



21st March – World Poetry day. Why poetry matters (now more than ever)

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Every March 21st, the world pauses to celebrate **World Poetry Day**. For many students, this announcement is met with a collective groan—the “Poetry” often recollects images of dusty sonnets and confusing metaphors. But for the English teacher, this day isn't just a calendar entry; it's a real opportunity to bridge the gap between “required reading” and “personal resonance.”



Established in 1999 by UNESCO, the day recognizes poetry's unique ability to capture the creative spirit of the human mind and give voice to diverse cultures across the globe.

According to UNESCO, World Poetry Day aims to:

- Promote the reading, writing, publishing, and teaching of poetry
- Encourage a return to oral traditions of poetry recitals
- Support small publishers and independent poets
- Revitalize endangered languages through poetic expression

Poetry is more than just rhyme and rhythm—it is a powerful tool for preserving identity, expressing emotion, and inspiring social change.

Check these poems that inspire social change:

[THE UNKNOWN CITIZEN](#) - W.H.AUDEN

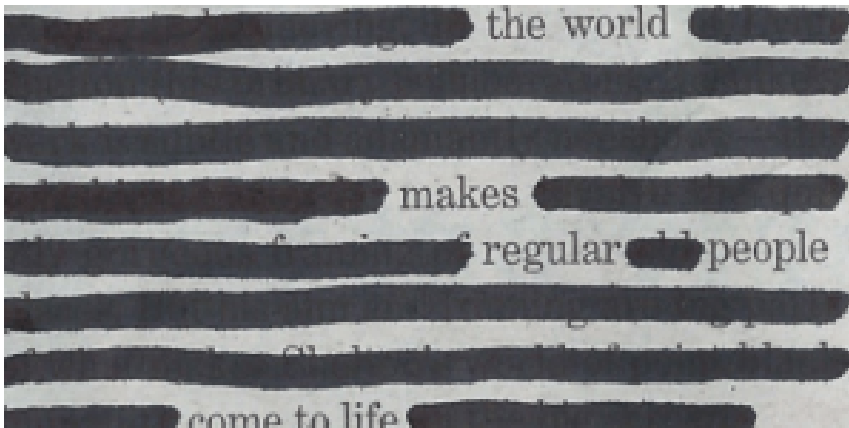
[PEOPLE NEED PEOPLE](#)- B.ZEPHANIAH

[THE HILL WE CLIMB](#) - A.GORMAN

In an age of 280-character limits and rapid-fire scrolling, poetry teaches **precision**. It forces students to slow down. Unfortunately, poetry is often presented as a dusty relic—a puzzle box to be solved rather than a medium to be felt. To truly engage students, we have to flip the script. Poetry isn't about what the poet "meant"; it's about what the poem does. Does it make the reader uncomfortable? Does it make them laugh? Does it capture a feeling they didn't have a word for until now? When we frame poetry as a tool for observation rather than a test of literary analysis, the fear begins to evaporate.

This **March 21**, try these approaches if you want to prioritize creativity over correctness. When we teach poetry, we aren't just teaching meter or metaphor; we are teaching students to be precise with their language. In an age of short texts and social media captions, taking the time to carefully choose a single word is a superpower. World Poetry Day isn't about memorizing the greats—it's about giving our students the confidence to be poets themselves as the famous English teacher **Mr. Keating** used to say in the movie **Dead poets society**.

BLACKOUT POETRY Give students a page from an old book or newspaper. Have them circle words they like and “black out” the rest with a marker to create a new poem.



POETRY JAM SESSION

Give students three words related to the same topic. Have them create a 5-line poem that will be performed in class.



SIX WORD MEMOIR

Legend says Hemingway wrote: “*For sale: baby shoes, never worn.*” Challenge students to write their life story in exactly six words.



As English teachers, we often find ourselves retreating to the safety of the “Greats”. World Poetry Day is the perfect moment to prove to our students that contemporary poetry offers the perfect alter ego to classics. Poetry deals with themes that are eternal and relevant through every era and time. Contemporary poems deal with the same issues that Shakespeare so eloquently wrote about centuries ago. They are timeless because the subjects of these poems are about the human condition and that never changes.

If you want to pair old and new poetry try these activities:

REFUGEE BLUES BY W.H.AUDEN AND HOME BY W.SHIRE

Refugee blues

Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in
holes:
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no
place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go
there now.

In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,
Every spring it blossoms anew:
Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports
can't do that.

The consul banged the table and said,
"If you've got no passport you're officially dead":
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
Asked me politely to return next year:
But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where
shall we go to-day?

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and
said;
"If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread":
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was
talking of you and me.
[...]

Home

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as
well
your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin
factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.
no one leaves home unless home
chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of
doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem
under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an
airport toilets
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be
going back.
[...]

1* **Auden:** The speaker notes that the city has "ten million souls," yet "there's no place for us." How does Auden use the contrast between a thriving city and a homeless couple to create a sense of isolation?

2* **Shire:** She famously writes, "no one leaves home unless / home is the mouth of a shark." How does her personification of "home" as a predator change your understanding of why people flee?

3* For Auden, home is a **place** they are barred from. For Shire, home is a **threat** they are escaping. Which perspective feels more urgent? What is home for you? Why?

THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN BY R.KIPLING AND THEY DON'T LOVE YOU LIKE I LOVE YOU BY N.DIAZ

The white Man's burden

Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.
Take up the White Man's burden—
In patience to abide,
To veil the threat of terror
And check the show of pride;
By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

They Don't Love You Like I Love You

My mother said this to me
long before Beyoncé lifted the lyrics
from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs,
and what my mother meant by
[...]
What is the United States if not a clot
of clouds? If not spilled milk? Or blood?
If not the place we once were
in the millions? America is *Maps*—
Maps are ghosts: white and
layered with people and places I see through.
My mother has always known best,
knew that I'd been begging for them,
to lay my face against their white
laps, to be held in something more
than the loud light of their projectors
as they flicker themselves—sepia
or blue—all over my body.
All this time,
I thought my mother said, *Wait*,
as in, *Give them a little more time
to know your worth*,
[...]
Yes,
when my mother said,
They don't love you like I love you,
she meant,
*Natalie, that doesn't mean
you aren't good.*

1* **Kipling:** Who is the "White Man" in this poem? Is he a specific person, or a symbol? Who are the "new-caught, sullen peoples" he refers to?

2* **Diaz:** The title is a "borrowed" lyric (from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs). When Diaz says "They don't love you like I love you," who is the "They" and who is the "I"?

3* How does Kipling's "I" (the colonizer) differ from Diaz's "I" (the Indigenous voice) in terms of authority and perspective?

SONNET 18 BY SHAKESPEARE AND TEXT BY C.A.DUFFY

Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of
May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a
date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course
untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his
shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can
see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to
thee.

Text

I tend the mobile now
like an injured bird
We text, text, text
our significant words.
I re-read your first,
your second, your third,
look for your small xx,
feeling absurd.
The codes we send
arrive with a broken chord.
I try to picture your
hands,
their image is blurred.
Nothing my thumbs
press
will ever be heard.

Both explore how we "send" love to someone. Shakespeare uses a poem; Duffy uses a mobile phone. It's a great study on how technology changes—but longing stays the same.

1* **Shakespeare:** The speaker claims, "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this..." What is "this"? How does he intend to make his lover immortal?

2* **Duffy:** The speaker describes love as being trapped in a "glass screen" and mentions "re-reading" messages. How does the "life" of a text message compare to the "life" of a printed poem?

3* Which medium feels more personal to you: a poem written for the world to see, or a private text message that can be deleted in a second? How do you "send" emotions to other people? Do you feel more comfortable behind a screen?



World Poetry Day is a reminder that language belongs to everyone. Whether it's a hip-hop lyric, a haiku about a cat, or a classic Langston Hughes piece, poetry allows our students to see their own experiences reflected in the English language.