

Poetry Response Instructions

Often students cringe when they learn that a major focus of this course is poetry. As children most of us loved poetry, reciting nursery rhymes and chanting limericks. What happened? I don't have the answer, but one of my goals this year will be to rekindle your enthusiasm for and appreciation of poetry.

Laurence Perrine suggests, "People have read poetry or listened to it or recited it because they liked it, because it gave them enjoyment. But this is not the whole answer. Poetry in all ages has been regarded as important, not simply as one of several alternative forms of amusement, as one person might choose bowling, another chess, and another poetry. Rather, it has been regarded as something central to existence, something having unique value to the fully realized life, something that we are better off for having and without which we are spiritually impoverished."

John Ciardi writes, "Everyone who has an emotion and a language knows something about poetry. What he knows may not be much on an absolute scale, and it may not be organized within him in a useful way, but once he discovers the pleasure of poetry, he is likely to be surprised to discover how much he always knew without knowing he knew it. He may discover, somewhat as the character in the French play discovered to his amazement that he had been talking prose all his life, that he had been living poetry. Poetry, after all, is about life. Anyone who is alive and conscious must have some information about it."

This year we will approach poetry two ways. We will study some poems in class, learning about the tools and devices poets use in their craft, talking about what a poem means or how it made you feel, or seeking answers to questions we raised while reading or studying. We might call this our structured or formal study of poetry. But we will also study poetry informally through poetry responses.

You will be asked to write a total of five poetry responses each six weeks. Please look closely at the class schedule to know when these responses are due (almost always on Mondays). You should choose one poem from a list of poems I have given you for the grading period and write a response to that poem. These responses should be a minimum of one double-spaced typed page. Just place the response in the bin at the beginning of class on the due date.

What should you write in a poetry response? You may approach this assignment several ways. Sometimes students might write an analysis of the poem. They explain what is going on in the poem and relate what they think the theme is. Other students begin with the theme and elaborate on that, while some apply the poem to themselves by relating a personal experience. Occasionally a student will write a response on just one line from the poem. What you do with the response is up to you – as long as you say something. Do not spend time explaining how you could not understand the poem no matter how hard you tried. Naturally, I do not expect you to like all the poems, but if you dislike a poem because of its content or style, then support that with specifics.

Read all the poems from the list every week. Read them at different times, in different places, and in different moods. You may notice how the poems will reveal themselves to you over the weeks. Although you are only required to respond on paper to one poem each week, you should acquaint yourself with all the poems on the list.