

# *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland*

Education and Programming Resource

## **Lesson Idea 1**

### **People's Playground Poetry**

**Grade levels 7-12**

#### **Summary:**

Using selected poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti as inspiration to reflect about his remembered experiences in New York and Coney Island, invite students to craft free verse poems that describe a memory of place or an experience from the past or present.

#### **Objectives:**

- Students will understand aspects of the Beat poetry movement
- Students will learn about writing free verse poetry
- Students will practice writing about their observations and experiences in a journal
- Students will craft free verse poems about a memory of place or experience

#### **Materials Needed:**

- Pencils and/or pens
- Notebooks for journaling
- Paper
- Laptops or access to a computer with Microsoft Word
- Book of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poetry

- Access to the internet to examine other poets' work such as Carl Sandburg, Langston Hughes, Jack Kerouac, E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, etc.

### **About Beat Poetry and Lawrence Ferlinghetti**

In the 1950s, San Francisco was the heart of the beat poetry movement, but it evolved out of activity on both the east and west coasts in the 1940s. These poets were part of a group of individuals who questioned mainstream politics, culture, and literary tradition. The beat movement (also called the beat generation) expressed alienation from society and convention by adopting manners of speech borrowed from jazz musicians and styles of dress that were nonconformist.

Beat poets were interested in making poetry more mainstream and less academic. They read their poetry sometimes to the accompaniment of jazz music. The composition of verse was often chaotic and unstructured.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti was born in Yonkers, New York, in 1919 as Lawrence Monsanto Ferlig. Before he was born, his father died and his mother went to a mental institution, and therefore as an infant Lawrence was sent to live with an aunt who took him to France. He moved back to the United States when he was six years old and his aunt sent him to an orphanage while she looked for work, eventually reclaiming him and settling on Long Island, New York. He started writing poetry at the age of twelve and after high school, enrolled at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill where he studied journalism. Ferlinghetti enlisted in the military during World War II. After the War, he earned a master's degree in Literature from Columbia University. In 1951 he left for San Francisco and started a magazine called *City Lights*. Two years later, the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco

opened. The bookstore was a gathering for other beat poets and became a hub for the literary beat movement.

### **Lesson Time**

- one class period to explore the exhibition *Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland* and read and discuss Lawrence Ferlinghetti's descriptions of Brooklyn and Coney Island through poetry
- one class time to explore the format of free verse poetry and free write
- out-of-class time for journaling about memory and experience (one week)
- one class time to work on a poem
- one class time to share poems out loud and evaluate them

### **Lesson Procedures**

#### **Step One**

Following time spent in the *Coney Island* exhibition, read several of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poems inspired by time spent in New York (see resources section of this lesson). Discuss how Ferlinghetti engages the senses to illustrate particular experiences or memories of place. Introduce the concept of free verse poetry by comparing Ferlinghetti's poems to other poets' work such as Carl Sandburg, Jack Kerouac, E. E. Cummings, etc. Explain that in free verse poetry there are no set rules: no specific rhyming scheme, syllable count, metric pattern, line arrangement or theme. Share context about the beat poetry movement and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's life and work.

#### **Step Two**

Invite students to free write in class to explore free verse and to obtain the experience of letting writing flow (unedited).

Distribute journals to each student and present an assignment to have each student journal about his or her observations and experiences for one week as an “out-of-class” time assignment.

### **Step Three**

Have each student craft a free verse poem using the weeks’ worth of journal entries for ideas. Spend one class period drafting and refining the poem.

### **Step Four**

Once students have crafted and edited a poem, have them read them aloud in class or compile them as a group chapbook.

### **Resources:**

## **A Coney Island of the Mind: Poems by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, 1958**

**The penny candy store beyond the El**  
is where I first

fell in love

with unreality

Jellybeans glowed in the semi-gloom  
of that september afternoon

A cat upon the counter moved among

the licorice sticks

and tootsie rolls

and Oh Boy Gum

Outside the leaves were falling as they died

A wind had blown away the sun

A girl ran in

Her hair was rainy

Her breasts were breathless in the little room

Outside the leaves were falling  
and they cried

Too soon! Too soon!

**Fortune**  
**has its cookies to give out**

which is a good thing

since it's been a long time since

that summer in Brooklyn  
when they closed off the street  
one hot day  
and the

FIREMEN

turned on their hoses

and all the kids ran out in it

in the middle of the street

and there were

maybe a couple dozen of us  
out there

with the water squirting up

to the

sky

and all over

us

there was maybe only six of us

kids altogether

running around in our

barefeet and birthday

suits

and I remember Molly but then

the firemen stopped squirting their hoses

all of a sudden and went

back in

their firehouse

and

started playing pinochle again

just as if nothing

had ever

happened

while I remember Molly

looked at me and

ran in

because I guess really we were the only ones there

**Johnny Nolan has a patch on his ass**

Kids chase him

thru screendoor summers

Thru the back streets

of all my memories

Somewhere a man laments

upon a violin

A doorstep baby cries

and cries again

like

a

ball

bounced

down steps

Which helps the afternoon arise again  
to a moment of remembered hysteria

**Johnny Nolan has a patch on his ass**

Kids chase him

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/brief-guide-beat-poets>

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/lawrence-ferlinghetti>

<http://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-free-verse-poems.html>

<http://www.biography.com/people/lawrence-ferlinghetti-9293358#synopsis>

## **Connections to Common Core National Standards**

(grade 7 example)

### **Reading Standards for Literature**

#### ***Key Ideas and Details***

- Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.
- Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g. how setting shapes the characters or plot).

#### ***Craft and Structure***

- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.
- Analyze how a drama's or poem's form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning.
- Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.

## Writing Standards

### *Text Types and Purposes*

- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
- Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.
- Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
- Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence and signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another.
- Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.
- Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on the narrated experiences or events.

### *Production and Distribution of Writing*

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.
- Use technology, including the internet, to produce and publish writing and link to and cite sources as well as to

interact and collaborate with others, including linking to and citing sources.

### ***Research to Build and Present Knowledge***

- Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.