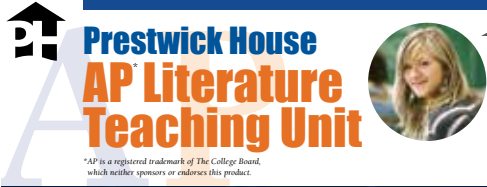




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Teaching Unit

101 Great American Poems

Edited by The American Poetry &
Literacy Project

Written by Douglas Grudzina

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A Note to the Teacher

POEMS COVERED IN THIS AP TEACHING UNIT

Prestwick House understands that it is not feasible to address every single poem in *101 Great American Poems* in this Advanced Placement Literature Teaching Unit. However, we also understand that you want your AP students to work with as wide a variety of poems as possible, so, with the exception of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," you will find that the poems examined in the Study Guide are not repeated in the Multiple-Choice or Free-Response sections. Neither is there any repetition between the Multiple-Choice and Free-Response sections.

This way, while the unit does not cover all of the poems in the book, it does cover—in one way or another—25 individual poems, including three the student will choose him or herself for the non-text-based free-response items.

There is also a section titled "General Questions for the Study of Poetry" at the beginning of the Study Guide. You will find these questions helpful in examining poems not covered in this Unit.

Study Guide:

Anne Bradstreet, "To My Dear and Loving Husband"
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Paul Revere's Ride"
Edgar Allan Poe, "Annabel Lee"
Walt Whitman, "I Hear America Singing"
Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus"
James Weldon Johnson, "Sence You Went Away"
Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy"
Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"
T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"
Claude McKay, "If We Must Die"
Langston Hughes, "I, Too"

Free-Response Items:

Countee Cullen, "Incident"
William Carlos Williams, "The Widow's Lament in Springtime"
T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"
Ella Wheeler Wilcox, "Solitude"
Marianne Moore, "Poetry"
Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica"
3 Free Choice

Multiple-Choice Questions:

Walt Whitman, "A Noiseless Patient Spider"
Wallace Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"
Robinson Jeffers, "Shine, Perishing Republic" and "Shine, Republic"
Carl Sandburg, "Chicago"
Emily Dickinson, "There is no frigate like a book"

Objectives

By the end of the Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain the relationship between a poem's form and its content;
2. discuss the nature of poetry and "the poetic";
3. describe the effect of literary and rhetorical devices on a poem's emotional impact and meaning;
4. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam;
5. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam;
6. offer a close reading of a previously unfamiliar poem and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text and from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre.

Introductory Lecture

WHAT IS POETRY? WHAT IS “POETIC”?

In a relatively infamous scene from the then-controversial film *Dead Poets Society*, a student reads a clear and concise explanation of “the poetic” from a fictional literary text (*Understanding Poetry*) by the fictional Dr. J. Evans Pritchard, Ph.D:

To fully understand poetry, we must first be fluent with its meter, rhyme, and figures of speech. Then ask two questions: One, how artfully has the objective of the poem been rendered, and two, how important is that objective. Question one rates the poem’s perfection, question two rates its importance. And once these questions have been answered, determining a poem’s greatness becomes a relatively simple matter.

If the poem’s score for perfection is plotted along the horizontal of a graph, and its importance is plotted on the vertical, then calculating the total area of the poem yields the measure of its greatness.

A sonnet by Byron may score high on the vertical, but only average on the horizontal. A Shakespearean sonnet, on the other hand, would score high both horizontally and vertically, yielding a massive total area, thereby revealing the poem to be truly great. As you proceed through the poetry in this book, practice this rating method. As your ability to evaluate poems in this matter grows, so will—so will your enjoyment and understanding of poetry.

The literature teacher in this movie—played by Robin Williams—dismisses this explanation and has his students tear the pages out of their books.

While it is tempting to try to find a foolproof method for evaluating the “greatness” of a poem, play, musical composition, or work of visual art, no such method exists. A piece’s “greatness,” its “artistry,” and its subject’s “importance” are all largely matters of individual taste and are affected by various attitudes of the time in which they were created and the time in which they are studied.

Today, Walt Whitman (“I Hear America Singing,” “A Noiseless Patient Spider”) and Emily Dickinson (“There is no frigate like a book”) are both hailed as the parents of modern American poetry, but in the nineteenth century, when they were writing, their work was dismissed as sloppy and incoherent—even vulgar.

In 1860, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (“Paul Revere’s Ride”) was the nation’s number one best-selling sensation. By the turn of the twentieth century, he was largely ignored as scholarly tastes began to swing toward the less formal verse of Whitman and Dickinson. Today, he is recognized for his role as a major American poet, but he is not celebrated as a significant artist or innovator.

QUESTIONS FOR ESSAY AND DISCUSSION

1. Beyond the obvious, surface distinctions, in what ways do freeform and more formally structured poems differ? What factors would a poet consider when deciding on the construction of his or her work?
2. Based on your study of the poems in *101 Great American Poems*, what themes, issues, and features can be said to characterize American poetry?
3. The poems in this book are arranged in chronological order, from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth century. How has the esthetic of poetry—the adherence to form and convention—changed? Why would they have changed in this way? How have the topics and issues of concern to the poets changed? Why? In what ways does each generation's poetry reflect that generation's concerns, hopes, and aspirations?
4. Given those traits and conventions most commonly associated with poetry, what is it about this medium that attracts writers to choose it as their means of expression? What is it that makes poetry attractive to readers?

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE ITEM 6

The genre of poetry includes a range of types from free verse to such strict forms as the sonnet and villanelle. Examine a number of poems in *101 Great American Poems*, paying close attention to each poem's rhythm, rhyme, and stanza structure. Then, write a thoughtful and well-supported essay in which you analyze how the formal elements of a poem contribute to its overall effect and meaning.

PRACTICE FREE-RESPONSE ITEM 7

Robert Frost once said in an interview:

There are only three things, after all, that a poem must reach: the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart or the mind. It is most important of all to reach the heart of the reader.

—quoted in Robert Newdick, “Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense,” *American Literature*, IX (November, 1937), p.298

Choose a poem from *101 Great American Poems* that reaches your heart as a reader (preferably a poem not dealt with in any part of this unit). Then, write a thoughtful, well-supported essay in which you examine the effect the poem has on your “heart” and analyze the techniques the poet uses to create this effect. Be certain to address the ways in which this poem reaches your “eye,...ear, and...mind.”

“The New Colossus”
by Emma Lazarus

1. In what formal poetic form is this poem written? How do you know?

2. What statue does Lazarus mean when she alludes to “the brazen giant of Greek fame”? How would a reader of this poem know this?

3. What, according to the poem, is the most significant difference between the New Colossus and the ancient stature to which it is compared?

4. What dual meaning does Lazarus suggest when she calls the ancient statue a “brazen giant”? What effect does she achieve with this phrase?

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”
by T. S. Eliot

1. Use the text to describe the nature of the visit Prufrock is on his way to make.

2. Examine the first 28 lines of the poem. What impression do they convey of the world Prufrock inhabits? How does Eliot’s use of metaphor, imagery, and other language devices create this impression?

3. One significant characteristic of T. S. Eliot’s poetry is his frequent use of biblical and classical allusions. Explain the source and significance of each allusion in the following list:

A. The Latin epigraph “*S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse*

. . .

Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.”

4. What overall impression do the following lines create? How does this impression contribute to the meaning of the poem?
- “the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table;”
 - “there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;”
 - “They will say: ‘But how his arms and legs are thin!’”
 - “I have known the eyes already, known them all— / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase”
 - “when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall
 - “I have known the arms already, known them all— / Arms that are braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
 - “Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.”
 - “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.”
 - “And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! / Smoothed by long fingers.”
 - “If one, settling a pillow by her head, / Should say: ‘That is not what I meant at all. / That is not it, at all.’”

5. Summarize the meaning of the poem.

6. One key trait that characterizes T. S. Eliot’s poetry as Modernist is his use of stream-of-consciousness and a non-linear or sequential organizational pattern. Explain how these techniques contribute to the aesthetic impact of the poem.
