

1 Performing Poetry

Peas

I eat my peas with honey,
I've done it all my life.
It makes the peas taste funny,
But it keeps them on the knife.

—Anonymous

About This Book

This book aims to get you thinking about poetry in different ways. It tries to challenge some of the common ideas that people have about poetry. The main idea of the book is that poetry is not simply a special form of writing. In this book poetry is treated as an *activity* that people sometimes take part in, just as they sometimes read novels or go to movies or build houses or play sports.

In this book it is assumed that people can use poetry for different purposes on different occasions: to entertain, to make money, to think philosophically about life, to sell a product, to make a political point, to mark a special occasion. This view of poetry differs from the traditional idea that poems are always about personal feelings and experiences, and “deep” meanings.

As you work through the following chapters you will learn to study poems in terms of their structures, patterns, and uses, as well as their “literary” meanings. Along the way, you will find yourself asking questions that might not have occurred to you before.

In the chapters to come, you will get involved in the following activities, and more:

- constructing “readings” of poems by presenting them aloud;
- surveying the poetry preferences of people in your class;
- testing different definitions of poetry;
- analyzing the sounds, words, and forms of poetry texts;
- writing your own poems by working from models;
- writing formal critiques (studies) of poems;
- reading and applying different theories of poetry.

Getting Started

A good way to begin studying any subject is to start with what you know—and what you like. So this book begins by asking you to think about the kinds of poems you like, and to share them with others in your class. Sharing poems in this way, and talking about which ones you like or don't like, can raise interesting questions—about what you think poetry is, why people read and write poems, and how they make sense of them. Answering some of those questions is what this book is about.

Activity

Before you start work on this chapter, here are some questions to write about or discuss.

1. What do readers expect to find in poems?
2. Where are most people likely to encounter poems in their everyday lives? (Your answer may depend on how you define a “poem.”)
3. What kind of poems do readers most enjoy?

Favorite Poems

Most people can think of at least one poem that they have read or heard and enjoyed—even those who don't like poetry. Many people even know a poem by heart.

Your poem may be one you recall from childhood, or it may be associated with some important experience or person in your life. It could even be a poem you have studied in school. You might like the poem because it is amusing, or because it means something special to you, or because you like the sound of it. If you can't think of a favorite poem, here are some ideas to choose from that may help.

- Find a poem in this book (or a poetry anthology) that you think is interesting.
- Choose one of the following to share with the class:
 - a song lyric;
 - a greeting card verse;
 - a rhyme that helps you remember things (such as the months of the year).
- Choose a poem that you *don't* like—and be prepared to say why.

Activity

1. Bring a copy of your poem to class to share with your group.
2. Start your presentation by introducing the title of your poem and the writer's name.
3. Read your poem to the group, and explain why you like (or dislike) it. In your explanation, you might comment on the following:

- how and when you discovered the poem;
- aspects of the poem that you like (the sound? the words? the images? something else?);
- anything you don't like about the poem.

A Class Poetry Survey

The poems you have shared can tell you something about the kinds of poetry that people in your class enjoy. Use a survey table similar to the one below to record the features of the poems that were shared in your class.

Activity

1. First, fill in the table for *your poem* only by marking a check mark in the appropriate boxes. (Note: You may need to practice reading your poem aloud to be sure about some aspects of its sound.)
2. Transfer your results to a *class copy* of the table. (This could be drawn on the board or on a large sheet of paper that can be pinned up for everyone to see.) Tally the class results in the second column. The survey results should allow you to draw some general conclusions about what you and your classmates look for in a poem. For example, how many of the people in your class prefer poems that rhyme? How many chose "serious" poems?

Features	Poetry Survey	
	Your Poem	Your Class's Poem
Regular Rhyme Checkmark if the lines rhyme in some kind of pattern.		
Strong Rhythm Checkmark if the poem has a "beat" that is more rhythmical than everyday speech.		
Free Verse Checkmark if the poem has no rhyme and no obvious rhythm.		
Long Checkmark if the poem is twenty lines or more in length.		
Short Checkmark if the poem is fewer than twenty lines long.		

The Soldier

Rupert Brooke

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Exploring the Poem

The activities that follow will help you to think about ways of reading "The Soldier."

Activities

- Printed below is a jumbled paraphrase of the poem, in which short sections of the poem have been rewritten in simpler language. Working with a partner, number the sections from 1 to 6, to show their correct order. The first section has been numbered for you.
 - Things seen and heard, friendship and peace, and pleasant thoughts that make England what she is.
 - 1 If I die, this is what I want you to think about me: that my grave is a little bit of England in a foreign land.
 - As I turn to dust, my body will enrich that foreign soil with a touch of England.
 - My body became part of England, absorbing the sun, air, and waters of England.
 - England gave birth to me, educated me, gave me the pleasure of her natural beauty, and the freedom to wander and grow.
 - And as I decay, in peace at last, I bring to this foreign land those elements of England that I am composed of:
- Now that you have read the poem carefully, practice reading it aloud in a serious, patriotic style. Experiment with volume, tone, accent, speed, and intonation to create the right effect.

Our Youth in Arms

Sir Winston Churchill was an admirer of Brooke. He once said that no other poet had captured so well “the nobility of our youth in arms.” His words support a patriotic reading of “The Soldier” by suggesting that the death of men in wartime is a noble sacrifice. This view is part of a set of beliefs about war, death, youth, and national pride often promoted in times of conflict.

Activities

1. Which of the following beliefs do you think are supported by Churchill’s words and by patriotic readings of Brooke’s poem? Make a note of your selections.
 - a. The young are the most important members of a society.
 - b. Young men are the most important members of a society.
 - c. A death in war is a good death.
 - d. A death in war is a bad death.
 - e. Dying in a war is the kind of death most men want.
 - f. Dying in a war is the kind of death most men *should* want.
 - g. War is a glorious event.
 - h. War is an inescapable fact of life.
 - i. War is a waste of human life.
 - j. England is the most civilized country on earth.
 - k. The British Empire achieved greatness through aggression and colonization.
2. Discuss these beliefs with others in your class and create an agreed-upon list. What is your reaction to these views?

An Alternative View

For those who disagree with these views about war, death, and youth, a patriotic reading of “The Soldier” might be distasteful or even offensive. These people might want to offer a different reading of the poem—one which does not produce the traditional patriotic view of war.

Activities

1. How could you reject or “unsettle” the patriotic reading of Brooke’s poem by changing your presentation of it? Here are some possible approaches for rereading “The Soldier.” Discuss these ways of reading the poem, and see if you can suggest other possibilities.
 - a. Reading in an increasingly crazed, raving voice that suggests the soldier has lost touch with reality.
 - b. Exaggerating the patriotic reading to the point where the speaker sounds foolish, misguided, or just silly.

- c. Reading in a bitter voice that suggests the speaker is mocking the ideas and beliefs represented in the poem.
 - d. Reading as a specific character—such as a “bad boy” football star.
2. Practice different approaches to reading the poem, and discuss the different effects of each.
 3. Return to some of the poems you have read in this chapter, and reconsider your original approach to the reading. Start by identifying some of the beliefs that the reading seems to support, and then consider ways of changing the presentation to challenge those beliefs.

Discussion

Are there right and wrong ways of reading a poem? If so, how would we know which way is right? If not, how would you choose between readings?