



Colonial Privy at Liberty Hall Museum

Lesson: Colonial Privy at Liberty Hall Museum

Grades: 6-8

Subject Areas: American History, Colonial America, Poetry Analysis

Duration: 30-45 minutes

Essential question: How can poetry be used to analyze aspects of colonial daily life?

Overview Summary: Middle school students will analyze poetry while studying the bathroom practices of colonists. Students will discuss Liberty Hall Museum's privy and chamber pots, read and analyze a poem about an outhouse, and write their own poetry.

Objectives for Students: After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify the various elements of poetry
- Analyze a poem for relevant historical information
- Construct an original piece of poetry demonstrating the use of various poetic elements and historical contexts

New Jersey Student Learning Standards for English Language Arts:

- **NJSLSA.R1.** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences and relevant connections from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- **NJSLSA.R2.** Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- **NJSLSA.R4.** Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- **NJSLSA.R5.** Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

Common Core Curriculum English Language Arts:

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1** Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5** Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

Materials:

- Liberty Hall Museum Colonial Bathroom Fact Sheet (provided on page 3)
- Passing of the Backhouse Poem (provided on pages 4 and 5)
- Poem Analysis and Activity Sheets (provided on pages 6-8)

Key Words:

- Liberty Hall
- Poetry
- Outhouse
- Chamber Pots
- Elements of a Poem

Opening Activity:

- Introduce Liberty Hall Museum:
 - Liberty Hall Museum is a historic house and garden museum in Union, New Jersey. It was the home of William Livingston, the first elected governor of New Jersey. In 1811, the home and grounds were purchased by the Kean family who lived in the home until 1995. In 2000, the home and grounds became a museum.

Historical Context:

- Establish and discuss the historic setting and context of the lesson plan with your students:
 - Liberty Hall was built in 1774 and the Livingston and Kean families lived in the house for over 200 years. The house today has five bathrooms, all of which have flush toilets, but flush toilets were not installed until 1925 when indoor plumbing was put into the house. This means that for over 150 years, residents of Liberty Hall did not have a flush toilet or a bathroom.
 - Where did residents of Liberty Hall “do their business” before toilets were installed?

Poetry Lesson Plan Activities:

1. Read the colonial bathroom fact sheet (page 3)
 - a. This fact sheet provides basic background information about the outhouse and chamber pots used by residents of Liberty Hall.
2. Read the poem “The Passing of the Backhouse” (pages 4 and 5)
 - a. This poem is by James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916), an American poet known for his sentimental, humorous, and children’s poetry.
3. Complete the “Identify Elements of the Poem” activity sheet (page 6)
 - a. This activity has students identify various elements of the poem including figurative language, alliteration, personification, and more.
4. Complete the “Analyze the Poem” activity sheet (page 7)
 - a. This activity has students answer questions regarding the poem.
5. Complete the “Write your own Poem” activity sheet (page 8)
 - a. This activity asks students to write their own poem about their own bathroom.

Activity #1: The Liberty Hall Museum Colonial Bathroom Fact Sheet



Exterior and interior views of the privy at Liberty Hall Museum, built 18th or 19th century

The Privy

The privy is an outdoor toilet without plumbing. Normally, they are built a reasonable distance away from the house and on the downwind side. This location helped balance the issues of easy access versus the smell! A privy consists of a wooden bench seat with holes where one could sit and “do their business” into a large hole in the ground underneath the

privy structure. The wooden structure over the benches existed to shelter the user, and also to protect the toilet itself. The privy at Liberty Hall has two seats inside each door. The seats are different sizes—the large one for adults and the small one for children. This double privy was unusual for the time, most privies would have been single. Toilet paper was not yet invented, so most colonial people used leaves or corn cobs. Yes, corn cobs! Privies were very unsanitary by our modern standard and most people did not wash their hands after using the bathrooms because they did not know about germs or bacteria. Yuck!

Imagine having to use a privy and go outside to use the bathroom? What would you do if it was raining, snowing, or the middle of the night? Colonists had a solution for this...



The Chamber Pot

Chamber pots were small clay or porcelain bowls used in the house. Many had fancy designs and most had a lid. Some chamber pots had a

crocheted piece that slid over the lid called a shusher. These Chamber Pots were used during the night (aren't you glad they had a shusher?!) and had to be emptied each morning into the privy. Unless a family had enslaved people or servants to empty the chamber pots, this chore was done by the youngest member of a family. Are you the youngest member in your family?



Chamber pot, glazed stoneware, 18th or 19th century, on display in the Alexander Hamilton Room

Activity #2: The Passing of the Backhouse - By James Whitcomb Riley

When memory keeps me company and moves to smiles and tears,
A weather-beaten object looms through the mist of years.
Behind the house and barn it stood, a half a mile or more.
And hurrying feet a path had made straight to its swinging door.
Its architecture was a type of simple classic art.
But in the tragedy of life it played a leading part;
And oft the passing traveler drove slow and heaved a sigh
To see the modest hired girl slip out with glances shy.

We had our posy garden that the women loved so well
I loved it too, but better still I loved the stronger smell
That filled the evening breezes so full of homely cheer,
And told the night - o'ertaken tramp that human life was near,
On lazy August afternoons it made a little bower,
Delightful, where my grandsire sat and whiled away an hour.
For there the summer morning its very cares entwined.
And berry bushes reddened in the steaming soil behind.

All day fat spiders spun their web to catch the buzzing flies
That flitted to and from the house, where Ma was making pies.
And once a swarm of hornets bold had built a palace there,
And stung my unsuspecting aunt--I must not tell where;
Then father took a flaming pole--that was a happy day--
He nearly burned the building up, but the hornets left to stay.
When summer bloom began to fade and winter to carouse,
We banked the little building with a heap of hemlock boughs.

But when the crust was on the snow and sullen skies were gray,
In sooth, the building was no place where one could wish to stay.
We did our duties promptly there, one purpose swayed the mind;
We tarried not, nor lingered long, on what we left behind.
The torture of the icy seat would make a Spartan sob,
For needs must scrape the goose-flesh with a lacerating cob,
That from a frost-encrusted nail hung pendant by a string.
My father was a frugal man and wasted not a thing.

When grandpa had to "go out back" and make his morning call,
We'd bundle up the dear old man with muffler and a shawl.
I knew the hole on which he sat--'twas padded all around,
And once I dared to sit there-'twas all too wide I found;
My loins were all too little and I jack-knifed there to stay.
They had to come and get me out or I'd have passed away.
Then father said ambition was a thing boys should shun,
And I must use the children's hole 'till childhood's days were done.

But still I marvel at the craft that cut those holes so true;
The baby hole, and the slender hole that fitted Sister Sue,
That dear old country landmark; I've tramped around a bit,
And in the lap of luxury my lot has been sit;
But e'er I die I'll eat the fruit of trees I robbed of yore,
Then seek the shanty where my name is carved upon the door.
I ween the old familiar smell will soothe my jaded soul;
I'm now a man, but none the less, I'll try the children's hole.



Sketch courtesy of Dave Weaver of Sunbury, PA

Activity #3: Identify Elements of the Poem:

Rhyme Scheme: *pattern of rhymes at the end of each line. It is usually referred to by using letters to indicate which lines rhyme; lines designated with the same letter all rhyme with each other.*

Figurative Language: *words and expressions used to convey various meanings and interpretations that appeal to the senses of the reader*

Symbolism: *using symbols to represent larger ideas*

Alliteration: *the repetition of initial sounds on the same line or stanza*

Onomatopoeia: *words that sound like that which they describe*

Personification: *treating abstract or inanimate objects as human*

What other elements of poetry can you find in this poem?

Activity #4: Analyze the Poem:

Backhouses still exist today. What are some other names for a “backhouse”?

Where was the backhouse located on the speaker’s property?

What other animals could be found in the backhouse?

What did they use to wipe?

What was the speaker’s favorite time of year to use the backhouse? What was his least favorite time of year?

Why couldn’t the speaker use the same hole as his Grandfather?

If the speaker could go back and use the backhouse again, what hole would he use? Why?

Connections:

- Teachers may use this lesson as a part of a larger lesson on colonial American history or early American lifestyle.
- Teachers may wish to take their students on a fieldtrip to Liberty Hall Museum in Union, New Jersey to explore the home of William Livingston, discover what other objects were used in his daily life and visit the colonial privy.