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*An Introduction to*  
**POETRY**

*Seventh Edition*

*An Introduction to*

# POETRY



*Seventh Edition*



HarperCollins*Publishers*

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# Index of Terms

- abstract, 40
- accent, 146
- accental meter, 146, 157
- acrostic, 169
- allegory, 209
- alliteration, 129
- allusion, 46
- analysis, 482
- anapest, 154
- anapestic foot, 154
- anthology, 495
- anticlimax, 252
- antithesis, 166
- apostrophe, 98
- assonance, 130
- auditory imagery, 73
- Augustan age, 49
- ballad, 115
- ballad stanza, 118
- bathos, 252
- blank verse, 165
- brainstorm, 465
- broadside ballads, 118
- cacophony, 125
- carpe diem, 4
- cesura, 148
- Child ballads, 116
- clerihew, 178
- closed couplet, 166
- closed form, 164
- collection, 495
- common meter, 118
- comparison, 485
- conceit, 260
- concrete, 40
- concrete poetry, 203
- connotations, 39, 64
- consonance, 136
- contrast, 485
- conventional symbols, 205
- conventions, 171
- cosmic irony, 26
- couplet, 166
- decorum, 49
- denotation, 39, 64
- dialect, 52
- diction, 40
- didactic poetry, 11
- dimeter, 155
- dramatic irony, 26
- dramatic monologue, 20
- editing, 467
- elegy, 264
- endnote, 472
- end rime, 136
- end-stopped, 149
- English sonnet, 172
- epigram, 174
- epigraph, 96
- euphony, 125
- exact rime, 136
- explication, 477
- eye rime, 137
- falling, 155
- feminine rime, 136
- figures of speech, 88
- fixed forms, 171
- folk ballads, 115
- foot, 154
- footnote, 472
- form, 164
- formal English, 51
- free verse, 180
- general English, 51
- haiku, 74
- half-stress, 155
- heptameter, 155
- heroic couplet, 166
- hexameter, 155
- hidden alliteration, 129
- hyperbole, 98
- iamb, 154
- iambic foot, 154
- iambic meter, 146
- iambic pentameter, 155
- imagery, 74
- imperfect rime, 135
- implied metaphor, 91
- incremental refrain, 110
- initial alliteration, 129
- internal alliteration, 129
- internal refrain, 110
- internal rime, 136
- ironic point of view, 25
- irony, 25
- irony of fate, 26
- Italian sonnet, 172
- journal, 474
- levels of usage, 51
- limerick, 178
- literal meaning, 38
- literary ballads, 119
- lyric, 6
- madrigals, 113
- masculine rime, 136
- metaphor, 91
- meter, 140, 153
- metonymy, 101
- mixed metaphors, 92
- monometer, 155
- monosyllabic foot, 155
- myths, 217
- narrative poem, 8
- near rime, 135
- neoclassical period, 49
- octameter, 155
- off rime, 135
- onomatopoeia, 126
- open form, 164, 179
- overstatement, 98
- parable, 210
- paradox, 99
- parallel, 166
- paraphrase, 2
- pentameter, 155
- persona, 20
- personification, 97
- Petrarchan sonnet, 172
- poetic diction, 49
- projective verse, 80
- proofreading, 467
- prosody, 153
- psalms, 181
- pun, 100
- quantitative meter, 157
- quatrain, 167
- rap, 111
- refrains, 110
- revisions, 231
- rhythm, 145
- rime, 133
- rime scheme, 110
- rondel, 194
- roundel, 194
- run-on line, 149
- sarcasm, 25
- satiric poetry, 14
- scansion, 154
- sentimentality, 251
- sestet, 172
- sestina, 193
- Shakespearean sonnet, 172
- simile, 91
- slack, 147
- slant rime, 135
- sonnet, 165, 171
- sound, 124-125
- spondee, 155
- stanza, 110, 165
- stress, 146
- subject, 4
- summary, 3
- surrealism, 5
- syllabic verse, 168
- symbol, 205
- symbolic act, 208
- symbolists, 207
- synecdoche, 99
- tactile imagery, 73
- terminal refrain, 110
- terza rima, 167
- tetrameter, 155
- theme, 4
- thesis sentence, 465
- tone, 13
- tragic irony, 26
- transferred epithet, 99
- translations, 235-236
- trimeter, 155
- trochaic foot, 154
- trochee, 154
- troubadours, 113
- understatement, 98
- verbal irony, 25
- verse, 110
- vers libre, 180
- villanelle, 179
- visual imagery, 73
- voice, 13
- vulgate, 51

# Preface

What is poetry? Pressed for an answer, Robert Frost made a classic reply: "Poetry is the kind of thing poets write." In all likelihood, Frost was not trying merely to evade the question but to chide his questioner into thinking for himself. A trouble with definitions is that they may stop thought. If Frost had said, "Poetry is a rhythmical composition of words expressing an attitude, designed to surprise and delight, and to arouse an emotional response," the questioner might have settled back in his chair, content to have learned the truth about poetry. He would have learned nothing, or not so much as he might learn by continuing to wonder.

The nature of poetry eludes simple definitions. (In this respect it is rather like jazz. Asked after one of his concerts, "What is jazz?" Louis Armstrong replied, "Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know.") Definitions will be of little help at first, if we are to know poetry and respond to it. We have to go to it willing to see and hear. For this reason, you are asked in reading this book not to be in any hurry to decide what poetry is, but instead to study poems and to let them grow in your mind. At the end of our discussions of poetry, the problem of definition will be taken up again (for those who may wish to pursue it).

Confronted with a formal introduction to poetry, you may be wondering, "Who needs it?" and you may well be right. It's unlikely that you have avoided meeting poetry before; and perhaps you already have a friendship, or at least a fair acquaintance, with some of the great English-speaking poets of all time. What this book provides is an introduction to the *study* of poetry. It tries to help you look at a poem closely, to offer you a wider and more accurate vocabulary with which to express what poems say to you. It will suggest ways to judge for yourself the poems you read. It may set forth some poems new to you.

A frequent objection is that poetry ought not to be studied at all. In this view, a poem is either a series of gorgeous noises to be funneled through one ear and out the other without being allowed to trouble the mind, or an experience so holy that to analyze it in a classroom is as cruel and mechanical as dissecting a hummingbird. To the first view, it might be countered that a good poem has something to say that is well worth listening to. To the second view, it might be argued that poems are much less perishable than hummingbirds, and luckily, we can study them in flight. The risk of a poem's dying from observation is not nearly so great as the risk of not really seeing it at all. It is

doubtful that any excellent poem has ever vanished from human memory because people have read it too closely. More likely, poems that vanish are poems that no one reads closely, for no one cares.

That poetry matters to the people who write it has been shown unmistakably by the ordeal of Soviet poet Irina Ratushinskaya, now living in the West. Sentenced to prison for three and a half years, she was given paper and pencil only twice a month to write letters to her husband and her parents and was not allowed to write anything else. Nevertheless, Ratushinskaya composed more than two hundred poems in her cell, engraving them with a burnt match in a bar of soap, then memorizing the lines. "I would read the poem and read it," she said, "until it was committed to memory—then with one washing of my hands, it would be gone."<sup>1</sup>

Good poetry is something that readers and listeners, too, can care about. In fact, an ancient persuasion of humankind is that the hearing of a poem, as well as the making of a poem, can be a religious act. Poetry, in speech and song, was part of classic Greek drama, which for playwright, actor, and spectator alike was a holy-day ceremony. The Greeks' belief that a poet writes a poem only by supernatural assistance is clear from the invocations to the Muse that begin the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and from the opinion of Socrates (in Plato's *Ion*) that a poet has no powers of invention until divinely inspired. Among the ancient Celts, poets were regarded as magicians and priests, and whoever insulted one of them might expect to receive a curse in rime potent enough to afflict him with boils and to curdle the milk of his cows. Such identifications between the poet and the magician are less common these days, although we know that poetry is involved in the primitive white-magic of children, who bring themselves good luck in a game with the charm "Roll, roll, Tootsie-roll! / Roll the marble in the hole!" and who warn against a hex while jumping along a sidewalk: "Step on a crack, / Break your mother's back." But in this age when we pride ourselves that a computer may solve the riddle of all creation as soon as it is programmed, magic seems to some people of small importance and so too does poetry. It is dangerous, however, to dismiss what we do not logically understand. To read a poem at all, we have to be willing to offer it responses *besides* a logical understanding. Whether we attribute the effect of a poem to a divine spirit or to the reactions of our glands and cortexes, we have to take the reading of poetry seriously (not solemnly), if only because—as some of the poems in this book may demonstrate—few other efforts can repay us so generously, both in wisdom and in joy.

If, as I hope you will do, you sometimes browse in the book for fun, you may be annoyed to see so many questions following the poems. Should you feel this way, try reading with a slip of paper to cover up the questions. You will then—if the Muse should inspire you—have paper in hand to write a poem.

<sup>1</sup>Reported in the *New York Times*, December 19, 1986.

## A WORD ABOUT CAREERS

Students tend to agree that to read poets such as Shakespeare, Keats, Emily Dickinson, and Robert Frost is probably good for the spirit, and most even take some pleasure in the experience. But many, if they aren't planning to teach English and are impatient to begin some other career, often wonder whether the study of poetry, however enjoyable, is not a waste of time or, at least, an annoying obstacle.

This objection may seem reasonable, but it rests on a shaky assumption. It can be argued that, on the contrary, success in a career is *not* mostly a matter of learning certain information and skills that belong exclusively to a certain profession. In most careers, according to a business executive, people often fail not because they don't understand their jobs, but because they don't understand the people they work with, or their clients or customers; and so they can't imagine another person's point of view. To leap outside the walls of your self, to see through another person's eyes—this is an experience that literature abundantly offers. Although, if you are lucky, you may never meet (or have to do business with) anyone *exactly* like the insanely jealous speaker of the poem "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," you will probably learn much about the kind of person he is from Robert Browning's portrait of him. Who knows? Among your fellow students or coworkers may be a J. Alfred Prufrock (the central character of T. S. Eliot's poem), or someone like John Updike's "Ex-Basketball Player." What is it like to be black, a white may wonder? Perhaps Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Rita Dove, Dudley Randall, James C. Kilgore, and others have something to tell. What is it like to be a woman? A man who would learn can read, for a start, Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Anne Bradstreet, Sharon Olds, and many more.

Plodding singlemindedly toward careers, some people are like horses wearing blinders. For many, the goals look fixed and predictable. Competent nurses, accountants, and dental technicians seem always in demand. Others may find that in our society some careers, like waves in the sea, will rise or fall unexpectedly. Think how many professions we now take for granted, which only a few years ago didn't even exist: computer programming, energy conservation, tofu manufacture, videotape rental. Others that once looked like lifetime meal tickets have been cut back and nearly ruined: shoe repairing, commercial fishing, railroading.

In a society perpetually in change, it may be risky to lock yourself on one track to a career, refusing to consider any other. "We are moving," writes John Naisbitt in *Megatrends*, a study of our changing society, "from the specialist, soon obsolete, to the generalist who can adapt." Perhaps the greatest opportunity in your whole life lies in a career that has yet to be invented. If you do

change your career as you go along, you will be like most people. According to U.S. Department of Labor statistics, the average person in a working life changes occupations three times. When for some unforeseen reason you have to make such a change, basic skills may be your most valuable credentials—and a knowledge of humanity.

Literature has much practical knowledge to offer you. An art of words, it can help you become more sensitive to language, both your own and other people's. It can make you aware of the difference between the word that is exactly right and the word that is merely good enough—Mark Twain calls it “the difference between the lightning and the lightning-bug.” Read a fine work of literature alertly, and some of its writer's sensitivity to words may grow on you. A Supreme Court justice, John Paul Stevens, gave his opinion (informally) that the best preparation for law school is to study poetry. Why? George D. Gopen, an English professor with a law degree, says it may be because “no other discipline so closely replicates the central question asked in the study of legal thinking: Here is a text; in how many ways can it have meaning?” (By the way, if a career you plan has anything to do with advertising, whether writing it or buying it or resisting it, be sure to read Chapter 4, “Saying and Suggesting,” on the hints inherent in words.)

Many careers today, besides law, call for close reading and for clear thinking expressed on paper. Lately, college placement directors have reported more demand for graduates who are good readers and writers. The reason is evident: employers need people who can handle words. In a recent survey conducted by Cornell University, business executives were asked to rank in importance the traits they look for when hiring. Leadership was first, but skill in writing and speaking came in fourth, ahead of managerial skill, ahead of skill in analysis. Times change, but to think cogently and to express yourself well are abilities the world still needs.

That is why most colleges, however thorough the career training they may provide, still insist on general training as well, including basic courses in the humanities. No one can promise that your study of literature will result in cash profit, but at least the kind of wealth that literature provides is immune to fluctuations of the Dow Jones average. A highly paid tool and die maker, asked by his community college English instructor why he had enrolled in an evening literature course, said, “Oh, I just decided there has to be more to life than work, a few beers, and the bowling alley.” If you should discover in yourself a fondness for great reading, then in no season of your life are you likely to become incurably bored or feel totally alone—even after you make good in your career, even when there is nothing on television.

## CHANGES IN THIS EDITION

Instructors familiar with this book from its earlier editions may be struck, first of all, by the new look of Chapter One. Following the wishes of many, this opening chapter now contains sections on Lyric Poetry and Narrative Poetry, to try to make these rough but serviceable distinctions clear from the start. A



different array of poems has been called for, but if you are looking for Housman's "Loveliest of trees," Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays," Linda Pastan's "Ethics," Robert Francis's "Catch," or Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," please be assured that these poems are still aboard.

Once again, the book's representation of minority poets has been strengthened, and so has the number of woman poets, both earlier and contemporary. Now added to this edition are Jimmy Santiago Baca, Aphra Behn, Deborah Digges, Rita Dove, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, Louise Erdrich, Linda Gregg, Elizabeth Jennings, Lorine Niedecker, Katherine Philips, Grace Schulman, Wole Soyinka, Ruth Stone, Emma Lee Warrior, Nancy Willard, and Elinor Wylie. Several others who were in the last edition are represented now in greater depth.

This time the ample *Anthology: Poetry* has been lengthened by only two poems, bringing the total to 146. It now includes 44 new selections—traditional, modern, and contemporary. These fresh choices have been made with the help of dozens of instructors, in an effort to provoke livelier classes.

For those who want to give their students a little background information on the poets they read, a new feature has been added: *Lives of the Poets*, which follows the *Anthology*. This section offers brief biographies, tucked in one place for easy reference. While it seemed neither necessary nor workable to include a biography for every poet, there is one for each poet represented by two selections or more. Throughout the book, an asterisk (\*) after a poet's by-line indicates a biographee.

For classes who have time for it, a knotty problem—how to evaluate an unfamiliar poem—is now treated in detail, with fresh (and almost certainly unfamiliar) poems given, and a list of questions supplied to help students make up their own minds. Users of the section of bad poetry will be happy to see that it now boasts major works by William McGonagall and Julia A. Moore, and other horrific new examples.

Since the sixth edition of *An Introduction to Poetry*, deep changes have been made in the "Supplement: Writing," especially in "Writing about Literature." In the past, our advice on writing has been conventional, not much nourished by recent advances in composition theory. In earlier editions, I used to see the writing of a paper as a lockstep trip through stages, with a foreseeable product at the end. This advice has now been recast, more accurately to reflect real life. Strategies for discovering material are given priority. Students are still told they may find it helpful to state a thesis, but this advice is given as only one possible way to write. Editing and mechanics, though given careful attention, take a back seat to more vital matters, such as the tendency of fresh ideas to arrive when it's time to revise. The directions for documenting sources now follow the latest *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. At the end of each chapter you will now find a few "Suggestions for Writing," which may be of special use to anyone using this book in a writing course.

Not one old question has gone unquestioned. More details about these and other renovations may be found in the preface to the thoroughly revised and updated *Instructor's Manual to Accompany An Introduction to Poetry, Seventh*

*Edition*, now conveniently bound in with desk copies and so made part of the book itself.

## THANKS

Once again, in revising this book and its manual, I have depended on the reactions, corrections, and suggestions of many instructors. (Some responded to it as part of *Literature, Fourth Edition*.) Deep thanks to Ila Abernathy, University of Arizona; Stephen Adams, University of Minnesota at Duluth; Jonathan Aldrich, Portland School of Art; R.M. Bedell, Virginia Military Institute; William W. Betts, Jr., Indiana University of Pennsylvania; Ellen Sternberg Bevan, St. John Fisher College; Peggy L. Brayfield, Eastern Illinois University; Laurel Brodsley, UCLA; Joyce Moss Brown, Catonsville Community College; Mary M. Burns, South Central Community College; Ellen Miller Casey, University of Scranton; Joe R. Christopher, Tarleton State University; Robert F. Coleman, Palomar College; Ruth Corson, Norwalk Community College; LuDene Dallimore, Weber State College; Emanuel di Pasquale, Middlesex County Community College; Dan Doll, University of New Orleans; Judi Dumas, Old Dominion University; Charles Clay Doyle, University of Georgia; William D. Eisenberg, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania; Ed Eleazer, Albany (Georgia) Junior College; SallyAnn H. Ferguson, North Carolina A & T State University; Matthew A. Fike, University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University; Robert Foster, SUNY College, Potsdam; G. Dale Gleason, Hutchinson Community College; Len Gougeon, University of Scranton; R.S. Gwynn, Lamar University; Diane Harris, Kent State University; Charles O. Hartman, Connecticut College; Norleen M. Healy, Sheridan College; James Heldman, Western Kentucky University; Randel Helms, Arizona State University; Leonard J. Leff, Oklahoma State University; Richard Lessa, University of Hawaii at Manoa; Stephen Shu-ning Liu, Clark County Community College; Joe Los-tracco, Austin Community College; Kathy L. May, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; Robert McGovern, Ashland College; Mary Nardo, Brevard Community College; Bruce Naschak, Mesa College; Janet C. Nosek, University of Alaska, Anchorage; L. Anderson Orr, Virginia Wesleyan College; Linda Pannill, Transylvania University; David Peck, California State University, Long Beach; Judith K. Powers, University of Wyoming; Helon H. Raines, Casper College; Linda C. Rollins, Motlow State Community College; Arthrell D. Sanders, North Carolina Central University; B. Sandlin, Scottsdale Community College; Ellery Sedgwick, Longwood College; Debra J. Sheffer, Central Missouri State University; Carol Sklenicka, Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design; Michael J. Smith, Highline Community College; Paul H. Stacy, University of Hartford; Al Starr, Essex Community College; Dabney Stuart, Washington and Lee University; Joseph L. Swonk, Rappahannock Community College; Ray S. Williams, Brigham Young University; Stephen Caldwell Wright, Seminole Community College. Some of these instructors testified that they have

used this book for twenty years. Others said that they never have used this book and don't intend to start. I am grateful to them, one and all.

Generously, many students wrote reactions and suggestions. I wish there were space to thank them all, but special thanks to D. D. Doner, Austin Community College; Stephania A. Ezell, University of Central Arkansas; Lawrence A. Ferguson, Centralia Community College; Christopher R. Lake, University of Wisconsin Center, Fond du Lac; Jack H. Marshall, Northeast Texas Community College; Tracy Martinez, Santa Barbara City College; Connie McMurray, Oakland Community College; and Jacqueline Waddington, University of Minnesota. In justice, I would have to name all the students at Tufts, Wellesley, Michigan, North Carolina (Greensboro), California (Irvine), and Leeds who in the past let me read poems in their company.

I owe thanks to many people on the publisher's staff, especially Anne E. Smith and Garret White for lending constant support, Ted Simpson for editing with a knowing hand, Marisa L. L'Heureux for zealously shaping and polishing, Guy Huff for battling with permissions, Debbie Costello for giving the book a fresh design, Kelly Mountain for locating poets' portraits, and Francis Byrne for inspired project editing. B. Dundee Holt recommended, and even transcribed, a rap song.

Finally, I remain grateful to hundreds of instructors named in prefaces past. Much of their thinking and experience is still here, as is that of Sylvan Barnet, who back in 1965 lent order to a confused manuscript. Dorothy M. Kennedy, co-author of the manual, has my lasting gratitude for certain of the questions and biographies, and for much besides.

# TO THE MUSE

---

Give me leave, Muse, in plain view to array  
Your shift and bodice by the light of day.  
I would have brought an epic. Be not vexed  
Instead to grace a niggling schoolroom text;  
Let down your sanction, help me to oblige  
Him who would lead fresh devots to your liege,  
And at your altar, grant that in a flash  
They, he and I know incense from dead ash.

—X.J.K.

# Contents

## 1 Reading a Poem 1

William Butler Yeats, *THE LAKE ISLE OF INNISFREE* 3

LYRIC POETRY 5

D. H. Lawrence, *PIANO* 6

Marianne Moore, *THE WOOD-WEASEL* 7

NARRATIVE POETRY 8

Anonymous, *SIR PATRICK SPENCE* 8

Robert Frost, *"OUT, OUT—"* 10

## 2 Listening to a Voice 13

TONE 13

Theodore Roethke, *MY PAPA'S WALTZ* 14

Countee Cullen, *FOR A LADY I KNOW* 15

Anne Bradstreet, *THE AUTHOR TO HER BOOK* 15

Walt Whitman, *TO A LOCOMOTIVE IN WINTER* 16

Emily Dickinson, *I LIKE TO SEE IT LAP THE MILES* 17

Langston Hughes, *HOMECOMING* 18

John Milton, *ON THE LATE MASSACRE IN PIEMONTE* 18

THE PERSON IN THE POEM 19

Trumbull Stickney, *SIR, SAY NO MORE* 19

Philip Larkin, *WEDDING-WIND* 20

William Wordsworth, *I WANDERED LONELY AS A CLOUD* 21

James Stephens, *A GLASS OF BEER* 23

Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, *WE NEVER SAID FAREWELL* 23

Paul Zimmer, *THE DAY ZIMMER LOST RELIGION* 24

William Carlos Williams, *THE RED WHEELBARROW* 25

IRONY 25

Robert Creeley, *OH NO* 25

W. H. Auden, *THE UNKNOWN CITIZEN* 27

Herbert Scott, *THE GROCER'S CHILDREN* 28

<i>John Betjeman</i> , IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY	28
<i>Sarah N. Cleghorn</i> , THE GOLF LINKS	30
<i>Thomas Hardy</i> , THE WORKBOX	30
<i>Robert Burns</i> , THE TOAD-EATER	31

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY 31

<i>Richard Lovelace</i> , TO LUCASTA	32
<i>Wilfred Owen</i> , DULCE ET DECORUM EST	32
<i>Bettie Sellers</i> , IN THE COUNSELOR'S WAITING ROOM	33
<i>Jonathan Swift</i> , ON STELLA'S BIRTHDAY	34
<i>Robert Flanagan</i> , REPLY TO AN EVICTION NOTICE	34
<i>John Ciardi</i> , IN PLACE OF A CURSE	35
<i>William Blake</i> , THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER	36

## 3 Words 38

### LITERAL MEANING: WHAT A POEM SAYS FIRST 38

<i>William Carlos Williams</i> , THIS IS JUST TO SAY	39
<i>Knut Skinner</i> , THE COLD IRISH EARTH	41
<i>Henry Taylor</i> , RIDING A ONE-EYED HORSE	41
<i>Robert Graves</i> , DOWN, WANTON, DOWN!	42
<i>Peter Davison</i> , THE LAST WORD	43
<i>Bruce Guernsey</i> , GLOVE	43
<i>John Donne</i> , BATTER MY HEART, THREE-PERSONED GOD	44

### THE VALUE OF A DICTIONARY 45

<i>Richard Wilbur</i> , IN THE ELEGY SEASON	46
<i>J. V. Cunningham</i> , FRIEND, ON THIS SCAFFOLD THOMAS MORE LIES DEAD	47
<i>Herman Melville</i> , THE PORTENT	47
<i>Lucille Clifton</i> , WINNIE SONG	48
<i>Laurence Perrine</i> , JANUS	48
<i>John Clare</i> , MOUSE'S NEST	48

### WORD CHOICE AND WORD ORDER 49

<i>Josephine Miles</i> , REASON	51
<i>Hugh MacDiarmid</i> , WHEESHT, WHEESHT	52
<i>Emma Lee Warrior</i> , HOW I CAME TO HAVE A MAN'S NAME	54
<i>Thomas Hardy</i> , THE RUINED MAID	55
<i>Richard Eberhart</i> , THE FURY OF AERIAL BOMBARDMENT	56
<i>Wole Soyinka</i> , LOST TRIBE	57

## FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY 57

- David B. Axelrod, *ONCE IN A WHILE A PROTEST POEM* 57  
Lewis Carroll, *JABBERWOCKY* 58  
Wallace Stevens, *METAMORPHOSIS* 59  
E. E. Cummings, *ANYONE LIVED IN A PRETTY HOW TOWN* 60  
Anonymous, *CARNATION MILK* 61  
A. R. Ammons, *SPRING COMING* 61  
William Wordsworth, *MY HEART LEAPS UP WHEN I BEHOLD* 62  
William Wordsworth, *MUTABILITY* 62  
Anonymous, *SCOTTSBORO* 63

## 4 *Saying and Suggesting* 64

- John Masfield, *CARGOES* 65  
William Blake, *LONDON* 66  
Wallace Stevens, *DISILLUSIONMENT OF TEN O'CLOCK* 68  
Gwendolyn Brooks, *THE BEAN EATERS* 69  
Timothy Steele, *EPITAPH* 69  
Geoffrey Hill, *MERLIN* 69  
Wallace Stevens, *THE EMPEROR OF ICE CREAM* 70  
Walter de la Mare, *THE LISTENERS* 71  
Robert Frost, *FIRE AND ICE* 72

## 5 *Imagery* 73

- Ezra Pound, *IN A STATION OF THE METRO* 73  
Taniguchi Buson, *THE PIERCING CHILL I FEEL* 73  
T. S. Eliot, *THE WINTER EVENING SETTLES DOWN* 75  
Theodore Roethke, *ROOT CELLAR* 75  
Elizabeth Bishop, *THE FISH* 76  
Oscar Wilde, *SYMPHONY IN YELLOW* 78  
John Haines, *WINTER NEWS* 79  
Emily Dickinson, *A ROUTE OF EVANESCENCE* 79  
Jean Toomer, *REAPERS* 80  
Gerard Manley Hopkins, *PIED BEAUTY* 80

### ABOUT HAIKU 81

- John Ridland, *THE LAZY MAN'S HAIKU* 82  
Richard Brautigan, *HAIKU AMBULANCE* 82  
Gary Snyder, Penny Harter, Paul Goodman, Virgil Hutton,  
Raymond Roseliep, Nicholas Virgilio, Richard Wright, *A SELECTION  
OF HAIKU* 82

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY	83
John Keats, BRIGHT STAR! WOULD I WERE STEADFAST AS THOU ART	83
Timothy Steele, WAITING FOR THE STORM	84
Walt Whitman, THE RUNNER	84
T. E. Hulme, IMAGE	84
William Carlos Williams, THE GREAT FIGURE	85
Robert Bly, DRIVING TO TOWN LATE TO MAIL A LETTER	85
Gary Snyder, MID-AUGUST AT SOURDOUGH MOUNTAIN LOOKOUT	85
H. D., HEAT	86
Emanuel di Pasquale, A SENSUAL, FOR EZRA POUND	86
Linda Gregg, THE GRUB	86
Mary Oliver, RAIN IN OHIO	87

## 6   *Figures of Speech*   88

WHY SPEAK FIGURATIVELY?	88
Alfred, Lord Tennyson, THE EAGLE	89
William Shakespeare, SHALL I COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER'S DAY?	89
Howard Moss, SHALL I COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER'S DAY?	90
Jon Stallworthy, SINDHI WOMAN	91

METAPHOR AND SIMILE	91
Richard Wilbur, A SIMILE FOR HER SMILE	93
Alfred, Lord Tennyson, FLOWER IN THE CRANNIED WALL	93
William Blake, TO SEE A WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND	94
Sylvia Plath, METAPHORS	94
Emily Dickinson, IT DROPPED SO LOW—IN MY REGARD	94
James C. Kilgore, THE WHITE MAN PRESSED THE LOCKS	95
Peter Williams, WHEN SHE WAS HERE, LI BO, SHE WAS LIKE COLD SUMMER LAGER	95
Ruth Whitman, CASTOFF SKIN	96

OTHER FIGURES	97
James Stephens, THE WIND	97
Chidiock Tichborne, ELEGY, WRITTEN WITH HIS OWN HAND	99
George Herbert, THE PULLEY	101
Edmund Waller, ON A GIRDLE	102
Theodore Roethke, I KNEW A WOMAN	102



FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY	103
Robert Frost, THE SILKEN TENT	103
Denise Levertov, LEAVING FOREVER	104
Jane Kenyon, THE SUITOR	104
Richard Wilbur, SLEEPLESS AT CROWN POINT	105
Robert Frost, THE SECRET SITS	105
Margaret Atwood, YOU FIT INTO ME	105
Grace Schulman, HEMISPHERES	105
John Tagliabue, MAINE VASTLY COVERED WITH MUCH SNOW	106
John Ashbery, THE CATHEDRAL IS	106
W. S. Merwin, SONG OF MAN CHIPPING AN ARROWHEAD	106
Robert Burns, OH, MY LOVE IS LIKE A RED, RED ROSE	107

## 7 Song 108

SINGING AND SAYING	108
Ben Jonson, TO CELIA	109
Anonymous, THE CRUEL MOTHER	110
Edwin Arlington Robinson, RICHARD CORY	114
Paul Simon, RICHARD CORY	114

### BALLADS 115

Anonymous, BONNY BARBARA ALLAN	116
Dudley Randall, BALLAD OF BIRMINGHAM	119

### FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER STUDY 120

John Lennon and Paul McCartney, ELEANOR RIGBY	120
Anonymous, FA, MI, FA, RE, LA, MI	122
Anonymous, THE SILVER SWAN, WHO LIVING HAD NO NOTE	122
Bruce Springsteen, BORN TO RUN	122

## 8 Sound 124

### SOUND AS MEANING 124

Alexander Pope, TRUE EASE IN WRITING COMES FROM ART, NOT CHANCE	125
William Butler Yeats, WHO GOES WITH FERGUS?	127
John Updike, WINTER OCEAN	128
Frances Cornford, THE WATCH	128
William Wordsworth, A SLUMBER DID MY SPIRIT SEAL	128
Emanuel di Pasquale, RAIN	129
Aphra Behn, WHEN MAIDENS ARE YOUNG	129