

## 1. The Importance and Relevance of Poetry

We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.  
~Dead Poet's Society

Your immediate reaction to the study of poetry is possibly, "Why do we have to learn this?" This is a fair reaction because at first sight there may not appear to be much relationship between poetry and everyday life. However, you may be surprised to find out how much contact you do, unknowingly, have with poetry probably every day, for example, in song lyrics.

If you search for the words to a favorite song, you would confirm three things:

1. Poems are generally written in lines.
2. Poems may be arranged in stanzas.
3. The words to songs are called lyrics, which are in fact, poems.

### Poems in other places

- Rappers "speak" in poetry.
- At weddings and funerals it is quite normal to read a poem as part of the service.

So why might poetry be used?

- The reason for the message: the occasion is special and requires different words from everyday.
- The form: the message is in stanzas and looks different and special.
- The word order: the words are arranged in a different order from normal speech.
- Choice of language: the message is expressed in a special way by using the best words in the best possible way.
- Length of message: the message uses only a few words. Words can serve more than one purpose and are carefully chosen for poetry.

### Cultural importance of poetry

One of the main reasons why poetry is important to people is because it appeals to our emotions and feelings. Part of this appeal lies in the history of poetry. Poetry is a very old art form, as most, if not all, cultures since ancient times have had a tradition of poetry, whether oral or written, spoken or sung. Poetry is an important part of our human heritage and cultural history,

and millions of people around the world appreciate it for its uniqueness, beauty and ability to touch human emotions.

### CHAPTER 1 REVIEW

Poetry is **relevant** to us because we experience it everyday in the form of song lyrics and in messages on other occasions.

Poetry is **important** to us because we call on poetry to help us express ourselves when we feel that our normal everyday language is just not good enough for the occasion. Poetry is important to most cultures as an expression of human history and emotions.

### For your interest

- Poetry has always been considered important for special occasions, so important that, in 1668 in Britain, a position for a poet was officially established as a royal "job." The person holding this job was called the Poet Laureate. For more than 150 years this tradition was kept until Queen Victoria changed it so the position became more of an award or recognition of achievement in poetry.
- William Shakespeare uses both prose and poetry in his plays. The speeches made by major characters are written as poetry and those by minor characters are prose.
- Poets are creative artists—they use words in the way an artist uses paints to be creative. Like other artists, poets either let their thoughts flow freely or choose to work within the confines of a set form. In either case, the poet strives to create the perfect work of art which, through its words, creates a feeling, mood, atmosphere or story. In creating that work of art, the poet refines and revises, carefully choosing, selecting and sometimes creating words, which will do the best job in creating the sounds and images he/she wishes the reader to experience.

## 2. Themes and Subjects in Poetry

Poetry explores many different themes and subjects to try to record or make sense of human experience. Begin able to work out the theme and the subject of a poem is an essential key to unlocking the meaning of a poem. To find the difference between the theme and the subject matter, remember that the subject is a more specific aspect of a broad theme. For example, a major theme in poetry is war, but the subject of a particular poem about war might be the effect of war on a child. In other words, the theme can be summed up in a few words and the title often hints at the theme. There may be more than one theme in a poem, but generally one theme is dominant. The subject matter, on the other hand, refers to what happens in the poem, what the poem is about. If you were asked to paraphrase the poem for someone who hadn't read it yet, you would mention both the theme and the subject.

### Theme and Subject Example:

"Symphony in yellow" by Oscar Wilde

An omnibus across a bridge  
Crawls like a yellow butterfly,  
And, here and there, a passer-by  
Shows like a little restless midge.

Big barges full of yellow hay  
Are moored against the shadowy wharf,  
And, like a yellow silken scarf,  
The thick fog hangs along the quay.

The yellow leaves begin to fade  
And flutter from the Temple elms,  
And at my feet the pale green Thames  
Lies like a rod of rippled jade.

### Q: What is the theme and subject of the poem?

The theme might be an appreciation of the beauty of the color yellow. In the poem the poet describes the environment around him, which includes images of activity on and around the River Thames. The poet highlights a yellow bus, yellow hay, yellow fog, yellow leaves. The poem ends by contrasting these yellow objects with the green river.

### CHAPTER 2 REVIEW

The **theme** of a poem is the general idea in a poem and can be summed up in a few words. The **subject** matter is a more specific aspect of a broad theme; it refers to what happens in the poem or what the poem is about in detail.

### For your interest

- Many themes are said to be universal because they arise from human experiences, which are understood by all peoples and cultures. The experience of life and relationships—birth, death, love, family, separation, war, injustice, etc.—are universal and not unique to one person or group of people.
- Poetry, on the other hand, can be unique because it results from the way a poet thinks, feels and writes about these human experiences.

### 3. The Poet's Purpose and Point of View

Poetry is first and foremost meant to be enjoyable or emotionally involving. However, like all reading, poetry should be read with a critical eye; in other words you should try to look between the lines for things that might lie behind the text and try not to accept everything you read at face value.

It is useful to consider the reasons why a poet has written a poem to help you understand more about the message of the poem. All writing, including poetry, presents a writer's own personal view of the world which includes their values, attitudes and beliefs and their emphasis on the particular elements that they consider important, not necessarily all elements. These things may or may not be valued by other people of a different gender, age, race, religion or cultural background.

As a reader, you are receiving ideas from texts according to your own values, attitudes and knowledge. Therefore if you don't understand what you read, it may be because you personally have no knowledge or experience of the ideas in the text, but it may be clear to another group of readers who do have this knowledge.

So not everyone will write or read texts in the same way because we all have different ways of looking at the world and this is reflected in our reading and writing.

So how do you read a poem critically? There are a number of questions you should ask yourself as you read a poem:

**1. What do you think is the writer's motive in writing the poem?**

- Motives might include wanting to express a political or social point of view on a range of subjects; wanting to express strong feelings or emotions; or simply to entertain.

**2. How is the reader meant to respond to the poem?**

- The reader is generally meant to agree or sympathize with the author's point of view.

**3. How does the poet position you, as the reader, to respond to the poem?**

- The poet uses emotive and persuasive language, arguments or reasons. These may be presented through the use of poetic devices and poetic forms that appeal to the reader and influence the reader to sympathize with the writer's point of view.

**4. Are there other ways a reader might respond to a poem?**

- A reader may disagree with the poet's ideas or point of view or may think of an alternative point of view.

**5. What values and attitudes are highlighted in the poem? Are they highlighted in a positive or negative way?**

- Values like bravery, beauty, faithfulness, etc. are usually regarded highly and are often emphasized in poetry. Attitudes relating to violence, injustice, hatred, etc. are usually negatively highlighted.

**6. What has the poet left out because it is assumed that the reader will have the knowledge to understand the material in the poem?**

- Poetry by its very nature is brief and so poets almost always assume that readers will share some of their

knowledge of the world and their own society. For example, the title of the poem "Hiroshima" should trigger readers' prior knowledge of World War II. Without this shared knowledge, it can be difficult to understand some poetry.

**7. What has the poet left out in order to present a particular view?**

- Poetry does not aim to present balanced views of all subjects. A poet will include only those things he/she considers important and will exclude everything else. This may offend or worry readers who do not value the same things.

**8. What has the poet emphasized in the subject matter, theme, characters and values of the poem?**

- A poet will highlight those elements in a poem that he/she considers important. These may not be considered important by readers with varying points of view due to cultural, racial, religious or gender differences.

**CHAPTER 3 REVIEW**

You should try to read all writing, including poetry, with a critical eye. (Ask yourself the 8 questions outlined earlier.)

Remember, as you do, that in regard to poetry, the poet's purpose could be as simple as to entertain or to provide an outlet for his/her creative spirit. It is important that you do not get so involved in applying critical literacy to the poems that you lose your enjoyment of them as individual words of art.

**For your interest**

- One of the longest poems in the English language, *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, was written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.
- It was written as a collection of stories told by pilgrims as they made their way to Canterbury.
- The stories are told to entertain and to help pass the time as the pilgrims walked on their long journey.
- Because the stories are told by people of various types—some are tradesmen, religious people, etc.—the reader gets a number of points of view of life in those times.