NATIONAL ENDOWMENT
FOR THE HUMANITIES

SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE

Summer Seminars for School Teachers
Institution: Harvard University

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DIVISION OF EDUCATION
PROGRAMS

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National Endowment for the Humanities
Division of Education Programs

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

This sample of the narrative portion from a grant is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with staff members in the NEH Division of Education Programs well before a grant deadline. This sample proposal does not include a budget, letters of commitment, résumés, or evaluations.

Project Title: *Poetry as a Form of Life, Life as a Form of Poetry*

Institution: Harvard University

Project Director: Helen Vendler

Grant Program: Summer Seminars for School Teachers

Grant Proposal to the NEH
Helen Vendler, Project Director
William J. Holinger, Project Manager
Harvard Summer School
July 7-25, 2008

Poetry as a Form of Life, Life as a Form of Poetry

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Poetry as a Form of Life, Life as a Form of Poetry

(Proposed) Summer Seminar for High School Teachers, July 7-25, 2008

Helen Vendler, Harvard University

Intellectual Rationale

Poetry is the oldest form of literature, found in all cultures and in all ages. Because it originated as an oral art, we have no record of its beginnings, but we do know (from prehistoric cave-paintings and prehistoric architecture) that our ancestors had a comprehensive and subtle aesthetic sense. We presume that with the development of language, that aesthetic sense expressed itself in chant, song, and spoken poetry. All high-school teachers of literature must include units on poetry each year, and our aim in the seminar is to deepen and enlarge our participants' sense of how poetry might be discussed. One of our aims will be to see both how poetry meditates on life, and why it has to have pattern in order to accomplish its task of reflecting life. The creation of patterns of life (in ritual, in social organization, in self-fulfillment) means that we are all makers, and that the patterns of life find themselves mirrored in the patterns of art. Our aim here is to distinguish the patterns chiefly proper to poetry (which are mainly concentric—A.R. Ammons spoke of "the ripples round the ripple-stone") from those most proper to narrative (with its linear forward-going) and those essential to drama (the clash of antagonisms). When teachers grasp the distinctions among genres, they are more likely to teach poetry with understanding, knowing that although it may have a plot, and contain antagonisms, these are not the principal determinants of its inner evolution and structure. Teachers, for the most part, have least training in the lyric genre. (Novels, movies, television, and human storytelling have trained them in fiction and drama.) Yet poetry encompasses the most precise use of language, and is--with its concentration and individuality of style--a daring vehicle of

imagination. Poetry has been part of our intellectual legacy since Homer, and part of the legacy of English since Chaucer. The English language, rich from its origins in Greek and Latin, Anglo-Saxon and French, has produced a poetry that is unequalled in force and beauty. Many students, and some teachers, however, remain intimidated by traditional poetry because they have had less experience of it and its symbols in their own intellectual training. They often have not experienced its relation with its sister arts of painting (with which it shares representational aims) and music (with which it shares a temporally evolving form).

The specific readings of lyric poetry in the Seminar will range from the Shakespearean sonnet to contemporary American poetry, with the emphasis on the persistence, in modern poetry, of the perennial genres (ballad, elegy, meditative poetry) and patterns (formal verse, free verse, internal evolution and architectonics) inherited from pre-20th-century authors. Because the originality of a poem cannot be gauged except by knowing the patterns from which it has chosen to diverge, no study of contemporary poetry can be intellectually sound that is not informed by earlier poetic invention.

Project Content and Implementation

Readings will be drawn from Helen Vendler's *Poems, Poets, Poetry* (Bedford Books), which is an introduction to poetry (and also contains an anthology and appendices on poetic forms and speech-acts). This will be supplemented by the Norton Critical Edition of Walt Whitman's poetry, which participants will be looking into throughout the first two weeks in preparation for the third week, which is mostly devoted to Whitman.

The plan of study will be as follows. We will meet five days a week in the afternoon (2:00-5:00) with, preceding the class, a group lunch, where (we trust) more free-wheeling literary talk can take place. Each day will include some space during the three-hour discussion for

teachers to present issues or poems that they would like to discuss. In addition, participants will write, for each meeting, brief notes on matters that arose in their minds as they prepared the reading for the day, and their comments and questions will jump-start the discussion. Because seminar participants will be reading, and writing informally, every day, separate projects are not required (though participants may elect to complete an individual project and earn academic credit: see the last paragraph of this narrative.) The examples given in the following schedule are typical of the sort of poems we will hope to discuss.

Week I, day by day

Sunday, July 6, 2008. Arrival. Check-in. Reception.

Monday, July 7. The Seminar will open with a study of a group of poems (arranged by life-stages from infancy to age) as representations of life. What aspects are singled out? What angle of vision toward them is revealed? What voice speaks the poem? What conclusions are drawn? On the same day we will take up a second study of exactly the *same* poems, but now in light of the questions, What patternings occur here? Why might the author pattern the poem this way? Does the patterning evolve? And finally, How does this patterning match the life-moment the poem has been at pains to convey? For example, we might consider Whitman's short poem, "A Noiseless Patient Spider," seeing, the first time through, that it is a poem of loneliness, that the poet finds, in contemplating the way the spider tirelessly "launch'd forth filament, filament, filament," an emblem of his own soul flinging abroad its "gossamer thread" in search of connection. The second time round, we would look at the way Whitman has patterned his poem, in one sense, to make the spider "match" his soul: to each is given a five-line stanza of its own, spider first, soul second. Yet the more we inquire into the patterning, the more we see divergences: the spider is described in the third person ("it") while the soul is addressed directly

("And you O my soul where you stand"). As the poet keeps drawing parallels, we see how the soul differs: while the spider stands on solid ground ("a little promontory"), the soul stands "in measureless oceans of space"; while the spider's actions are material ones (launching, unreeling, speeding the filaments of the web), the soul's actions operate in a less definite way ("musing, venturing, seeking"); that the spider has no other spider in view as the object of its filaments, but that the poet is "seeking the spheres to connect them," hoping to make "human" stratagems (a "bridge," an "anchor") to attach his "gossamer thread" that he can merely fling toward an unknowable "somewhere"; that while the spider's actions are seen as completed, in the past tense, the soul's actions, beginning in the present, cannot find present resolution, but looks toward an uncertain future: "Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold, / Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul." We would ask why the poet employs these patterns (third person versus second person, past versus future, ground versus "oceans," etc.), and hope to understand better both Whitman as observer and Whitman as yearner. Whitman's pattern of reprise here, in which the soul "redoes" the story of the spider, replicates the wish that nature should yield symbols—but how far are nature's symbols equal to the inner life of a human being?

Tuesday, July 8. We will consider some of the more or less "inflexible" poem-patterns: the ballad ("Ancient Mariner"), the sonnet (Shakespeare), blank verse (Wordsworth), and take up the question of why an author might choose to write in such a form rather than in another. After seeing the classic patterning (three alternating-rhyme quatrains and a couplet) of, say, Shakespeare's sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day"), we might look at the equally classic "Italian" patterning (an embraced-rhyme octave plus a sestet) in Sidney's sonnet "With how sad steps, Oh Moon, thou climb'st the skies," asking what is lost in forsaking the

four-part Shakespearean sonnet for the two-part Italian form, and what is gained? We might then go on to Rich's sonnet (from "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law") "A thinking woman sleeps with monsters"; Rich keeps to fourteen lines, but divides them 7 + 7 (creating new proportions) and does not rhyme. We would ask how a division into two equal stanzas changes the "feel" of a sonnet, and why one senses, from its internal structure, that a poem is a "sonnet" even when unrhymed (as in Keats's "O thou whose face has felt the winter wind").

Wednesday, July 9. At the center of today's discussion will be the nature of the speaker of the poem. We will consider gender and the speaker, class and the speaker, and race and the speaker, and we will look at the non-gendered, the gendered, and the cross-gendered poem, as well as the poem employing a non-gendered, non-human speaker. Poems discussed will include Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, "That time of year thou may'st in me behold"; Marvell, "The Garden"; Dickinson, "A narrow fellow in the grass"; Merrill, "Christmas Tree"; Hardy, "The Ruined Maid" (class and the speaker); and Cullen, "Heritage" (race and the speaker).

Thursday, July 10. We will consider some of the flexible "inner forms" of a given lyric and how they relate to its beginning and end: the poem as crisis, contest, vortex, dialogue, hierarchy, etc. We will look at poems from the anthology as well as some contributed by participants for discussion of how the poem evolves. For example, we might consider Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," in which the poet confronts the crisis of old age. The poem is composed throughout its four stanzas (each preceded by a Roman numeral) in a single external form, *ottava rima* (*abababcc*). The external form proposes its own questions: why put a Roman numeral in front of each eight lines? Does Yeats follow or contradict, in his syntax, the stanza's rhyme-division into 6 + 2, and why? And then we must come to an adequate description of the internal form of the poem as it evolves through its four stanzas. We notice that the rhymes at the end of

stanza two (“come / Byzantium”) are the same—but reversed—at the end of stanza four (“Byzantium / come”). This tells us that we are to think of the poem as divided into two symmetrical parts, and that we will need to analyze their relation to each other. When we look into the four stanzas, we notice that each focuses on a different place: The country of the young, left behind; Byzantium and its monuments; a cathedral with mosaics representing sages in heaven; and the Emperor’s palace (the movement from place to place explaining the pauses imposed by the Roman numerals). This is a mysterious evolution: why does the poem “do” these places in this order? How would the poem be different if it ended in the cathedral? How does the second half “reverse” the first? Or, we might look at Plath’s “inexplicable” poem, “Daddy”—sixteen stanzas long, repetitive, reductive (as one might first say)—and ask how Plath manages both its steady-state aspects (the persistent rhyming throughout with “you” and “du”) and its evolution (through successive metaphors—of her relation to her father—which steadily mount in hyperbole, until by the end he is a vampire murdered by the “villagers”). Behind such a succession of metaphors lie the “usual” formulations of the relation of child to parent, each of which is blasphemously contradicted in turn by Plath: it is important to supply the “good” usual metaphors in order to understand their black obverse in the poem. (Close the day with an evaluation.)

Friday, July 11. We will consider radical experimentation in poetic form: parallel dialogues (e.g. Rita Dove’s “Thomas and Beulah,” depicting two sides of a marriage, with each partner pursuing a single monologue, and a startling absence of interaction between them); pursuing two poems within a single one (e.g. Stevens’s “The Hermitage at the Centre,” in which a “left-hand poem” of exhausted age, and a “right-hand poem” of the eternal recurrence of Spring, parallel each other as the poem unrolls down the page:

The leaves on the macadam make a noise—

How soft the grass on which the desired

Reclines in the temperature of heaven—

Like tales that were told the day before yesterday—

Sleek in a natural nakedness,

She attends the tintinnabula—

How will the poet—in fifteen lines—bring the two equally valid perceptions together?).

And we might consider e.e. cummings' desire to write his grasshopper poem-that-cannot-be-read-aloud, a poem graphically imitating (by rearranging the letters and case in the word "grasshopper") the grasshopper's leaps and changes of position: it begins with "*r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r*" as its title, evolves through PPEGORHRASS and gRrEaPsPhOs until finally, with equilibrium, the grasshopper resumes his proper shape. How much is a poem a written thing, how much an oral thing, and can we sympathize with the point cummings is making? What other ways of "pressing language as far as it will go" have poets tried? (We can look at examples of nonsense poetry, concrete poetry, and perhaps other types as well.)

Week II, day by day

Monday, July 14. The week will begin with discussion of the Horatian aims of poetry: How does it instruct? How does it delight? We'll consider the Shakespearean aim, "To hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature"; the Wordsworthian aim, "a renovating function"; the Shelleyan aim, "To hope, till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates"; the Frostian aim, "a stay against confusion"; the Stevensian aim, "arranging, deepening, enchanting"; the Eliotic aim, to "do the police in different voices," etc. We'll discuss these aims with respect to

two or three poems, e.g. Milton's "L'Allegro," Yeats's "The Second Coming," and Dickinson's "There's a certain Slant of Light."

Tuesday, July 15. Today the Seminar will focus on symbolism. What is a symbol—and why? How are symbols useful (e.g., Blake's lamb and tiger)? Are there any non-symbolic poems? Also on the agenda will be: personification; allegory; simile vs. metaphor; figures of thought (e.g., arranging things in parallel) vs. figures of speech (e.g., apostrophe). To illustrate these issues, we'll look at Dickinson ("The Soul Selects") and Keats ("Ode on a Grecian Urn"), as well as twentieth-century poets such as Countee Cullen (symbols for Africa in "Heritage"), Marianne Moore (the cliff-face as a symbol for moral strength in "The Fish"), and Jorie Graham (a painting, Piero della Francesca's "La Madonna del Parto," as a symbol for inception in "San Sepolcro").

The central theme of this second week is to raise the difference between a mechanical application of literary terms—this is a simile, this is a symbol, this is apostrophe, etc.—and the viewing of the appearance of a figure of speech or a figure of thought as a functional part of the "machine made out of words" (as Williams described a poem). The aim is to account for why the figure arises at *this* point in the poem, and why the author chooses to use *this* figure (e.g., a simile) and not another (e.g., a metaphor). Too often, students are taught to identify literary figures but not to see them as useful to the poem in specific ways. Looking at poetic stratagems as necessary to the functioning of the poem makes a poem more than a succession of propositions with decoratively appliquéd figures.

Wednesday, July 16. Today we'll take note of the power of grammar and syntax. We'll look at: the sentence as a lyric tool; syntactic patterns of foregrounding and subordination; and syntax (conventional and deviant) as a vehicle of voice (Eliot's "Prufrock," for example, and

Berryman's "Dream Songs"). The day will include analysis of deviant grammar in Dickinson, deviant typography in cummings, deviant diction in Dylan Thomas, and syntactic virtuosity in Keats ("To Autumn") and Moore ("A Grave").

Thursday, July 17. We will consider poets on poetry: the meta-poem. Illustrations will range from Shakespeare ("Why is my verse so barren of new pride?") to the twentieth century (Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B"), with possible inclusions of Wordsworth ("The Solitary Reaper"), Shelley (skylark), Keats (nightingale), Dickinson ("Split the lark"), and Stevens ("The Idea of Order at Key West"). The aim of this day is to see what counters are brought into play in a given group of meta-poems sharing a single subject (e.g. birdsong in some of the above poems, a woman singing in others). (Close the day with an evaluation.)

Friday, July 18. On Friday we'll consider poets on art: the sister arts. These arts include sculpture (Keats, "Grecian Urn"), painting (Ashbery, "And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name"), film (Graham, "Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them"), and possibly some others. We will also discuss the aims of the "comprehensive poem," and of "philosophical" poetry, looking at (among others) Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" and Yeats's "Among School Children." The discussion certainly will touch on ways in which representations of life in the sister arts compare to depictions of similar themes and elements of life in poetry.

Week III: The Poet and His Poems: Whitman

Monday, July 21. The final week begins with an overview of Whitman, from the early bad ballads to late short pieces. What is the value of studying a poet whole? What makes the poet change style, perhaps several times, over a lifetime? We'll examine Whitman's genre choices: first the early years (philosophical autobiography in "Song of Myself," impersonal narrative in "There Was a Child Went Forth," unity with the future in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"); then the

changes brought about by the Civil War (single elegy for Lincoln, group elegies for the war dead, post-traumatic stress syndrome in “The Artilleryman’s Vision”); and finally the later, shorter poems (self-elegy in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” vignettes, and glimpses). We’ll look at suppressed poems (e.g., “Hours Continuing Long”), and discuss specific problems and issues Whitman faced, e.g., how to be a nationalist poet, and the anxiety of American verse in the shadow of its English predecessors.

Tuesday, July 22. On the second day of the week we will look at free verse, and talk about the “why” and the “how.” We’ll look at models in the Bible, in sermons, and in opera and oratorio. We’ll consider free verse as a structure conforming to Whitman’s sense of nature (Darwinian, evolutionary, progressive—“Earth, my Likeness,” “The World Below the Brine”). We’ll discuss Whitman’s psychology of the self and its symbols as they extend across space and time (in “Song of Myself”)—the self as singular, the self in a dyad, the self as collective, the self as a national self.

Wednesday, July 23. We’ll examine Whitman’s complex sense of the war: the participating non-soldier; disillusion with former hopes for America; war as an aspect of industrialism. And we’ll discuss his four elegies for Lincoln (“Hush’d Be the Camps To-Day,” “O Captain, My Captain!,” “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” and “This Dust Was Once the Man”). Why did Whitman write in all these genres (collective voice of soldiers; allegory of ship of state; extended formal elegy; and epitaph)?

Thursday, July 24. On Thursday, we will take up Whitman’s sense of the other: lovers (“I saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing”), workmen (“A Song for Occupations,” “Sparkles from a Wheel”), women (“To a Common Prostitute,” “Twenty-eight young men” from “Song of Myself”), soldiers (“A March in the Ranks Hard Pressed”), family (“Come Up from the Fields,

Father"), the camerado ("Song of the Open Road"), passengers on Brooklyn Ferry, etc. How "realistic" is Whitman's verse? Who is the implied author (Whitman's self-projection)? Who is the implied reader?

Friday, July 25. We will conclude the Seminar with summaries, final questions, and evaluation.

Other Resources To Be Used

Participants will have full access to the Harvard Libraries and Museums. To prepare for the class on symbols, participants will visit the Fogg Art Museum, and consider one painting (a painting of their choice, from Giotto to Max Beckmann) in terms of its presentation of a coherent pattern of symbols, in order to draw a distinction between the means of painting and the means of poetry.

The Woodberry Poetry Room (located in Lamont Library, and under the administration of Houghton Library) has a large and valuable collection of poets (beginning with Tennyson) reading their own poetry on disk or video. Each participant will be asked to listen to (or view) a reading by a poet in whom he or she is particularly interested, and report briefly on the reading style to the class. (Some poets who have wildly different styles may be suggested: Pound, Dylan Thomas, Eliot, Seamus Heaney). Of course, all participants are invited to make full use of the Woodberry Poetry Room, which, in addition to its collection of books, has current issues of all the standard poetry magazines.

Participants will be asked to read aloud the poems we are discussing. The art of conveying the import of poetry by intonation of voice, rhythmic pattern, and a sense of the poem's inner emotional evolution is crucial to the teaching of poetry, and it is anticipated that

participants will leave with a firmer sense of how to read a poem aloud so as to make it personal, interesting, moving, and convincing.

The Houghton Library, Harvard's Rare Book Library, will be the venue for at least one seminar meeting. The librarians there are glad to set up a seminar room with all sorts of rare manuscript materials and rare books on display, as well as artist's books and association copies. We have a particularly rich collection of Keats materials and of Dickinson materials, and a tour of the Keats Room and the Dickinson Room preceding the seminar meeting will be arranged. Participants will also be able to pursue independent interests within the Rare Book collection. (See, in Appendix 2, the Letter of Commitment from Leslie A. Morris, Curator of Modern Books and Manuscripts, Harvard College Library.)

Additionally, there are of course many places with literary associations in and around Boston. For example, Longfellow House, a National Historic Site operated by the National Park Service (http://www.nps.gov/long/), is just three blocks from Harvard Square—practically on campus. And with a local English teacher, Dan Conti, as their guide, participants will be encouraged on the first Saturday to participate in a group outing to Concord, Massachusetts, to visit Emerson, Thoreau (Walden Pond), and Hawthorne sites. On the second Saturday, Mr. Conti will lead a tour to Amherst, Massachusetts, where the Dickinson Homestead and the Austin Dickinson House are open to view.

Project Staff and Faculty

The Project Director, Professor Helen Vendler, is the A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard University. (See Appendix 1 for resumes of key personnel; two letters in support of Professor Vendler may be found in Appendix 3.) Professor Vendler is the author of books on many poets: Yeats, Stevens, Herbert, Keats, Shakespeare, and Heaney. She has written as well

several collections of essays and lectures, all published by the Harvard University Press, as is her anthology, *Contemporary American Poetry*. She has reviewed contemporary poetry for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Book Review, The New York Review of Books, The London Review of Books,* and *The New Republic*, and was the principal consultant for a television series on poetry called *Voices and Visions*. She has led several previous seminars for high school and college teachers for the NEH, and was the Jefferson Lecturer for the NEH in 2004. She is the recipient of 23 honorary degrees from universities and colleges here and abroad. She has been one of the most consistent advocates for contemporary American poetry.

Professor Vendler says, "I have shaped this seminar to fall between the 6-8 week seminars I have given for the NEH in the past and the single-week Mellon Seminar I gave for the National Humanities Center. My previous experience with summer seminars has convinced me that those who apply are intense and committed teachers, who bring back to their schools a new sense of curricular possibility (they have often been appointed to curriculum-development posts within their school system). Many high school teachers have had no systematic instruction in poetry, and are somewhat at a loss within that genre. For that reason, I like to include a great variety of poets and genres within the seminar, so that many topics within lyric poetry come under discussion. At the same time, I believe that to know a poet you must read the complete works, and so I like to include one poet studied in some depth. Teachers in the seminar are thus exposed to a host of poets, some of whom they may not have come across before; this gives them, if they wish it, a lifetime program of personal reading."

The Project Manager, William J. Holinger, is Director of Secondary School Programs, Harvard Summer School. He will be responsible for the administration of the grant, including managing finances, overseeing the participant-selection process, and reporting to the National

Endowment of the Humanities. As a senior staff member of Harvard Summer School, he is in a position to ensure that all elements of the University extend a warm welcome to participants and grant them hassle-free access to relevant campus resources and facilities.

Daniel Conti, a teacher at the Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School in Sudbury, Massachusetts, will serve as a resource and guide once teachers arrive in Cambridge. Dan will lead several excursions, including two Saturday bus trips--one to Concord and one to Amherst--and he will host a cook-out at his home in Concord. (See Appendix 2 for Dan Conti's Letter of Commitment, and Appendix 4 for itineraries of the two Saturday trips.)

A Graduate Student Assistant (GSA), a doctoral candidate in English and American Literature at Harvard, will be engaged by Professor Vendler. The GSA will be on board for two summer months and will assist Professor Vendler and the seminar participants in their research and writing endeavors, and will serve as the participants' liaison to the academic and research resources of Harvard University.

Participant Selection

The Selection Committee will be composed of

No special ability is required of applicants, although a knowledge of a foreign language is always helpful in reading poetry, as is knowledge of a foreign literature. We especially invite minority applicants.