



Great American Poems

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



PRESTWICK HOUSE
LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS™

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Great American Poems

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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.



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[†]
Did numb, torpedo-like, a wasp
Whose stiffened limbs encramped, lay bathing
In Sol's[†] 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

[†]Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

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