



# *Great American Poems*

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**The Road Not Taken, The Waste Land,  
Paul Revere's Ride, and 99 Others**



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# Great American Poems

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# Notes

## N O T E S

**What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?**

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

This anthology has been assembled to celebrate the diversity of style and subject matter of 56 American poets, who lived between colonial times and the present. Poets in each generation added new techniques, afforded us new perspectives, and refined existing literary style to create a uniquely American genre of poetry. Regardless of the era, these poems reflect the poets' concerns, interests, political opinions, and emotions on both an individual and a universal level. Writing poetry has always provided an outlet for the patriot, the storyteller, the humorist, the rebel, the philosopher, and the songwriter to share their thoughts.

It is important to consider the historical context in which these poets lived and wrote. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century poets were immersed in the colonization of America, the freedoms of the new country, and the hardships the new Americans frequently encountered. In Colonial America, poetry frequently appeared as children's verse, popular songs, ballads, Christian hymns, and elegies for public figures; these subjects would change shortly and would encompass many more themes.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, citizens began to explore the vast country, migrate westward, welcome immigrants from many countries, and develop a modern American culture. Prompted by the national schism of the Civil War, poetry also focused on various regional perspectives and antislavery protests, as well as marching songs, and calls to arms. The publication of poetry in newspapers and popular magazines brought it into the mainstream of American life, and made it easily accessible to the average person.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought about rapid and turbulent change. Two World Wars and other major conflicts, the Great Depression, the Feminist and Civil Rights Movements, the Vietnam War, and a transportation and communication revolution increased interaction among people and made the world simultaneously smaller and much larger. American poets became active in a variety of poetic movements that experimented with new techniques like imagism, modernism, surrealism, as well as abstract, found, and confessional poetry.

# READING POINTERS

## Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

Poetry is a form of language organized by rhythm and structured to elicit emotions, as well as communicate ideas. It requires the reader to consider both *what* a poem is saying and *how* it is being said. The sound of a poem is frequently as important as its message; as you read, pay attention to how the poems would sound if they were read aloud. Some will crackle with thunder, and some will lull you into the peace of a quiet summer day. The subject matter of the poems in this anthology is also varied—from the consequences of war, to the beauty of a lover, to the isolation present in modern life.

A good poet uses every word in the poem purposefully; a good reader, therefore, must be sensitive to the implications of word choice. The saying, “One picture is worth a thousand words,” is true, but the reverse is more pertinent: One word creates a thousand pictures. What the words *sad* or *glory* or *river* might mean to you is different from what they mean to someone else. Poetic language enables a reader to find meaning that is both rich and satisfying, troubling and uncomfortable, as well as personal and universal. A single line of poetry can convey the writer’s emotions and ideas in very few words, and conciseness is one of poetry’s essential elements.

In addition, because poetry is filled with literary devices, much more so than prose is, it creates images and connections in the reader’s mind that each reader will understand through his or her own perspective. When you read these poems, remember that poetry conveys what no other form of literature can and that many times, *feeling* the poem is as important as *understanding* it.

The following reading pointers should help enhance your reading, your understanding, and, lastly, your enjoyment of poetry, which, ultimately, is most important.

As you read these poems, incorporate the following strategies:

**Read a poem sentence-by-sentence or thought-by-thought, rather than line-by-line.**

Pay attention to the punctuation and not where each line ends. While this may be difficult with authors such as H. D. or E. E. Cummings, some, like Stephen Crane or William Carlos Williams wrote poems that are composed of a single sentence or two. Many poets will use fragments—incomplete sentences—to make their points. Carl Sandburg’s “Chicago,” begins with the fragment, “Hog Butcher for the World...” and lists other characteristics of the city in a series of descriptive phrases, none of which are complete sentences, but which, together, allow the reader a glimpse of the enormous strength of the city.

**Notice that poets change the usual order of words by putting the object before the verb, the subject after the predicate, modifiers in unusual places, etc.**

Sometimes, this is done for rhyme or meter, but often, word order is altered to give the poem a flavor it would not have otherwise. While this technique might initially hinder your appreciation of a poem, a second reading will usually make the intent of the poem clear. Had Robert Frost written, “I think I know whose woods these are,” instead of “Whose woods these are I think I know,” the entire rhyme scheme of the poem would have been altered, but the rhythm would have remained the same. Emily Dickinson, however, writes: “Yet certain am I of the spot”; rewording it to “Yet I am certain of the spot” does not change the meaning, but does ruin the rhythm of the line.

**Be prepared to make inferences and not interpret the poem literally.**

Figurative language does not mean exactly what it says; rather it suggests meanings. Poets use metaphor, personification, symbolism, hyperbole, allusions, etc., to build associations and content in a very concentrated verse form. T.S. Eliot’s line, “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,” is an example of personification; the fog has no back, nor can it “rub” against anything. The imagery, however, is effective, and you should form a mental image of fog as you read the line. The title of Jean Toomer’s poem, “Her lips are Copper Wire,” is a metaphor, but what does it mean? The person’s lips cannot be made of copper, so it is up to the reader to infer meaning from the image.



## UPON A WASP CHILLED WITH COLD

By  
Edward Taylor

*Edward Taylor (1642-1729), the greatest Colonial poet, did not publish his bounty of finely constructed religious poems during his lifetime. Found in 1937, at Yale University, his poems were subsequently published. Taylor was born in Britain and then came to America in protest of the lack of religious freedom in England. Here he went to Harvard University. Taylor was a minister, physician, and militia leader in his town of Westfield, Massachusetts, where he remained for the rest of his life. His poetry echoes the style of the popular British Metaphysical poets. Taylor's outstanding skill and depth of religious theme are qualities that few other American poets have equaled. His poems illustrate his love and devotion to the Lord. Taylor died at the age of 87*

The bear that breathes the northern blast<sup>†</sup>  
Did numb, torpedo-like, a wasp  
Whose stiffened limbs encramped, lay bathing  
In Sol's<sup>†</sup> warm breath and shine as saving,  
Which with her hands she chafes and stands  
Rubbing her legs, shanks, thighs, and hands.  
Her pretty toes, and fingers' ends  
Nipped with this breath, she out extends  
Unto the sun, in great desire

<sup>†</sup>Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

To warm her digits at that fire.  
Doth hold her temples in this state  
Where pulse doth beat, and head doth ache.  
Doth turn, and stretch her body small,  
Doth comb her velvet capital.  
As if her little brain pan were  
A volume of choice precepts clear.  
As if her satin jacket hot  
Contained apothecary's shop  
Of nature's receipts, that prevails  
To remedy all her sad ails,  
As if her velvet helmet high  
Did turret rationality.†  
She fans her wing up to the wind  
As if her pettycoat were lined,  
With reason's fleece, and hoists sails  
And humming flies in thankful gales  
Unto her dun curled palace hall  
Her warm thanks offering for all.  
Lord, clear my misted sight that I  
May hence view Thy divinity,  
Some sparks whereof thou up dost hasp†  
Within this little downy wasp  
In whose small corporation we  
A school and a schoolmaster see,  
Where we may learn, and easily find  
A nimble spirit bravely mind  
Her work in every limb: and lace  
It up neat with a vital grace,  
Acting each part though ne'er so small  
Here of this fustian animal.  
Till I enravished climb into  
The Godhead on this ladder do,  
Where all my pipes† inspired upraise  
An heavenly music furred with praise.



## AN HYMN TO THE EVENING

By

Phillis Wheatley

*Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784) was a poet of great skill but one most unlikely to be famous. Wheatley came to America when she was taken from her home in Gambia, Africa. Surviving the Middle Passage, she was bought and educated by a Bostonian family, who encouraged her to write. Wheatley had one volume of poetry published. Her moving verses often address religious issues to which she was devoted. As a published author, Wheatley was able to obtain her freedom. She married and had three children within five years; however, her life ended tragically. She experienced the loss of her husband through abandonment, and her children through death. Wheatley died in poverty at a boarding house. Friends knew there was another volume of verse, but it has never been discovered*

Soon as the sun forsook the eastern main  
The pealing thunder shook the heav'nly plain;  
Majestic grandeur! From the zephyr's wing,  
Exhales the incense of the blooming spring.  
Soft purl the streams, the birds renew their notes,  
And through the air their mingled music floats.

Through all the heav'ns what beauteous dyes are  
spread!  
But the west glories in the deepest red:  
So may our breasts with ev'ry virtue glow,  
The living temples of our God below!

Fill'd with the praise of him who gives the light,  
And draws the sable curtains of the night,  
Let placid slumbers sooth each weary mind,  
At morn to wake more heav'nly, more refin'd;  
So shall the labors of the day begin  
More pure, more guarded from the snares of sin.

Night's leaden sceptre seals my drowsy eyes,  
Then cease, my song, till fair Aurora<sup>†</sup> rise.



## THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER

By  
Francis Scott Key

*Francis Scott Key (1779-1843), an amateur poet, and a full-time lawyer, wrote his immortal poem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," during the War of 1812. Key was born into an aristocratic southern family in Maryland. He received his law degree at St. John's College and practiced law before becoming a district attorney. Key penned the words of "The Star-Spangled Banner" on the back of a letter at the end of a great bombardment by the British on Ft. McHenry. It became the National Anthem in 1931. His other poetry, which is religious in nature, was published posthumously in a volume called Poems of the Late Francis S. Key, Esq. He died of pleurisy at the age of 74 at his daughter's home in Baltimore.*

O say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,  
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming:  
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,

O'er<sup>†</sup> the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?  
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there;  
O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave  
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave?

On the shore dimly seen through the mists of the deep,  
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,  
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep  
As it fitfully blows, now conceals, now discloses?  
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam;  
Its full glory reflected now shines on the stream;  
'Tis the star-spangled banner; Oh! long may it wave  
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore,  
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,  
A home and a country should leave us no more?  
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution;

No refuge could save the hireling and slave  
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave,  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave  
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!

O! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand  
Between their loved homes and the war's desolation;  
Blessed with victory and peace, may the Heaven-rescued land

Praise the power that hath made and preserved us a nation.

Then conquer we must, for our cause it is just.  
And this be our motto, "In God is our trust" :  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave  
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave.

## Glossary

### Upon A Wasp Chilled With Cold

**The bear...northern blast** – an allusion to an Iroquois Indian legend that relates that a bear's breath can freeze waters; therefore, the bear was given the task of being in charge of the winter winds

**Sol's** – the sun's

**Did turret rationality** – As if the wasp's movements indicate intelligence

**whereof thou up dost hasp** – “which you (God) has given”

**pipes** – another word for voice

### An Hymn to the Evening

**Aurora** – the Roman goddess of the dawn

### The Star-Spangled Banner

**O'er** – Over

### A Visit from St. Nicholas

**like the down of a thistle** – The seed of a thistle (a purple weed) appears soft and fluffy and easily blows away with a breath of air.

### Thanatopsis

**last bitter hour** – the time of death

**narrow house** – the coffin or grave

**patriarchs of the infant world** – the early Hebrews before written records

**Barcan wilderness** – a desolate area in North Africa

**Oregon** – a river in northwest United States

### Paul Revere's Ride

**North Church** – a famous Bostonian church, built in 1723

**Middlesex** — the Massachusetts county where Boston was founded; it was named for a county in England.

**Charlestown** – a Colonial town north of Boston, situated between the Mystic and Charles Rivers

**Mystic** – a river near Boston

**Lexington** – the famous site of the first shots fired during the Revolutionary War, seven miles from Boston

**Concord town** – a small Colonial town nineteen miles northeast of Boston

**ball for ball** – literally, “shot for shot”; early ammunition was shaped into small lead balls.

## Vocabulary

*Note: Vocabulary words are defined here by how they are used in the poems.  
Traditional uses of the words may be different.*

### Upon A Wasp Chilled With Cold

apothecary – pharmacist

capital – the head; top

corporation – the body

chafes – rubs vigorously and roughly

dun – grayish-yellow

encramped – constricted; contracted

enraptured – overcome

furred – covered

fustian – an appearance like something woven; grand (It is not obvious from the poem which definition is intended.)

precepts – beliefs

shanks – long parts of the body; legs

### An Hymn to the Evening

forsook – abandoned; left

placid – tranquil, peaceful

purl – to murmur

sable – dark; black

sceptre – the ruling staff of a monarch

zephyr – a breeze

### The Star-Spangled Banner

haughty – proud, arrogant

havoc – chaos

hireling – a mercenary

perilous – dangerous

ramparts – fortifications; battle walls

reposes – rests

vauntingly – boastfully

### A Visit from St. Nicholas

coursers – fleet reindeer

droll – amusing, funny

luster – shine

sash – a window

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