

Instructor Notes on John Berryman

The sample essay in this lesson—along with all of the work leading up to the paper—was designed to mimic, as closely as possible, the manner in which the students should write their essays on “The Ball Poem.” Because of this, the only information on the author that was used is located on the web links provided in the lesson, with the addition of a short biography in *Poetry Speaks*. This lesson attempts to avoid the situation of “teacher vs. students” so eloquently described by Robert Scholes in *Semiotics and Interpretation*: “[...]reading [is] turned into a mystery and the literature classroom into a chapel where the priestly instructor (who knows the authors, dates, titles, biographies, and general provenance of the texts) astound[s] the faithful with miracles of interpretation.” This lesson attempts to bring a level of clarity to interpretation, and as such, it cannot afford outside texts that the students cannot access. The information below is found in all of the sources provided in the lesson. However, they are collected here so that the instructor of this lesson can have all of the specific information applied to the essay in one place.

- 1) Berryman’s teaching
 - a. Berryman was “tremendously erudite” and “a brilliant teacher.”
 - b. Berryman was considered “brilliant, intense, and articulate” as a professor.
- 2) Berryman’s work
 - a. He “displayed great technical control in poems that remained firmly rooted in the conventions of the time” as a young writer
 - b. “It was not until [...] he was already in his forties” that he earned acclaim as a top-rank American poet.
 - c. *The Dream Songs* would be his break-out work, and was a drastic departure from his earlier work.
- 3) Berryman’s alcoholism and other problems
 - a. Berryman’s father committed suicide just outside of John’s window when Berryman was a young boy.
 - b. He was “prone to emotional instability and heavy drinking throughout his life”
 - c. Beginning in 1939 he was hospitalized for nervous exhaustion; beginning in 1959, he was hospitalized at least once a year for the rest of his life
 - d. Diary entries give evidence of his “mania for sexual attention and adulation”
 - e. Dismissed from a position at Iowa for an arrest on charges of public intoxication and disturbing the peace
- 4) Berryman’s Religious Conversion
 - a. Berryman checked into alcohol rehabilitation four times from 1969-1970.
 - b. He experienced a “sort of religious conversion” in 1970, and later “professed Catholicism.”