

# Why You Should Read Poetry ... Yes, Poetry

By John Lundberg

In May of 1944, the poet Anna Akhmatova gave a reading at the Polytechnic Museum, the largest auditorium in Moscow. It was her first appearance in the city since World War II, and the room was packed. The poems she read had rallied Russians throughout the war, and her voice had broadcast through the streets of Leningrad to steel the city to the approaching German Army. When she finally closed her books, she received such thunderous applause that Joseph Stalin asked who'd organized the ovation. The man knew power when he saw it.

If you grew up in America, it might surprise you to learn that a poet has ever had that sort of impact. Poetry here is best known for the simple, sentimental verses found in Hallmark cards and the lyrics of pop music. The word "poet" probably calls to mind some weirdo in a beret. And poetry's power to influence American politics is, at best, a fizzle--if you heard anything about the anti-Bush anthology *Poets Against the War*, then you listen to a lot of NPR. The truth is most Americans have lost touch with the best of what poetry is: a record of some of civilization's greatest writers--and wisest people--taking on the questions and emotions that define us...

So why aren't we reading poetry? Here are some reasons I often hear that will probably sound familiar. Here, too, are some reasons to reconsider.

## **Reason 1: I've never understood it.**

Poetry can be difficult. Learning to read Shakespeare is difficult, and I certainly wouldn't recommend anyone take on T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" without some guidance. But most poets are far more accessible than Eliot or Shakespeare. Also, it's important to note that your expectations for a poem should be different from your expectations for, say, a newspaper or a novel. A poem often has multiple layers of meaning that will unfold over a few readings--and it's important to give a poem that opportunity. It's a good idea to read a poem more than once in a sitting or go back and reread it over the course of a few weeks or even a lifetime. Remember that the process of exploring a great poem should be part of the reward.

## **Reason 2: I can't get past the whole rhyming thing.**

Rhyming verse can fall a little hard on the modern ear, which is why most contemporary poems are written in "free verse" with no set meter or rhyme scheme. Rhymes are a part of poetry's music: the rhythms and sounds of words from which a poet draws power. Like a great orator, a poet with a good ear can infuse what he's saying with emotion and immediacy. If you're reading a poem with end rhymes and they're bothering you, ignore the line breaks and try reading the poem as if it's prose.

## **Reason 3: Poetry is for angst-ridden teens, hopeless romantics and the aforementioned weirdos in berets.**

Sure, you run into a few aspiring poets at your local coffee shop that fit this bill, but I guarantee you couldn't pick a practicing poet off the street. We're surprisingly normal. Just like you, we're obsessed with things like fantasy football and *I Love New York 2*. I was on track to be a doctor before I stumbled on poetry (yes, my parents were real happy about that one). That's not to say that your experience with poetry will be as all-consuming as mine, but for all that poetry has given me, I have no doubt that it has something to give you.

## Poetry Opinion Questions

Where do you stand when it comes to poetry? Do you agree with Lundberg that we need to read and appreciate poetry more often? Or, are you in the camp of critics he addresses, thinking that poetry is just too weird and confusing for the average person? Answer each question below with AGREE or DISAGREE and be prepared to defend your answer.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Real poetry should rhyme.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I read poetry for pleasure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I do not understand most poems I read (and this is frustrating to me!).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Poetry is too confusing for the average person to understand.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Poets probably are weirdos who wear berets.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I enjoy listening to poetry for the rhythm, rhyme, and sounds of the language.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. When I understand what a poem means, I feel smart.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Coming up with rhymes for my poetry is a fun challenge, and I'm pretty good at it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I can't rhyme to save my life.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Poetry is all right, but I'd rather read prose (i.e., regular language, like short stories or novels)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Poetry should have very deep themes and meanings, such as love, hope, death, God, etc.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. A poem can be about anything, even regular daily life; it's the expression of ideas and the beauty language that make a good poem.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. April is National Poetry Month. I'll be celebrating by rereading some of my all time favorite poems and maybe writing some new ones of my own.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Even when I don't understand a poem, I still appreciate the language and expression of ideas.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. Poetry doesn't have to be complicated to be good. Dr. Seuss and Shell Silverstein are great poets.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Classic poets like Shakespeare are important and valuable to study today, even when their works are confusing to the modern student.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. When I think of poetry, I think of some of my favorite music lyrics and song writers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. Poetry is the best thing we've done all year.



\_\_\_\_\_ 20. Poetry is the worst thing we've done all year.