Unit One

Elements of Poetry
1. Defining Poetry

Throughout history and across national and cultural boundaries, poetry has held an important place. In ancient China, for example, poetry was prized above all else. To the ancient Greeks and Romans, poetry was the medium of spiritual and philosophical expression. Today, throughout the world, poetry continues to delight and to inspire. It has always been one of the best means of expressing thoughts and feelings. The sweetness, melody and smoothness that we feel while going through poetry cannot be found in any other form of literature. For many people, in many places, poetry is the language of the emotions, the medium of expression they use when they speak from the heart.

Despite the long-standing place of poetry in our lives and the fact that poetry springs from deep human impulses and fulfills human needs, many people—including poets themselves—have difficulty describing what poetry is. One way of defining poetry is to say that it uses language to condense experience into an intensely concentrated package, with each sound, each word, each image, and each line carrying great weight. For example, we may say that more than fiction, poetry is an art of condensation and implication; poems concentrate meaning and distill feeling. Or that poetry is a form of literature that uses aesthetic and rhythmic qualities of language—such as phonaesthetics, sound symbolism, and meter—to evoke meanings in addition to, or in place of, the prosaic ostensible meaning. Or that poetry is an attempt to render the beautiful or sublime without the burden of engaging the logical or narrative thought process.

But beyond this, it is difficult to pin down what makes a particular arrangement of words or lines a poem. Part of the problem is that poetry has
many guises. To further complicate the issue, different readers, different poets, different generations of readers and poets, and different cultures may have different expectations about poetry. As a result, they have different assumptions about poetry, and these different assumptions raise questions: Must poetry be written to delight or to inspire? Can a poem have a political or social message? And must this message be conveyed subtly, embellished with imaginatively chosen sounds and words, or can it be explicit and straightforward? ... These questions have no easy answers—perhaps no answers at all.

Some 20th-century literary theorists, relying less on the opposition of prose and poetry, focused on the poet as simply one who creates using language, and poetry as what the poet creates. The underlying concept of the poet as creator is not uncommon, and some Modernist poets essentially do not distinguish between the creation of a poem with words, and creative acts in other media. Yet other Modernists challenge the very attempt to define poetry as misguided.

Postmodernism goes beyond Modernism’s focus on the creative role of the poet to emphasize the role of the reader of a text (Hermeneutics), and to highlight the complex cultural web within which a poem is read. Today, throughout the world, poetry often incorporates poetic form and diction from other cultures and from the past, further confounding attempts at definition and classification that were once sensible within a tradition such as the Western canon.

The early 21st-century poetic tradition appears to continue to strongly orient itself to precursor poetic traditions such as those initiated by Whitman, Emerson, and Wordsworth. “The generation of poets who stand together now, mature and ready to write the major American verse of the 21st century,” as Harold Bloom has put it, “may yet be seen as what Stevens called ‘a great shadow’s last embellishment,’ the shadow being Emerson’s.”

In spite of the disputes, we may say that poetry is a way of saying. The “way of the saying” is featured by the strongly marked rhythms, the frequent appearance of rhyme, and the figurative language. As for the “nature of the said,” poetry is a response to, and an evaluation of, our experience of the objective, bustling world and of our ideas about it. Poetry is concerned with the
world as responded to sensorially, emotionally, and intellectually.

But this response always involves all three of these elements: a massive, total response. So we say poetry is concerned with the multidimensional quality of experience, which constitutes a significant characteristic of poetry that cannot be overemphasized. As Coleridge has put it, poetry “in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul into activity.” Mexican poet Octavio Paz believes that the purpose of poetry is “to create among people the possibility of wonder, admiration, enthusiasm, mystery, the sense that life is marvelous. …to make life a marvel—that is the role of poetry.” And poetry conveys a sense of the mystery and marvel of life through what African poet Quincy Troupe calls “the music of language.” In other words, poetry captures intense experiences or creative perceptions of the world in a musical language. And that is why Nicaraguan poet Daisy Zamora calls poetry “a way of feeling life” and why American poet Elizabeth Bishop said that “Poetry has always seemed the most natural way of saying what I feel.”

Now before you read further, consider the following questions:
(a) Why do you read poetry?
(b) Is poetry always a big puzzle to you?
(c) Do you want to figure out hidden meanings while reading a poem?

Then read the following poem and devote yourself to “feeling life” in it.

**The Echoing Green**

William Blake

The sun does arise,
And make happy the skies;
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring;
The skylark and thrush,
Sing louder around
To the bells’ cheerful sound,
While our sports shall be seen  
On the Echoing Green.  

Old John with white hair,  
Does laugh away care,  
Sitting under the oak,  
Among the old folk.  
They laugh at our play,  
And soon they all say:  
“Such, such were the joys  
When we all, girls and boys,  
In our youth time were seen  
On the Echoing Green.”

Till the little ones, weary,  
No more can be merry;  
The sun does descend,  
And our sports have an end.  
Round the laps of their mothers  
Many sisters and brothers,  
Like birds in their nest,  
Are ready for rest,  
And sport no more seen  
On the darkening Green.

Analysis Questions

1. What do you make of the phrase “Echoing Green,” which appears in the title and provides a refrain for the first two stanzas, a refrain which is altered in the last line?

2. What is “echoing” (what, that is, repeats what) in the poem? Why is this idea central to the poem? Why is the word “echoing” changed in the last line?

3. How do the title and the refrain in the first two stanzas prepare for this change? Is the basic notion of the poem altered by this, or merely reiterated in another way?
Background: William Blake and Romanticism

William Blake (1757–1827) was an English poet, painter, and printmaker. Visionary, mystic, and revolutionary, Blake remained an original and unorthodox thinker throughout his life. Some of his contemporaries considered him insane, and his genius was not widely appreciated until long after his death. His books of poetry were unique in their combination of visual and literary arts. The best known of these books is *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, a double collection of poems, in Blake’s own words, “shewing the two contrary states of the human soul.”

Blake is now considered a seminal figure in the history of the poetry and visual arts of the Romantic Age, whose verse and artwork became part of the wider movement of Romanticism in late 18th and early 19th century European culture. Romanticism is a phenomenon characterized by a new interest in the inner experience of the individual, reliance on the imagination and subjectivity of approach, freedom of thought and expression, and an idealization of nature. It partly reflects the tastes of the rising middle class rejecting the refined and elegant art forms favored by the aristocratic society.

Though Romanticism was officially started by the *Lyrical Ballads* jointly penned by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1830, poets like William Blake made cracks to neoclassicism (emphasizing reason, order and “elegant wit”) towards the end of the 18th century. In Romanticism, a piece of work could become, as Blake described, “an embodiment of the poet’s imagination and vision.”

Blake’s poetry has many characteristics of the romantic spirit. The romanticism of Blake consists in the importance he attached to imagination, in his mysticism and symbolism, in his love of liberty, in his humanitarian sympathies, in his idealization of childhood, in the pastoral setting of many of his poems, and in his lyricism. It is established that his use of images, symbols, metaphors and revolutionary spirit combined with simple diction and spontaneous expression of thoughts and emotions makes him a typical Romantic poet.

Responding to the Poem

Pastoralism is one of the features of Blake’s poetry. The little pastoral poem “The Echoing Green,” which is taken from his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, has a delicate simplicity. This is a poem which consists of three ten-line stanzas, each in turn
composed of five rhyming couplets. The mood is happy and carefree, celebrating a close bond between man and nature (stanza 1). The young play alongside the old (stanza 2), both of whom are reminded of their own youth as they sit and watch them contentedly on the village green, which echoes to the human voices and activities linking present to past. The last stanza suggests both the end of the day and the end of a distinctive way of life. Blake uses rhyming couplets throughout, and the result is a joyous poem that celebrates a country community bound together by the simplest of shared pleasures.

The little narrative, so unpretending and simple, and written in language equally simple and unpretentious making no attempt at sophisticated poetic effects, suggests how man can be happy in the acceptance of his lot in nature and time, of life and a self-fulfilling natural process with a sense of community and warmth in it. Blake uses this poem with its picturesqueness in a warmer hue, its delightful domesticity, and its expressive melody to celebrate the traditional rural community, before poverty and the Industrial Revolution drove agricultural workers in droves to seek jobs in smoky impersonal cities.

But if we want to answer those analysis questions properly, we should explore the poem more carefully. Generally, William Blake’s short poems are explained very simply, but there are hidden depths in his work. This poem follows the structure of a day—“the sun does arise” in the beginning of the first stanza, and “the sun does descend” in the middle of the third stanza, and can be read as a metaphor for human life. A hint of melancholy affects the poem in the last stanza, where the “Echoing” green becomes the “darkening” green.

Blake has used many symbols to make the poem more attractive and more powerful. “Echo” suggests the shouts and hooting of children. “Green suggests the mirth of childhood besides the scene of children’s play. Again “oak” symbolizes old age. “Nest of birds” symbolizes peace and purity. “Darkening Green” symbolizes the death. Therefore, the poem is not only the contrast between innocence and experience—the blend of childlike innocence and grayness of later years, but also the contrast between perceptions of joys and sorrows—the contrast between youth and old age. What is happening on the Green will happen again, which is shown by the “old folk” who watch the children and reminisce about their own childhood on the Green.

The shifting images used to describe two opposing views of childhood or the journey between light and dark memories of times gone by are described with contrasting adjectives. New beginnings and fond childhood memories are seen in words that indicate a
lightness of spirit such as “arise,” “skies,” “ring,” and “Spring” to illustrate innocent memories of childhood which are fresh and pure in the parallel that is seen with the energies of youth. The opposition to these words which indicate a moving away from the carefree enjoyment of childhood is seen in “weary,” “descend,” “end,” “nest,” and “rest” to suggest a closure or end of an era that childhood in its comparison to nature may once have embodied at its peak, but which now dissolves towards the grave with the death of nature, to nest and rest for the beginnings of a new day.

The title of the poem is therefore important to remember when discussing a lost childhood since it remains at the back of the mind in the form of an echo as opposed to something more substantial and real. As such, it remains as a distant shadow pushed to the back of the mind, in an attempt to preserve the poet’s fading connection to a past that is no longer a living reality.

The reading and understanding of this poem makes it possible for us to answer the question of what poetry is. Poetry is characterized by the special use of rhythm, sound, and language. Its prime technical characteristic is that it ismetrical; that is, the words of a poem are arranged according to some sort of rhythmical scheme. The second characteristic is that the effect of the rhythm is augmented by the sound of the words, by the use of rhyme, and by such devices as alliteration and onomatopoeia. The third characteristic of poetry is that the meaning of the words is heightened by the intensification of its language, by compression, and by the use of striking words, images, similes, puns, paradoxes, and other linguistic figures. And most important of all, poetry helps us “feel” life by deploying its elements in special ways.

2. The Pleasures of Poetry

Poets are not always perfectly clear, but can be ambiguous or elusive, sometimes on purpose as they try to imitate the ambiguity or complexity of life itself. Mystery and confusion, however, are not essential attributes of poetry. Poetry is something for everyone to enjoy. We read it for the many pleasures it offers—pleasures of sound and meaning, of image and symbol, of speech and feeling, of thought and imagination. Some of the pleasures of poetry are
intellectual, as when we enjoy a poet’s witty wordplay or understand a poem’s central idea. Others are emotional, as when a poem evokes sorrow or pity, fear or joy. Still others are physical, as when our skin tingles or when we feel the impulse to tap our feet or nod in time to a poem’s rhythmic beat.

Undoubtedly, reading poetry is a peculiarly difficult, though mentally and physically delightful, act, for it demands the devotion of body, mind, and heart. And there are no shortcuts, and there will never be, if poetry remains and we remain human. Anyway, we cannot escape the particularity and physicality of words arranged just so, written or spoken or sung, in an individual poem. To appreciate poetry, therefore, we need to pay attention just as learning to love requires profoundest attention, and it may take some time to train ourselves to take the painstaking care needed to read a poem well. But the end of our labor is joy, just as a good meal needs time to slowly simmer and at last to savor and celebrate.

If poets are allowed to speak in their fullness to us through their works, they will help sharpen our understanding of human nature and, in the process, give us great pleasure in their handling of language, form, and ideas. Furthermore, poetry sharpens our perception of the world around us since it draws its energy from the fresh observation of life. Poetry can reveal to us things we didn’t know or knew only vaguely. It can excite our capacity for wonder, and it can enlarge our appreciation of beauty. It can make us feel more acutely and deeply, and also make us more receptive to imaginative experience. So though “poetry makes nothing happen,” it does not have to. What it does instead is to open our eyes to the mystery of being, for it reaches into the marrow of reality.

Language shapes the way we think, and the words we use shape our vision of the world. Poems are made of words—at their best, the most carefully chosen words in the best order. They renew our language, re-imbuing meaning into words maltreated by sound-byte discourse and Facebook memes. So even if you don’t find much in poetry to interest you, you should know that we read poetry because it is an important part of our culture and education, and that reading poetry improves our ability to use and understand language.

If you are one who has been estranged from poetry, i.e. you are baffled by
it and left in the dark, let go of the anxiety that you don’t understand it, and rediscover its pleasure. If you are hoping to renew your feeling for poetry and reacquaint yourself with it, just take it up as an experience, listen to the voice of the speaker, and don’t worry about understanding or not understanding. Poems should be taken up first as experiences to enjoy and then as objects to analyze. Approach poetry with delight and imagination, and you will be able to uncover the hidden meanings.

Now read the following short poem and consider how much you are indebted to poetry for pleasure and enjoyment, how much you are fascinated by the way the poet expresses his inner feelings through poetry, and how much you love the rhythm, the depth, and the power of poetry.

**Dust of Snow**

Robert Frost

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

**Analysis Questions**

1. How important is the last word “rued” in the poem?
2. Is it because the speaker now knows how to solve his problem (using hemlock) that he becomes happy? Or could it be that even though there are bad things in the world there are still beautiful things (like snow)?