A Primer for Poetry
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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

To many, it seems natural to turn to poetry in their darkest or most joyous hours, but strong feelings are always flowing underground. We dig the narrow shaft of a poem to hoist a shimmering bucket. This class is for people who want to read poetry with more confidence and pleasure. We will read poems by great poets such as Robert Frost, John Keats, and Emily Dickinson and also fine contemporary poets. We'll study the way poets use traditional forms such as the sonnet and villanelle to harness their passions.

Below are some notes on the poems and questions meant to spur discussion. But you're not required to read the notes. And you should first read the poems to yourself and even read them aloud. Notice the lines you like, whether you feel you understand them or not. You don't have to understand a dream before saying how it feels to you. Feelings are a road that leads to understanding.

For those who want to try writing poems, I've also given writing "suggestions" inspired by the poem we've read. But I don't expect you to write, and you don't have to read your work in class. If you feel like it, let me know, and we'll save time for you.

SYLLABUS and NOTES:

Week 1: What Makes a Poem: ***"The Hammered Anvil's Short-Pitched Ring"***
Week 2: Nature Poetry: ***"Whose Woods These Are"***
Week 3: The Sonnet: ***"With This Key, Shakespeare Unlocked His Heart"***
Week 4: Free Verse: ***"Letting the Animal Run"***
Week 5: Elegies: ***"Pack Up the Moon and Dismantle the Sun"***
Week 6: Great Poems: ***Love and Death***

Week 1: What Makes a Poem: ***"The Hammered Anvil's Short-Pitched Ring"***

There are many pithy and inspiring definitions of poetry. Sylvia Plath called it "the blood jet." Emily Dickinson wrote, "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry." Robert Frost called it "a way of taking life by the throat." And Dylan Thomas only half-joking wrote, "I like to think of poetry as statements made on the way to the grave."

But let's get cruder to start. Poems are made of lines the way paintings are made of brush strokes. You can spot a poem across the room by the way its lines amble on for a while then suddenly quit on some impulse or principle, different from prose where the lines bump up against the margin like lake water lapping the shore. The word "verse," which is the same as "poetry" comes from the Latin "versus" which meant the turning of a plough at the end of a row. But what impulse, what principle tells the poet where to end a line?
Go to an art museum and when the guard pads off into another gallery, inch up close to that portrait of a lady. See the brief whitish brush stroke that sculpts the tip of her nose? It also shows the delight of a dot of light balancing there like Tinkerbell. It tells you that the woman in the picture is so special that light dotes on her. It reminds you that light which is common as dirt is also a wonder. Painters and poets are always trying to get you to notice the light on the face of cathedral or on ocean waves. Probably the painter was as much in love with the light as the lady. Her portrait shows body and soul flowing into each other, illuminating each other. And that's one of poetry's big subjects.

But back to lines, take Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which is one of this week's poems. If you say it out loud, you can hear the steady rhythm-exactly four heavy beats per line. Did Frost just count to four and end the lines there? Well, a poet does have to use his fingers sometimes. But you get the feeling here Frost was almost in a trance. Or like pacing-you don't count your steps, you just know when to turn on your heel and pace back. When you're writing in a meter like iambic tetrameter, you want to fall under the spell of the meter or the mood of the moment and not count beats. It's like having a conversation-together without thinking the two of you settle into a rhythm. Which rhythm depends on whether you're billing and cooing in bed or chucking insults across the room. John Donne, who lived in Shakespeare's time, starts one

poem, "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love"' Later of course you've got to go back and fix things. Nobody spews out perfect lines. The art is in what the poet Yeats called "stitching and unstitching" the lines so they work just right.

Suppose Frost had written, "Whose woods these are I think I know,/But he lives in the village." If he liked that steady, hypnotic four-beat thing he'd got started with, he'd have to go back and make the line longer¬. "His house is in the village though." And for his trouble, I reckon he'd get two bonuses. The "h" in "house" echoes the "h" in "His." And the "though" at the end of the line instead of "But" at the beginning feels more like someone musing to himself alone. I said "impulse or principle" ends a line of poetry. Or both acting together rather. Ever have a drink at five o'clock-because it's five so you can and because it's five and you could use one? Poetry likewise is all opportunity.

I said Frost measured out four heavy beats-Whose woods these are I think I know." That's "iambic tetrameter," to use the old Greek. "Iambic" means lub-dub, like a heart beat. Do that four times in a line of poetry and you've iambic tetrameter. Most poetry in English is roughly iambic. That's because we Americans and Brits talk mostly in iambic. "I'm going inside to get some lunch."

Frost was also rhyming, so he had to quit each line on a rhyming word. In this poem, the rhyme is as steady as the rhythm. The words know, though, and snow all rhyme making the first stanza feel like it's standing still even as the thoughts moves along-like rocking in a rocking chair. But the third line ends in here that looks ahead to the next stanza which contains the rhymes queer, near, and year. When you say this poem out loud you feel like something's hooked its finger through your belt loop-reluctance to move on.

"The Hammered Anvil's Short-Pitched Ring" is the title of this week's session. It's from a poem called "The Forge" on page 1789 of the text by Seamus Heaney, the Irish Nobel Prize winner. Heaney is a good poet but he's also full of charm and in Dublin they tease him with the name "Famous Seamus." Anyway, this poem's about a blacksmith, maybe the last one working in some modern car-infested city. Really, the whole line reads, "Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring." That's iambic pentameter-doing five times in a line what iambic tetrameter does four times. I suppose I thought of it for the title because of the short-pitched ring of it. I like the way you get going on "hammered anvil's" then pull up short on "short" like a horse shying at a jump. Say it-see how the "a's" in the beginning get the mouth moving easily but there's no easy way to get from a "t" to a "p." It' a little bit of violence or exertion anyway, and it puts into your mouth the taste of labor. Not a bad taste but not a lullaby either. A poet is a blacksmith with a shop on a roaring city street. Time rushes past like rush-hour traffic and inside the shop he, or she, makes his own time. I don't mean says no to the world-he has horses to shoe-but you see a lot more from a horse. We'll talk a lot more about the how poets get music in poems.

To Read This Week

- **Robert Frost - "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"**
- **Seamus Heaney - "The Forge"**
- **Emily Dickinson -"I Like a Look of Agony"**
- **Walt Whitman - "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"**

Writing Suggestion

Try writing a six-to-ten-line poem in iambic pentameter. Make it unrhymed, unless you have a hankering to rhyme it. This is called "blank verse," and a lot of great poetry has been written in it, including most of Shakespeare. Your lines don't have to be perfect iambic pentameter. Just try for five heavy beats in each line. You could have a few extra unstressed syllables sprinkled in. For example, take Shakespeare's sonnet that begins, "*When* in dis*grace* with fortune and *mens' eyes*/ I *all* a*lone* be*weep* my *out*cast *state*." The first line isn't perfect but the second is.

What should you write about? Why not start close to home by describing the objects on your desk or kitchen counter and see what comes of it. You don't have to know where a poem is going when you start. A surprise is nice.

Discussion Points

1. Why do you imagine Frost makes the last line of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" a copy of the one before it? Can you think of a couple of reasons?
2. Heaney called one of his books "A Door into the Dark." What does that phrase make you think about? "The Forge" begins, "All I know . . ." When do we usually mean by that?
3. People died at home in Dickinson's day, and she knew how it looked. What is the "distance" she sees in a dead person's "look"?
4. Walt Whitman's poem is free verse. That means it's got no set number of heavy and light beats in each lines, and doesn't rhyme. It's got its own music, though. Read the poem out loud, and see what you hear.

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Week 2: Nature Poetry: *"Whose Woods These Are"*

"The idea of "nature" meaning "woods" emerged when humans come so far that we decided to visit our old neighborhood to remember who we are. Take a poem like Keats's "To Autumn" with its scent of apples and drowsy sunshine. It's a dream descent into that season, but we may also think of how we mature and then die.

To Read This Week

- **John Keats-"To Autumn"**
- **Robert Frost-"Come In"**
- **William Wordsworth-"The World Is Too Much with Us"**
- **Emily Dickinson- " There's a certain slant of light"**

Writing Suggestion

Write a poem with nature in it. You may want to try writing your own "To Autumn" which will be different from Keats's. You could take any of the assigned poems as inspiration for your own. Write eight lines or more and like last week make them blank verse-unrhymed iambic pentameter-unless you have a hankering to rhyme.

Discussion Points

1. Keats's "Ode to Autumn" makes the season seem a person, or a few people. Do you feel seasons have personalities? Keats's autumn is an early, mellow autumn with the crops ready for harvest. It is also a fleeting season that ends with the birds heading south. Does the poem suggest anything about human nature or the seaons of life?

2. Frost had that knack or genius of talking on different levels at once and not getting caught at it. No heavy winking at the reader, I mean. Frost's woodland nightfall could make you sad. But he little joke at the end is good but it always struck me as light after such stirring images. Why make a joke?

3. Wordsworth is thought of as a great poet of nature in the Romantic period. Halfway through, he shouts "Great God!" to himself. What's he upset about?

4. Dickinson makes a personality out of dimming winter light as Keats does out of a season. If that light were a person who "oppresses" us, might he still be worth hanging around?

Week 3: The Sonnet: *"With This Key Shakespeare Unlocked His Heart"*

To Read This Week

- **William Shakespeare -- Sonnets: "When in disgrace with fortune and mens' eyes" and "That time of year thou mayst in me behold"**
- **John Milton --"When I Consider How My Light Is Spent"**

- **Seamus Heaney -- "The Forge"**
- **Donald Justice – "My South; On the Porch"**

Writing Suggestion

Try writing a Shakespearean sonnet. Remember that a Shakespearean sonnet has 14 lines and rhymes abab cdcd efef gg. It is also in iambic pentameter, which means it goes, roughly, "Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub." Look at Shakespeare's sonnets in the packet as examples.

Also keep in mind that a sonnet doesn't have to follow that pattern perfectly and often won't. If you wrote nothing but perfect lines, the poem would sound like sing-song. It would lack the speeded up and slowed-down bits that sound like someone talking.

Discussion Points

1. Which part of the poem pleases you more, the speaker's woe or the cure to it?
2. The other poem by Shakespeare describes a later autumn than Keats's. It's not the end, though. Also, why "When yellow leaves, or none, or few," rather than "yellow leaves or few or none"? A few reasons?
3. Milton's poem on his blindness has the famous line "They also serve who only stand and wait." He's probably referring to the highest class of angels around God, compared with the messengers who "post o'er Land and Ocean." This sonnet like Shakespeare's has a "turning" or second thought, and it comes with "But Patience .. " Read up on the Parable of the Talents in the New Testament, if you don't remember it.
4. Someone said a poem is always a portrait of the poet. Do you see this in Heaney's poem, which is about a blacksmith, not a poet?

Week 4: Free Verse: *"Letting the Animal Run"*

To Read This Week

- **Walt Whitman-"When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"**
- **Marie Ponsot – "Among Women"**
- **William Carlos Williams – "This is Just to Say"**

Introduction

"Letting the animal run" comes from the pen of the boisterous Robert Bly, poet and a guru of the men's movement. Call it giving a poem its head, unbridling the wildest and deepest things in us. For some poets speaking truly means throwing off their Sunday clothes-no meter or rhyme. Free verse. Many poets now in their 70s, like Bly, began as rhymesters and then went naked in mid-career. It's often said that good free-versers first mastered form. Walt Whitman's long, loping lines are as sinuous as the muscles of a snake. T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is free verse and he warned, using the French, "No *vers* is truly *libre* to the man who wants to do a good job."

Writing Suggestion

Try a poem in free verse. If I were you, I'd take one from the week's reading that drew you to it and imitate it somehow. You could write a domestic note like Williams', for example.

Discussion Points

1. Read Whitman's poem aloud for a bit and see how shapely the lines are though in free verse. He wrote a lot of Shakespeare before he began writing this way. The long open-throated lines have rhythms out of the King James Bible. What's the difference between "unaccountable" which he says and "unaccountably"?
2. Did you ever get that feeling so much comes down to so little? There aren't many words in Williams' poem, so their "placement" matters. Try putting "depends" on the second line, for instance.
3. Philip Levine grew up in Detroit, and worked in car factories when young. Not many poets tackle the working life, though much of our lives happen at work. Levine is grubby, then suddenly lifts off into an inspired rant that reminds you that suffering is universal.

Week 5: Elegies: *"Pack Up the Moon and Dismantle the Sun"*

Introduction

"Pack Up the Moon and Dismantle the Sun" comes from W. H. Auden's "Funeral Blues" elegy. It's British wryness is wrenching. An elegy or poem for the dead is one kind of "occasional" poem. A wedding poem or "epithalamium" is another. These poems can do more than honor the dead or married. They can root around in the basements of death and love.

To Read This Week

- **Alfred Lord Tennyson-"The Charge of the Light Brigade**"
- **W. H. Auden- "Funeral Blues**"
- **W. H. Auden-"In Memory of W. B. Yeats"**
- **William Carlos Williams- "This Is Just to Say"**

Writing Suggestion

Try writing a poem for an occasion. No occasion is too small, if you have the impulse. Look at Wiliams' poem to his wife, Floss. How would you take it, if you were Floss?

Discussion Points

1. Tennyson was the poet laureate of Britain at the height of the Empire. He was a celebrity, as no poet is now. When a regiment were butchered due to a screwup in the Crimean War, Tennyson wrote this, and they ran it in The Times of London. It's got a galloping meter which sounds like a cavalry charge. See how meter-pure music-can carry a message?
2. Auden's poem in memory of W.B. Yeats not only honors a great poet, but poetry itself. But its second section seems to put down the art-"For poetry makes nothing happen:" Can he mean it? The last section is advice to poets.
3. Williams seems to pull off an apology for pilfering by giving back the goods in the apology. But perhaps his wife found it galling. Is saying "I'm sorry" the same as being sorry?

Week 6 -- Great Poems: *Love and Death*

To Read This Week

- **Thomas Hardy- "Transformations" and "During Wind and Rain"**
- **Philip Larkin-"Aubade"**
- **John Donne-"A Valediction Forbidding Mourning"**
- **Wallace Stevens-"The Emperor of Ice Cream"**
- **Gerard Manley Hopkins-"Pied Beauty**"

Writing Suggestion

Try writing a poem inspired by one of this week's readings. Yours could be inspired by the subject or the tone or the form of that poem.

Discussion Points

1. Hardy rigged up his own forms for poems, and his syntax could be rough. But he always has heart and he's never dull. This poem, for instance, notices something subtle about love.
2. "During Wind and Rain" -- if you had to pick out a couple of lines or images that stick in your mind's eye, what would they be? What is the story it tells?
3. "Aubade" is a traditional kind of poem announcing lovers' farewell at dawn. But Larkin's speaker is alone here, and his subject isn't love but death. So, a joke?
4. John Donne, a contemporary of Shakespeare's, wrote all of Hemingway's best titles. In one of his "meditations," a religious work in prose, he pointed out that *no man is an island*, that *the sun also rises*, and that we should not ask *for whom the bell tolls*. In this poem, a husband leaving on a trip tries to persuade his wife

not to feel bereft. In his poems Donne pulls metaphors from all knowledge -- astronomy, astrology, geography, mathematics, *etc*.

5. Wallace Stevens' day job was as a lawyer for an insurance company in Hartford, and he was very good at it. Nights, he wrote beautiful, exotic, and deep poems that don't sound like anybody else. He can be funny, so don't forget to laugh as they say.

6. Gerard Manley Hopkins was a Jesuit priest in Britain in the late 19th century. Nobody sounds like him either. He lays it on thick with his language and sounds-over the top, you could say. And he's exhilarating in the same way Walt Whitman is. "Pied" means "many-colored." Look up the words you don't know, to suck all the poems juice.