

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

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What Is the Greatest Poem of All-Time?



Still trying to slough off the fatigue and mild disorientation of a quick trip to California last week exploring the opportunity to extend the Jefferson Educational Society's **Global Summit** to Redlands, California and the University of Redlands, a fine college with a stunning campus, I sat down to write this week's **Book Notes** on Barbara Walter's (no, not that one) **How Civil Wars Start and How to Stop Them**. Trying to avoid engaging with that deeply disturbing book, I engaged instead in a tap dance of avoidance behavior. Seeking advice from a package of pencils I bought in the Ontario, California airport labeled "Pencils for Writer's Block" I thought it too early to "Try Vodka," having no characters to kill, I could not "Kill Your Characters," but

having a multi-screen computer set-up I succumbed to “Lightly Plagiarize’s” temptation.

Recalling that in a **Book Note** several weeks ago I answered a reader’s question about where I get my ideas for the **Notes** on poetry, in the mental equivalent of drumming one’s fingers while awaiting an idea’s appearance (any idea, really), I *googled* (now there’s a post-modern verb) “greatest poem of all time.”

Boom!

Four billion, one hundred, and eighty million “hits” popped up on my screen. Showing the power of compression, googling “the ten greatest poems of all time” delivered three billion, six hundred, and sixty million “hits.” When in a recent **Book Note** I noted that the internet is awash in poetry, I understated by who knows what order of magnitude, but “awash” seems a puny word to describe the internet’s poetic deluge.

Noodling around the various sites, I landed on one I’d not seen before titled “*Greatest Poems*.” A snip of its homepage adorns the top of this **Book Note**. Curiously, there is no “About” tab identifying who aggregates this page, what criteria they use and to what their vision for poetry’s past and future might aspire. Whoever they might be, their taste, while eclectic, tilts to the classics with enough diversity to spare them cancelling. Inveterate list makers, in addition to the daunting “10 Greatest Poems of All Time,” they will give you 10 poems about friendship, inspiration, death, funerals, love (of which they list at #1 William Blake’s “The Blossom”), funny poems, Mother’s Day poems, beauty, hope, life’s struggles, and about life. The last category struck me as a tautology, for aren’t all poems about life? [1]

Scrolling down, I immediately discovered another list. This one compiled by *Ranker*, which does have an “About” tab. In their own words, “*Ranker* aims to be the definitive source of rankings on everything from film to sports to food. We believe the opinion of millions is more relevant (and far more predictive) than the opinion of one writer or one critic.” They unabashedly court millennials, about whom they opine, “Say what you want about millennials, but we love them. We reach 40 million Americans monthly, with 18 million being passionate millennials.” As they say “We (*Ranker*) know a thing or two (hundred) about your audience. *Ranker* has a robust psychographic platform based on correlations from more than a billion votes on *Ranker* lists about Film, TV, Music, Sports, Travel, and everyday lifestyle items, providing a treasure trove of first-party data.” [2] So, they believe in the wisdom of crowds, especially if the crowd slants heavily to those born between 1981 and 1996.

Curiously, *Ranker's* "Top Ten Poems of All Time" and whoever sponsors *Greatest Poems'* list of the greatest poems of all time have significant overlap. *Ranker* has at #1 Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," followed hard by Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" and Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." Others include Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and Shakespeare's "All the World's a Stage." [3]

Greatest Poems' "10 Greatest Poems at All Time" lists at #1 to my taste both a curious and dubious choice of Rudyard Kipling's "If" followed in order by:

2. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge
3. "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson
4. "Ozymandias" by Percy Bysshe Shelley (the first on this curious list that might actually qualify as "great," but that's only my opinion, which as *Ranker* explicitly states, might not mean much)
5. "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley
6. "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe
7. "All the World's A Stage" by Shakespeare
8. "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou
9. "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas
10. "A Red, Red Rose" by Robert Burns
11. "I Wandered Lonely as A Cloud" by William Wordsworth
12. "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost
13. "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus

Which, if you're counting is 13 and not 10, but perhaps whoever the compilers were thought a baker's dozen better than a mere 10. If, as I noted above, both lists use the same database to arrive at their choices, then the unstated criteria seem to be whatever millennials read in school tempered by others they found in "You Can Do It" motivational training workshops and other self-help sources. The lists might better have been labeled, "The Most Frequently High School and College Anthologized Poems and Some You Might Have Found On _____ (fill-in your internet self-help platform of choice)."

Well, whatever, we're not going to solve the riddle of what is the greatest poem of all time today, tomorrow, or ever, for that matter. As I have said numerous times over what is now years in these **Book Notes**, the greatest poet (any artist in any medium, actually) is the artist that helps you be more **present-to-the-present**; in short, the artist who helps you focus on life's **way**; the artist who helps you **be here now**. While there are several real clunkers on those lists, there are also some that do indeed help you to **be here now**, who help you focus on life's **way**. They include Angelou, Thomas, Frost, and maybe Wordsworth, in his wordy but gentle manner.

But, if “greatness” is the function of saying the most in the least amount of words (brevity being the soul of wit), then, as happens frequently, Shakespeare has the last word. His “All the World’s a Stage” sums up life in 28 lines and 211 words. Since the speech is spoken by Jacques in *As You Like It*, the lines refer to *man* and a male specifically. Granted, several of the metaphors would need to be changed, but with only a touch of license the poem is really gender neutral for we are all born and, playing our assigned roles, mature, grow old, and die. Here it is in its entirety:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.

Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. [4]

I promised my editors this **Book Note** would be a “micro-note” under a thousand words. Since the Photo Credit and End Notes add up to 116 words and Shakespeare 211 (total equal 337), at a net 1,188 we’re close. So, I’ll close by

asking, “What is your candidate for “greatest poem ever written?” Or, simply, your favorite poem?



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Snip of “Masthead” at the website **Greatest Poems** available at [10 Greatest Poems of All Time – Greatest Poems](#) accessed October 3, 2022.

End Notes

1. “10 Greatest Poems of All Time” at **Greatest Poems** available at [10 Greatest Poems of All Time – Page 2 of 2 – Greatest Poems](#) accessed October 3, 2022.
 2. “About” at [Ranker.com](#) available at [RANKER](#) accessed October 3, 2022.
 3. “The Greatest Poems Ever Written,” at [Ranker.com](#) available at [Best Poem of All Time | List of the Greatest Poems Ever Written \(ranker.com\)](#) accessed October 3, 2022.
 4. Shakespeare, William. “All the World’s A Stage” from **As You Like It**, II, vii. The poem is in the public domain.
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