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Book Notes #142

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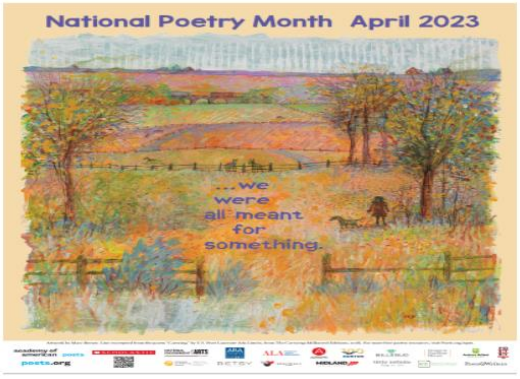
High School Poetry
(Part Two)



Apparently I struck a chord with my request to readers about poems they recalled from high school English class – those they loved and those they loathed. Numerous readers shared their memories, which ranged from remembering none at all to remembering poems that changed their understanding of the world and where they fit in it. Today let's explore those

reactions, pay at least passing attention to the question "How to read a poem?," and answer the question "Do song lyrics qualify as poetry?"

"How to read a poem?"

It is a deceptively simple question to which there is no simple answer, for it implies another question – "What is poetry?" – which itself implies yet another question – "Why read poetry?" Putting those three questions in their proper logical order, they would be: 1) "What is poetry?"; 2) "Why read poetry?"; and, 3) "How to read a poem?"

Someday I am going to write a series of ***Book Notes*** answering those three questions, because readers' responses asking me why I so enjoy poetry, what do I find in it so valuable, have taken me back to – my, oh, intellectual roots, aesthetic roots sounds so pretentious – when I first fell in love with the sounds of words (a hint that song lyrics are, indeed, poetry) and how one could "work" them so they could be made to say more than they literally seemed to say, how they could be evocative, how something so simple and obvious as the word "green" could mean so much more than *green*. For one thing, what shade of green? Olive, lime, sage, forest, mint, hunter, viridian, mossy, or, a hint of the suggestively salacious, chartreuse? Or one could be "green," lacking experience and naïve; one could, like Iago, be "green" with envy succumbing to jealousy's embrace; one could be "green" politically seeing everything through an eco-friendly lens; one could be olive, lime, sage, mint – a range of flavors; one could be a green jewel – emerald or jade; one could be *teeming green* (that's both assonance with the vowels rhyming, and alliteration with the consonants rhyming, too, by the way) with youth's vigor and all of life's possibilities.

No, I'll not answer those questions today, but next week I'll share with you my new research assistant's replies to those three questions. ChatGPT has some stunningly simple (that's also alliteration) but promising preliminary comments about poetry, and why, and how, to read it.

For now, let's turn to reader "Tom No. 2"'s recollections of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (remembering we had several Toms reply). Tom No. 2, like readers "Nancy," "Eileen," "Raven," (no, not the figure in the poem), and several others clearly remember the rich musicality of Poe's verse showing them that poetry might be something more than their 10th grade teacher's idea of drudgery to fill a class's afternoon hour.

In fact, in Poe's "The Raven" reader Tom No. 2 (remember in the previous Book Notes' installment Tom No. 1 was tortured by being forced to memorize and recite "The Charge of the Light-Brigade"), Tom No. 2 discovered that poetry could mean something more than mere sentimental drivel about clouds and

rainbows and spring rains. He found Poe's mingling of language's musicality with ominous images somehow compelling. Particularly Poe's use of alliteration, as in the first stanza below, the use of rhyme, and the repetition of "Nevermore" creating a rhythm that is both haunting and ominous. You'll recall, the Raven's name is "Nevermore," the only word it can speak. It continually replies to the poem's narrator's increasingly desperate inquiries about his lost lover Lenore: "Nevermore." The escalating tension between the narrator's frantic questions and the Raven's mindless "Nevermore" finally unhinges the narrator.

from The Raven

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
  While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
"'Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—
      Only this and nothing more."...

...Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
  "Wretch," I cried, "thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee
  Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore;
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!"
      Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

  "Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
  Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
  It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."
      Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."... [1]

Similarly, readers "Raven" and "Nancy" found that Poe's use of rhyme and other devices made poetry come alive for them. They both mentioned Poe's "Annabel Lee," of which "Raven" (the reader) said "it reminds me of young love because it can feel that intense, passionate, and even sometimes tragic." The poem speaks directly to the adolescent heart, with its melodramatic and intense self-focus. The narrow focus can make that youthful love seem like (a simile) life's crowning passion, losing contact with the fact that life has only just begun. Yet, with the sea's chill winds and stone-cold sepulcher, it also hints that life ends as the images mingle sublimated erotic yearning with intimations of mortality.

from Annabel Lee

It was many and many a year ago,

In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me…

… The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
Went envying her and me—
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee…

For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
lllOf the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,
In her sepulchre there by the sea—
In her tomb by the sounding sea. [2]

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Reader "Herm" caught a whiff of life's mortality during an English class reading of William Cullen Bryant's "The Death of the Flowers." Bryant, who was also the editor of the ***New York Evening Post,*** the forerunner of today's ***New York Post***, was a major figure in 19th century American politics and culture. It was Bryant who brought the then relatively unknown Abraham Lincoln to New York to give his speech at Cooper Union that led to his selection as the Republican candidate for President in 1860. Bryant was also, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, one of the most famous and popular American poets of the 19th century, a time when poets were, if not rock stars, major cultural icons. His most famous poem is/was "Thanatopsis," a meditation upon death that resolves the despair people experience contemplating death by finally seeing death as a natural and harmonious part of the life cycle.

from Thanatopsis

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,

Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams. [3]

Similarly, in "The Death of the Flowers," Bryant finds solace mourning the death of a young woman by comparing her youthful death to the seasonal fading of flowers. It is all in the natural order, it is all part of the cycle of life.

from The Death of the Flowers

Where are the flowers, the fair young flowers, that lately sprang and stood
In brighter light and softer airs, a beauteous sisterhood?
Alas! they all are in their graves, the gentle race of flowers
Are lying in their lowly beds, with the fair and good of ours.
The rain is falling where they lie, but the cold November rain
Calls not from out the gloomy earth the lovely ones again. [4]

***

If Poe and Bryant conjure thoughts of death, "Raven" and reader "Ben" found in poetry flashes of insight into self-identity and the understanding of others. Learning that people do not always present themselves honestly to others – that they are not what they seem – marks one of life's key discoveries as we pass from childhood to adulthood. Sometimes, one chooses to dissemble to deceive, to gain advantage; sometimes, if one is discriminated against, if one is powerless to assert oneself, one then dissembles as a survival mechanism – one dissembles in order to hide in plain sight. One of the great African American poets, Paul Laurence Dunbar shares the latter experience in his "We Wear the Mask," which "Raven" says became "increasingly relevant as I've entered adult life…"

from We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
    We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
    We wear the mask! [5]

Reader “Ben,” growing up in a small town in southwestern Pennsylvania, discovered insights not only into himself, but also into the experience of others from a high school English reading assignment of Langston Hughes’ “Theme for English B.” I’ve quoted Hughes a number of times in previous ***Book Notes***. A member of what became known as the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes was a major figure in American literature in the early and mid-20th century. His self-appointed mission was “to honestly portray the joys and hardships of working-class Black lives, avoiding both sentimental idealization and negative stereotypes.” As The Poetry Foundation quotes his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes sought “to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.” [6]

Reader “Ben” shared his experience of first reading Hughes poem in an email to me earlier this month. I am taking of the liberty of sharing its core insight with you:

> "Theme for English B" expanded my understanding of 'other', and of 'outsider'. Or, the complex notion of being ‘marginalized’. (We got the assignment in AP English, where those in my class [of 86] who had college aspirations would learn together [and try to score some college credits].)
>
> Of course, as a white, cisgender male, I will never know what it is to be anything other than what I am -- although what I am, in various ways, which Hughes teases out, evolves over time. This includes being Black, other than what I can learn from what those who are willing to share offer. So, of course, I will never know what it is like to be the only Black student in a class. I did, however, gain an understanding of what they would be like for those who are, thanks to Hughes' poem. Honestly, I'd never thought of my race, and how that affects me, until Hughes' relaying of how his race affects him in who he is. This helped me gain an appreciation of myself and of others' selves and what our selves stand to share with and teach each other.
>
> I went home wondering 'what would I write? what would come out of me that would be true?', and 'what is core to my identity? what will change over time?' This awakened, at the age of 17, a journey of self-discovery that I am still on today.

I can't thank my teacher, Ms. Corwin, enough for exposing me to this poem, and calling us to reflect on it -- both as Hughes' poem and account, and what it means to us.” [7]

Theme for English B

The instructor said,

Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it’s that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It’s not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I’m what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page.
(I hear New York, too.) Me—who?
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.
I guess being colored doesn’t make me *not* like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?

Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That’s American.

Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you're older—and white—
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B. [8]

Next week I'll share ChatGPT's analysis of Hughes' poem.

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Let's end this tour through high school poetry by answering reader "Ned's" question – "do song lyrics count as poems?" To which, as my former Executive Assistant April would say, I answer, "Most definitely!" Although not the earliest known poems, the Psalms were first recited or chanted to the accompaniment of a lyre – a stringed musical instrument played by plucking the strings with the fingers or a pick. The instrument gives its name to the words which it accompanied. Without tracing out the entire etymology, the word lyric is derived from lyre. The Biblical David, who besides being a warrior, was also a musician and a poet who accompanied himself on the lyre as he sang/recited/chanted the Psalms, some of which he is believed to have written.

No one knows with any definitiveness when poetry was "invented;" in fact, it might not be possible to say that "poetry" was *invented*. It evolved, it grew out of the oral tradition of telling the history of a group/clan/tribe by the campfire, in the palace hall, or in the mead hall by a singer singing a song of the group's lineage, its origins, its heroes, its values and beliefs. The bards who performed were the group's living history.

Poetry evolved as a linguistic technique to aid memory. Rhyme, alliteration, repetition – all the tools of the poet's craft – first evolved as mnemonic techniques to enhance and train the memory. For example, last week we read Carl Sandburg's "The Fog":

<u>Fog</u>

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city

on silent haunches
and then moves on. [9]

Memorize it. It'll take you four-five times through, but then you'll have it. Try to memorize this:

> The fog silently rolls in across the harbor settling across dockyards and neighboring city. All morning it blankets both the harbor and the city and then as temperatures rise it lifts, moves on, and the city is clear again.

Two things: the prose, which people are sometimes surprised to discover they've been speaking all their lives, is clumsy and lacks any linkages or images to make the fog vivid. It contains almost twice as many words as Sandburg's poem and to call it forgettable is charitable. Sandburg's poem is easily memorized; more importantly, it evokes an image of the fogbound harbor and city making the fog a living, breathing thing.

So, poetry evolved to aid the memory and to make stories more vivid, more real, to make them in some ways more vivid and real than the actual experience.

Yes, song lyrics are poetry.

Reader "Shelley" mentioned learning Richard Harris' "MacArthur Park" in high school English class. Other readers mentioned Bruce Springsteen, Joni Mitchell, John Lennon and Bob Dylan. Younger readers will have their own examples. There are literally hundreds of examples of great songs whose lyrics are among the late 20th and early-21st century's great poems.

Obviously, they are not the only poets working today, but musicians and singers are clearly responsible for poetry's revival in our time. A quick look at ***Rolling Stone Magazine's*** list of "The Top 500 Songs of All-Time" will supply a list we could spend the next several hundred ***Book Notes*** parsing. I won't do that, but let's take a quick look at No. 1 on that list. Written by Otis Redding, it's Aretha Franklin's "Respect" (1967).

from Respect

What you want, baby, I got it
What you need, do you know I got it?

All I'm askin' is for a little respect when you get home
(Just a little bit) hey, baby
(Just a little bit) when you get home

(Just a little bit) mister
(Just a little bit)

I ain't gon' do you wrong while you're gone
Ain't gon' do you wrong 'cause I don't wanna

All I'm askin' is for a little respect when you come home
(Just a little bit) baby
(Just a little bit) when you get home
(Just a little bit) yeah
(Just a little bit)

I'm about to give you all of my money
And all I'm askin' in return, honey
Is to give me my propers when you get home

(Just a, just a, just a, just a) yeah, baby
(Just a, just a, just a, just a) when you get home
(Just a little bit) yeah
(Just a little bit)

Ooh, your kisses, sweeter than honey
And guess what? So is my money
All I want you to do for me, is give it to me when you get home

(Re, re, re, re) yeah, baby
(Re, re, re, re) whip it to me
(Respect, just a little bit) when you get home, now
(Just a little bit)

R-E-S-P-E-C-T
Find out what it means to me
R-E-S-P-E-C-T
Take care, TCB, oh

(Sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me)
A little respect
(Sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me, sock it to me)
Whoa, babe

(Just a little bit) a little respect
(Just a little bit) I get tired
(Just a little bit) keep on tryin'
(Just a little bit) you're runnin' out of fools

(Just a little bit) and I ain't lyin'
(Just a little bit)

(Re, re, re, re) start when you come home
(Re, re, re, respect) or you might walk in
(Just a little bit) and find out I'm gone
(Just a little bit) I gotta have [10]

Now, the Self-Help section of any library or bookstore is stocked with dozens of books about ones quest for respect from at best, obtuse, and, at worst, abusive partners. A quick Google.scholar search for articles about "women seeking respect" yields 3.25 million "hits."

Name one.

Yet, in approximately 200 words, many of them repeated for effect, Redding/Franklin say all that needs to be said about the subject.

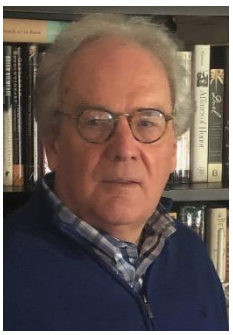
And once you've heard it, you don't forget it.

A video of Franklin performing "Respect" can be found here.

Now that leads to another question – what makes the song/poem so memorable? The quality of its lyrics or the quality of its performance?

Well, that question is unanswerable, for when the combination works, as Yeats asked, "Who can tell the dancer from the dance?"

Next week in ***Book Notes***, we'll pick up this topic by asking, "When did silent reading begin?" In fact, I'll introduce you to my new research assistant ChatGPT and get its take on all of the above. In the process, we'll talk about this brave new world of artificial intelligence we're rushing into with all its promise and danger.



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"20 Indispensable High School Reads" at **Edutopia.org George Lucas Educational Foundation** available at 20 Indispensable High School Reads | Edutopia accessed April 16, 2023.

End Notes

1. Poe, Edgar Allan. *"The Raven"* in **The Raven and Other Favorite Poems**. (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), pp. 26, 28-29.
2. Ibid., pp. 40-41.
3. Bryant, William Cullen. *"Thanatopsis"* at **The Poetry Foundation** available at Thanatopsis by William Cullen Bryant | Poetry Foundation accessed April 24, 2023.
4. _____. *"The Death of the Flowers"* at **Poetry** available at The Death of the Flowers by William Cullen Bryant (poetry.com) accessed April 24, 2023.
5. Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *"We Wear the Mask"*, in **The Norton Anthology of Poetry**, Eds. Alexander Eastman, et. al. (New York: The W.W. Norton Co., 1970), p.935.
6. *"Langston Hughes, 1902-1967"* at **The Poetry Foundation** available at Langston Hughes | Poetry Foundation accessed April 24, 2023.
7. Personal email from reader "Ben" to A.Roth April 6, 2023.
8. Hughes, Langston. *"Theme for English B"* in **The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry,** Eds. Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair. (New York: W.W. Norton, Co., 1973), 640-641.
9. Sandburg, Carl. *"Fog"* at **The Poetry Foundation** available at Fog by Carl Sandburg | Poetry Foundation accessed April 17, 2023.
10. Redding, Otis. *"Respect, lyrics"* at **Musixmatch** available at aretha franklin's spect lyrics - Search (bing.com) accessed April 24, 2023.

In Case You Missed It

The Wider World | Israel: Constant Clash of Interests written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

Truth in Love | How to Conduct Culturally Conscious Conversations written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

Probing Education | Laura Bassi: Breaks Glass ceiling for 18th century women written by Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education **Rev. Charles Brock**

Be Well | How to Prevent Plantar Fasciitis written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

Book Notes #141 | High School Poetry (Part One) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

Alfred E. Newman: Bay Rat Spiritual Guru written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

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