

Materials and Background for Scroll Exercise

“Afternoon on a Hill”, by Edna St. Vincent Millay

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Poetry is primarily a creation of the spoken word, yet most people encounter it first – and most often – in the silent medium of print. Consequently, one of the challenges of teaching poetry is in getting students to hear the language – to breathe life into the words, to read with genuine feeling and to genuinely feel what they are reading.

Poets have adapted to print by using layout, capitalization, punctuation, and a variety of other typographic devices to, in effect, score (in the sense of a musical score) their printed poems, and thereby help preserve the sounds of rhythm, meter, inflection, pause, and dynamics. Without this scoring, the sounds – as conceived by the poet – might be misconstrued or lost.

When you hand students a poem in the form and layout in which it was originally published, they may not realize that it is essentially a score and that there is work that must be done to recover the poem as sound. Consequently, they might fail to “hear” – and comprehend – the poem altogether. So there are at least two problems:

1. Students don’t understand what it means to breathe life into a poem through sound, let alone how to go about doing it, so the scoring doesn’t serve its intended purpose. In other words, the scoring provides information that they don’t understand and don’t know how to use. Until they can feel how the sound of the poem impacts its meaning – and this can only come through hands-on experience – students are not likely to put much effort into recovering the sound of a printed poem. This leads to the second problem, which is that...
2. The scoring deprives students of the experience of discovering, on their own terms, the music of poetry. The poet’s score is so specific and well defined that it looks like there is little left for the reader to do; most readers simply don’t bother. They don’t realize that there really is quite a lot to do. They can’t see past the constraints of the score; they don’t have any experience with poems that tells them that there is something worth digging for. They don’t know how to dig, and they don’t know why they should.

One way to right this situation is to strip away all of the scoring – all of the typography – and reduce the printed poem to the most simple, least-processed form possible. This guarantees that there will be absolutely nothing there unless students engage the poem and really hear its words. You could argue that this makes the poem less accessible – that it is not at all helpful to the reader, which is exactly the opposite of what the poet intended. But in effect it amounts to a vote of confidence, and a welcoming invitation to unravel an interesting mystery.

On the following page, you will find a poem stripped of much of its typography – including all letter-spacing, word spacing, line breaks, punctuation, and capitalization. You can use this poem as it appears, on one page, or you can cut it up into line strips and assemble the strips into a scroll. My recommendation is that you assemble the strips into a scroll because the scroll works better as a manipulative, but you will get good results from the page as well.

- Use with [millayInstructions.pdf](#) and [millayLayout.pdf](#).
- If you’d like your students to work a bit more with text connections, you might consider using the handout [bioMillay.pdf](#) as well.

