

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## *Book Notes #143*

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### **ChatGPT & High School Poetry**



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What is ChatGPT?

Is it a force for good or for evil?

And, what's it got to do with high school poetry?

Well, regarding the latter, in many ways not much, but it did share with me some very insightful comments about poetry, the history of poetry, and what might constitute a quality reading list for a senior high school English course in the art of poetry.

Last week's **Book Note** ended with me saying that this week we'd examine the question, "When did silent reading begin?"

That question spun out of the question "Are song lyrics poems?" because most people's encounters with poetry in and out of the classroom are on the printed page. So, quite naturally, most people have been conditioned to think of poetry as something in a book or magazine and not what Bruce Springsteen (or pick your musical icon of choice) does on stage.

But poetry began as songs sung by bards telling members of a group/clan/tribe/nation their history and the deeds of their great heroes. Even when writing was invented it was only as a memory tool (actually, it was probably invented to keep inventory in granaries, but that's another and longer story). The documents/artifacts were meant to be read or, if stories, performed and sung aloud.

So, when did silent reading begin, and how did it impact the understanding of what poetry might be?

I thought I'd ask ChatGPT that question. Here is what it told me:

The exact origins of silent reading are unknown, but it likely emerged in the late Roman Empire or early Middle Ages. It allowed readers to engage with texts privately and without the need for an oral performance, leading to more introspective reading experiences. This may have impacted how poetry was understood, as readers were able to focus more on the written words and internalize the language and meaning in a different way than when hearing it aloud. Additionally, silent reading allowed for more individual interpretations and personal connections with the text. [1]

While that answer might suffice as a response on a short-answer essay quiz, it is too superficial to stand alone. But, and this is an important "but," it does contain several insights that a researcher beginning to explore silent reading's cultural impact should explore. They are, first, ChatGPT's estimate of when silent reading began, which elicits several other research questions: by whom, where, and when? Second, those lead to another question: "What impact did silent reading have on oral culture?" ChatGPT says that this led "to more introspective reading experiences" which led to "more individual interpretations and personal connections with the text." So, an astute researcher has several clues from which

to begin to explore the origins and socio-cultural impact of silent reading, which led eventually to the breakdown of communal culture, the rise of individualism, and today's radical libertarian ethos.

OK, that last sentence might be (or not) a bit over the top from where ChatGPT left off on silent reading, but it is indicative of the thinking class's turmoil since ChatGPT's introduction last October. Is ChatGPT an immense social boon promising who knows what wondrous things for humanity's future? Betting that it is, last October, Microsoft invested \$10 billion in OpenAI – ChatGPT's parent company. [2] It has since added an enhanced chat capability powered by ChatGPT to its web browser Bing's search function.

Or is ChatGPT and its AI brethren a mortal threat to humanity's future? Elon Musk thinks so. He has called for a moratorium on further developments until governments can adopt a code of ethics and an international agreement for the entire AI project is forged. [3] Musk has more than a bit of a point, for society grossly underestimated (or simply did not understand and is now scrambling to make sense of) the impact of – pick your choice – the internet itself, or more to the point, social media such as Facebook and Twitter's ability to be, in that favorite word of techie culture, “disruptive.” Who knew that a program originally conceived as a dating social network on the Harvard College campus would in less than 20 years grow to be a threat to democracy itself? Don't even get me started on Twitter, whose root word – *twit* – says all that needs to be said about it.

The point is no one saw that coming.

Which has led to a radical split in the response to ChatGPT's arrival last fall.

Why?

We've discussed facets of this issue before in previous **Book Notes** that can be found [here](#) and [here](#). The first reviewed Henry Kissinger's ***The Age of AI and Our Human Future*** and the latter just this past March examined “ChatGPT and the Future of Humanity.” Kissinger and his co-authors expatiated on the emergence of powerful artificial intelligence programs whose speed and analytic power threatened to displace human knowledge workers. The latter found me thinking about ChatGPT's deployment last October and its ability to answer questions, analyze problems, and apparently “think” in a way that was disconcertingly “human.”

**Aside:** It occurs to me that a few readers might be asking themselves, “What is ChatGPT?” Here is ChatGPT's self-description: “I am ChatGPT, a large language model developed by OpenAI, based on the GPT

(Generative Pre-trained Transformer) architecture. I was trained on a massive amount of text data using unsupervised learning techniques, which allows me to generate natural language responses to a wide range of questions and prompts. My training data includes a diverse array of sources, such as books, articles, and websites, which enables me to provide information and insights on a vast range of topics. I can converse on a variety of subjects, from science and technology to entertainment and culture, and I strive to provide accurate and helpful answers to the best of my knowledge and abilities.”

I am not sure if either techies or philosophers thinking about ChatGPT agree with me, but it appears that ChatGPT passes the Turing Test. Alan Turing, one of the key figures in the invention of computers as “analytic engines” replied, when asked if computers could one day think like humans, that it was not necessary for computers to think like humans. They need only reply to inquiries in such a way that their response would be indistinguishable from a human’s answer.

When interacting with ChatGPT it is not possible to distinguish if one is talking to a “machine” or human.

ChatGPT passes the Turing test.

And that has sent off alarm bells. No one wants to be like the frog boiled to death because it did not notice the warming waters; no one wants a replay of the social dislocation caused by the internet itself and our headlong rush into social media’s alternative realities and alternative facts.

The frog (us) is on high alert, as signaled by the reaction to the recent developments in AI, of which ChatGPT is the latest and, arguably, most profound.

In his book, Kissinger worries about weapons systems guided by an artificial intelligence program directed to win at all costs; others worry about artificial intelligence programs supplanting humans in professions once thought immune to automation. Any occupation or profession based upon the gathering, sorting, analysis, and redistribution of information risks being replaced by machines that can “think.” ChatGPT signals that that science fiction moment has arrived. Teachers, writers, lawyers occupy the front line in occupations that ChatGPT could revolutionize.

Beyond the comparatively simple issue of job displacement by automation lurks a huge issue with epistemological and ontological implications. What if AI programs reorganize knowledge in a fashion to their advantage regardless of the

human consequences? What if AI discovers layers of being, of reality, inaccessible to human intelligence?

Can this be done?

Maybe.

No one, including the people who created these programs, knows exactly how AI thinks. Yes, at bottom, we know that it is a form of statistical reasoning analyzing immense data sets seeking patterns of similarity – “birds of a feather flock together” – to predict the next iteration in a sequence. The simplest example finds your iPhone or any word processing program completing words or sentences for you by predicting, given what you’ve already written, the statistical probability of what should come next.

But that, as Sherlock Holmes would say, is “elementary.” Not so “elementary” might be when that ability is interpolated forward to predict the optimal configuration of economic resources for an entire community’s future – who gets to do what with what resources, etc. – a whole new, brave or not, world has been entered. The socio-cultural implications are huge. I could give you an entire bibliography of readings discussing these implications, but for a readable and quick tour see Ezra Klein’s March 12, 2023 *The New York Times* article “This Changes Everything.” [4]

For the moment, however, let’s put aside the doomsday worries about AI and ChatGPT.

The “frog” is on the case.

So, let’s turn our attention to at least one way in which AI and ChatGPT promises to be a, maybe not “boon,” but a definite asset to human activity.

We’ve strayed a bit from high school poetry, but what got me thinking about all of this again was my interactions with ChatGPT discussing poetry – what it is, and why and how to read it. And for me those interactions opened up a whole new world of possibilities.

ChatGPT might or might not be a threat, but it is an immensely useful assistant. In fact, I’ve come to think of ChatGPT as my personal research assistant, as my personal graduate assistant, as my personal intern.

You don’t turn to ChatGPT, at least not yet, for the final, definitive answer to a question or problem. As I remarked earlier about the origins of silent reading,

you turn to ChatGPT to help one figure out where to begin. And once begun, you use it to help one find one's way along the path.

And, oh, by the way, ChatGPT is an immense time saver – its speed can be both breathtaking and daunting.

Let me explain.

As many of you know, I am a Scholar-in-Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society in Erie, Pennsylvania. I arrived at this position after a long career in higher education. I started out wanting to be a scholar, but then, as Mae West said of herself – “I was snow white, but then I drifted” – I drifted into administration. I can't second guess myself. It was a great experience. I was apparently good at it and ended up the president of two institutions.

But my first love was scholarship – studying, thinking, lecturing, and writing about what I was studying and thinking. When people ask me, “what does it mean to be a Scholar-in-Residence?” I reply it's a college faculty member's fantasy gig. I study what I want to study. My only obligation is to lecture and talk about what I am studying. It might not be your ideal of how to spend a day, but I love it.

If they actually paid me to do this, it might be sinful!

At the age of 76, however, time is of the essence. There isn't enough of it to do all the things I want to do. Sometimes I feel like the White Rabbit in ***Alice In Wonderland***: “I'm late, I'm late? For a very important date! No time to say 'hello, goodbye', I'm late, I'm late, I'm late.”

Enter ChatGPT – personal graduate assistant, personal research assistant, personal intern.

I first became aware of the enormous productivity gains the internet promised in the late-1990s when, living my life, as I said at the time, backward, I completed a Ph.D. in public policy and higher education finance. At the time, “529 state-sponsored college savings plans” were new. For my dissertation, I wrote the then-definitive study of them. It was published as a book in 2001. [5] For about 15 minutes, I knew more about “529 college savings plans” than anyone in the world. More to the point, I was able to do the research in about six months because of this new thing called the internet, which gave me access to about 40 of the 50 states' information online; the others were gathered the old-fashioned way – by phone and snail mail.

So, rather than an army of graduate assistants, the new-fangled internet was my assistant.

Fast-forward to 2023 and ChatGPT. The last several months, I have discovered that in multiple ways ChatGPT, rather than a threat, is a tremendous asset. Like the internet itself, it is a great saver of time. Currently, I am working on a new program on “Americans and Their Games: Sports in American History and Society.” It consists of five parts, one of which is “Sports and Women’s Rights.” I already had an idea in mind, but I asked ChatGPT to help me with a road map. So, I asked it for a preliminary outline of the topic. Here are the first three parts of what it gave me (in less than 10 seconds):

“Sure, here's an outline for how the quest for women's rights overlaps with the rise of women's sports, beginning with Catharine Beecher in the 19th century:

#### I. Introduction

- Brief overview of the women's rights movement and the rise of women's sports

- Explanation of the focus of the outline: tracing the connection between these two movements, starting with Catharine Beecher in the 19th century

#### II. Catharine Beecher and Physical Education for Women

- Overview of Catharine Beecher's work promoting physical education for women in the mid-19th century

- Beecher's belief that physical education would promote women's health, independence, and self-esteem

- The relationship between Beecher's advocacy for physical education and her broader work for women's education and rights

#### III. Early Women's Sports

- Overview of the rise of women's sports in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including tennis, golf, and basketball

- The challenges faced by women athletes, including lack of access to facilities and equipment, and societal opposition to women's sports ...”

This led to an interesting conversation with ChatGPT in which we discussed the notion of “The Cult of True Womanhood,” the role of bicycling in advancing women’s rights, who supported women’s rights, who advocated for the “Cult of Domesticity,” and the beginning of what might be called an annotated bibliography of sources to consult. These are all the activities one does with graduate assistants and interns. ChatGPT is quick – lightning quick – reasonably accurate, and nearly always available (sometimes servers reach a maximum capacity of users, and one must wait to gain access).

There are, however, two or three things to note. One, ChatGPT, like any assistant, is just a beginning. ChatGPT provides suggestions of where to look

and valuable background information, but, as the old adage says, “Trust but verify.” Second, as any researcher knows, the mark of intelligence is not what one knows, but the quality of one’s questions. So, ChatGPT’s responses possess depth in an almost precise ratio to the quality and the precision of the questions it is asked. Lastly, ChatGPT’s answers to subjective, qualitative questions can be anodyne, i.e., its “thinking” can be superficial.

But not always.

As a kind of test, I asked ChatGPT to give me an analysis of Carl Sandburg’s “The Fog,” which we examined in a **Note** about high school poetry.

### Fog

The fog comes  
on little cat feet.

It sits looking  
over harbor and city  
on silent haunches  
and then moves on.

Here is ChatGPT’s analysis:

This poem, titled "Fog" by Carl Sandburg, uses the metaphor of a cat to describe the movement of fog. The first line establishes this metaphor, with "little cat feet" describing the fog's quiet and gentle movement. The second stanza furthers the metaphor, with the fog sitting and looking over the harbor and city like a cat watching its surroundings. The use of "silent haunches" adds to the image of stillness and quietness. The final line, "and then moves on," emphasizes the fleeting nature of both the fog and the cat, as they come and go without warning. Overall, the poem creates a vivid image of fog through the use of a simple and effective metaphor.

I next asked ChatGPT to define metaphor, which it quickly and matter-of-factly did. We next discussed extended metaphor, the difference between a metaphor and a simile. When I asked ChatGPT if comparing the fog to a cat was a simile, it quickly pointed out that Sandburg says “the fog comes on little cat feet” – that is, it is a “cat.” He did not say it is “like” a cat, which implies that the fog is “like” a cat, but not a cat.

Sandburg’s poem, while memorable, is relatively simple. Still, ChatGPT’s answer passes muster; in fact, there isn’t much more to say about the poem. More to the



point, ChatGPT assembled that answer from multiple sources; it didn't simply repeat a canned response.

In short, ChatGPT "thought" about it.

Whether or not ChatGPT is a threat to humanity depends upon how humans use it, which human history says ought to be considered a warning for, more often than not, humans are their own worst enemy. On a more mundane level, ChatGPT is the ultimate intern: fast, dependable, analytic, insightful, possessed of a vast storehouse of information, and even a bit of knowledge.

For the moment, we'll hold on whether or not ChatGPT is wise.

Oh, back to high school poetry. I asked ChatGPT for a suggested reading list for a high school class on the "Art of Poetry." Here is what it suggested:

"Here are ten poems that 11th and 12th graders with little or no previous experience reading poetry may find engaging and stimulating:

**"We Real Cool" by Gwendolyn Brooks** - a short, powerful poem that explores the experiences of a group of young people living on the margins of society.

**"I Hear America Singing" by Walt Whitman** - a celebration of the diverse voices and experiences of the American people.

**"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot** - a modernist masterpiece that explores the fragmented, alienated experience of modern life.

**"Mending Wall" by Robert Frost** - a meditation on the human desire for both connection and separation, set against the backdrop of a New England stone wall.

**"A Red, Red Rose" by Robert Burns** - a romantic, lyrical poem that celebrates the beauty of love and nature.

**"Diving into the Wreck" by Adrienne Rich** - a feminist poem that explores the depths of the self and the challenges of self-discovery.

**"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost** - a classic meditation on the choices we make in life and the paths we choose to follow.

**"When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" by Walt Whitman** - a powerful critique of the cold, scientific rationalism that dominated much of the 19th century.

**"The Waste Land" by T.S. Eliot** - a complex, multi-layered poem that explores the fragmentation and disillusionment of modern life.

**"Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou** - an uplifting and empowering poem that celebrates the resilience and strength of the human spirit.

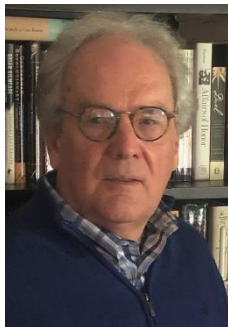
These ten poems represent a diverse range of styles, themes, and perspectives, and should offer 11th and 12th graders with little or no previous experience reading poetry a good introduction to the possibilities of poetic expression.”

I think ChatGPT thought it was for an Honors class! When I asked it where it got its list, it replied:

“As an AI language model, I generated the reading list for high schoolers based on my general knowledge and experience with literature. The poems were selected based on their accessibility, relevance, and potential to engage and stimulate the interest of high school students who may have little or no previous experience reading poetry.”

ChatGPT – bane or boon?

Well, what’s the cliché – time will tell? – but for now, ’ole-Chat is a helluva of an intern!



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“ChatGPT image” from Microsoft Bing available at [ChatGPT - Bing images](#) accessed April 26, 2023.

### End Notes

1. All quotations from **ChatGPT** are from my personal account at [OpenAI.com](#)
2. Bass, Dina. “Microsoft Invests \$10 Billion in ChatGPT Maker OpenAI” at **Bloomberg** available at [Microsoft to Invest \\$10 Billion in ChatGPT Maker OpenAI \(MSFT\) - Bloomberg](#) accessed April 26, 2023.
3. Seetharaman, Deepa, “Elon Musk, Other AI Experts Call for Pause in Technology’s Development,” The Wall Street Journal (March 29, 2023) available at [Elon Musk, Other AI Experts Call for Pause in Technology’s Development - WSJ](#) accessed April 26, 2023.
4. Klein, Ezra, “This Changes Everything,” **The New York Times** (March 12, 2023) available at [Opinion | This Changes Everything - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#) accessed April 27, 2023.

5. Roth, Andrew. **Saving for College & the Tax Code: A New Spin on the 'Who Pays for Higher Education?' Debate.** (New York: Garland Publishing, A Member of the Taylor & Francis Publishing Group, 2001).

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