



# Poems

Middle Level

Robert Browning

Emily Dickinson

Robert Frost

Robert Hayden

Denise Levertov

Edgar Lee Masters

Dorothy Parker

Carl Sandburg

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Sara Teasdale

Margaret Walker

Lucille Clifton

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Oliver Goldsmith

Oscar Hijuelos

Vachel Lindsay

Mary Oliver

Linda Pastan

William Shakespeare

May Swenson

Alice Walker

Walt Whitman

# Best Poems

Middle Level

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## TO THE STUDENT

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Whenever we sleep soundly, we dream. Our minds call up images from normal life in an abnormal order. We can find ourselves swimming through grocery stores or joining long-ago playmates at lunch at a house we no longer live in. By the time we wake up, the unreal images are usually gone and we consider them unimportant. Scientific experiments have revealed how wrong that attitude is, however. Volunteers for dream-research projects have been kept from dreaming. Observant researchers wake them up every time brain signals indicate that dreams are beginning. After a few dreamless nights, the volunteers lose their ability to deal with normal life. They can spend eight hours sleeping, but the sleep doesn't refresh them. They are always tired and are unable to think straight. The researchers have concluded that, for various reasons, we need to dream.

In a way, poems are like dreams. They call up images from normal life in interesting and unusual ways. Reading some poems in a strictly logical way leaves us with a feeling of confusion, just as remembering a dream may. Yet when we let ourselves react to the images, the music, the form, and the weird logic of poems, they take on meaning and importance. They take us a step back from normal life and let us see normal events in a new way. Experiencing poems can help us appreciate the pleasant things in reality with greater awareness and deal with the undesirable things with more creativity. Like dreams, poems refresh us and leave us more capable of coping with life.

In this book, you will read poems by more than 50 poets. They will share their distinctive views of life through the shapes, sounds, and meanings of their words and the images those words create in your mind. They will relate stories, tell of personal weaknesses and triumphs, and draw you into moments of excitement and contentment. You will have many opportunities to broaden your own outlook and adapt some of your ideas about life.

The lessons in this book will help you recognize how the writers constructed their poems. You will learn about the major elements of poetry and the techniques poets use. You also will have a chance to try these techniques in your own writing. Perhaps you will find, as these writers did, that in expressing your thoughts, feelings, and dreams to others, they will make more sense to you.

## **UNIT FORMAT AND ACTIVITIES**

- Each unit begins with a list of all the poems you will read in that unit. About the Lessons explains why the poems are grouped the way they are. In general, poems are grouped together because they are particularly good examples of one element of poetry that will be taught in that unit.
- The unit's major writing exercise is then introduced. In this exercise you will begin planning for the writing project that you will complete at the end of the unit. Periodically throughout the unit, you will have opportunities to explore and develop ideas for your writing project.
- About This Poet focuses on one important poet whose work appears in that unit. Here you will learn about the poet's life, major accomplishments, and works.
- Next, there are questions for you to ask yourself as you read the poems in the unit.
- The poems themselves make up the next section. Before each poem is a short biography of the poet and/or further information about the poem. These notes have been included because knowing something about a poet and the poem's content may help you better understand and appreciate the work.
- Following the poems are questions that test your comprehension and critical thinking skills. Your answers to these questions and to other exercises in the unit should be recorded in a personal literature notebook. You also should check your answers with your teacher.
- Your teacher may provide you with charts to record your progress in developing your comprehension skills: The

Comprehension Skills Graph *records* your scores and the Comprehension Skills Profile *analyzes* your scores—providing you with information about the skills on which you need to focus. You can talk with your teacher about ways to work on those comprehension skills.

- The next section contains two or three lessons, which begin with a discussion of the literary concept that is the unit's focus. Each lesson illustrates one or more techniques that poets use to develop the concept. For example, you will see how a poet uses sensory details and concrete language to create memorable images.
- Short-answer exercises test your understanding of the poets' techniques as illustrated in particular poems that appear in the unit. You can check your answers to the exercises with your teacher and determine what you need to review.
- Each lesson also includes a writing exercise that guides you in creating your own original work using the techniques you have just studied.
- Discussion guides and a final writing activity round out each unit in the book. These activities will help sharpen your reading, thinking, speaking, and writing skills.
- At the back of the book is a discussion of the writing process. You may want to refer to it as you complete your writing exercises and projects. You also will find a glossary of literary terms. You can refer to the glossary when you encounter an unfamiliar term or concept.

Reading the poems in this book will enable you to recognize and appreciate the skills it takes to write a good poem. When you understand what makes a poem good, you will be better able to choose and enjoy worthwhile poems on your own. The writing exercises will help you become a better writer by giving you practice in using other poets' techniques to make your own poetry more effective and appealing.



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## INTRODUCTION

### ABOUT THE LESSONS

What do you think of when you hear the term *poetry*? Pretty language? Someone talking about flowers or feelings?

Rhyming words on a greeting card? Certainly poetry can be involved in these things, but the definition and uses of poetry extend much further.

Poetry also can tell of mythical heroes and modern mysteries. It can be a tool for fighting indifference and injustice. It can give people a voice and help them express their hopes, doubts, confusions, and fears. Sometimes its language is flowery but not always. Sometimes it rhymes but not always. It is difficult to find a single description that fits all poetry. However, one thing that is almost always true is that in poetry writers share powerful thoughts, feelings, and experiences through the use of striking and unusual language.

The lessons in this unit will discuss some of the qualities that are found in most poems. Group 1 contains examples of some interesting language used by poets. Group 2 contains poems in which poets use the sounds of words to express or emphasize their ideas. Group 3 contains poems that illustrate how poets share their views and experiences in intense and personal ways.



### WRITING: BECOMING AWARE OF POETRY

As you progress through this book, you will see that poets use a variety of techniques to write effective poetry. At the end of this unit you will write a poem of your own in which you use some of those techniques. Here are some ideas to help you get started:

- The building blocks of poetry are all around you. Start to listen for elements of poetry in your daily life. Begin by carrying

around a notebook and recording interesting comparisons that you may hear. For example, you may hear someone say that students are “packed like sardines into a school bus.” Also record words and phrases that describe sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or feelings in particularly unique ways.

- Listen for examples of interesting or surprising uses of sounds in what you read or hear. Good sources for sounds are advertisements, such as television commercials, jingles, and slogans. You also may hear memorable uses of sounds in everyday conversations. Record any sounds that appeal to you or capture your attention.
- Also record words and phrases that appeal to your emotions. For example, list words that make you feel sad or optimistic, or that fill you with energy or calm you down.

#### ABOUT THIS POET

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) was born in Long Island, New York, and moved to Brooklyn, New York, when he was four years old. At the age of 10, he was apprenticed to a printer and later worked at that trade in New York City before becoming a teacher back in Long Island. Eager to return to the excitement of New York City, Whitman then took jobs as a printer and a journalist in the New York City area. While working at his various jobs, he began writing poetry. In 1855, he published his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The form and content of his poems were so unusual that he could not find a publisher willing to publish his book, so he published it at his own expense. The volume was met with little enthusiasm by critics and the public.

At one point Whitman started his own newspaper, the *Freeman*, but was forced to close it down because of political pressure. During the Civil War, Whitman served as a volunteer in military hospitals in Washington, D.C., and after the war he worked at government jobs until he suffered a paralyzing stroke in 1873. At that time he relocated to Camden,

New Jersey, where he continued revising and adding to *Leaves of Grass* until he died in 1892.

Whitman thought of himself as the poet of democracy. In many of his poems he praises the United States and its form of government. He once wrote, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” Whitman turned his back on traditional rhythm patterns and wrote in a more natural, conversational, and modern style, using what has come to be called *free verse*. Among his better-known poems are “O Captain! My Captain!” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (both of which mourn the loss of President Abraham Lincoln); “Song of Myself”; and “I Sing the Body Electric.”

**AS YOU READ**

As you read each of the poems in this unit, ask yourself these questions:

- How do the words that the poet uses appeal to my senses?
- How do the sounds and/or the visual form of the poem help to get my attention? How do they help to express the poem’s meaning?
- What idea or feeling is the poem about? Have I ever thought or felt this way?
- Does the poem contain comparisons that help me make connections that I was never aware of before? If so, how and why?



# African Sunrise

by Gertrude May Lutz

## ABOUT THE SELECTION

Gertrude May Lutz (1899– ) was born in Oakland, California, and has lived most of her life there. Although she attended business college, her chosen career was to write and teach poetry. Lutz has published five volumes of poetry and has had many of her poems included in poetry anthologies. She also has received a number of state and national poetry prizes. Look for the surprising combinations of images that she has included in “African Sunrise.”



Sky  
Over the last star;  
The parrot-winds  
Sharp-beaked with yellow  
Nipping the bunched date palms . . .

Now the camels  
Open their beeswax eyes  
And raise long necks,  
Rutt<sup>1</sup>ed sound in their throats—  
Camels, pock-marking the sand with spread knees,  
Lifting the odor of under-body with them.

Sun—  
The burn of it  
Hot-coined to each eyelid,  
And desert-stretched,  
                    the caravan of hours  
                            not yet begun.

---

<sup>1</sup>as if going over tracks or grooves

# Pigeons

by Richard Kell

## ABOUT THE SELECTION

Richard Kell (1927– ) was born in Ireland and graduated from Trinity College at the University of Dublin. He has been a college teacher, librarian, and lecturer and has written poems, essays, and short stories for a number of anthologies. In this poem look for the striking descriptions of a type of bird that is not universally loved.



They paddle with staccato<sup>1</sup> feet  
in powder-pools of sunlight,  
small blue busybodies  
strutting like fat gentlemen  
with hands clasped  
under their swallowtail<sup>2</sup> coats;  
and, as they stump about,  
their heads like tiny hammers  
tap at imaginary nails  
in non-existent walls.  
Elusive ghosts of sunshine  
slither down the green gloss  
of their necks an instant, and are gone.

---

<sup>1</sup> abrupt and disjointed

<sup>2</sup> a man's full-dress coat with tails

Summer hangs drugged from sky to earth  
in limpid<sup>3</sup> fathoms<sup>4</sup> of silence:  
only warm dark dimples of sound  
slide like slow bubbles  
from the contented throats.

Raise a casual hand—  
with one quick gust  
they fountain into air.

---

<sup>3</sup> transparent; clear

<sup>4</sup> units used to measure water depth





# Central Park Tourney

by Mildred Weston

## ABOUT THE SELECTION

Everyone knows that cars replaced horses for normal, everyday transportation long ago. In “Central Park Tourney,” Mildred Weston suggests that they also have replaced the horses used in a more romantic, legendary pastime. As you read the poem, listen for the stops and starts.



Cars  
In the Park  
With long spear lights  
Ride at each other  
Like armored knights;  
Rush,  
Miss the mark,  
Pierce the dark,  
Dash by!  
Another two  
Try.

Staged  
In the Park  
From dusk  
To dawn,  
The tourney goes on:  
Rush,  
Miss the mark,  
Pierce the dark,  
Dash by!  
Another two  
Try.