



Poems

Advanced Level

Maya Angelou

Emily Brontë

Robert Browning

Emily Dickinson

Robert Herrick

Donald Justice

N. Scott Momaday

Marge Piercy

Ishmael Reed

Anne Sexton

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Sara Teasdale

William Wordsworth

William Blake

Gwendolyn Brooks

e. e. cummings

Robert Frost

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Denise Levertov

Naomi Shihab Nye

Edgar Allan Poe

Carl Sandburg

William Shakespeare

Luci Tapahonso

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Richard Wright

Best Poems

Advanced Level

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TO THE STUDENT

"She walks in Beauty, like the night/Of cloudless climes and starry skies;"

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?/Thou art more lovely and more temperate:"

"Come, my friends,"Tis not too late to seek a newer world."

"Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,"

"Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,/Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!"

In this book you will read the poems which first introduced these unforgettable lines to the world. Although you will not remember every line of every poem, if you are like most people certain lines will lodge themselves in your memory—perhaps for the rest of your life. Years from now you will still be able to recall and enjoy their unique sounds, images, and meanings.

What makes poems so affecting and so memorable? First and foremost, poets love words and they understand the power of both their sounds and their meanings. Using just the right words, poets are able to compact large ideas about such topics as life, love, and death into a few short lines. In the best poems these words ring so true that they become part of a reader's memory forever.

Because poems pack a great deal of meaning into a few words, they often can be dense and complex. There almost seems to be a code that you need to crack before you can understand them thoroughly. In this book you will get the help you need to understand poetry. Not every poem that you read will be explained in detail. It would be foolish to attempt such a task, since in many cases the meaning of a poem depends upon the interpretation of the person reading it. Instead of trying to analyze every poem, this book focuses on specific elements that

are outstanding in each poem. By completing the lessons in this book, you will gain experience in recognizing and appreciating the elements that make a poem superior. You will analyze the techniques that poets use to create their work, and you will have the opportunity to try those techniques in poems that you write yourself.

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

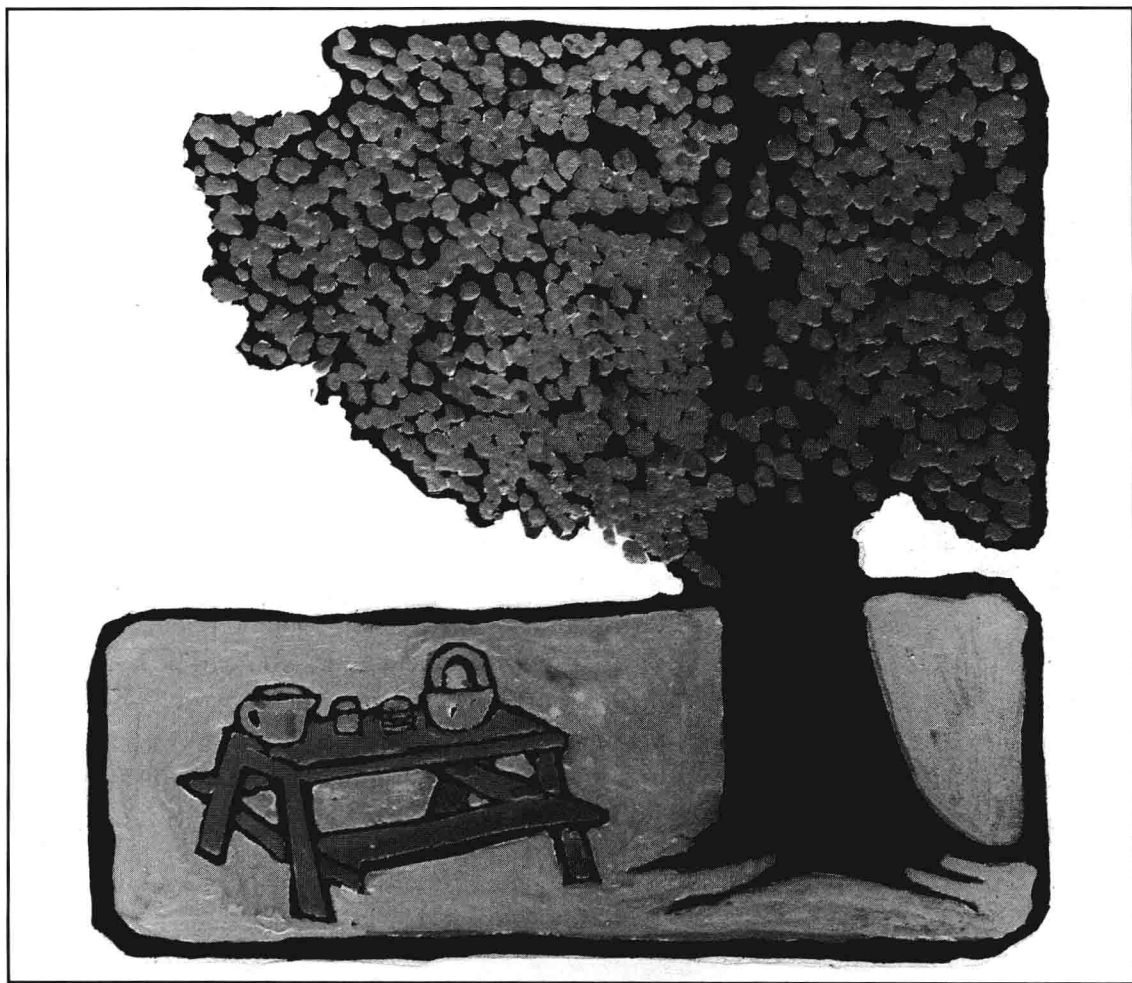
Comprehension Skills Profile *analyzes* your scores—providing you with information about the skills on which you need to focus. You can talk with your teacher about ways to work on those comprehension skills.

- 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.



What Is a Poem?



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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE LESSONS

Long before people had systems of writing, they often shared stories by reciting them in the form of poetry. Long after writing was invented, people wrote stories in the form of poetry rather than in conversational language. Only in the last few hundred years have some people chosen to write in prose instead of poetry, using sentences and paragraphs instead of lines and stanzas.

Why is it that so many imaginative people have chosen to present their ideas in the form of poetry? Why are poems so powerful? In this unit you will consider these questions as you look at some elements that are common to most poems. The lessons will look at these characteristics: 1) poets find meaning or raise questions as they experience the world around them, and then they relate those experiences or questions to others; 2) poets distinguish their messages from normal, everyday communication by using special sounds, patterns, and forms; 3) poets use imagery, striking comparisons, and exact detail to make their messages vivid and memorable. Each of the three groups of poems in this unit highlights one of these characteristics.



WRITING: DEVELOPING A POET'S EYE AND EAR

Not every writer sits down with the express purpose of writing a poem. In fact, you already may have written a poem without knowing it. That is because everyday speech contains rhythm, rhyme, and the repetition of sounds. People naturally fill their conversations with ear-catching sounds, interesting comparisons, and humorous wordplay. At the end of this unit you will write a poem, using your natural speech patterns along with other poetic elements. For now, begin to develop a poet's eye and ear with these suggestions:

- Sometimes people use poetic language without thinking. For example, writing that is intended to serve a special purpose, such as signs and labels, often has a rhythm and a form that

suggest poetry. Because these poems are found by chance, they are called *found poems*. For one day, carry a notebook with you and look for found poems in signs that you see in school or on the street or on labels that you read on cans or bottles. Look for signs whose lines break in ways that suggest a poem. You are the judge of what constitutes a found poem. Here is one example:

Fair Warning!
Trespassers will be
prosecuted to the
full extent of the law!

- For one day, listen to the natural speech of everyone around you—your friends, your teachers, your family, radio announcers, and television actors. Do you hear any rhymes? repetition of sounds and words? obvious rhythms in speech? unusual comparisons or descriptions? In your notebook record any interesting uses of sounds and words.

ABOUT THIS POET

Carl Sandburg (1878–1967) was a historian, a biographer, and one of the most important modern poets in the United States. In all his works he showed an enthusiasm toward the American way of life and the common man. Sandburg was born in Galesburg, Illinois, and left school at age 13 to take on a series of jobs. As a young man he traveled about as a hobo, and then in 1898, he served briefly in the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War. Later that year he returned home to study at Lombard College in Galesburg. In 1902 he dropped out. He then worked for the Socialist Party in Wisconsin for about 10 years.

From 1912 through the 1920s Sandburg worked as a newspaper writer, primarily in Chicago. During that time he established his reputation as a poet with the publication of *Chicago Poems* (1916) and a series of other collections. He and other important

writers living in Chicago then became known as the *Chicago School*.

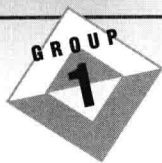
In 1926 he published the first two volumes of his biography of Abraham Lincoln, called *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years*. Its success allowed him to concentrate on literature. Earlier he had begun collecting American folktales, ballads, and other folklore. In 1927 he published his collection of folk songs in *The American Songbag*. His study of folklore also influenced much of his poetry and the books he wrote for children, such as *The Rootabaga Stories* (1922).

In the 1930s Sandburg published *The People, Yes* (1936)—a long poem that included American folktale heroes—and the last four volumes of his Lincoln biography, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (1939). The biography earned him the 1940 Pulitzer Prize for history. In 1951 he won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for his *Collected Poems* (1950). Sandburg, like Walt Whitman, wanted to speak for the American people. In many ways he achieved that goal.

AS YOU READ

As you read each poem in this unit, ask yourself these questions:

- Who is speaking in this poem? What message is the speaker expressing, and why?
- What sounds and sound patterns do I find in the poem that I don't hear in normal conversation or see in prose writing?
- What pictures does the poem paint in my mind?



Flying Fish

by Carl Sandburg

ABOUT THE SELECTION

Carl Sandburg (1878–1967) was one of the most important modern poets in the United States. He traveled widely and held a series of jobs before becoming a journalist in Chicago. When his first book of poetry was published in 1916, he became nationally known and eventually won two Pulitzer Prizes. For more information about Sandburg, see About This Poet at the beginning of this unit. Perhaps “Flying Fish” reflects Sandburg’s feelings during some of his early travels.



I have lived in many half-worlds myself . . . and so
I know you.

I leaned at a deck rail watching a monotonous sea,
the same circling birds and the same plunge
of furrows¹ carved by the plowing keel.

I leaned so . . . and you fluttered struggling between
two waves in the air now . . . and then under the water
and out again . . . a fish . . . a bird . . . a fin thing . . .
a wing thing.

Child of water, child of air, fin thing and wing thing . . .
I have lived in many half-worlds myself . . .
and so I know you.

¹ long, shallow trenches or grooves

Self Portrait

by Samantha Abeel

ABOUT THE SELECTION

When Samantha Abeel (1977–) was in seventh grade, she learned that she had a learning disability. In order to prove to herself and others that she had strengths as well as weaknesses, she began writing poetry. Her first book of poems, *Reach for the Moon*, was published while she was still in high school. “Self Portrait” is from that collection.



To show you who I am
I crawled inside a tree, became its roots, bark and leaves,
listened to its whispers in the wind.
When fall came and painted the leaves red and gold
I wanted to shake them across your lawn
to transform the grass into a quilt, a gift spread at your feet,
but their numbers eluded¹ me,
so I turned a piece of paper into my soul
to send to you so that you might see
how easily it can be crumpled and flattened out again.
I wanted you to see my resilience,²
but I wasn't sure how to arrange the numbers in your address,
so I danced with the Indians in the forest
and collected the feathers that fell from the eagle's wings,
each one a wish for my future,
but I lost track of their numbers, gathered too many,
and was unable to carry them home

¹ escaped from, as by skill

² ability to recover quickly from illness or other setback

so I reaped the wind with my hair,
relived its journey through my senses, and
felt its whispered loneliness, like lakes in winter,
but it was too far and you could not follow me.

Now I've written out their shadows
like the wind collects its secrets
to whisper into receptive ears, and I
will leave them at your doorstep,
a reminder of what others cannot see,
a reminder of what I can and cannot be.

The Argument of His Book

by Robert Herrick

ABOUT THE SELECTION

Robert Herrick (1591–1674), the vicar of a rural church, produced some of England's finest lyric poems. Born in London, Herrick was ordained a minister in the Church of England in 1621. He served in a small parish in Devonshire (now Devon). Although his poems were not published until 1648 they were already popular, having circulated widely in manuscript form. Many of his best works are love poems to imaginary women and poems about nature and country life, such as "The Argument of His Book." In this poem Herrick uses the term *argument* to mean "summary, or short statement of subject matter."



I sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds and bowers,¹
 Of April, May, of June and July-flowers;
 I sing of May-poles, hock-carts, wassails,² wakes,
 Of bridegrooms, brides and of their bridal cakes;
 I write of youth, of love, and have access
 By these to sing of cleanly wantonness;³
 I sing of dews, of rains, and piece by piece
 Of balm, of oil, of spice and ambergris;⁴
 I sing of times trans-shifting, and I write
 How roses first came red and lilies white;
 I write of groves, of twilights, and I sing
 The Court of Mab,⁵ and of the Fairy King;
 I write of hell; I sing (and ever shall)
 Of heaven, and hope to have it after all.

¹ shady resting places in a garden

² festive occasions marked by drinking

³ playfulness

⁴ waxy substance added to perfumes to slow down evaporation

⁵ queen of the fairies



April

by Marcia Masters

ABOUT THE SELECTION

The scene that Marcia Masters paints in “April” is of a world long gone, before television and cars provided easy access to entertainments away from the neighborhoods people lived in. Try to put yourself in this scene, on a street full of children as late afternoon turns into evening.



It's lemonade, it's lemonade, it's daisy.
It's a roller-skating, scissor-grinding day;
It's gingham-waisted,¹ chocolate flavored, lazy,
With the children flower-scattered at their play.

It's the sun like watermelon,
And the sidewalks overlaid
With a glaze of yellow yellow
Like a jar of marmalade.

It's the mower gently mowing,
And the stars like startled glass,
While the mower keeps on going
Through a waterfall of grass.

Then the rich magenta² evening
Like a sauce upon the walk,
And the porches softly swinging
With a hammockful of talk.

¹ referring to dresses made of a cloth whose patterns are usually checks, plaids, or stripes

² purplish-red