

Why Teaching Poetry Is So Important

The oft-neglected literary form can help students learn in ways that prose can't.

By Andrew Simmons

16 years after enjoying a high school literary education rich in poetry, I am a literature teacher who barely teaches it. So far this year, my 12th grade literature students have read nearly 200,000 words for my class. Poems have accounted for no more than 100.

This is a shame—not just because poetry is important to teach, but also because poetry is important for the teaching of writing and reading.

High school poetry suffers from an image problem. Think of *Dead Poet's Society's* scenes of red-cheeked lads standing on desks and reciting verse, or of dowdy Dickinson imitators mooning on park benches, filling up journals with noxious chapbook fodder. There's also the tired lessons about iambic pentameter and teachers wringing interpretations from cryptic stanzas, their students bewildered and chuckling. Reading poetry is impractical, even frivolous. High school poets are antisocial and effete.

I have always rejected these clichéd mischaracterizations born of ignorance, bad movies, and uninspired teaching. Yet I haven't been stirred to fill my lessons with Pound and Eliot as my 11th grade teacher did. I loved poetry in high school. I wrote it. I read it. Today, I slip scripture into an analysis of *The Day of the Locust*. A Nikki Giovanni piece appears in *The Bluest Eye* unit. Poetry has become an afterthought, a supplement, not something to study on its own.

In an education landscape that dramatically deemphasizes creative expression in favor of expository writing and prioritizes the analysis of non-literary texts, high school literature teachers have to negotiate between their preferences and the way the wind is blowing. That sometimes means sacrifice, and poetry is often the first head to roll.

Yet poetry enables teachers to teach their students how to write, read, and understand any text. Poetry can give students a healthy outlet for surging emotions. Reading original poetry aloud in class can foster trust and empathy in the classroom community, while also emphasizing speaking and listening skills that are often neglected in high school literature classes.

Students who don't like writing essays may like poetry, with its dearth of fixed rules and its kinship with rap. For these students, poetry can become a gateway to other forms of writing. It can help teach skills that come in handy with other kinds of writing—like precise, economical diction, for example. When Carl Sandburg writes, "The fog comes/on little cat feet," in just six words, he endows a natural phenomenon with character, a pace, and a spirit. All forms of writing benefits from the powerful and concise phrases found in poems.