English 9
Poetry Unit

Selected Poems:
- Introduction to Poetry, Billy Collins
- Honky Tonk in Cleveland, Ohio, Carl Sandberg
- Thumbprint, Eve Merriam
- Harlem: A Dream Deferred, Langston Hughes
- Dream Variations, Langston Hughes
- Mid-Term Break, Seamus Heaney
- The Portrait, Stanley Kunitz
- Richard Cory, Edwin Arlington Robinson
- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, Robert Frost
- The Trees, Rush
**Poetic Elements & Terms**

**DIRECTIONS:** As we review the slides, fill in the chart below.

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How to Read a Poem

There’s really only one reason that poetry has gotten a reputation for being so darned “difficult”: it demands your full attention and won’t settle for less. Unlike a novel, where you can drift in and out and still follow the plot, poems are generally shorter and more intense, with less of a conventional story to follow. If you don’t make room for the experience, you probably won’t have one.

Aside from its demands on your attention, there’s nothing too tricky about reading a poem. Like anything, it’s a matter of practice. But in case you haven’t read much (or any) poetry before, here’s a short list of tips that will make it a whole lot more enjoyable.

- **Follow Your Ears.** It’s okay to ask, “What does it mean?” when reading a poem. But it’s even better to ask, “How does it sound?” If all else fails, treat it like a song. Even if you can’t understand a single thing about a poem’s “subject” or “theme,” you can always say something – anything – about the sound of the words. Does the poem move fast or slow? Does it sound awkward in sections or does it have an even flow? Do certain words stick out more than others? Trust your inner ear: if the poem sounds strange, it doesn’t mean you’re reading it wrong. In fact, you probably just discovered one of the poem’s secret tricks!

- **Read It Aloud.** OK, we’re not saying you have to shout it from the rooftops. If you’re embarrassed and want to lock yourself in the attic and read the poem in the faintest whisper possible, go ahead. Do whatever it takes, because reading even part of poem aloud can totally change your perspective on how it works.

- **Don’t Skim.** Unlike the newspaper or a textbook, the point of poetry isn’t to cram information into your brain. We can’t repeat it enough: poetry is an experience. If you don’t have the patience to get through a long poem, no worries, just start with a really short poem. Understanding poetry is like getting a suntan: you have to let it sink in.

- **Be Patient.** You can’t really understand a poem that you’ve only read once. You just can’t. So if you don’t get it, set the poem aside and come back to it later. And by “later” we mean days, months, or even years. Don’t rush it. It’s a much bigger accomplishment to actually enjoy a poem than it is to be able to explain every line of it. Treat the first reading as an investment – your effort might not pay off until well into the future, but when it does, it will totally be worth it. Trust us.

- **“Look Who’s Talking.”** Ask the most basic questions possible of the poem. Two of the most important are: “Who’s talking?” and “Who are they talking to?” If it’s a Shakespeare sonnet, don’t just assume that the speaker is Shakespeare. The speaker of every poem is kind of fictional creation, and so is the audience. Ask yourself: what would it be like to meet this person? What would they look like? What’s their “deal,” anyway?

- And, most importantly, **Never Be Intimidated.** Regardless of what your experience with poetry in the classroom has been, no poet wants to make his or her audience feel stupid. Sure, there might be tricky parts, but it’s not like you’re trying to unlock the secrets of the universe. Heck, if you want to ignore the “meaning” entirely, then go ahead. Why not?
I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Discussion Questions
1. What words and images stand out to you?

2. Read the poem a second time and identify any figurative language (e.g., simile, metaphor, hyperbole) you encounter.

3. What do “they” think Collins is saying about the study of poetry?

4. According to Collins, what is the real goal of reading poetry?
Poetic Elements Practice

Alliteration and Onomatopoeia

**Alliteration** is the repetition of a beginning sound for effect. These may be vowel or consonant sounds. The alliterative sounds have been underlined in the following examples:

The alligator ate apples and avocados.

Walkin’ in a winter wonderland.

Underline the alliteration in these sentences:
1. The warm wind wafted across the window.
2. I accidentally ate an awful apple.
3. Slipping and sliding, I stumbled in the snow and slush.

Finish these sentences with alliterations of your own:

1. Swiftly swimming ____________________________.
2. The tired traveler ____________________________.
3. While wandering ____________________________.
4. The lurking leopard ____________________________.

**Onomatopoeia** is the imitation of natural sounds. For example: The steam hissed from the open valve. Onomatopoeia is a poetic device that produces an auditory image to the reader.

Underline the words you “hear” in these sentences:
1. The train rumbled down the track.
2. The truck’s brakes screeched in the distance.
3. The old floor creaked as we walked across the room.

Complete the following sentences using onomatopoeia of your own:

1. The rusty gate ________________________________.
2. The branches ________________________________.
3. The motorcycle ________________________________.
Honky Tonk in Cleveland, Ohio
by Carl Sandburg

It’s a jazz affair, drum crashes and cornet razzes.
The trombone pony neighs and the tuba jackass snorts.
The banjo tickles and titters too awful.
The chippies talk about the funnies in the papers.
   The cartoonists weep in their beer.
   Ship riveters talk with their feet
   To the feet of floozies under the tables.
A quartet of white hopes mourn with interspersed snickers:
   “I got the blues.
   I got the blues.
   I got the blues.”
And . . . as we said earlier:
   The cartoonists weep in their beer.

Discussion Questions
1. What might the poet mean in the second line, “The trombone pony neighs and the tuba jackass snorts”? Are there actually animals in this bar?

2. Find an example of alliteration in the poem. Copy the line/lines.

3. Find an example of onomatopoeia in the poem. Copy the line/lines.

4. Consider the title and the setting of this poem. Why is onomatopoeia a good poetic device to use in this poem?
Similes and Metaphors

A **simile** is a phrase or word that describes one thing as *similar* to another, often unrelated thing. An example is "Jane went up the stairs as quiet as a mouse." Similes use the words "like" and/ or "as".

A **metaphor** is a phrase or word that states that one thing *is* another, often unrelated thing. An example is “Harold is a snake.”

**Practice:** Read the following sentences. At the end of the sentence, write in brackets whether the sentence is an example of a metaphor (M) or simile (S).

*Example: The clouds were fluffy like cotton wool. __S__

1. As slippery as an eel. _______
2. He was a lion in battle. _______
3. She is as pretty as a picture. _______
4. The striker was a goal machine. _______
5. The moon was a misty shadow. _______
6. His eyes sparkled like a diamond. _______

Now you are going to make up similes and metaphors of your own by finishing these sentences.

1. As heavy as _________________________________.
2. He was a cold _________________________________.
3. She had skin like a _________________________________.
4. As cool as _________________________________.
5. The mountain was a _________________________________.
6. Slippery like a _________________________________.
Thumbprint
by Eve Merriam

In the heel of my thumb
are whorls, whirls, wheels
in a unique design:
mine alone.
What a treasure to own!
My own flesh, my own feelings.
No other, however grand or base,
can ever contain the same.
My signature,
thumbing the pages of my time.
My universe key,
my singularity.
Impress, implant,
I am myself,
Of all my atom parts I am the sun.
And out of my blood and my brain
I make my own interior weather,
My own sun and rain.
Imprint my mark upon the world,
whatever I shall become.

Discussion Questions
1. What is the “treasure” of which the speaker is proud? Why might she call it a treasure?

2. To the speaker, what does her thumbprint represent? Find one or two comparisons to support this.

3. Identify two examples of alliteration in this poem.

4. Give an example of a metaphor the poet uses to describe her thumbprint.
Poetic Elements Practice

Personification and Hyperboles

**Personification** is when you give a human quality to an inanimate object.

Personification is a comparison that treats things as if they were capable of the actions and feelings of people.

Personifications are things we feel but don't literally see.

*Examples of personification:*

The moon slept in the night sky.

The star is winking at me.

A **hyperbole** is any extravagant statement or exaggeration for effect.

Hyperbole is used as a figure of speech. For example: I could sleep for a year!

*Examples of hyperboles:*

He’s so mean he eats snakes for breakfast.

I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.

Identify whether the following sentences use a hyperbole (H) or personification (P):

1. The flames called out their names. _______
2. After shoveling snow I was so tired I couldn’t move. _______
3. The clock told us it was time to go. _______
4. She hit the ball hard enough to fly all the way to Pittsburgh. _______
5. The wind whispered to the trees. _______
6. It was so cold her car laughed at her when she tried to start it. _______
7. After the dance my feet were killing me. _______
8. All day long I worked my fingers to the bone. _______
Poetic Elements Practice

Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds. It is often used in combination with consonance and alliteration.

He saw the cost and hauled off.
Will she read these cheap leaflets.
The snow in the rose garden groaned.

Notice the repetition of the “awe” sounds in the first example, the “e” sounds in the second example, or the “o” sounds in the third example? Assonance can be subtle and may go unnoticed if you’re not listening for it.

Practice: Underline the vowel sound repeated in each of these examples. Read them aloud to hear it!
1. I slipped because of the dip and then flipped.
2. I high five my French fries.
3. The crook took the book.

Consonance

Also known as near rhyme, off rhyme, or slant rhyme, consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds in the middle or at the end of words. Using consonance is a sophisticated poetic technique that can create subtle yet beautiful lyrics or lines of poetry. Here is an example of consonance:

Her finger hungered for a ring.
The satin mittens were ancient.
You could paddle through the spittle in the bottle.

Listen for the repeated “ng” sound in the first example, the hard “en” sound in the second, or the “ddle/ttle” sound in the third. It’s not that the letters are the same, but that they have a similar consonant sound.

Practice: Underline the consonant sound repeated in each of these examples. Read them aloud to hear it!
1. She lounges in the cool thrill of a steep hill.
2. I slipped because of the dip and then flipped.
3. The crook took the book.
Mid-Term Break
by Seamus Heaney

I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At ten o’clock our neighbours drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying -
He had always taken funerals in his stride -
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
When I came in, and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were ‘sorry for my trouble’;
Whispers informed strangers that I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.
At ten o’clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse, stanched and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple.
He lay in a four foot box, as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

Discussion Questions
1. What event does this poem narrate in Heaney’s life?

2. The title “Mid-Term Break” probably makes you think of a holiday. At what line did you notice that something was wrong (and it wasn’t a holiday)?

3. Provide an example of assonance used in the poem.
Harlem: A Dream Deferred
by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Discussion Questions
1. This poem is about Langston Hughes’ community in Harlem. What impression do you get of Hughes’ community in this poem?

2. Based on this poem, do you think life in Hughes’ community is easy or hard? Why?

3. Why do you think Hughes titled this poem “Harlem: A Dream Deferred”?

4. Hughes published this poem in 1951. Do you think this poem could be used to describe the world today? Why or why not?
Dream Variations
by Langston Hughes

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
    Dark like me—
That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening . . .
A tall, slim tree . . .
Night coming tenderly
    Black like me.

Discussion Questions
1. At the end of the first stanza, Langston Hughes exclaims: “That is my dream!” In your own words describe what Langston Hughes’ dream is.

2. In both poems of his poems, Langston Hughes talks about dreams. How is his discussion of dreams in this poem different from that in “Harlem: A Dream Deferred”?

3. Based on this poem, do you think Hughes is satisfied with life in his community? Why or why not?

4. What goals do you think Langston Hughes had for his community?
My mother never forgave my father for killing himself, especially at such an awkward time and in a public park, that spring when I was waiting to be born. She locked his name in her deepest cabinet and would not let him out, though I could hear him thumping. When I came down from the attic with the pastel portrait in my hand of a long-lipped stranger with a brave moustache and deep brown level eyes, she ripped it into shreds without a single word and slapped me hard. In my sixty-fourth year I can feel my cheek still burning.

Discussion Questions
1. Who is the speaker? What is the story he is telling in the poem?

2. Why do you think the mother slaps the speaker?

3. What do we know about the father? Find two specific examples of sensory imagery that Kunitz uses to describe his father.

4. Why is the narrator’s face still burning?
Richard Cory
by Edwin Arlington Robinson

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Discussion Questions
1. Who is the speaker of the poem?

2. Why might people have identified Richard Cory as the embodiment of success?

3. How do the townspeople feel about Richard Cory? Copy a line/lines from the poem that shows this.

4. What was your reaction to the end of “Richard Cory”?

5. Why do you think Richard Cory kills himself?
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
by Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Discussion Questions
1. The first stanza presents the situation. What is going on in the first stanza?

2. What is the imagery of this poem? (time of day, season, feeling)

3. Identify at least TWO poetic elements in the poem and provide examples.

4. What are the final two lines for? What do they mean and what purpose do they serve?
The Trees
by Rush (Neil Peart, Geddy Lee, Alex Lifeson)

There is unrest in the forest
There is trouble with the trees
For the maples want more sunlight
And the oaks ignore their pleas

The trouble with the maples
(And they're quite convinced they're right)
They say the oaks are just too lofty
And they grab up all the light
But the oaks can't help their feelings
If they like the way they're made
And they wonder why the maples
Can't be happy in their shade

There is trouble in the forest
And the creatures all have fled
As the maples scream 'Oppression!'
And the oaks just shake their heads

So the maples formed a union
And demanded equal rights
'The oaks are just too greedy
We will make them give us light'
Now there's no more oak oppression
For they passed a noble law
And the trees are all kept equal
By hatchet, axe and saw

Discussion Questions
1. What is the conflict in the song – the “trouble in the forest”?

2. Find two examples of personification used in the song.

3. What might the trees symbolize? What lines support this opinion?

4. What might the last two lines “And the trees are all kept equal / By hatchet, axe and saw” mean?