks.
3. Listen to the *Prairie Home Companion* "Guy Noir" recording in which Guy Noir collaborates with the Poet Laureate Billy Collins to stop a terrible poet (William Williams) from spreading awful poetry around the world.

Guy Noir script and audio link:

<http://www.prairiehome.org/performances/20021130/noir.shtml>

4. After listening to Guy Noir, invite students to
 - a. Read one or two parodies of "This Is Just to Say."
 - i. Ed Dorn's "the hazards of a later era: variation on a theme"
<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/dorn-plums-parody.html>
 - ii. Kenneth Koch's "Variation on a Theme by William Carlos Williams"
http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/iacd_99F/intro_lit/LitLab/L1207.htm#p2
 - b. Invite students to write their own parodies of "This Is Just to Say."

Other Than Analyzing

In an interview for the College Board in 2003, Billy Collins talked about the disadvantages of focusing only on analysis when teaching poetry. "The drawback in teaching features of poetry," he explained, "is that it's like dismantling a car -- putting the parts out on the floor, so you can identify the carburetor and the distributor, what's a simile and metaphor, but you can't put the key in the ignition and make the car go." (2003-2004 AP English Literature and Composition Workshop Packet: Special Topic: Reading Poetry)

He suggested three things teachers could do with students that would give them a different experience of poetry. Perhaps you might try one with your students. Invite your students to:

- Memorize a poem

- Write a poem out in long hand
- Recite a poem aloud

Because each activity requires students to slow down and register every word, each one invites closer attention to the language of the poem.

A variation:

To increase student attention to particular words, you might divide your class into groups and ask them to read "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House."

Tell your students that they are famous actors who will be reciting this poem at the Academy Awards. Begin by having them focus on a single stanza -- stanza two could be especially fruitful. In each group, have students decide what words to stress, where to include pauses, what tone to use. Encourage them to approach the poem as actors preparing for a performance.

Then, have a member of each group perform the stanza. Let the class decide -- by applause or show of hands or secret ballot -- which performance was the best. Ask students to explain what they liked about each performance and how the readers made the poem come to life through their use of stress, intonation, pause, and so forth.

POETRY WEB GUIDE: BILLY COLLINS

Big Snap <http://www.bignap.com/poet.html>

This official Billy Collins Web site contains information about Collins, links to interviews and articles, a complete poem list, and cover images of all of Collins's books. You can listen to poems online or sign up to be on the mailing list for news and updates. A rich site for teachers.

Poetry 180 <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>

As Poet Laureate, Collins developed the idea of "Poetry 180" to encourage students to listen to poetry on a daily basis. Collins explains that "Poetry 180 is designed to make it easy for students to hear or read a poem each day of the 180 days of the school year. I have selected the poems you will find here with high school students in mind. They are intended to be listened to, and I suggest that all members of the school community be included as readers. A great time for the readings would be following the end of daily announcements over the public address system."

The poems on the Web site are also available as a book: *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*, selected and with an introduction by Billy Collins. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2003.

Twenty Actions

<http://www.heinemann.com/shared/onlineresources/0506/lesson6.pdf>

This is a complete lesson plan excerpted from Nancie Atwell's book *Lessons That Change Writers*. It is based on a writing assignment Billy Collins uses with his students in which he asks them to list 20 actions they took the day before. Atwell asks her students to list 20 actions of their own and to use those actions as a launching pad for poetry. The lesson plan provides plenty of examples, including sample poems written by her students and herself.

Academy of American Poets: Billy Collins

<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7C000C040D0D>

This page includes a short biography of the poet and plenty of links to other Collins material on the Web. There is also an audio link to "Fishing on the Susquehanna in July."

Contemporary Poetry: Billy Collins

<http://www.contemporarypoetry.com/dialect/biographies/collins.html>

This site offers a brief biography and links to Collins reading "Candle Hat," "Consolation," "Forgetfulness," "Japan," "Marginalia," "Nostalgia," and "Thesaurus." It includes the text of each poem.

The Poetry Center of Chicago

<http://www.poetrycenter.org/involved/news/billyandira.html>

Ira Glass interviews Billy Collins, November 2001.

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