

*2007 Bechtel Prize finalist*

# Giftng Poems

## Getting Students to Read Poetry Closely

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**W**ITH AN EYE FOR AN A GRADE, students in my college “Introduction to Poetry” class are highly motivated. They read every poem and essay assigned, participate in discussions, and work at making the papers on poem analysis complete. Aside from an occasional lax opening or closing paragraph, most develop a well-informed discussion, supported by textual citations and bibliography correctly using MLA guidelines. Most students demonstrate sufficient effort to warrant a good grade.

A good grade is not good enough for me. As an educator, book lover, and poet, I want my students to be hungering for and awed by poetry. On Friday nights when they gather at a friend’s dorm for pizza, I want them to talk about a phrase, a poem, or the entire collection of poetry with the same enthusiasm usually reserved for the latest movie or the music on their iPod. I want them to recognize, like my Iranian-American physician who grew up reciting hundreds of poems and filling dozens of notebooks with his own creative expressions, that poetry is a beacon for society and a pinnacle of individual achievement. I want them to share my appreciation for imagination, personal expression, and the mysteries of poetic expression. In short, I want them to enjoy poetry as much as I do.

My love for books began at an early age. From the age of three, I was driven by my mother to the allergist who treated my severe asthma. For the next twelve years, my doctor punctured my arm with a series of shots that left tender swells which took months to vanish. In those early years, glad that no scream or cry erupted from my mouth, the doctor rewarded me with a pick of flavored lollipops. My hand would dive into the pool of sweetly colored candies for my favorite, root beer, and if that were missing, then grape. The licking began immediately, before we got into the car and before the receptionist filled out a card with the date of our next appointment. By far though, my preferred reward was my mom taking me to the library several blocks from the allergist to choose not one, but several books. Every week, my tender arms carried home a prized stack of books to sit on my night table and keep me awake late into the evening and in bed on weekend mornings when my brothers had already rushed out the door to play.

On the first day of class, I always ask my students how many books of poetry they've read in the past year. When no head nods or hand goes up, I offer, "Five?" No movement. "Three?" Same response. "One?" Gazes dart about the room.

"Not even one?" That's when, feigning disgust, I gather up my books and bag from the desk and head toward the door. My pretending contains a wisp of truth; I see the huge task before me. My hope is that my students leave class at the end of the semester with not only the ability to write an intelligent paper that demonstrates an appreciation and understanding of poetry, but as or more important, a love for poetry which contributes to a new generation of devoted readers.

How do you get students to open themselves to enjoying the complexity and richness of language? How do you get them to experience the magic contained in a poem and the journey it maps in voice, image, and rhythm? How do you rouse genuine curiosity and get their hearts pulsing in response to a poet who, for the sake of beauty or the ache of living, has apprenticed herself to a trade of grasping after the ungraspable, an

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impractical trade that holds little promise of rewards or a lucrative job? When poems have no buttons, beeps, or flashing lights, how does a teacher light a fire of interest in students that will continue to burn after the final exam?

My assignment, "Gift of a Poem," provides some of that tinder. I provide them with a list of six poets, typically Pablo

Neruda, Yusef Komunyakaa, Mary Oliver, Charles Bernstein, Eileen Myles, and Li-Young Lee. They choose a poem by one of these poets and choose, also, a noteworthy person to whom they give that poem as a gift. A noteworthy person may be a parent, a sibling, a guidance counselor, a dean, a friend, a stranger. They memorize the poem, if possible, and read the poem aloud before handing the receiver of the gift a paper copy of the poem. Afterwards students write a paper about the criteria used in selecting the poem and the recipient of the gift. They reflect on the process and how the poem was received. No line by line, stanza by stanza analysis is needed.

All semester, I look forward to these papers for the risks and discoveries. Often their tales bring me to tears. Melanie gave her father a Komunyakaa poem about struggles as a Vietnam War vet. Her father, also a Vietnam War vet whom she described as reticent and distant, spoke to her for the first time about his own painful experiences as a soldier and survivor. Unlike the routine of other evenings, he never turned on the television and, likewise, she didn't disappear into her room. Before going to bed, she told him that she looked forward to hearing more of his stories. The poem opened a channel of communication that strengthened their bond and understanding of each other.

Stephen selected a love poem by Neruda to give to his girlfriend during a sailing excursion. He read and reread Neruda beforehand, closely examining each word and phrase for unintended nuances. He was unsure about his commitment to her and didn't want her to mistake the poem as a proposal or promise of long-term love, but he did want her to know how strongly he felt. He memorized the poem, which he shared under

a moonlit sky, and received a firm, passionate kiss. That a poem could elicit such a response amazed him.

Tasha chose her grandmother and delivered her poem at the start of a Thanksgiving dinner with the entire family present. “We read sections from the Bible, which I now see as poetry,” she wrote in her paper, “so I thought a poem by Mary Oliver fit perfectly.” The discussion that followed lasted for hours and the family agreed to include reading poetry every year as part of their Thanksgiving ritual.

Craig chose a stranger at a grocery store. After several folks refused to speak to him, perhaps, he speculated, because they believed he was trying to sell them something, he finally managed to win the ear of a woman. After hearing the last line, she leaned over and cried on his shoulder. “I’ve always wanted my husband to read me poetry,” she said, “and you just come up to me and do it out of the blue like that.” She and husband were on the verge of divorce and the poem stirred her vulnerability and soothed her. He offered her comfort, admitted to getting to know this woman better than he wanted, and recognized the event as unforgettable.

Some students preface their action by saying to their school counselor, friend, or loved one that they’re completing an assignment for class; others withhold the information. Although there may be some initial discomfort at the novelty of the gesture, the receiver of the poem ultimately feels honored to be selected, and students are consistently surprised by the impact of their gift. Students and poem recipients end up talking in depth about a line, an image, the entire poem. They speculate about the poet’s motivation for writing such a poem. They share what the poem stirs. The gifted poem acts as a catalyst that gets students talking about themselves and connecting with others in a new and powerful way.

In discussing this assignment, I explain they are not required to analyze the poem, but with stakes high in giving someone a gift, their search for and reading of the right poem expands the familiar academic chore of interpreting poems into a more meaningful activity. Students are motivated more so than ever to read the poem closely—lest they misrepresent themselves. When I collect and read their papers, the students’ astonishment at the power of poetry is my delight. Many say they want to continue gifting a poem to see how reactions may differ.

In my many years of teaching, I find English classes frequently shy away from talking about matters of the heart in favor of using books to reinforce skills in critical thinking and as artifacts for studying a given period. Yet when the motivation and subject of so much poetry is the heart twining with language, how can we afford to overlook this vital element? We emphasize teaching ideas, structure, form, all darlings of cognition, but students crave real-life connections. Students yearn to travel, to dirty their feet, to snorkel, to pierce their bodies, to get drunk, to fall in love. What happens when a class arouses and begins feeding that hunger usually stirred into action during break or delayed until the summer?

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As a teacher, I admit to having an agenda. I want to convert non-readers into impassioned readers who prize their stack of books. As a poet, I want students curious about what makes a poet's heart tremble and what visions inspire us to commit words to a page.

In *Frames of Mind* and subsequent books, education theorist Howard Gardner recognizes that our education system is biased toward verbal-linguistic and logical-mathematical learning. By ignoring other forms of learning, what he calls intelligences (musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalist), he believes we shortchange building

broader skills that support a multiplicity of talents. Poetry performs a great service, a venue in which students learn about themselves and others. Strong on the verbal-linguistic intelligence, poetry can also be taught to embody intrapersonal (understanding self) and interpersonal (understanding others) intelligences.

As a teacher, I admit to having an agenda. I want to convert non-readers into impassioned readers who prize their stack of books. As a poet, I want students curious about what makes a poet's heart tremble and what visions inspire us to commit words to a page. These words are more savory than any candy, their flavors and texture more complex. I want language rolling around on their tongues, each word and phrase revealing the subtleties and zestfulness of verse.

I know my students are concerned about getting a good grade, which they believe leads to a good job. But no job, regardless of pay and benefit package, will satisfy them if day after day they go through the motions of completing tasks with robotic efficiency yet they don't know how to connect with their longings and true direction.

Several months ago, I received an e-mail from one of my students who graduated three years ago. She had broken up with the boyfriend she dated in college and was changing jobs. She finished reading her third book by Joy Harjo, *A Map to the Next World*, and wanted to share a poem that she kept rereading during this difficult transition period. The e-mail contained a copy of the poem which she hoped would inspire me. The topic of the poem and its pacing did inspire me, but her choosing to share it with me, the gifting itself, uplifted me more. 

*Cheryl Pallant, poet, writer, and dancer, has published five books. Her latest, in nonfiction, is Contact Improvisation: Introduction to a Vitalizing Dance Form. Selections of poetry and prose have appeared recently in magazines like Fence, No Tell Motel, Sentence, Cue: a Journal of Prose Poetry, and New York Quarterly. She teaches at the University of Richmond in Virginia.*