

Poetry Porch: Poetry

Poetry Class

By Helen Heineman

I began with Billy Collins,
Because his language is so
Direct, no need for elaborate explanations.
They liked the Lanyard poem
Because it praised mothers
And most of them were old enough
To remember their own more kindly
Than they used to do and relished
Praise for what they'd done themselves.

I decided to teach
The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner
Hoping to get them to discuss
The mariner's motives in shooting the albatross.
Motiveless malignity, Coleridge called it,
A state of mind difficult to assess.
Easier to understand the Duke
In Browning's "My Last Duchess":
Possessiveness, jealousy, and greed.
The mariner's motives are obscure.
He changes, goes home, a sadder and wiser man.
The Duke does not.
Instead, he woos a new Duchess,
His motives clear and unchanged.
I wonder which character is more accessible.
Here, where nearly everything's in retrospect,
How much do we understand
Of the harm we've done.