

“OH, SAY CAN YOU SEE?”
(WHAT IS A GOOD POEM AND EVEN MORE
CONFUSING, WHO IS A GOOD POET?)
(A LESSON PLAN FOR TEACHERS)

By James E. Tokley, Sr.
Poet Laureate

INTRODUCTION

Soon after the first poem was written, one of the first true arguments began: WHAT IS A GOOD POEM? AND WHO IS A GOOD POET? Answers to these two questions, no doubt, fill one complete floor of the Library of Congress. These days, poetry slams are predicated by the ideas of WHAT IS A GOOD POEM, AND WHO IS THE BEST POET? Indeed, attempts to answer these two questions have been more murderous and ruinous to the art of poetry than even the opinions of Plato, who often referred to us as “THAT ANGRY TRIBE OF POETS.”

Instead, what I suggest is that we not necessarily try to discover what is a GOOD POEM, or a GOOD POET, but open ourselves to the questions, WHAT IS AN EFFECTIVE POEM? WHAT IS THE MAKE-UP OF AN EFFECTIVE AND AN ENDURING POET? Take for instance, the lawyer, Francis Scott Key, who was moved to write a poem, which a century later would become the anthem of a nation, or the soldier, Sgt. Joyce Kilmer, who – in the midst of a World War One battle – was inspired to write, “I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree . . .” or the author of the poem that singer Billie Holiday turned into a popular favorite whenever she sang “Strange Fruit,” which described the horror of a Southern lynching.

WHAT IS A GOOD POEM? WHO KNOWS? WHAT IS AN EFFECTIVE POEM? EVERYBODY KNOWS! However, in order for a poem or any piece of literature to be effective and perhaps, to stand the test of time, it ought (and I say “ought”) to be the product of certain poetic concepts, techniques and legacies. The following lesson plan is one poet’s suggestion as to how one might approach such a life-long road. . .the road of effective poetry. Have fun! ☺

WHAT OTHERS HAVE SAID ABOUT POETRY

1. (Ralph Waldo Emerson) “The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He or she is a sovereign and stands on the center. The poet announces that which no other person has foretold. He or she is the true and only doctor; knows and tells. For, the poet is a beholder of ideas and an utterer of the necessary and causal” (The Poet).
2. (Walt Whitman) “Of these United States, the poet is the equable man. . .For the great idea. That, my friends, that is the mission of poets.”

3. (Shelley) “Poetry, in a general sense, is the expression of the imagination.”
4. (Gwendolyn Brooks) “These are the times for big poems!”
5. Prose is the tobacco stuffed in a pipe. But poetry is the aroma from the smoke, the memories from the aroma and the emotional response from the total experience (Tokley).

MATERIALS, WHICH EVERY EFFECTIVE POET WILL NEED

1. Dictionary (suggest Oxford English Dictionary or Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, most current edition)
2. Thesaurus (suggest Webster’s Thesaurus)
3. Rhyming Dictionary
4. Dictionary of Allusions (Oxford)
5. Inspiration
 - a. Newspapers/ Current Events/ Media
 - b. Art
 - c. Music/ Instruments
 - d. Reading/ Fiction/ Nonfiction/ Poetry/ Plays etc.
 - e. Human Relationships
 - f. Appreciation of All that Exists
 - g. “As I am human, all things human are common unto me” (Terence).

PRESENTING THE CLASS

1. Ice Breaker Poems: Select and recite two energizing poems to promote audience interest and “buy-in.” (Your own choice)
2. What Is A Good Poem?: Discuss the personal preferences of writers, readers and listeners of various poetry techniques (i.e. rhythm and rhyme, free verse, iambic pentameter, iambic tetrameter, terza rima, rime royal etc.). Read examples from writers who have used such techniques (i.e. Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare Whitman, Dunbar, Dickens, Hughes, Brooks, Frost etc.) Remind students that the King James version of the Bible is written in iambic pentameter.

3. Introduce and discuss the following poetic techniques:

- a. Simile
- b. Metaphor
- c. Analogy
- d. Alliteration
- e. Consonance
- f. Assonance
- g. Symbolism
- h. Personification
- i. Onomatopoeia
- j. Repetition

Read examples of the use of each of the above in selected poems.

4. Discuss poetry slams and the art of poetry: pros and cons

5. What is Effective Poetry?: Discuss the impact of poems on the psyche and emotions of the listener or reader.

6. What is A Poet?: Discuss the human qualities that open the mind to inspiration and motivation to write poetry (i.e. in touch with self, nature and mankind, sense of humor, sensitive, enthusiastic about life, imagination, creative etc.)

7. Writing Exercise One: Instruct students to write a poem about a topic or object and sign the poem.

- a. Have students to exchange their poems and read them silently.
- b. Encourage students to share how they felt having someone else read their work, and explain that poetry is sharing a part of who we are.

8. Writing Exercise Two:

- a. Instruct students to play a game wherein they become the great, world-renowned literary personality they would most like to become. Then have students to rewrite their first poem in the style and feeling of their alter-ego.
- b. Have students to read and compare the two poems. Discuss any possible change in their writing styles.
- c. Then instruct students to rewrite their poem a third time, this time with the personality of themselves as the great, effective poets they wish to become, not someday, but NOW. (What this exercise proves is that within us and within our reach is the effective artist we wish to become, through faith and release and refinement.)

9. Questions and Answers: Students will ask questions, or share ideas and original poems, as time permits.

10. Wrap-Up: Final Statement by Instructor

Peace

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