



# A Basic Coursebook Of English Poetry

## 英语诗歌基础教程

杜 平 李 秋◎主 编  
周维贵 杨升华◎副主编

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## 序言

诗歌作为最古老，最优美，最凝练的文学形式，抒发情怀，阐释哲理，讴歌人生，是物质与精神，时间与空间，理智与情感的汇聚。诗歌犹如万古不倒的青松，集万千魅力，幻化无穷。儿时读唐诗，曾为之骄傲和倾倒，在“等闲识得东风面，万紫千红总是春”中感受春之活力，在“接天莲叶无穷碧，映日荷花别样红”中迎来夏的炙热，在“停车坐爱枫林晚，霜叶红于二月花”中领悟秋之深邃，在“地白风色寒，雪花大如手”中如见冬雪纷飞。诗歌是人类智慧的结晶，展现了人类最纯粹的精神家园，历经斗转星移，已经超越了民族、国别和时空，激荡着一代又一代人的心弦。

作为语言的学习者，笔者认为学习目标语言的诗歌有助于产生对语言美的最高感悟，才会深刻体验语言的文化性、人文性与社会性。英语诗歌是我国高校英语专业高年级语言教学的一项重要内容，不但有利于提升学生对语言的敏感性和对语言的驾驭，还可以提高学生个体的人文素养和审美情趣，因此，在英语教学中加入英语诗歌教学一直是我校英语课程设置的特色。尽管英语诗歌在英语语言掌握上有着极其重要的地位，但是作为非母语的

学习者，其中困难重重，学习英语诗歌，除了对语言功底有一定的要求外，基本知识与兴趣也是影响诗歌学习的重要因素，这也给教学资料的选择提出了挑战。

本教材是笔者根据多年的英语诗歌课程教学经验，归纳总结英语诗歌的特点编写而成。全书分为十个章节，分别介绍了史诗、民谣、英雄双韵体，十四行诗，挽歌，颂歌，挽歌，戏剧独白诗，无韵诗，自由诗以及印象派诗歌，选篇兼顾英国诗人和美国诗人，选出两到三篇具有代表性的诗歌作品，并以具体诗歌为例，介绍诗歌基本知识与读诗技巧，设计并提供了相应的问答与翻译练习以及术语介绍。

本教材旨在培养学生对诗歌的基本兴趣，帮助学习者熟悉诗歌的基本形式和知识，从中提高学生的语言理解能力，语言综合运用能力以及思辨能力。由于笔者水平有限，编写中难免有所疏漏，敬请广大读者谅解。

# A Basic Coursebook of English Poetry

## A General Introduction

‘Sir, what is poetry?’

‘Why Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is.’

(Boswell’s Life of Johnson)

Like many other words, ‘poetry’ defies any precise definition and its meaning shifts and evolves with time. From Aristotle onwards, many poets and critics in English poetic tradition such as Wordsworth, Arnold, T. S. Eliot and Auden have ventured definitions. However, very few of them have agreed with one another on what poetry actually is, because poetry is an ancient form that has gone through numerous and drastic reinvention over time. The very nature of poetry as an authentic and individual mode of expression makes it nearly impossible to define.

When we turn to dictionaries for meaning of poetry, the definitions invariably focus on the formal characteristics such as language patterns, metrical qualities, choice of words and rhetorical devices. *The Oxford English Dictionary*(OED) gives a rather elaborate definition of poetry:

“composition in verse or metrical language, or in some equivalent patterned arrangement of language; usually also with choice of elevated

words and figurative uses, and option of a syntactical order, differing more or less from those of ordinary speech or prose writing.”

In this definition the poetic components and imaginative use of language are highlighted. Here, poetry is seen as the art of language with its special use of patterning and sound effects, which distinguishes poetry from prose. Obviously to heighten and intensify expression the poetic language is featured by exploiting sounds of words in a systematic way—using rhythm, rhyme and other sound-effects. Thus, it is the consistent use of distinct rhythmic regularity (with the exception of free verse) that makes poetry the most highly emotive form of expression.

The artistic use of language is only one of the outstanding features of poetry; the core of poetry is open to interpretations as different poets and critics have their own tastes and understanding. Among all the theories of poetry, the emotion theory is probably the commonest for poetry is an imaginative awareness of experience expressed through meaning, sound, and rhythmic language choices so as to evoke an emotional response. One of the most familiar quotations derives from William Wordsworth’s preface in the *Lyrical Ballads*: “Poetry was the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Moreover, Thomas Hardy says that poetry is the “emotion put into measure.” Therefore, for most general readers poetry is the language of emotion. However, poetry, for T.S. Eliot, is detached from personal feelings and is “an escape from emotion.” In fact, for many poets and critics, emotion is not the sole nature inherent in poetry, and poetry is the closest to life and plays many other functions. The Victorian poetic critic Mathew Arnold, for instance,

considers poetry as “criticism of life” while W.B. Yeats thinks that a poet writes always of his personal life. The exact definition of poetry is hardly reached, but all the attempts to search for an explicit meaning of poetry offer some invaluable – even if sometimes contradictory—suggestion on how to read poems. .

Why students of English language need to read and learn poetry? As a genre of literature poetry is universally considered as the finest language art—“the best words in best order”(Samuel Coleridge). In reading poetry we can be first fascinated by the skillful and subtle use of words, amazed by expressive power of sound and rhythm. Secondly, poetry expresses emotion and delights our senses; it helps to satisfy our desire for expression when words fail us. Thirdly, poetry glorifies goodness and criticizes evil and ugliness. We read poems either for aesthetic pleasure and linguistic charm. Poetry has become important cultural legacy as the best written in language; its form and content are comprehensive and impressive. Reading poetry is necessary because it “ shows the highest degree of concentration, so the reading of poetry calls for an attention not demanded by the literature legitimately designed for the amusement of tired minds.” (John Drinkwater, 1938) In a word, learning to read poetry well makes us be more attentive to the connotations of words, more receptive to the interpretation of significance as well as more impressive by the personal memories and feelings.



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## **Chapter One Epic**

### **About Epic**

Poetry is normally divided into two major types: narrative and lyric poetry. Narrative poems like novels or short stories tell stories and are driven forward by action, and they include the epic, ballad and romance.

An epic is a long narrative poem that describes the adventures of heroes, demigods and gods whose exploits are important to a nation. Conventionally, epics narrate great deeds of great heroes; its theme and structure are required to be formal, complex and serious, so they are the grandest form in poetry. In Western literature Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost* are all classified into epics.

Among all the epics two types of epics are easily identified in Western literary tradition. The earliest epics, known as primary, or original, epics, were shaped from the legends of an age when a nation was conquering and expanding; such is the foundation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of the Greek Homer, and of the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*. Literary, or secondary, epics, written in conscious imitation of earlier forms, are most notably represented by Vergil's *Aeneid* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

## Selected Reading

### Poem 1: *Beowulf*

#### Introductory Remark

*Beowulf*, the oldest national epic of the Anglo-Saxons, was probably composed in the early 8th century by an Anglican bard. Originally, the setting and hero *Beowulf* had nothing to do with England. The materials for *Beowulf* are mainly based on Scandinavian history, folk tale and mythology. The epic consists of two parts: The first relates *Beowulf*'s successful fights with the water monsters Grendel and with Grendel's mother; the second narrates the hero's victory in his old age over a dragon and his subsequent death and funeral at the end of a long life of honor. These events take place entirely in Denmark and Sweden. The poem contains a remarkable fusion of pagan and Christian elements and provides a vivid picture of Old Germanic life. It is written in a strongly accentual, alliterative verse. Simple as its plot be, the epic is diverse in meaning. Some take it as an early celebration of Christianity. Others say it praises or condemns heroic values. J. R. R. Tolkien argued that *Beowulf* is a balance between beginnings and endings, of youth and age, the most dominating being Beowulf's. On the one hand the poem is of historical value, on the other hand it is more interesting as a powerful work of art. So far there have been more than 65 translations of the work into modern English; one of the most accomplished versions is by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney (2000).

The following excerpt is about one of the most beautiful extended passages in the poem, the description of the funeral pyre and the final resting place of the ashes of the great man.

The Geat <sup>[1]</sup>people built a pyre <sup>[2]</sup>for Beowulf,  
 Stacked and decked it until it stood foursquare,<sup>[3]</sup>  
 hung with helmets, heavy war-shields,  
 and shining armor, just as he had ordered.  
 Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it, 5  
 mourning a lord far-famed and beloved.  
 On a height they kindled the hugest of all  
 funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke  
 billowed darkly up, the blaze roared  
 and drowned out their weeping, wind died down 10  
 and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,<sup>[4]</sup>  
 burning it to the core. They were disconsolate  
 and wailed aloud for their lord's decease.  
 A Geat woman too sang out in grief;  
 With hair bound up, she unburdened herself 15  
 of her worst fears, a wild litany  
 of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,  
 enemies on the rampage, bodies in plies,  
 slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.  
 Then the Geat people began to construct 20

---

[1] The Geat: a North Germanic tribe inhabiting what is now Götaland ("land of the Geats") in modern Sweden.

[2] pyre: a high pile of wood on which a dead body is placed to be burned in a funeral ceremony.

[3] foursquare: firmly or stably.

[4] bone-house: from the Old English word meaning 'body', literally translating as 'bone-house'.

a mound on a headland, high and imposing,  
 a marker that sailors could see from far away,  
 and in ten days they had done the work.  
 It was their hero's memorial; what remained from the fire  
 they housed inside it, behind a wall 25  
 as worthy of him as their workmanship could make it.  
 And they buried torques in the barrow<sup>[1]</sup> and jewels  
 And a trove<sup>[2]</sup> of such things as trespassing men  
 had once dared to drag from the hoard.  
 They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure, 30  
 gold under gravel, gone to earth,  
 as useless to men now as it ever was.  
 Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,  
 chieftains' sons, champions in battle,  
 all of them distraught, chanting in dirges, 35  
 mourning his loss as a man and a king.  
 They extolled his heroic nature and exploits  
 and gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,  
 for a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear  
 and cherish his memory when that moment comes 40  
 when he has to be convoyed from his bodily home<sup>[3]</sup>.  
 So the Geat people, his hearth-companions,

---

[1] torques in barrow: also torcs meaning necklaces of twisted metal, esp. of ancient Gauls and Britons; barrow: important ancient grave

[2] trove: treasure trove, a collection of valuable or delightful things.

[3] When he has to be convoyed from his bodily home: When his spirit has been led forth from his body.

sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.  
 They said that of all kings upon the earth  
 he was the man most gracious and fair-minded, 45  
 kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

(translated by Seamus Heaney)

## Poetic Devices

One prominent poetic technique in *Beowulf* is its heavy use of repetition of the same consonant sound in verselines called as alliteration. For example, the initial f sounds in the following line: “funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke.” (line 8) In the original *Beowulf*, alliteration is used in almost every line. A line of the poem actually consists of two half-lines with a caesura (pause) between them. Usually, spacing indicates that pause.

The other impressive feature of *Beowulf* is the use of kennings—compound-words as metaphors, providing some vivid as well as funny imagery for the poem. Simply put, kennings are compound expressions that use characteristics to name a person or thing. For instance, an early kenning for “sea”: seġl-rād “sail-road” (*Beowulf* 1429 ), swan-rād “swan-road” (*Beowulf* 200), hron-rād “whale-road” (*Beowulf* 10).

## Questions for Reflection

**Directions:** Read the poem and answer the following questions.

1. What is your impression of the hero Beowulf?
2. What mood does the selected reading convey?
3. How is the atmosphere of the funeral described?



4. Identify some more examples to illustrate the use of alliteration in the poem?
5. What heroic value does Beowulf express?

## Translation

**Directions:** *Read the following lines and translate them into Chinese.*

1. On a height they kindled the hugest of all  
funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke  
billowed darkly up, the blaze roared  
and drowned out their weeping, wind died down  
and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,  
burning it to the core.
2. They said that of all kings upon the earth  
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,  
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.

## Poem 2: The Faerie Queene

### Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)

#### Introductory Remark

Edmund Spenser was born to parents of modest means and status in London. However, he received a good education. He started as a poet by translating some poems for a volume of anti-Catholic propaganda. Spenser set out, consciously and deliberately, to become the great English poet of his age. He is sometimes called the “poet’s poet”