

# American Poetry

## Introduction

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Have you ever had a feeling so deep, that words alone seemed insufficient to communicate it? Have you ever been awestruck by a vision of beauty, or grasped an idea too profound for normal expression? If so, then you understand the purpose of poetry. God, love, death, life—meditating on these requires more than prose can offer and so our souls turn to a medium that goes deeper, that doesn't just tell, but also feels; we turn to poetry.

However. . .

While we are all subject to intense feelings, reading poetry may seem, well, boring, to some people. Those unaccustomed to understanding poetry may prefer a root canal to an afternoon of reading verse. What we hope to accomplish in this study is to teach reluctant readers how to read poetry so that they will understand and appreciate it, and to increase the depth of appreciation in those already excited about poetry. We are going to accomplish these goals by:

1. Defining the literary terms every student must know;
2. Outlining the seven basic steps required for reading poetry with understanding and insight;
3. Investigating major American poets;
4. Writing essays on what we've learned; and
5. Putting into practice what we've learned.

This program offers three different levels of study. **Level One** is for high-achieving students, preparing for a four-year university, and motivated to study. Completing the assignments as recommended qualifies for "Honor's English" or "Advanced Placement" credits. The lesson plan for advanced students is on page 5. **Level Two** is for students whose strongest skills are not in English and literature, but are capable of high school level work, plan to further their education after high school, and are motivated to study. Completing Level Two assignments as recommended qualifies for regular high school credits. The regular high school lesson plan is on page 6. **Level Three** is for students who are working at a high school level, but prefer an overview approach. High school credits are earned when this module is completed along with other high school level work for the quarter. The lesson plan is on page 7.

This module is divided into three units and will take between six and ten weeks to complete. Instructions will be given specifically for each level of work throughout this study; if no levels are mentioned, all three levels should complete the assignment.

*Unit One* focuses on mastering the literary terms and the seven basic steps necessary for appreciating poetry. Mastery of the terms will aid your ability to understand and put into practice the skills you will be developing. A Glossary of Literary Terms is provided beginning on page 77; although we recommend students research the terms in a grammar handbook. Level One students will finish Unit One in six school days. Level Two may require twelve school days, and Level Three students may complete the work in eleven days.

*Units 2 through 5* focus on investigating the major poets, utilizing the seven-step approach, and writing compositions on various topics. Thirty American poets worthy of note are covered in this section. Level One and Level Two students will cover this material in approximately five weeks; Level Three students will need approximately four weeks. An “Analysis Worksheet” will be completed for each author. Instructions for filling out the worksheet are on page 99. Reproducible worksheets are on page 101; each student will need up to thirty of them (permission to photocopy is granted).

*Total Language Plus* has always utilized an “ask” rather than “tell” approach. In order to excel in higher education, even in life, research skills are necessary; therefore, students benefit from researching these authors. Information on every author and many of their poems is available on the Internet. Researching via the Internet will help prepare the student for college level work where ease in using the web is mandatory. There is, however, information for each poet provided with units 2 through 5. Use the information if time constraints prevent the research suggestion.

*Unit 6* focuses on the student’s poetry writing skills. Students will compose a sonnet, a haiku, a limerick, a poem in blank verse, and/or a poem in free verse. Levels One and Two are given about a week and a half for this section. Level Three students are not required to do this section.

Reading poetry is harder than reading prose. It requires a different set of skills, a different approach. If you open your mind to getting the most out of this module and pay attention to the lessons, your life will be blessed. Learning how to read and appreciate poetry gives you another mode of communication, another way to express your deepest feelings and to understand another person’s deep feelings. There is nothing sissy or weak or particularly feminine about poetry. As you will see, many great American poets were men; King David was a poet. Poetry allows us to peek into the soul of the writer and gives us a tool of expression to use when prose alone is not enough.

Be aware that poetry is not an exact science. Because it deals with ambiguities and emotions, a particular poem may mean different things to different readers. We purposely do not give definite answers to a number of questions because a plurality of responses may be valid, and we want to encourage personal exploration. Many of us enjoy listening to music. I can put in an Andrea Bocelli CD, crank up the volume, and be transported to worship my Maker in a meaningful and real way. Bocelli may be singing love songs to a paramour, but when I listen, I’m loving my God. It is unrealistic to suppose that everyone shares this same response; someone may come in and criticize my music as just so much noise. Poetry is music without the instruments, but not without the rhythm, the meaning, or the emotion, and is subject to the interpretation of the reader. Don’t be distressed if answers differ from the suggested responses.

Read Chapter 3 in *How to Read Slowly* by James W. Sire for help in getting the most from this study.