

Why Teach Poetry?

by Carol Clark

In our technological age of “sound bites” and short attention spans, the brevity and compression of poetry are especially appealing to students. The same student who might balk at reading ten pages of prose for a homework assignment may show more enthusiasm and care in the preparation of a ten-line poem, simply because it seems more manageable. I have discovered, especially in recent years, that my students are genuinely intrigued by the ideas as well as the form of poetry, even if they have had limited experience with reading poems.

Students sometimes associate poetry with the lyrics for popular music or with the search for individuality. Topics such as identity, discovery, family relationships, survival, change, mortality, hopes, and dreams are of primary interest to young people searching for self-awareness in an uncertain world. By addressing such topics, poetry often has the ability to reach the heart of the young reader with more intensity and immediacy than some of its prose counterparts. It also helps students discover the interconnectedness of all literary genres, especially when a course exposes them to fiction, poetry, and nonfiction on related topics or themes.

The value of presenting students with a range of poems is self-evident. Because moving from reading and recognition of ideas to expressing one’s own thoughts is a natural process, reading poetry can enrich a student’s particular cultural experience. The teacher who combines poetry reading with both analytical and creative writing assignments will find that students make a natural bridge between cognitive learning and personal expression; each activity reinforces the other. Reading poetry and writing in response to it can also stimulate an interest in further reading of poetry or other genres thematically related to the poems studied.

In addition to the psychological and intellectual reward poetry can provide, reading it can have practical value. Studying poetry can be a source of enhancing reading and analytical skills. Understanding poetry demands that one pay close attention to text, especially to diction,

grammar, and syntax; this process naturally strengthens reading comprehension skills. College students frequently report the importance of such exposure and training as they pursue challenging advanced literature courses. Whether a returning student reminds me that “the more poetry the better” or a high school freshman tells me that “poetry slams are cool,” I know that teaching poetry requires a commitment that is intrinsically rewarding—for teachers and for students of all ages. Older students benefit from the language study and attention to detail that both the poems and the students’ responses demand; poetry’s rhythms and rhymes attract younger students to the beauty and functions of language. At my school (covering grades six through twelve), we try to find a definite place for poetry in every English course, not just a day here or there on which we fill in an odd space with a few poems, but a serious two- or three-week unit of study that takes students from an introduction to a welcome familiarity with this versatile and engaging genre.

References

Carol Clark (adapted from “*Why Teach Poetry?*” from the Teacher’s Guide to *Poetry in Six Dimensions: 20th Century Voices* by Carol Clark and Norma Fifer).