

STUDENT HANDOUT · UNIT II · POETRY



Session 6

Voice & the Lyric I

Sunday, June 21, 2026 · 4:00–5:30 PM · The Community Room

Readings · main points · in-class practice · discussion questions · homework · worksheet

The Art of Telling

A free creative-writing salon for residents of 2601

Led by James F. Mulhern · Silver Current Press

Welcome

This handout gathers everything from today's Session 6 page in one place: the readings, the main points of the lesson, the in-class practice, the discussion questions for our conversation, this week's homework, and the Voice Worksheet for your own private notebook. Keep it with you during the session and take it home afterward — and if you would like to revisit any of it, the companion site, companion.art-of-telling.com, holds the same materials for you to review after each Sunday.

Main Points

Main points of the lesson

The *I* of a poem is not the same as the poet. It is a **constructed voice** — a position the poet chooses to speak from.

The lyric *I* can be intimate, distant, formal, plain, performative, hidden, or refused entirely.

Voice precedes plot. Readers commit to a narrator before they commit to a story.

Distance is a dial, not a switch. Close can pull back for a beat, then return.

Ask of your own poem: *Whose voice is this, exactly?* The more sharply you can name it, the more focused the poem will become.

Readings for Class

- Seamus Heaney, *Digging* — [Poetry Foundation](#)
- Jane Kenyon, *Otherwise* — [Academy of American Poets](#)
- Lucille Clifton, *won't you celebrate with me* — [Poetry Foundation](#)

Critical Reception (after our discussion)

- [Elizabeth Bishop — Analysis of “One Art” \(Literary Ladies Guide\)](#) — a reading of Bishop’s villanelle, its form, and its loss.
- [Lucille Clifton — Poet Page \(Poetry Foundation\)](#) — biography, voice, and key poems.

In-Class Practice

From the live site

Take any paragraph you know well — a piece you have written in this course, a stretch of one of our readings, or a paragraph you write right now from memory. Rewrite it twice. First in close third person; then in a removed first person looking back years later. Compare. What survives the change? What only one version can do?

What happens with this: stays in your notebook. Two or three volunteers may read both versions aloud so the room can hear what voice does. Nothing collected.

Space for your rewrite

Use the lines below for your close-third-person version and your removed-first-person-looking-back version, or continue in your notebook.

Discussion Questions

The five questions below are exactly as they appear on the Session 6 page. Use the space beneath each one to jot down your own thoughts before or during our conversation. Nothing here is collected.

Q1. Whose voice in your own reading life feels most distinct? Name two specific habits of that voice.

Q2. Look at any piece of writing — one of yours, or a paragraph of any reading from this course. Where does the narrative distance shift? Is the shift earned, or accidental?

Q3. In a piece of writing you have done, or any reading from this course, what does the narrator know that the protagonist does not — and how is the gap signaled?

Q4. Pick any of our readings. What is one piece of information that story withholds? What does the withholding ask of the reader? Then ask the same of any piece you have written.

Q5. Pick any of our readings. If the writer switched point of view in the opening, what would the reader gain? What would they lose?

Homework

Re-read

Re-read the three poems for Session 7: William Carlos Williams, *The Red Wheelbarrow* (revisited); Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day*; and Lucille Clifton, *won't you celebrate with me*. Read each aloud. Time the reading; notice how short these poems are and how much they carry.

The optional exercise

Optional: name the voice in something you are writing — in one phrase — using the Voice Worksheet below.

Before Next Sunday — Session 7

Compression — How a Poem Holds a Whole World. We close the poetry unit by looking at how poems gain force by leaving things out. We will look for places in our own drafts where we are explaining what the image already says — and cut them.

Voice Worksheet — for your private notebook

From the live site

Copy into a Word document. Fill in for a poem or passage you are drafting — or for one of our readings. This stays in your private notebook — never collected, never read aloud unless you choose.

1. Name the voice in one phrase (e.g., the voice of someone who has lost their faith but not their memory of it): _____
2. Two diction habits of this voice: _____
3. One thing this voice will *never* say: _____
4. One thing this voice withholds from the reader: _____
5. Exit reflection — complete the sentence: *The voice I most want to develop in my next draft is one that* _____

Closing Note

Because there wasn't time to tell everything, the companion site — companion.art-of-telling.com — gathers session materials, reading companions, and course updates so residents can follow along and review after each Sunday.