

# Demystifying the Poem

Excerpted from *Our Difficult Sunlight: A Guide to Poetry, Literacy, & Social Justice in Classroom & Community*

GEORGIA A. POPOFF

*In Our Difficult Sunlight: A Guide to Poetry, Literacy, & Social Justice in Classroom & Community (forthcoming from Teachers & Writers Collaborative in Spring 2011), Quraysh Ali Lansana and Georgia A. Popoff demonstrate the power of poetry in the K–12 classroom. Based on their combined thirty years as teaching artists, the authors explore the terrain of the twenty-first century public school and offer strategies for using the reading and creation of poetry to improve students' reading comprehension and writing skills, and to foster connections among students and teachers from very different backgrounds.*

*The point is not to teach—but to evoke, to stir our desire to believe differently.*

— Richard Lewis, from *When Thought is Young: Reflections on Teaching and the Poetry of the Child*

**S**EVERAL YEARS AGO while I was preparing to present a workshop for middle- and high-school English teachers, I considered what I truly wanted to communicate as a poet to those who are most likely not poets, but who are expected to teach poetry to teenagers. I

have spent more than a decade working in schools at every grade level, as well as in adult-education classes, and my experience has led me to believe that one of the most terrifying questions a teacher can ask of a student of any age is, *What does the poem mean?*

I can only imagine what a ninth-grader feels when he is given an Auden poem to read and is then asked to define the poet's intention on the spot. It seems a bit presumptuous to assume we could know what the poem "means," especially since I think we poets often don't fully know what we mean ourselves as we create and recreate a poem, until long after the poem is "finished." We need to step back from the creation, to separate from the act of bringing forth something new before we can fully comprehend the result.

I believed that if I could communicate an understanding of this process to the teachers in my workshop it would foster a different approach to poetry in the classroom, one that would allow a deeper response to a given poem, beyond a surface understanding of its mechanics. A reader will never develop a relationship with a poem if he or she approaches it solely by attempting to decipher some "sorcerer's alchemy" of literary device, form, structure, and figurative lan-

Frequently we discuss the study of a poem as “analyzing” the poem, as if it is a scientific formula [or] a mathematical equation. . . . [Neither] of these approaches will help students discern meaning and form a personal relationship with a poem.

guage.

Frequently we discuss the study of a poem as “analyzing” the poem, as if it is a scientific formula, a mathematical equation, or a psychiatrist’s patient on the couch. None of these approaches will help students discern meaning and form a personal relationship with a poem. It is like the difference between reading the engine specs of a Ferrari and taking one for a 100-mph spin on a closed track. One is all in the head; the second is tangible and immediate, solely for the moment and the memory.

When I propose banishing the “analyze this poem” approach, teachers often respond with audible gasps and comments like, “That’s all very well and good, but we have to prepare students for the Regents exam. There are things they have to know.” This is a valid concern, given the current educational climate, but I believe that the approach I encourage offers a stronger connection between reader and poem, and one that will lead students to greater success in facing the gauntlet of standardized testing. Instead of “analyzing” a poem, I ask students and teachers to use the following process of exploration:

**Examine:** Read the poem silently, read it out loud to yourself or others, or listen as someone reads it to you. Notice specific details, and immerse yourself in the poem multiple times.

**Experience:** Think about the poem. Try to relate what it says to something you know, have experienced, or have heard about. Continue to notice the details of the poem, the language and word choices, the structure, literary devices, theme, and content.

**Interpret:** Make connections between what you know

from your own life and what the poem is saying. Try to say what the poem has conveyed to you in your own words.

**Reflect:** Consider all of the elements of the poem and the connections that you have recognized.

Ask yourself what there is about the poem that you can imagine or relate to from your own point of view.

**Respond:** React to what you have found in the poem and voice an opinion about it, then share your opinion with someone else.

Whether you are working with students or teachers, rather than asking what the poem *means* it is more pertinent and productive to ask, *How does the poem make you feel?* Or, *What does this poem make you think?* Refine that question to ask, *What do you believe the poet wants you to know, feel, and/or understand from these words?* Follow that question with, *What in the poem causes you to think that?* *How can you say in your own way what this poem means to you?* *How would you rewrite this poem from your own experience?* Each question addresses content in a different manner, and each asks for the kind of personal engagement with the poem that leads to a deeper understanding of the work and alleviates the fear of being wrong. By asking readers to value their own responses to a poem, while also looking for evidence within the poem to support those responses, we help foster a conversation that adds to everyone’s understanding of the work.

How should a teacher respond if a student’s interpretation seems too far off the mark? What if, for example, a student were to respond to Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” as a veiled story of a UFO sighting? If that student could support the premise from evidence in the language of the poem, would that interpretation be incorrect? When this question comes up I ask teachers to remember that the point of a poem is to elicit response, not to

By asking readers to value their own responses to a poem, . . . we also help foster a conversation that adds to everyone's understanding of the work.

demand a prescriptive interpretation. If the reader engages with a poem through his or her personal history, turning the interpretation a few degrees, there is no harm in permitting that flexibility. Even the most outlandish interpretations can stimulate fruitful discussions among students. That alien sighting in Frost's woods just may provide a phenomenal teachable moment.

The need to be "right" about the meaning of a poem is a learned response based on the myth that a poem has a single correct meaning, and if you don't get it you are just too dumb to "get" poetry. Just days before I presented my teachers' workshop, I articulated this premise to a friend and colleague who is not a poet. She told me that I had perfectly described the reason she is terrified of reading poetry. I believe my friend is in the company of many. I understand that fear completely. I often have the same concern, even though I am a poet myself.

Sometimes I do not even comprehend the "meaning" of my own poems to their fullest extent, particularly in the early stages of the life of a poem. This is an intuitive journey at best. There have been times when someone who has read one of my poems has given me a perspective that deepened my own understanding. Sometimes these sage readers are students. I was delighted to read Richard Hugo's "confession" regarding a poem that he cited in his book *The Triggering Town*. He says that he did not really know what he had meant in a poem written when he was a younger poet; he just appreciated the sound and sensibility of the poem. He is quite certain that he knew what he meant when he wrote it, but although he no longer felt confident about his intended meaning, he was quite taken with the poem's musicality, and that was enough for him.

What a relief! And what a teaching opportunity! Once I began teaching poetry from this more expansive perspective, I found that I had a way of helping both classroom teachers and students. It is important

to remember that a poem is first and foremost a creative work of art, not an equation. Poets, as artists, give themselves over to something bewitching and inexplicable. Each achieves a poem by different methods. Some are quite disciplined, others more driven by the moment of inspiration. Few sit down to build a poem the way folks once built Sears houses. There is something else happening, a kind of "zone" that brings forth a draft poem, followed by a revision process. In other words, writing a poem is part magic and part sweat equity. Attempting to fit an understanding of poetry into the sort of constraints required by a single "analysis" is antithetical to the nature of the art form and its inherent value. Understanding this allows for a more liberating way to enter a poem so that teachers and students alike will be able to claim it as their own. ☺

*Teachers & Writers Collaborative will publish Our Difficult Sunlight in early 2011. The information and lesson plans in the book will be supplemented by additional resources on the T&W website ([www.twc.org](http://www.twc.org)). Teachers and teaching artists will be able to download additional exercises from the site, share lesson plans that they have developed, and ask questions about challenges faced in the classroom.*

**About the Authors:** *Quraysh Ali Lansana is director of the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing and an associate professor of English and creative writing at Chicago State University, and the author of They Shall Run: Harriet Tubman Poems (Third World Press, 2004) and the poetry collection Southside Rain (Third World Press, 2000). Georgia A. Popoff teaches with the Downtown Writers Center at the Syracuse chapter of the YMCA Writers Voice program and serves on the Association of Teaching Artists Board of Directors. She is managing editor of the Comstock Review. Popoff's poetry collections are Coaxing Nectar from Longing (Hale Mary Press, 1997) and The Doom Weaver (Main Street Rag Publications, 2000).*