



The  
Teaching  
Series

**Special Focus in  
English Literature  
and Composition**

Reading Poetry

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## Table of Contents

Wrestling with the Angel of Poetry .....	1
by Edward Schmieder	
Dancing with Poetry.....	4
by Ellen Greenblatt	
Richard Wilbur’s Letter About “The Death of a Toad” .....	7
Close Reading: Real Preparation for Multiple-Choice Tests.....	9
by Jane Schaffer	
Introduction to Teaching Poetry: Ideas for the Classroom .....	11
by Ellen Greenblatt	
When “The World Is Too Much with Us” .....	12
by Carol Jago	
The Sonnet As a Doorway to Poetry .....	18
by Ellen Greenblatt	
Poetry: Lesson One .....	25
by Linda Hubert	
Sound and Silence:	
An Interview with Billy Collins.....	40
by Renee H. Shea	
Contributors.....	45

### ***Important Note:***

*The following materials are organized around a particular theme that reflects important topics in AP English Literature and Composition. They are intended to provide teachers with professional development ideas and resources relating to that theme. However, the chosen theme cannot, and should not, be taken as any indication that a particular topic will appear on the AP Exam.*

## **Wrestling with the Angel of Poetry**

Edward Schmierer

Why do we ask our students to wrestle with the angel of poetry? Of course it is not merely to pass an exam. We want them to admire poetry's beauty and strength. We want them to learn not just about it, but from it, and we know that they will not admire what they cannot understand. We have the challenge of prepping test-takers and the privilege of sharing keys to unlock the craft, content, and joy of poetry. We aim for the day when our students find themselves thrilled to encounter "real toads in imaginary gardens."

### **Reading Widely**

- **Read poems from sixteenth to twenty-first centuries.**
- **Examine models of representative poems from particular eras.**
- **Practice unraveling conceits.**
- **Practice making sense of associative logic.**
- **Understand the importance of the line.**
- **Practice sorting out syntax.**

In the context of a year's course, reading "widely" may best be interpreted to mean reading selected works from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Students need to see models that are representative of the chief stylistic elements of an era's poetry. They need, for example, to practice unraveling the knotted ideas and syntax of a conceit in a metaphysical poem. They need to practice making the necessary connections among the sometimes-jarring juxtapositions and associative logic of a modernist poem. They need to understand the importance of the line in poetry and learn to negotiate its reading whether end stopped, enjambed, punctuated or not. They need to have reading modeled to learn to capture a line's "sense." They need to practice honoring the line, noting how meaning may be shaped typographically in modern and contemporary poems lacking punctuation.

### **Reading Deeply**

- **Read closely and carefully.**
- **Seek out relation of writer's craft and meaning.**
- **Identify speaker.**
- **Identify situation.**

In the context of a year's course, reading "deeply" means closely and carefully. Readers must carefully discern the text's meaning, the writer's craft, and the relation between the two. To this end, students should identify the speaker in the poem and identify the situation that appears to have prompted his or her speaking, because most poems come to us uncontextualized. Students need to know who is talking and why. They need to

discover that it's a woman awed by her pregnancy or a son recollecting a tender act by a usually stern father or an overly self-conscious, balding man paralyzed by indecision. Helen Vendler in *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology*, in her chapter "Describing Poems," suggests that readers identify the kind of "speech act" a poem presents. Is it an apology, a declaration, a boast, an explanation, a prayer, or a reproach? Are there successive speech acts in the same poem? (Vendler presents a list in an appendix titled "On Speech Acts.")

### Writing

- **Practice annotation.**
- **Paraphrase.**
- **Identify sections.**
- **Note literary devices.**
- **Ask questions of the text.**

Deep reading can't happen without writing. Perhaps the most fundamental and necessary writing practice is annotation. It is a strategy (or better, a habit of reading) students should develop. Reading with a pen or pencil in hand and marking the page are essential to sorting through the layers of complexity in poetry: paraphrasing, identifying the sections, noting literary devices, asking questions, and responding effectively and intellectually help understanding and create a record of the reading for future examination and reevaluation. A well-annotated text can serve much the same purpose as an outline; it can help organize an essay and provide ready reference for specific supporting details needed to strengthen assertions. A fully annotated poem is a visual representation of the complexity and compression of the poem.

### Approaching Prosody

AP teachers often are concerned about how much class time should be devoted to teaching prosody (syllabic and rhythmic patterns) and stanzaic form. Here I would let teachers' interests, expertise, and the exam itself determine how fully these are covered. From a strictly "mercenary" standpoint, very few questions on the test traditionally have called upon students' knowledge of these aspects of poetry. Rarely are there more than two or three multiple-choice questions related to prosody or form on a given test. Questions are predominately about meaning and the literary devices that create it. Rarely does the essay prompt call upon students to discuss prosody. Consequently, time in class is better spent challenging students to understand poems rather than to recognize formal elements. This does not mean study of these elements must or should be abandoned; however, I caution teachers about devoting too much time and placing too much emphasis on these technical aspects. For those who are not confident teaching prosody, Robert Pinsky's *The Sounds of Poetry* may be both the clearest and the friendliest resource available.

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## **Dancing with Poetry**

Ellen Greenblatt

### **Folding Sheets**

Recently, when I invited several English teachers at a workshop to find a partner and stand facing each other, they were a bit mystified. “Are we going to dance?” joked an older man. “Maybe,” I responded, “but first let’s fold some sheets.” When they stood up, willing to play, to be adventurous, to take a chance, I knew they were ready to dance their way into poetry by way of a quietly intimate sonnet by Seamus Heaney.

“Imagine that you’ve taken a sheet from the dryer or from off the line. Now, please fold it,” I said. I then watched as the pairs negotiated whether to go horizontal or vertical, left or right. There was a lot of laughing and good-natured ribbing as they stumbled through the task. But as they proceeded, their movements became smoother, and everyone ended up standing close to the partners they might not have known before, with their virtual sheets neatly folded.

So it is with reading poetry, if all is going well. We encounter the poem, and if we’re lucky, we might have someone to read it to or who will read it to us. If we’re teachers, we will have our students read the words aloud, and if we can’t resist, we’ll read them aloud too. At first, especially if we are unaccustomed to reading poetry, we won’t know how to proceed. We’ll flounder a bit and lurch over words whose meanings or connotations are unfamiliar. We’ll wonder if we’re missing something, whether we should stop at the end of a line or only where there is punctuation. But we’ll make it to the end. And the next time we read this poem or another one, we’ll have gained a bit of confidence. We’ll have been there before.

### **Haggling with Language**

Reading a poem involves haggling with language, with form and function, with metaphors, and maybe with rhyme and rhythm. But there is something mesmerizing about the choreography between a poem and a reader. Fans of hip-hop and spoken word poetry know how viscerally the power of the words involves our whole bodies and minds. After all, hip-hop and spoken word artists dance to the sound of their own words, and when they’re good, they get us moving too. We can resist, of course, but many of us choose to accept the enticement.

When we’re not worried about getting the interpretation “right” (something that we only worry about when we’re in school, as if there were just one “right” interpretation), we can find our feet more easily. We embrace the adventure and playfulness that the relatively few words of a poem offer us. It’s not surprising that former poet laureate Robert Pinsky’s invitation to participate in his “Favorite Poem Project” proved irresistible to people from

all segments of society. Listening to several readers of the same poem on the Favorite Poem Project Web site allows us to witness fresh responses and throws open the doors to meaning and interpretation.

### **Discovering *Clearances***

When my sheet-folding group encountered “Sonnet #5” from *Clearances* by Seamus Heaney, they exclaimed, “We get what you’ve been up to!” But though the sonnet is about folding sheets, as with all good poetry and good writing, there’s more to it. The speaker observes:

So we’d stretch and fold and end up hand to hand  
For a split second as if nothing had happened  
For nothing had that had not always happened  
Beforehand, day by day, just touch and go,  
Coming close again by holding back...<sup>1</sup>

**Seamus Heaney (1987)**

Is the poem about lovers? Is there tension, wondered my group? Maybe it’s about a mother and son, conjectured a few. Maybe it doesn’t matter, said others. Maybe what’s important is the feeling of familiarity it evokes with its silken rhythms and down-to-earth resonant images. Only after some discussion do I tell them that Heaney wrote the sonnet about his mother after her death. They can see that it, like other sonnets in *Clearances*, reads like the love poem it is.

The tension and intimacy conjured by the most banal of tasks, folding sheets together, is what the speaker remembers, even as he “pull[s] against her.” And so we dance, in our groups of teachers and students, first with the sheets, and then with the words of the poem and the memories of intimacy it conjures in our own minds.

### **The Mystery of Poetry**

In an essay entitled “Are You Doing Any Poetry with Them?” in *The American Scholar* in the fall of 2001, Heaney reflects on his first years as a teacher in the early 1960s: “[I was] in front of a class of disaffected adolescent boys, many of whom would end up a decade later as active members of the Provisional IRA. There was plenty to make them shy away from poetry: peer pressure, the macho conventions of the playground, a working-class unease in face of anything that smacked of middle-class pretension—but even so, the mystery of the thing interested them.”<sup>2</sup>

It still interests them, students and others, that is, and if we invite them to read and write with us, they will come to the party, and they will dance.



**Notes**

1. Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems, 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 311.
2. \_\_\_\_\_, "Are You Doing Any Poetry with Them?" *The American Scholar*, Autumn 2001, 160.

## **Richard Wilbur's Letter About "The Death of a Toad"**

In 1997, Richard Wilbur's poem "The Death of a Toad" appeared on the Advanced Placement English Literature Exam. At that time, an AP teacher named Penny wrote to him about the poem, and he responded with a long, detailed letter about the writing of the poem. The teacher was so delighted that she shared it on the AP English Electronic Discussion Group. For some time now, the letter has made sporadic appearances on the Electronic Discussion Group and is always a great hit.

We are delighted to announce that Richard Wilbur has given us permission to publish his letter. We hope that you will use it to enhance your own reading and that you will share it with your students. You will find the full text of the letter below. We wish to extend a special thank you to Richard Wilbur for his generosity.

Dear Penny,

I don't get letters like yours every day, and I wish I did. It makes me pleasantly dizzy to think of being read by 170,000 teachers for a week. In the long history of exposure, it beats even Gypsy Rose Lee.

Let me see what I can remember about the poem's inception. The poem was first published in *Poetry* (Chicago) in February of 1948, and that means that it was written during the lawn-mowing months of 1947. We (Charlee and I and our daughter Ellen) were then living in Cambridge, and I, having earned an M.A. at Harvard, was about to begin a three-year Junior Fellowship there. At some time during the summer, Charlee's cousins, the Tapleys, who lived in Wellesley Hills, invited us to look after their house and grounds while they went off on a vacation jaunt. We were happy to get out of the city, and the house was far bigger and airier than our Plympton Street apartment, and so the sojourn in Wellesley Hills was agreeable to us, even though we felt somewhat oppressed by what we perceived as the tepid gentility of the town.

Most of my poems are made out of accumulated thoughts and feelings and perceptions, and almost never does it happen that I have an experience and then go straight to a chair and write about it. But that's how it happened with "The Death of a Toad." Mowing the Tapley's suburban lawn one day, I mortally injured a toad, and before the day was out I had made that into a poem. Why did that occur? I think it was because I was young, and just out of military service, and spoiling to live, and felt, as I said before, oppressed by the safe, somnolent retirement-village atmosphere of Wellesley Hills; part of me identified, therefore, with the toad, and made me see the toad as representing the primal energies of the Earth, afflicted by the sprawl of our human dominion.

The first two lines of the third stanza are out to associate [the] toad with those "primal energies"—and of course there is biological ground for doing so. The words are out to magnify the toad and at the same time to be disarming about that—to acknowledge by an undertone of humor that I am making a great deal of a very small creature. My tonal ambiguity has worked for some readers but did not work, as I recall, for Randall Jarrell.

The poem has an ad hoc stanza form, created by the way the phrasing wanted to happen. It's scannable as a "loose iambic" poem in the metrical pattern 465543. I think that in '47 I was beginning to enjoy incorporating the six-foot line in some of my made-up stanzas; later I did so in a poem called "Beasts." The six-footer being very often a slow and awkward measure, it's a challenge to use it effectively, and in support of one's meaning.

Whether my toad actually took refuge under a cineraria or not, I can't say; but it had the right shape and shade of leaf for my poem. I recall, for some reason, that the first stanza originally ended "in a dim, / Low, and an ultimate glade." That sounded too good to me, and I knew why when I remembered Poe's description of Dream-Land as "an ultimate dim Thule." In the first lines of the poem I imagined the declining sun as moving—so setting suns may appear to do—along the horizon, and that's what led me to use the verb "steer," which has given trouble to a number of my readers. Quite reasonably, some have seen in that word not a verb meaning "to pursue a course" but a noun meaning "a castrated animal." It's led me to consider, more than once, replacing "steer" with "veer."

Does that give you what you were after? Thank you for the news of Barbara and of the tearing-up of our lane in Key West, and our very best wishes to you,

Dick

## Close Reading: Real Preparation for Multiple-Choice Tests

Jane Schaffer

### Taking a Different Tack

For some years, the English Vertical Team at my school has been concerned about our students' multiple-choice scores on AP Exams and other reading assessments. We were giving practice sets from previous AP Exams, but we didn't see much growth. We decided to take a different tack and began doing focused close reading assignments, asking open-ended reading questions that required sophisticated textual analysis.

At first, we looked at published materials designed for higher-order reading skills, but we found little on the market that suited our purposes. So, we wrote our own. Commercially available lessons asked, "What do you think was going on in Jack's head in *Lord of the Flies* when he looked at his reflection?" We wanted more analysis of the writer's choices and the kind of effect those choices created, so we deepened the question by asking, "When Jack looks at his reflection first in the pool and later in the coconut shell, what kind of light appears in the shell that wasn't present in the pool? What effect does Golding create here, and why does he create it?" The idea worked. Born from frustration, our approach to reading instruction can be used by any AP teacher.

We follow several steps in producing close reading exercises:

- First, we identify key passages from the assigned reading. Shorter passages are more successful than longer ones.
- Second, we write close reading questions for them, borrowing from AP multiple-choice stems, and assign them in class. We have learned that generic reading prompts asking about sequence or inference, for example, do not elicit higher-order analysis. We write text-specific questions that require students to search the story for the information. "What is the main idea of the first paragraph?" is not nearly as effective as "How does Hawthorne describe the throng in the prison scene, and how does this description tell you his attitude toward the group?" If students can answer without looking back at the book, then we have written a study question, good in its own right, but not a close reading one. Students often must read a passage two or three times. They balk at this—"We already read that page!"—but they need to learn that good readers often reread challenging texts.
- Third, we revise our question sets based on feedback from the class. They always show us what we need to clarify and polish.

### **Writing Your Own Assignments**

The best way to write close reading assignments is to work as a group with colleagues who teach the same literature. Our most productive session was a release day where five of us went off-campus to work. The synergy led us to questions that none would have thought of alone. Even working together, we realized how difficult it was to phrase the questions correctly to help our students achieve a greater understanding of the piece.

When students begin a close reading exercise, they annotate the passage and make observations in the margins. They have little experience in doing this, so we model the process for them. If duplicating is an issue at your school, it needs to be solved. Students must have their own copies of materials to mark.

Sometimes we use a passage before starting the book. For example, at the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, we read the prison door scene to establish theme and tone. At other times, we might return to a selection that the class read several days before or assign the same excerpt twice to focus on an author's narrative technique. The only recommendation we have is that you not assign two or three days' worth in a row. Analyzing a passage is an intense process, one that students don't sustain well day after day. We average three to five excerpts per novel or play, fewer with short stories or essays. Poetry is an exception; by its very nature, it demands many questions. At first, we work as a class, then in pairs or small groups, and finally as independent work.

Our multiple-choice averages have moved up steadily over the last few years. By AP Exam time, our students are well versed in good reading skills and much more confident about handling the challenge of the multiple-choice section on any AP Exam.

## **Introduction to Teaching Poetry: Ideas for the Classroom**

Ellen Greenblatt

We teachers know that even the best approaches to teaching (the activities that should be sure-fire winners) don't work every time. Teachers have to be physicians and magicians: physicians who diagnose what a particular class needs on a particular day, and magicians who conjure up, often on the spot, activities to keep students interested as we accomplish our goals.

In the following pages, you will find strategies experienced high school and college teachers have used as they begin to immerse themselves and their students in an exploration of poetry. Their work is designed to make your work easier. But please don't view any of these lessons as prescriptive. They are certainly intended as approaches for you to copy and use, but they are also meant to be inspirations to help you find your own way into teaching this most economical of literary forms.

As you begin to leaf through the packet, do what I encourage my students to do when they first encounter a poem: read it aloud. Then read it aloud again. Listen to the sound of your voice as you say the words. Be aware of the understanding and questions the sound of your own voice evokes.

Now you're ready to go into the classroom and to let students hear your voice and their own voices read, question, discuss, and understand the clarity and sometimes liberating, sometimes vexing, ambiguity poetry brings.

## When “The World Is Too Much with Us”

Carol Jago

### Starved for Poetry

Students are hungry for poetry. Many don’t know it themselves, but many 17-year-olds’ dissatisfaction with the world around them has as much to do with the lack of poetry in their lives as it does with the natural process of growing up.

Often students come to a twelfth-grade Advanced Placement Literature class from eleventh-grade AP English Language and Composition. Some have had little instruction in poetry since the tenth grade. Others have had minimal experience with close readings of poems, particularly of pre-twentieth century poetry.

I begin with the assumption that students are starved for these rich texts, and that it is my good fortune to be able to introduce them to giants like William Wordsworth. Every teenager needs to consider how “The World Is Too Much with Us.”

#### **The World Is Too Much with Us**

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now lie sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.—Great God! I’d rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

#### **William Wordsworth (1807)**

Beginning the year with a unit on poetry allows an AP Literature teacher to introduce or— one hopes—re-introduce many literary terms that will be used throughout the year. We want this terminology to become our common classroom language. Rather than handing students a list of terms to memorize, I have the class develop its own list. As I use

the terms, students copy words and definitions into their notes. The simple act of putting down definitions in their own hand helps to make these terms more their own.

### **A Word on Literary Terminology**

For many students, the study of literary terminology is the epitome of school for school's sake. "Why do we need these made-up words, Mrs. Jago?" I answer that just like physics and calculus, the study of literature has its own vocabulary. Words like "hyperbole," "allusion," and "connotation" help us be more articulate about what we experience as we read. The more students use these words in class, the more natural it becomes to employ them in writing.

Posted in my classroom is a word wall of literary terms. The first time I use a term, I add it to the list. Each time I repeat it, I point to the word on the list and then embed the definition into my sentence. "How would you describe the tone of this poem? You know tone is the author's attitude towards the subject. What do you think Wordsworth thinks or feels about nature?" Like water dripping on stone, the definitions become part of students' working vocabulary.

No need for nasty quizzes when students use the language of literature every day.

### **The Lazy Machine**

A teacher could take an entire class period offering students background information on this poem. You might talk about the Romantic Period and the genesis of *Lyrical Ballads*. You could also tell students about Wordsworth's love of the Lake District and the criticism he was receiving from conservative reviewers who called him an enemy of progress. The problem is that young readers don't have a place to store this information until they have made some sense of the text for themselves. I almost always start with the poem.

In *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Umberto Eco has written, "*Il testo è una macchina pigra che necessita di essere attivata*": "The text is a lazy machine that needs to be activated" (Eco, 1979). I tell students that poems are lazy machines. In order to turn the machine on, they are going to have to do more than simply say, "I don't get it," and wait for a teacher to explain. In order to make sense of a poem, a reader needs to set that machine in motion. "Thinking aloud" is one strategy that helps.

### **Thinking Aloud**

The goal is to make visible the thinking that goes on inside a good reader's head during a first reading. I model the first few lines for students and then have them work with a partner taking turns reading and thinking aloud.

Good readers commonly do the following:



- pose questions,
- identify unfamiliar vocabulary or allusions,
- make connections to their own experience,
- rephrase inverted lines, and
- comment on the poem.

My modeled lines are below in italics. Of course, as someone who has read the Wordsworth poem many times before, I am re-creating an imagined first read. You might want to have students bring in a contemporary poem to stump you with (AP students love this game) and use a think-aloud strategy in front of them cold. What you want to demonstrate is that on a first read, one always has more questions than answers, but that as one works through one's questions thoughtfully, carefully, with the help of a dictionary and sometimes of other readers, comprehension emerges.

### **Modeling Thinking Aloud: “The World Is Too Much with Us”**

The world is too much with us; late and soon,

*I like the sound of this. Reminds me of my cell phone going off when I'm trying to think. I wonder why he says, “late and soon,” instead of sooner or later. Maybe it's for rhyme.*

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:

*Can't spend money unless you get it. I guess laying waste our powers means something like using up all your energy.*

After pairs wrestle with the poem for 10 minutes or so, I bring the class together and ask if there are unresolved questions. It is always more effective to respond to student questions—after checking that no one else in the classroom has answers—than simply telling them this information unbidden.

This “think aloud” strategy has other benefits as well:

- It gets everyone in the class talking.
- Students discover that they are not the only ones with questions or who find a line difficult to unpack.
- Students often express insights that surprise their partners, opening up the poem to richer interpretations.
- The intimacy of pairs invites personal reflection of a sort that might feel inappropriate or uncomfortable within the larger forum.

### **Next Step: Free Writing**

Too often teachers make the mistake of stopping once they have elicited a personal response. For AP students, this is only the beginning. After this “think aloud” activity—which should only take about 10 to 15 minutes of class time—I ask students to read the poem again and then to write for 7 to 10 minutes about what they think it is about.

#### *A word on free writing...*

*This kind of response to literature has often been misused and misunderstood. Free writing is a thinking exercise. Students take the ideas that emerge from their conversation with a partner and use writing to sort out their thoughts. The act of casting ideas into coherent sentences helps shape these ideas and pushes students to develop their thinking without fear of error.*

I encourage students to use this time to express questions they have about the text. The articulation of a question often leads to tentative, exploratory answers. “Maybe Wordsworth is thinking...” “I wonder if...” Almost instinctively, students begin to interpret the poem.

This is not prewriting for an essay. Unless I were teaching a class that needed the threat of points to keep them on task, I wouldn’t even collect their papers. I don’t want to suggest by word or deed that this kind of writing is a negotiable product.

What I like best about having students free write before we begin discussion of a text is that it allows me to call on any student in the class without having it be a “Gotcha!” moment. Everyone has had a chance to think about Wordsworth’s poem, and everyone has something to share. Some have only questions, but the magic is that these are their questions, not mine.

### **Unfamiliar Language**

Definitions I commonly need to provide in response to student questions include:

- **sordid boon:** a shabby or somehow foul reward. The choice of these words suggests that Wordsworth views trading our relationship with nature for a lifetime of commerce as a bad bargain.
- **suckled in a creed outworn:** nurtured in an outdated/obsolete religion.
- **lea:** meadow.

- **Proteus:** a sea god from Greek mythology. He is able to change shape at will. Some students may remember from *The Odyssey* that Odysseus had to wrestle Proteus for information about getting home to Ithaca.
- **Triton:** another sea god who serves Poseidon from Greek mythology. His special role is blowing a conch that controls the waves, the “wreathéd horn.”

Student questions about Proteus and Triton provide an opportunity to teach about allusion. Adding the term to our word wall of literary terminology, I tell students that allusions are references to something from history, religion, mythology, or literature. I invite them to bring in copies of literary allusions they find in the newspaper. Our display of allusions in the news grows quickly. Examples:

- “Something Rotund in the State of Denmark,” an article on overeating in Scandinavia
- “Harvard? The Horror, the Horror!” an article on competition in Harvard Law School
- “The Crime of Punishment Taints All of America,” an editorial on prison reform

### **The Sonnet: A Refresher**

Though most students were taught the sonnet form in ninth grade when they studied *Romeo and Juliet*, it is never a bad thing to remind them of what they should know.

#### *The Sonnet*

*A sonnet has 14 lines and is usually written in iambic pentameter. Italian sonnets (Petrarchan) are divided into two parts, an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet. The octave typically presents a problem that the sestet resolves. The rhyme scheme of the octave is abbaabba. The rhyme scheme of the sestet is cdcdcd.*

In the first eight lines and the first half of line 9, the speaker in Wordsworth’s sonnet criticizes his times for being too much caught up in the material world. He feels society is “out of tune” with Nature.

In the middle of line 9, the poem turns on the exclamation, “Great God!” In the remaining lines of the sonnet, the speaker declares with passion his preference for the pagan world, which though primitive compared with the contemporary world, remained in touch with nature and the mysteries of life.

### **Discussion Questions**

I always invite students to consider why Wordsworth would choose such a traditional structure for a poem advocating a return to more primitive times.

Other questions that trigger stimulating discussion include:

- Do you find that electronic devices like cell phones cause the world to be too much with you?
- Is a return to more primitive ways a practical solution?
- Do you think it is possible to remain in tune with Nature and yet “get and spend”?

Poetry can be a vehicle for powerful thinking. Feed your students well.

## **The Sonnet As a Doorway to Poetry**

Ellen Greenblatt

“Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat.” — Robert Frost

“Poetry should be like fireworks, packed carefully and artfully, ready to explode with unpredictable effects.” — Lilian Moore

“Poetry must have something in it that is barbaric, vast and wild.” — Denis Diderot

Everyone, it seems, has something to say about poetry. But while the writers above are so passionate about its powers and possibilities, our students are sometimes daunted by the form, uncertain how to enter, and tentative about what to do after they can paraphrase the writer’s ideas.

A challenging, manageable, and finally, exhilarating way to begin, I have found, is with the sonnet, starting with Renaissance sonnets and moving to the present. The sonnet form is economical, even for poetry, itself the most economical of literary forms. And, though Renaissance sonnets are tough, they ultimately yield up their meanings while simultaneously making students aware of the importance of being able to recognize the shorthand of biblical and classical allusions.

So I invite students to begin a yearlong course in literature with an exploration of poetry and the amazing variety possible within the restricted form of 14 lines of iambic pentameter.

### **Writing to Learn: The Thought Piece**

The basis of “writing to learn” in my classes is what I call the “thought piece.” In this homework assignment—which for most occasions replaces in-class reading quizzes for poetry, prose, and drama—students begin with a word, a line, a section, an opinion, an argument, or a question (to which they do not have to know the answer). They use the beginning they have selected to attempt to write their way into an understanding of the piece they are preparing for class discussion. This focused free write frequently leads them into questions and insights they didn’t know they had. I assign a 1-10 score for thought pieces (based mainly on their exhibition of effort—scores of 7 and above are satisfactory), and though they are not meant to be revised, thought pieces might well become the basis of a more formal paper.

### Part I: Beginning to Read “Holy Sonnet #9”

I usually start with a sonnet by John Donne. Here’s a sample lesson based on “Holy Sonnet #9.”

#### **Holy Sonnet #9**

If poisonous minerals, and if that tree,  
Whose fruit threw death on else immortal us,  
If lecherous goats, if serpents envious  
Cannot be damned, alas, why should I be?  
Why should intent or reason, born in me,  
Make sins, else equal, in me more heinous?  
And mercy being easy and glorious  
To God, in His stern wrath why threatens He?  
But who am I, that dare dispute with Thee,  
O God? Oh, of Thine only worthy blood  
And my tears make it a heavenly Lethean flood,  
And drown in it my sins’ black memory;  
That Thou remember them, some claim as debt;  
I think it mercy if Thou wilt forget.

**John Donne (1618)**

#### **Directions**

- Give students the sonnet, then read it aloud to them. Read the sentences in the poem as sentences, with only the slightest pause at the end of enjambed lines, modeling for students that the ends of lines do not mean automatic stops. Encourage them to read with and for understanding.
- Invite a student volunteer to read the sonnet. Tell students beforehand that if they mispronounce a word or stop where there is no stop, you will gently help them. Then invite a second student volunteer to read the sonnet, following the same procedure.
- Distribute the following questions for students to think about. They can begin the discussion in small groups and finish thinking about the list for homework. I do not make them write answers, but you could certainly do that. Their homework will be the basis for the class discussion on Day 2.

#### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Who is the *speaker* in this poem? What kind of person is he or she?
2. To whom is he or she speaking? In other words, describe the speaker’s *audience*.
3. What is the *situation* and *setting* in time (era) and place?

4. What is the purpose of the poem?
5. State the poem's *central idea* or *theme* in a single sentence.
6. Indicate and explain (if you can) any *allusions*. Do the allusions share a common idea?
7. Describe the *structure* of the poem. What is its *meter* and *form*? (Scan it.)
8. How do the structure of the poem and its content relate?
9. What is the *tone* of the poem? How is it achieved?
10. Notice the poem's *diction*. Discuss any words that seem especially well chosen.
11. Are there any predominant *images* in the poem?
12. Note *metaphors*, *similes*, and *personification*, and discuss their effect.
13. Recognize and discuss examples of *paradox*, *overstatement*, and *understatement*.
14. Explain any *symbols*. Is the poem *allegorical*?
15. Explain the significance of any sound *repetition* (*alliteration*, etc.).
16. Discuss whether or not you think the poem is successful.

### Building a Literary Vocabulary

The italicized words above, plus other terms that inevitably come up in discussions of poetry, are printed below (feel free to make additions). You might make a handout of these terms so that students can develop their own glossaries of literary terms. When you or a student uses a term on the list in class, you might reinforce students' learning by asking one of them to define the term from their personal glossary. Encouraging students to have the glossaries out during discussion is a good first step! If you think it's a good idea, a terminology test is always an option. I don't usually find that necessary, because we are using the terms every day. But classes differ, and sometimes a test is the way to go.

### Vocabulary Reference/Review List

allegory	meter (iambic, trochaic, dactylic, anapestic)
alliteration	paradox
allusions	personification
assonance	purpose
audience	scan
central idea or theme	sestina
consonance	similes
free verse	situation and setting
hyperbole (overstatement)	sonnet
iambic pentameter	speaker
litotes (understatement)	symbol
metaphors	tone
meter (iambic, trochaic, dactylic, anapestic)	

**Donne: Notes for Teachers**

1. I spend at least two and often three full classes discussing this sonnet. Taking the time with a difficult sonnet like this pays off: when students begin to feel even a little comfortable with it, they begin to feel that they can tackle anything. Starting with the questions of speaker, audience, situation, and setting will set the tone for discussion of this sonnet and any other poetry.
2. Knowing enough of the Bible and classical mythology to pick up allusions is part of the AP curriculum. I explain to students that, no matter what their backgrounds, they need to recognize Biblical allusions. I would suggest *Genesis* and *Exodus* plus one of the narrative Gospels (*Matthew* or *Luke*) as summer reading or during the first weeks of class. Authors expect that students know these stories. Make a list of topics you want students to know (e.g., Creation, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, the sacrifice of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers) and assign students to “tell the Bible story.” Students seem to love both telling and listening to these stories.
3. This is a Shakespearean or English sonnet (three quatrains and a couplet), though the rhyme scheme (abba, etc.) is more like a Petrarchan sonnet. The distinction isn’t very interesting in the AP classroom. What we want students to think about is how the form serves the function. For instance, here the first quatrain poses a question. Try reading the quatrain aloud. It’s difficult—until you get to the last four words. The monosyllabic series, “why should I be?” sets up the tone of questioning, challenging, even baffled anger.
4. The second quatrain continues with two more questions, almost as if the speaker is building a case against God. But in line 9 (beginning with what I call a “flag” word—a word waving at you and signaling a change), the tone changes, and the speaker retreats from challenge and anger into a humble plea for mercy from God. But the couplet, with its neat summation, again returns to a kind of negotiation. The speaker is actually telling God (“I think it mercy”) what He ought to consider!



## Part II: A Different Kind of Sonnet: “If We Must Die”

### If We Must Die

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

**Claude McKay (1919)**

### McKay: Notes for Teachers

I chose this sonnet because, among other reasons, its “precious blood” allusion brings home to students the importance of knowing Biblical allusions. Using the restricted sonnet form also mimics the restrictions the speaker feels and articulates so passionately.

I don't always tell students ahead of time that McKay wrote “If We Must Die” as a response to the Harlem and Chicago race riots of 1919 and 1920. Without the knowledge of its historical context or of the race of its author, some students read it as a political manifesto of whatever struggle is in the news at the moment, while others see it as an emblem of the Holocaust or of besieged peoples in a war. The multiplicity of readings raises an interesting question about interpretation: Who owns the literature once it is published? I want students to know McKay's place in the Harlem Renaissance, and I don't keep that information from them. But confronting the poem without knowing its historical context makes them think about the importance of the context from which a work springs. Interpreting the poem in the light of contemporary events is not wrong; in fact, it enables us to discuss the richness of literature that manages to speak across decades and centuries and contexts. You can find more information about Claude McKay, especially excerpts from his meditations on his own poetry at [www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/mckay/mckay.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/mckay/mckay.htm).

**Part III: Seamus Heaney “Sonnet #5” from *Clearances***

When we have finished reading Donne and McKay, students could easily have the sense that sonnets are argumentative or hortatory. That’s why I offer the silken “Sonnet #5” from *Clearances*.

**Sonnet #5 from *Clearances***

The cool that came off sheets just off the line  
Made me think the damp must still be in them  
But when I took my corners of the linen  
And pulled against her, first straight down the hem  
And then diagonally, then flapped and shook  
The fabric like a sail in a cross-wind,  
They made a dried-out undulating thwack.  
So we’d stretch and fold and end up hand to hand  
For a split second as if nothing had happened  
For nothing had that had not always happened  
Beforehand, day by day, just touch and go,  
Coming close again by holding back  
In moves where I was X and she was O  
Inscribed in sheets she’d sewn from ripped-out flour sacks.

**Seamus Heaney (1987)**

**Heaney: Notes for Teachers**

Students love this sonnet, and the first thing they want to know is to whom Heaney wrote it. Although he wrote it about his mother, I’m of two minds about when to offer this revelation. I want students to understand that knowing that the poem is about his mother, written after she died, does not preclude other interpretations. I think that tenderness and choreography and sexuality are all present in the intimacy of mundane tasks. This raises again an important question: Who owns the literature? Once an author publishes something, does she or he retain control over how people read it? Even if an author announces the meaning, does that necessarily keep us from seeing other meanings?

The Heaney sonnet has enormous power, I think, because of the intense and easy intimacy it conveys. Some see this as sexual intimacy, and perhaps it is. But approaching intimacy through folding sheets made out of flour sacks on which the xs and os are still visible is enormously poignant. Reading this as the third of the sequence of sonnets shows the enormous elasticity of this most rigid of forms. In Heaney’s poem, the fluid quality,

the gentle rhythm of coming close and going apart, almost belies the rigidity of the sonnet form. And that's another interesting aspect to discuss.

#### **Part IV: Trying Their Hands**

After reading a selection of sonnets from Donne and Shakespeare and Milton to St. Vincent Millay and Heaney, students might well want to try their hands at writing one of their own. What better way to have them display their knowledge of the form? Of course, the authors and their classmates can analyze each others' as yet unknown sonnets using the very same list of questions we used for the sonnets of the authors with whom we are already familiar.

## Poetry: Lesson One

Linda Hubert

I am calling the unit “Lesson One” because it involves the first exercises that I have often relied upon to introduce the study of poetry to my college students. Although specifically concerned with a constituency of twelfth grade AP Literature and Composition students, some of the specific suggestions for assignments might well be integrated into a variety of eleventh or twelfth grade courses, where poetry is a genre of focus. The series of interrelated lessons and exercises can be easily adapted for other contexts; some parts could even be used as the culmination of the study of certain poems.

The first two steps of “Lesson One” can be completed within the course of one or two class sessions, if desired. Steps two and three can represent two additional days of study—or many more, depending on how the teacher might expand them.

### Step One: Attempts at Definitions of Poetry

### Step Two: Distinguishing Between Poetry and Prose

### Step Three: “Meta-Poetry”—Poems About Reading and Writing Poetry

### Step Four: Writing Poetry to Understand It

## Lesson One: What Is Poetry?

“Sir, what is poetry?” “Why, Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is.” — Samuel Johnson; April 1776 (from *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*)

Like United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when he provided his famous non-definition of obscenity (“...I know it when I see it”), Samuel Johnson dodges the challenge of describing poetry and acknowledges the inherent subjectivity of any attempt at definition. However, he implies that we must know it when we see it. Perhaps that is so, but perhaps—and more likely—we have widely differing ideas about what the word *poetry* means, given its various denotations and connotations—and even what a poem is meant to look like, sound like, accomplish, and/or be.

Beginning a unit on poetry, whether it is to last for a few hours, days, weeks, or an entire semester, is a daunting challenge. “*So much depends...*” on whether students become engaged in the process with enthusiasm from the start. As English teachers well know, an unhealthy percentage of students greet the task of reading poetry with apprehension or

disdain: they have already been educated to their own “inadequacies” as readers by previous classroom experiences, or they have become convinced of the irrelevancy of poetry in the contemporary high-tech world, or they see it as a code they have no desire to break, or they simply have a million and one things they would rather do. The chief object of this poetry lesson is to convince students of the value of *knowing* poetry—not just as an academic enterprise (or to perform well on a test of skills), but also as a lifelong engagement. Hence we’ll consider some philosophical or theoretical questions—but not pressed in so heavy-handed a way that all but the very best students will check out. This crucial first session has to be fun.

Since poetry texts often begin with some query about “what,” indeed, is being studied, these exercises could be used to enable or enrich the textbook commentary. However, teachers (particularly in first-year college classes) seldom have the option of a dedicated course on poetry, so other uses may be more likely. There is no reason why this lesson cannot be incorporated into a study of nineteenth-century British poets or early American writers or, indeed, poems linked by theme, form, or ethnic origins. As the AP class undertakes the study of particular poems or groups of poems chosen for an infinite variety of curricular reasons, engaging students from the outset in at least some of the definitional questions provoked by poetry is a worthy, constructivist task. The exploration will be open-ended, and teacher and students alike must become comfortable with the knowledge that “definitions”—like poems—can be as ambiguous, dynamic, elusive, and distinctive as the individuals, cultures, and literary trends that inspire and shape them.

### **Objectives:**

- To stimulate thinking about the comprehensive implications of the word poetry
- To introduce poetry as a genre
- To inspire an appreciative response to rich texts, whether prose or poetry
- To help students begin to shape their own definition(s) of poetry
- To overcome any residue of poetry anxiety
- To underscore the important role of poetry and poetics in a risky world

**Step One:**

**Attempts at Definitions of Poetry**

1. Hand out blank index cards. Give students 10 minutes to do—thoughtfully—the following tasks:
  - i. Write down their reactions to the word poetry—including their stab at a definition.
  - ii. Write down what they consider to be the distinction between prose and poetry.
2. Ask two students to read only the definitions, and another two to write them on the board. Consider; discuss; decide which, if any, have merit—or at least possibilities.
3. Explore with the class the ramifications of the word by providing the definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary* or from some dictionary or dictionaries of your choice. Work through each of the meanings. See if any of these definitions embrace the suggestions made by the students. Be sure to pay special attention to striking definitions; for instance, *Microsoft Encarta College Dictionary* (St. Martin's Press, 2001) includes these two provocative entries:
  - **Beauty or Grace:** something that resembles poetry in its beauty, rhythmic grace, or imaginative, elevated, or decorative style.
  - **Poetic Quality:** a poetic or particularly beautiful or graceful quality in something.
4. Now, consider some of these “definitions” provided by poets:

**Lofty Definitions**

“...something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.”

—Aristotle, *Poetics*, Chapter 9 (c. 350 B.C.)

“Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science.”

—William Wordsworth, Preface, *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)

**Definitions That Address Form and Function**

“I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth.”

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle” (1842)

“For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet” (1841-42)

(Students are familiar with these two writers. Have them note the congruency of dates and speculate about the oppositional nature of the quotations.)

### **Definitions That Focus on the Impact of Poems upon the Reader**

“If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?”

—Emily Dickinson (from *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson: By Her Niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi*, 1924)

“quite simply a poem shd fill you up with something cd make you swoon, stop in yr tracks, change yr mind, or make it up, a poem shd happen to you like cold water or a kiss.”

—Ntozake Shange, “Self-Interview,” quoted by Alicia Ostriker, “American Poetry, Now Shaped by Women,” *New York Times Book Review* (March 9, 1986)

These are just some “for instances.” Shelley and Wordsworth are responsible for many extractable comments—but so are any number of modern and contemporary poets. Helping students figure out where these definitions or reactions fall in reference to the dictionary definitions fortifies their sense of the word in the world.

### **Options for Assignments**

1. Suggest that students search in text(s) referenced above to find their own preferred quotations to share with the class the next occasion.
2. Give students who can handle the challenge Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry” (or another treatise on poetry) to ponder, to discuss, and to address with (perhaps collaborative) reaction papers.
3. Assign an argumentative essay that honors either Emerson’s or Poe’s approach—based on just these quotations or the essays from which they derive.

4. Focus on the Romantic responses. Help students notice the similarity of reactions in a given period by sending them to Keats, Byron, and/or Coleridge, as well as Wordsworth and Shelley.



**Step Two:**

**Grappling with the Distinctions Between Prose and Poetry**

“It may be safely affirmed that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. We are fond of tracing the resemblance between Poetry and Painting, and, accordingly, we call them Sisters: but where shall we find bonds of connection sufficiently strict to typify the affinity betwixt metrical and prose composition? They both speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance... the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both.”

— William Wordsworth, Preface, *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)

“[Poetry] has the virtue of being able to say twice as much as prose in half the time, and the drawback, if you do not give it your full attention, of seeming to say half as much in twice the time.”

— Christopher Fry, *Time*, (April 3, 1950)

Return to the “distinction” part of the first task assigned. (It is of course possible to begin the introductory lesson pondering the difference between prose and poetry.) Collect and discuss the initial descriptions provided by the students. It is usual for the majority of students to characterize poetry as verse, that is, language written with obvious patterns of rhyme and meter. You may hope they volunteer factors such as concentrated language, intensity, density, fresh imagery, and rich diction. To make the point that prose and poetry are often difficult to distinguish—that poetry can be prosaic and prose poetical—try one of the following exercises:

**Exercise: Distinguishing Poetry from Prose—How Hard Is It?**

1. Give to each group of four or five students one of the following quotations, either in its actual form or that into which it has been recast. Ask them to determine whether they have received the author’s version or the phony. Encourage them to list the characteristics that they consider self-identifying as poetry or prose so as to explain their judgment. Reconvene the class to present results. Reward for accuracy, compelling arguments, or both.
2. Alternatively, give them both versions and let them select the accurate—or preferred—form. Still another alternative would be to give them the actual version and let them prepare an alternate version themselves (by hand or on computers) to see if they can stump their colleagues. This can save valuable teacher time—

- plus give students hands-on contact with the language of the pieces—a good thing.
3. You may of course add to or substitute for these quotations. Possibilities are infinite. Virginia Woolf, Herman Melville, Joyce, Faulkner, and a host of modern and contemporary novelists (as well as “prose” dramatists from Beckett to Williams) are lyrical; many contemporary poems are prosaic (if not pedestrian).

### Sample Text

#### 1. (a) Walt Whitman in original prose:

"This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body...."

—from Walt Whitman, Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*

**1. (b) Walt Whitman arranged in lines as if poetry:**

This is what you shall do:  
Love the earth and sun and the animals,  
Despise riches, give alms to every one  
    who asks,  
Stand up for the stupid and crazy,  
Devote your income and labor to others,  
Hate tyrants,  
Argue not concerning God,  
Have patience and indulgence toward the  
    people,  
Take off your hat to nothing known or unknown  
Or to any man or number of men.  
Go freely with powerful uneducated  
    persons  
And with the young  
And with the mothers of families.  
Read these leaves in the open air  
Every season  
Of every year of your life.  
Re-examine all you have been told  
At school or church or in any book.

Dismiss whatever insults your own soul,  
And your very flesh shall be  
a great poem.

—from Walt Whitman, Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*

**2. (a) Whitman's poetry:**

WHOEVER you are, I fear you are walking the walks of dreams,  
I fear these supposed realities are to melt from under your feet  
    and hands,  
Even now your features, joys, speech, house, trade, manners,  
    troubles, follies, costume, crimes, dissipate away from you,  
Your true soul and body appear before me,  
They stand forth out of affairs, out of commerce, shops, work,  
    farms, clothes, the house, buying, selling, eating, drinking,  
    suffering, dying.

Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you be my poem,  
I whisper with my lips close to your ear,  
I have loved many women and men, but I love none better than you.  
—from Walt Whitman, “To You” (1860)

**2. (b) Now ask students to arrange the above lines as prose.**

**3. (a) Offer two prose passages cast as poems:**

Doubt not, O Poet, but persist  
Say ‘It is in me, and shall out.’  
Stand there, balked and dumb,  
Stuttering and stammering,  
Hissed and hooted,  
Stand and strive,  
Until at last rage draw out of thee  
That dream-power which every night shows  
Thee is thine own; a power  
Transcending all limit and privacy,  
And by virtue of which a man is  
The conductor of the whole river  
Of electricity.  
Nothing walks, or creeps, or grows, or exists,  
Which must not in turn arise and walk before him  
As exponent of his meaning.  
Comes he to that power,  
His genius is no longer exhaustible.  
All the creatures  
By pairs and by tribes  
Pour into his mind  
As into a Noah's ark,  
To come forth again to people a new world.  
—from Emerson, “The Poet” (1841-42)

He stood naked and alone in darkness,  
Far from the lost world of the streets and faces;  
He stood upon the ramparts of his soul,  
Before the lost land of himself;  
Heard inland murmurs of lost seas,  
The far interior music of the horns.  
The last voyage, the longest, the best.

“O sudden and impalpable faun,  
Lost in the thickets of myself,  
And I will hunt you down until  
You cease to haunt my eyes with hunger.  
I heard your foot-falls in the desert,  
I saw your shadow in old buried cities,  
I heard your laughter running down  
A million streets, but I did not find you there.  
And no leaf hangs for me in the forest;  
I shall find no door in any city.  
But in the city of myself,  
Upon the continent of my soul,  
I shall find the forgotten language,  
The lost world, a door where I may enter,  
music strange as any ever sounded.  
—Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929)

**3 (b) Provide students with the original versions.**

**Step Three:**

**Meta-Poetry: Poems About the Process of Reading and Writing Poetry**

Three poems by the contemporary poets Josephine Jacobsen, Linda Pastan, and Marilyn Nelson are particularly nice choices to continue the discussion of what makes a poem—and a poet.

**Gentle Reader**

Late in the night when I should be asleep  
under the city stars in a small room  
I read a poet. A poet: not  
a versifier. Not a hot-shot  
ethic-monger, laying about  
him; not a diary of lying  
about in cruel cruel beds, crying  
A poet, dangerous and steep  
O God, it peels me, juices me like a press;  
This poetry drinks me, eats me, gut and marrow  
until I exist in its jester's sorrow,  
until my juices feed a savage sight  
that runs along the lines, bright  
as beast's eyes. The rubble splays to dust:  
city, book, bed, leaving my ear's lust  
saying like Molly, yes, yes, yes O yes  
—Josephine Jacobsen, from *The Shade-Seller* (Doubleday 1974)

**How I Discovered Poetry**

It was like soul-kissing, the way the words  
filled my mouth as Mrs. Purdy read them from her desk.  
All the other kids zoned an hour ahead to 3:15,  
but Mrs. Purdy and I wandered lonely as clouds borne  
by a breeze off Mount Parnassus. She must have seen  
the darkest eyes in the room brim: The next day  
she gave me a poem she'd chosen especially for me  
to read to the all except for me white class.  
She smiled when she told me to read it, smiled harder,  
said oh yes I could. She smiled harder and harder  
until I stood and opened my mouth to banjo playing  
darkies, pickaninnies, disses and dats. When I finished  
my classmates stared at the floor. We walked silent

to the buses, awed by the power of words.

—Marilyn Nelson, from *The Fields of Praise* (LSU University Press 1997)

**Prosody 101**

When they taught me that what mattered most  
was not the strict iambic line goose-stepping  
over the page but the variations  
in that line and the tension produced  
on the ear by the surprise of difference,  
I understood yet didn't understand  
exactly, until just now, years later  
in spring, with the trees already lacy  
and camellias blowsy with middle age,  
I looked out and saw what a cold front had done  
to the garden, sweeping in like common language,  
unexpected in the sensuous  
extravagance of a Maryland spring.  
There was a dark edge around each flower  
as if it had been outlined in ink  
instead of frost, and the tension I felt  
between the expected and actual  
was like that time I came to you, ready  
to say goodbye for good, for you had been  
a cold front yourself lately, and as I walked in  
you laughed and lifted me up in your arms  
as if I too were lacy with spring  
instead of middle aged like the camellias,  
and I thought: so this is Poetry!

—Linda Pastan, from *Carnival Evening: New and Selected Poems*  
(Norton 1998)

**For Discussion**

1. These poems work well in the above exercises for Step Two. Arrange them as prose. This exercise with these poems becomes a splendid opportunity to talk about the line as a unit in poems compared to the sentence in prose and about syntax (the grammatical structure of the lines) and the way it is countered by meter. You can keep this discussion simple—saving the complications of prosody for another time—or head right into them with these poems. All three depend on iambic pentameter—but with lots of emphatic and effective variations. Jacobsen's lines often open with stressed syllables, creating trochees that underscore

- emotion. The “goose-stepping” line in Pastan’s poem is particularly amusing, but of course the first part of that poem is splendid in spelling out the basic “101” principle of prosody: the importance of the variations to the primary meter. Nelson’s could be considered a radical variation on the sonnet (without regular rhyme and highly irregular meter); the poem is prosaic—the retrospective recollection of an adult, but in language that re-creates the childhood experience.
2. How important does the word “poet” become in Jacobsen’s poem? Consider the description of good poetry that the speaker in Jacobsen’s poem provides—and reprise those definitions with which these lessons began. Ask which of the poets’ definitions of poetry might be dismissed by her stated preferences (Poe with the versifying; Emerson with his form-directing ideas or themes). You’ll no doubt have to gloss the reference to confessional poetry—and Molly Bloom’s famous line from Joyce’s *Ulysses* (though they’ll surely pick up on the sexual innuendo that expresses the speaker’s passion—or, even stronger, “lust”—for what she defines as good poetry). Discuss the loaded language of “ethic-monger”—particularly in conjunction with the smart-aleck “hot-shot”—and comment on the emphatic syncopation effected by the rhymes: *not, hot, shot*. Ask how a poet can be “dangerous” and “steep.” Discuss the energy of the second stanza with its graphic images of consumption, its turbulent syntax, its strong verbs.
  3. Students will probably need to define prosody. Work together to show how Pastan moves from a technical definition of prosody to an experiential definition of poetry. How does “common language” conflict with poetry? Sort through the other contrasts that the poem sets up: regular iambic and variations, spring (warmth) and the cold front, youth and middle age. Ask how the poem conveys a sense of the speaker’s working through the process of making connections between the poetry class of her youth and her adult “epiphany.” Is this a function of syntax? Of meter? Of the shifts in time and place? Explore the images, both literal and figurative—the “goose-stepping” iambic line, the lacy trees (and the “lacy” speaker), the camellias. (It helps to bring a camellia in for view: students seem to be flower-challenged—at least with respect to knowing them by name.) How does the mention of “ink” bring us back to the idea of language and the question of poetry?
  4. Glosses here will include Mount Parnassus and “wandered lonely as clouds.” The Wordsworth allusion can remind students of the romantic principles invoked by several of the poets cited earlier. Ask them to discuss how these references and the noun “soul-kissing” convey the child’s response to the poem the teacher is reading. Again we’re seeing images of words “fill[ing] my mouth”; compare with the speaker’s reaction in Jacobsen’s poem. Reflect on the diction of the poem within the poem: “pickaninnies,” “darkies,” “disses and dats.” How do the pejorative terms become instrumental in conveying theme? How is the speaker in Nelson’s poem betrayed by the poem that the teacher gives her? What recognition is achieved by the final “We”?



5. All three poems are by women. Discuss with students how this affects the perspective from which the poems are conceived—or experienced? How does race factor in Nelson’s poem?
6. A unit on poems about poetry might also include Archibald MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica,” Seamus Heaney’s “Digging,” Mark Strand’s “Eating Poetry,” and D. C. Berry’s “On Reading Poems to a Senior Class at South High.” Jorie Graham’s “Vertigo” (from *The End of Beauty*, Ecco Press, 1987) is a sophisticated poem that can be interpreted to be about shaping thoughts and feelings into the forms of poetry—or, as she says, “story,” even as it is more comprehensively about the tension between aspiration and realization, reach and limits.

#### Step Four:

#### Writing Poems to Understand the Poems of Other Poets

Fundamental to the study of poetry should be the opportunity for students to explore the work of particular poets and their poetics by writing themselves. Following is a short list of exercises that have worked well for me.

1. Model a poem after a poet being studied. These can be serious attempts at imitation—or witty parodies (fun to do with Wordsworth, Emily Dickinson, or Stephen Crane, among others). Engage the idiosyncratic aspects of the poet’s style to the extent possible. My favorite example: When studying Whitman, teach “There Was a Child Went Forth.” The speaker in that poem collects all the images of his youth that he feels made him who he is; the poem uses both the day and the year—working through early spring to the “fifth-month” and moving from morning images to the images of evening. The child absorbs the flowers and fauna about him, is affected by his teachers and friends, is influenced by his parents (his father’s portrait is not flattering!). Assign the composition of a similarly autobiographical poem, challenging the students to collect significant images from their own early lives. Ask them to use Whitman’s measure, employing his prosaic free verse, driven to poetry by its repetitions of words and rhythms and its carefully observed images. This exercise provides a wonderful opportunity to get to know your students—and they feel in control and seem to love doing it.
2. Provide a prompt for a simile that derives from a poet’s text, i.e., “My love is like....” Challenge the students to create their own similes. Compare the student work with the original—for fun and for edification. You can take this exercise a step further by requiring that the simile be positioned in a line or two of iambic pentameter—or the meter of the original poem.
3. Suggest that students create as many metaphors or similes as possible for a very ordinary object that might be mentioned in the text of poem under scrutiny (pencil, telephone, light bulb, fireplug, dandelion leaves, mailbox shoe, cat’s eyes,

- end of a leaf's stem where it connects to the twig, star, and so forth). Make a poem from the best of these.
4. Ask for a reply to a poem that expresses a position with which a student might argue—or suggest that they write both parts of the argument as Wordsworth does in “Expostulation and Reply” and “The Tables Turned.”
  5. Have students write an epitaph for a poet being studied. (Or their own epitaph? Or their own epitaph as a poet?)
  6. Provide one of the poems being studied without the line endings being observed. The students are to make their own line divisions. Compare with the original.
  7. A very obvious assignment is to have students write a poem in a form being studied: a sonnet, sestina, or dramatic monologue. They can write stanzas using ballad meter when studying old and modern ballads. (Musical students can provide the tunes for their ballads.)

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## Sound and Silence: An Interview with Billy Collins

Renee H. Shea

*Appointed Poet Laureate of the United States in 2001, Billy Collins is the author of six collections of poetry, including Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems (Random House, 2001). He is a recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, a Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College of the City University of New York, and a visiting writer at Sarah Lawrence College. Collins initiated “Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools” (www.loc.gov.poetry/180/) with the hope of making poetry a part of students’ daily lives and edited an anthology of the poems entitled Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry (Random House, 2003).*

**Renee Shea:** What were your goals for starting the Web site *Poetry 180*?

**Billy Collins:** My idea was to supplement the teaching of poetry for high school students by providing them with a poem a day, which they would simply hear, maybe as part of the morning announcements. They would not have to write about the poems but simply listen. I think one of the anxieties that sometimes degrades the spirit of poetry in academic settings is students’ uncertainty about how to approach a poem and about dealing with difficulty in poetry. In the Introduction to *Poetry 180*, I present a student syllogism: “I speak and write English. This poem is written in English. I have no idea what this poem is saying.” That’s a very rudimentary, fundamental frustration!

So I tried to present 180 poems that were clear enough to be received on the first bounce, the first reading. The second motive was to expose students to extremely contemporary poems—because textbooks and anthologies tend to lag behind the times anywhere between 50 and 400 years—to kind of seduce students by hooking them with a poem that’s clear, contemporary, yet interesting. It might be a poem about skateboarding or music or son/daughter relationships to parents.

**RS:** I read in an anthology entitled *First Loves*<sup>1</sup> that your first poetic love was John Donne’s “The Flea,” which is from the seventeenth century. Yet, are you saying that teachers should start with the contemporary?

**BC:** I think reverse chronology is good, using contemporary poetry as a sort of seductive device, or going achronological—doing a contemporary poem, then one by Donne or Hardy, and talking about some common element in both of them, whether it’s humor or love or irony.

**RS:** In your poem entitled “Introduction to Poetry,” you warned against the inclination to “tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it / ...beating it with a hose / to find out what it really means,” but don’t we have to teach formal elements of poetry at some point?

**BC:** The drawback in teaching features of poetry is that it’s like dismantling a car and putting the parts out on the floor so you can identify the carburetor and the distributor. What’s a simile and metaphor? But you can’t put the key in the ignition and make the car go.

As far as its formal aspects go, I like to teach poetry in a participatory way. I get students to write three or four lines of iambic tetrameter, for instance. I tell them not to worry about rhyme or even making sense, just to get the beat right. Even writing nonsense in iambic tetrameter will present obstacles and resistance. I do this so they’ll experience the difficulty that formal poets experience—so they’ll feel the resistance against their expressive desires. I think that’s what formal poetry—or even informal poetry where the form is a little bit submerged, a little less apparent—is about. Unless the poet feels some kind of counterpressure or resistance to his or her desire to get up on the branch and sing, I don’t think there’s much critical activity going on.

So whether it’s a strict sonnet form or three-line stanzas, it’s good to put students in the poetry driver’s seat. They’ll resist this, of course, but you have to tell them that they’re not committing acts of literature here! They’re just going through a very simple exercise so they can feel what Milton and Keats and Wordsworth felt, and they’ll appreciate poetry more. I took oil painting classes many years ago for a summer, not because I wanted to become a painter, but I wanted to experience the difficulty of oil painting so I could appreciate it more.

Also, if students are made aware of what diction gear the poet’s in and how to shift, they can use it on any test. I think it’s a good thing to point out that English has two personalities— the very formal Latinate one and the more down-to-earth Anglo-Saxon personality. The Latinate tends to be conceptual with words like “institution” and “democratization,” and the Anglo-Saxon side tends to be concrete and material: “table,” “chin,” “bottle.” Any really great poet in English—and Shakespeare is the absolute master—knows that he or she has these two faucets at their disposal, and they mix the two together. So when Shakespeare says, “the multitudinous sea incarnadine” [from *Macbeth*], he takes this one little Anglo-Saxon monosyllabic word and puts these Latinate words on either side almost to crush it. Another good example is Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz”: it starts in Anglo-Saxon, shifts for two lines to Latinate, and then goes back to Anglo-Saxon.

**RS:** How do we, as teachers, achieve that balance between personal response and critical analysis? I'm afraid we often ask students to respond freely, but then we don't value that when we ask them to write.

**BC:** I don't have an answer to that exactly, because unless their responses are somewhat guided, they'll be led into lots of irrelevant areas. If students think, "This is poetry, so anything goes," then a poem about love invites them to talk about their autobiographical traumas with love. They need to be kept on track within the structure of the poem.

I think there are two ways to do that. One is to try to detect the poem's organization—to find out whether it comes in stanzas or if it doesn't, where there's a break, maybe in blocks or lines. Then ask the students to organize their responses according to the organization of the poem. So if the poem has three stanzas, encourage them to make their responses three-part. That means, then, talking about organization and structure first.

Another way that I think is more interesting is to substitute for the question "What does this poem mean?" the question "How does this poem go?" In other words, how does this poem move? You could compare it to maneuvers on a basketball court. How does this poem find its way down the court? One way to start is to look at the very beginning of the poem to see where we are, then look at the end of the poem and see where we end up.

A good example would be "Dover Beach," where you start very simply, "The sea is calm tonight / ... the moon lies fair / Upon the straits..." That's very tranquil, simple language. How does he [Matthew Arnold] get from there to "where ignorant armies clash by night," this disturbing, apocalyptic vision of struggle and alarm? So you can see that, well, he escalates at this point, he shifts direction here, introduces the element of love here. So you isolate various "shift points" of the poem, like shift points on a racecar. That relieves the students of saying, "This is what the poem means." It asks them to follow the poet's shifts of thought and tone; how do we get from the beginning to the end? Once a student can answer questions like that, the so-called meaning of the poem will be revealed.

**RS:** In an interview in *The Paris Review*<sup>2</sup>, you commented, "The basis of trust for a reader used to be meter and end-rhyme. Now it's tone that establishes the poet's authority." But tone is so difficult to teach. Any advice?

**BC:** The only way to teach tone is by recitation. I know that's old-fashioned—what we used to call elocution. But if a student came to my office and could recite "Dover Beach"—and I don't mean with operatic intensity standing up on a chair—but if a student were just able to say the lines in a way that clearly reveals an understanding of the emotional or conceptual run of the poem, I would prefer that to a 10-page paper on the poem.

One way to express tone is to have a number of students read a few lines of a poem. Maybe have one read the first four or five lines, then ask another student to read, [using] different ways of making that sound. You could bring in professional recordings, too.

**RS:** These days it seems that many of the young male students have no use for poetry. What can we do to challenge the stereotype that poetry isn't a guy thing?

**BC:** I think *Poetry 180* is one answer. I have poems about cars and kissing...kissing in cars! The idea is that you put out 180 hooks, especially for the recalcitrant boy with his baseball hat on sideways in full slouch in the back of the classroom, and there will be a poem for him somewhere. All of those poems are meant to be a doorway into why you're reading.

**RS:** What about hip-hop and rap? Is it a good idea to use that as a kind of bridge to interest students in poetry?

**BC:** I don't think hip-hop particularly leads to reading other poetry. These are fairly separate interests. If you're trying to get a student interested in music, and you play Dixieland, it doesn't mean he'll be interested in Mozart. Just because you can put hip-hop and John Donne under the general umbrella of poetry doesn't mean that one will necessarily lead to the other. There are such discrete differences.

**RS:** Can you describe the very best teacher of poetry you ever had?

**BC:** It wasn't until I got to graduate school, when I met a professor and poet named Robert Peters, who taught Victorian poetry. He taught it from the poet's point of view, which means instead of talking about how the poem reflected Victorian attitudes or how it fit into Tennyson's life, he did close readings of the poem, not even for analysis but for appreciation of sound. At first I thought I was wasting my time in this course because I was very test-oriented, and I thought, "I'm not learning anything I could be tested on here." But gradually I realized he was teaching me something more valuable. He had such a sensitive ear for poetry. For the first time in a classroom, I was really reading poetry as poetry, not as culture, but as a set of sounds set to rhythm.

**RS:** What have you learned from your own teaching about teaching poetry?

**BC:** I think I used to be very analysis-oriented, and I was definitely from the school of New Criticism. I would lead students through a poem and put on a kind of analytical performance of the poem. I think I've shifted away from that to some degree in that I try to emphasize now in my teaching the pleasures of poetry that don't have anything to do with conceptual pleasure. Unfortunately, these pleasures often don't require a teacher!

I see three things you can do with a poem besides analyzing it or in addition to analyzing. Memorization is one. Another is to write out the poem in long hand. It's a way of duplicating the compositional experience, and writing it out slows you down. The other way is reciting it aloud.

In *Poetry 180*, I write about the introduction of silence into the classroom, which I know is a very difficult thing to do. This actually goes back to my teacher, Robert Peters. If we were doing a Tennyson poem, we'd come to an interesting part or a complex part. He'd have us read it, and then allow maybe 20 seconds, which is a long time. Then someone else would read it, then another silence. I think that silence as an acceptable mode of being in a classroom is a very good way to teach poetry.

### Notes

1. Carmela Ciuraru, ed., *First Loves: Poets Introduce the Essential Poems That Captivated and Inspired Them* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 62.
2. Billy Collins, "The Art of Poetry LXXXIII," interview by George Plimpton, *The Paris Review*, Fall 2001, [www.parisreview.com/tpr159/collins.htm](http://www.parisreview.com/tpr159/collins.htm).

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**Billy Collins**, poet laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003, is one of those rare poets who has won both critical acclaim and a wide popular audience. He has been a professor at Lehman College, City University of New York, for more than 30 years.

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**Renee H. Shea** has been involved with the AP Program for over 25 years as a Reader and Question Leader for both English exams, and has led AP and AP Vertical Team® workshops. Currently a professor of English at Bowie State University in Maryland, she has written on numerous contemporary authors, including Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Edwidge Danticat, Rita Dove, and Grace Paley.

**Richard Wilbur**, poet laureate of the United States from 1987 to 1988, is known for his witty verse and keen interest in traditional forms. He has published many books of poetry, including *Things of This World: Poems*, which was awarded both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award.

**Eric Wimmers** has been developing tests at ETS since 1977. For many years, he has served as the ETS consultant to the AP English Committee, responsible for the content of both the AP English Literature and the English Language examination, and is an experienced writer of multiple-choice questions on literary texts.

