

# ***Pencil-Yellow School Buses***

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**A Poetry Guide for Educators**



**by Richard Blanco, Education Ambassador, Academy of American Poets**

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**and Madeleine Fuchs Holzer, Educator-in-Residence, Academy of American Poets**

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“My face, your face, millions of faces in morning’s mirrors,  
each one yawning to life, crescendoing into our day:  
pencil-yellow school buses, the rhythm of traffic lights...”

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from *One Today*, by Richard Blanco  
a poem for Barack Obama’s  
Presidential Inauguration  
January 21, 2013

## Preface

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During my tenure as Presidential Inaugural Poet I've received (and continue receiving) thousands of e-mails, letters, and Facebook messages from people from all walks of life expressing how powerfully they connected with the inaugural poem and how they have begun reading poetry. At first, I was surprised by such a positive response; after all, I had been under the distinct impression that most Americans didn't care much for poetry—and that was that. However, I've since realized that the inaugural poem was for many the very first time they had engaged with a contemporary poem by a living poet—and that made all the difference.

Moreover, over the past four years I've been blessed with the opportunity of sharing my love for poetry at such unlikely venues as the Federal Reserve, engineering firms and conferences, law firms, the Mayo Clinic, Silicon Valley, the USDA, and advocacy groups of all kinds—from LGBT rights to immigration reform. In every instance, I've witnessed people by the hundreds taken by a newfound connection to poetry, suddenly realizing that poetry was not what they thought it was. I hear comments such as: *That's not what they taught me in high school; I never knew poetry could be like this; This is my first time at a poetry reading—and I'm hooked.* Reactions like these have bolstered what I already believed to be true: poetry is indeed powerful and life-enriching. But on the other hand, I've realized there is an unsated hunger for poetry and an unrealized potential for the art which is so utterly misunderstood.

Reflecting on my life, I recall that throughout my education I was never introduced to a single poem by a living poet. As a result, my classroom experience with poetry was lackluster and detached. Not until I began taking creative writing courses on my own after college did I encounter the incredible spectrum of contemporary poets. Poetry then became alive and relevant—it changed my life forever. But why hadn't that happened sooner? Why isn't poetry a larger part of our cultural lives; more connected to our popular conversations as with film, music, and novels? Why isn't poetry more entrenched in our history, rooted in our folklore, and established in our national identity as it is in other countries? Where is the disconnect?

I believe part of the reason has largely to do with education. The way poetry is generally taught, even by teachers who like poetry, falls short of exploring its full potential and engagement. It's a systemic issue. Many teachers have been taught that poetry is "mysterious" and that there is only one way to read a specific poem. As a result, they often become intimidated by the art form. Not learning anything else, they often teach the way they were taught, and their students become similarly intimidated. To this point, there even exists a recognized fear of poetry known as *metrophobia*. Many people first develop the phobia in school when asked to rank poems according to artificial scales, break them down, and search for esoteric meanings. Those who suffer from metrophobia were never properly introduced to the subject in the first place.

Wanting to foster lasting change in the area of poetry education, I currently serve as the first-ever Education Ambassador for the Academy of American Poets. A cornerstone of the Academy's mission is

to serve educators in poetry. This guide, in part, is a distillation of the innovative approaches, activities, and resources developed by their Educator-in-Residence, Madeleine Fuchs Holzer. I share in the Academy's commitment to inspire educators with a newfound enthusiasm for poetry and empower them to more effectively bring poetry into their classrooms, thus enabling students to discover its relevance and life-enriching power.

## The Poem as Experience

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The Academy's general approach to teaching poetry draws from John Dewey's "Art as Experience" ([click here](#)), his major work on aesthetics. Dewey proposes that, "...to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience" (Dewey). This essentially tells us that to understand a poem the reader (the "beholder") must "experience" it. So how is a poem experienced? Well, it goes well beyond simply reading the poem once and then asking point blank: *What does it mean?* To experience a poem students must develop and exercise a certain poetic sensibility that allows them to understand the poem beyond the words (Holzer). This sensibility involves fostering certain capacities of perception and expression (some of the very capacities that poets use to create poems), namely:

- A keen sensitivity to the surrounding world through multi-sensory perception.
- Noticing deeply and identifying patterns.
- An ability to ask questions of that world and live in ambiguity.
- Being able to make both logical and intuitive connections.
- A penchant for just the right word or phrase to express feelings and meaning.
- The use of imagination to connect the above in new ways.

Through the Academy of American Poets, Holzer has created the weekly series, *Teach this Poem*, as an online resource designed to help K-12 teachers foster these capacities in a recursive process that allows students to "experience" poetry. Rather than beginning with a *cold* reading of a poem, *Teach this Poem* typically begins with an activity that uses a "resource" (such as a photograph, a video, an object, or a painting) that is related to the poem. This is meant to spark sensory experiences which then open-up a contextual door to "enter" the poem. The poem is then explored through various activities that promote deep noticing and listening. Further class discussions and collaborative small group activities are then introduced to foster participation, discovery, and ownership of ideas. To illustrate this, three specific examples of *Teach this Poem* activities follow; each activity is annotated with corresponding capacities and concepts it is focused on developing.

## **Teach this Poem: “Ode to My Socks” by Pablo Neruda**

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*Developed and Written by Madeleine Fuchs Holzer*

(to view in web browser [click here](#))

### **Ode to My Socks**

Maru Mori brought me  
a pair  
of socks  
which she knitted herself  
with her sheepherder’s hands,  
two socks as soft  
as rabbits.  
I slipped my feet  
into them  
as though into  
two  
cases  
knitted  
with threads of  
twilight  
and goatskin.  
Violent socks,  
my feet were  
two fish made  
of wool,  
two long sharks  
sea-blue, shot  
through  
by one golden thread,  
two immense blackbirds,  
two cannons:  
my feet  
were honored  
in this way  
by  
these  
heavenly

socks.  
They were  
so handsome  
for the first time  
my feet seemed to me  
unacceptable  
like two decrepit  
firemen, firemen  
unworthy  
of that woven  
fire,  
of those glowing  
socks.

Nevertheless  
I resisted  
the sharp temptation  
to save them somewhere  
as schoolboys  
keep  
fireflies,  
as learned men  
collect  
sacred texts,  
I resisted  
the mad impulse  
to put them  
into a golden  
cage  
and each day give them  
birdseed  
and pieces of pink melon.  
Like explorers  
in the jungle who hand  
over the very rare  
green deer  
to the spit  
and eat it  
with remorse,  
I stretched out

my feet  
and pulled on  
the magnificent  
socks  
and then my shoes.

The moral  
of my ode is this:  
beauty is twice  
beauty  
and what is good is doubly  
good  
when it is a matter of two socks  
made of wool  
in winter.

*"Ode to My Socks" from Neruda & Vallejo: Selected Poems, by Pablo Neruda and translated by Robert Bly (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). Used with permission of Robert Bly.*

## Classroom Activities

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1. Tell your students that they are going to read a poem by Pablo Neruda in celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. (You may want to explain who Pablo Neruda is to your students, if they don't already know.)
  - ✓ **Sharing background on the poet as well as relating the lesson to a current or historical event, or a holiday are effective and easy ways to add useful context for the poem.**
2. Ask your students, as a way of preparing to read this poem, to think of a piece of clothing from home that they love and can easily bring to school. (You might have to remind older students that this piece of clothing needs to be appropriate.) This piece of clothing should also be something they are willing to share with their peers.
  - ✓ **Here a student's article of clothing serves as a very personal and relatable resource that serves as an entry point into the poem.**
3. When your students have brought in their special piece of clothing, ask them to write a short list (or paragraph) that describes in detail how the clothing looks. Then ask them to add what they love about it and why.
  - ✓ **This activity asks students to notice deeply, creating a sensitivity to the surrounding world by activating multi-sensory perception. Stress the importance of describing the article of clothing through details that evoke the five sense (the smell, taste, texture,**



etc. of the object). In other words, using specific concrete details instead of abstractions.

4. Project the poem “Ode to My Socks” by Pablo Neruda in front of the class. Ask your students to read it closely and to write down all the words and phrases that jump out at them.
5. Ask one student in the class to read the poem aloud. Ask the listening students to jot down the new words and phrases they notice when they hear the poem read. Repeat this process with another student reading the poem aloud.
  - ✓ Activities 4 and 5 promote deep, active listening while allowing students to live in the ambiguity of not necessarily knowing exactly what a word or phrase means. Rather, they are responding intuitively to what catches their attention and piques their curiosity.
6. After your students have compiled their lists, ask them to turn to a partner and share what they noticed. Ask them to discuss what Neruda does to make us love his socks as much as he does, using their compilations to assist them.
  - ✓ Small group and/or peer-to-peer activities are a non-threatening way to invite intuitive learning and foster participation, discovery, and ownership of ideas.
7. Have a whole-class discussion, based on the concept of an ode. Why do your students think Neruda wrote odes to common things, such as socks?
  - ✓ Activities 6 and 7 invite students to make logical and intuitive connections, discovering how words and phrases convey meaning and emotions in a poem. It would be worthwhile to have a [briefly explain the concept of an ode \(click here\)](#).
8. Ask your students to write an ode (or paragraph) praising the piece of clothing they have brought from home.
  - ✓ Students now exercise what they’ve learned by engaging their imagination; they also learn about word choice—how to use just the right word or phrase to express feelings and meaning. In addition, they’re able to form a connection between their subjective experience (their piece of clothing) and the meaning of the poem.

## More Teach This Poem Activities

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The following selection of additional *Teach This Poem* activities relates to the regional demographics of South Florida's landscapes and diverse, Hispanic, and immigrant populations. Dozens more *Teach This Poem* activities, as well as full lesson plans, are available online at [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org)

**Teach This Poem: "We All Return to the Place Where We Were Born" by Oscar Gonzales**

<http://academyofamericanpoets.cmail20.com/t/ViewEmail/y/ACEE35BCA0738DE3/EAE3DEC0C00D7DB1F99AA49ED5AF8B9E>

**Teach This Poem: "Ode to My Socks" by Pablo Neruda**

<http://academyofamericanpoets.cmail19.com/t/ViewEmail/y/A4A3052B760879E2/EAE3DEC0C00D7DB1F99AA49ED5AF8B9E>

**Teach This Poem: Blackberry Eating by Galway Kinnell**

<http://academyofamericanpoets.cmail19.com/t/ViewEmail/y/E19AA711B0DCDE91/EAE3DEC0C00D7DB1F99AA49ED5AF8B9E>

**Teach This Poem: Correction – "For the Poorest Country in the Western Hemisphere" by Danielle Legros Georges**

<http://academyofamericanpoets.cmail20.com/t/ViewEmail/y/12F4FF6412178891/EAE3DEC0C00D7DB1F99AA49ED5AF8B9E>

**Teach This Poem: maggie and milly and molly and may by E. E. Cummings**

<http://academyofamericanpoets.cmail20.com/t/ViewEmail/y/254D4039A8724FF9/EAE3DEC0C00D7DB1F99AA49ED5AF8B9E>

**Teach This Poem: A Jelly-Fish by Marianne Moore**

<http://academyofamericanpoets.cmail20.com/t/ViewEmail/y/A9D4C9381BDE4391/EAE3DEC0C00D7DB1F99AA49ED5AF8B9E>

## Additional Educator Resources

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A plethora of Educator Resources ([click here](#)) is available at the Academy of American Poets website ([www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org)) for your perusal and use. Here are a few highlights.

- **Teach this Poem** ([click here](#)). You can sign-up to receive weekly *Teach this Poem* activities and/or peruse the archives for dozens online. When deciding which one(s) to use in the classroom, consider factors that may help to more easily connect students with the poem(s).
- **Poetry in the Classroom Calendar** ([click here](#)). A downloadable, interactive PDF designed to inspire ideas for teaching poetry throughout each month, with links to related lesson plans, and activities. This resource is especially helpful for selecting poems connected to current or historical events and/or holidays in order to make poetry more relevant to students.
- **Full Lesson Plans** ([click here](#)). Dozens of lesson plans, most of which align with Common Core State Standards, and all of which have been reviewed by the Educator in Residence with an eye toward developing skills of perception and imagination.
- **Glossary of Poetry and Terms** ([click here](#)). An important reference for discussion of various poetic terms, forms, and techniques that might be introduced in the *Teach this Poem* activities.
- **Dear Poet** ([click here](#)). A multimedia education project that invites young people in grades five through twelve to write letters in response to poems written and read by some of the award-winning poets who serve on the Academy of American Poets Board of Chancellors.
- **Essays on teaching poetry** ([click here](#)).

## More Insights on Teaching Poetry

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Some tips, advice, pitfalls, and important topics gleaned from years of teaching poetry and creative writing. These are meant to compliment educators' understanding and practice of the *Teach this Poem* activities, as well as to provide greater insight into the dynamics of poetry.

- **Good Poems to Teach:** Generally speaking, it's a good idea to teach poems that are appropriate for the grade/age of the students. In other words, poems that are accessible and perhaps more narrative (story-like). But take note: simply because a poem is accessible, doesn't mean it isn't complex or can't present a fair amount of challenge and learning. An accessible poem can have many layers of complexity for the student to discover. Generally, accessibility means that the poem has an *accessible* point of entry for students. The *Poems for Kids* ([click here](#)) section on Poets.org contains selections of poems curated around specific themes that are appropriate for young people. In this same regard, it's important to introduce students to contemporary voices of living poets who can "speak" to their lives in *real time* and dispel the myth that poetry is a bygone, "dead" art that is no longer irrelevant. Moreover, it's worthwhile to highlight regional poets whose work mirrors the community, families, and culture of students. To help, Poets.org also contains a database of thousands of poems that are searchable by region, as well as by themes, forms, and poetic movements.
- **The Poem as Mirror:** For the most part, poetry is generally approached through a purely analytical lens and thus objectified, leaving very little room for emotional responses by students. This creates a disconnect. Speaking as a poet, I can certify that poetry is written with every intent to elicit emotion. Poets want readers to feel what they are feeling. They invite this by creating an emotional aura in the poem that connects to our shared humanity through a core set of universal emotions (e.g., love, loss, joy, etc.). Asking, *How does the poem make you feel?* is an important question; it acknowledges that subjective, emotional responses are indeed catalysts toward more objective, analytical conversations about a poem's theme and other matters. It also recognizes the ambiguity and contradiction that are often an important dimension a poem. On the other hand, asking, *What does the poem mean?* can be detrimental. It mistakenly implies that the poet has master-mined one singular meaning for the poem and it's the student's "job" to find that meaning. The poem becomes a guessing game, a puzzle, a mystery to be solved instead of being an experience that invites students to feel and discover meaning through interaction. It's useful to think of a poem as a mirror in front of which the poet stands looking at the reflection of his/her life, trying to make sense of a particular experience, concern, memory, relationship, etc. But the reader is standing right beside the poet, also looking into his/her own life in relation to the poem. Poetry *happens* in that mirror where the life of the reader and the poet blur together. Through this interaction the conversation can then move more effectively toward a more objective analysis of a poem's meaning.
- **How a Poem is Made:** Although related, writing poetry versus analyzing poetry are really two separate modes of engaging with a poem. When analyzing poetry we often skip over the elements of craft or "tools" that a poet uses to design and "make" a poem. These tools include: imagery (sensory details), literal language versus figurative language (metaphor, simile, etc.), word choices,

rhythm, musicality, among others. Exercising these is how a poet imparts meaning in a poem. As such, in order to have a fuller understanding of any particular poem, it's essential to become generally familiar with these techniques by perusing a craft-based book that discusses poetry from the writer's perspective. A favorite resource is "In the Palm of Your Hand" by Steve Kowit. Also useful is the glossary of poetry and terms on Poets.org ([click here](#)).

- **Historical Context:** Many students maintain an archaic sense of poetry as a static art, thinking it is the same today as it was hundreds of years ago. For example, there still exists a wide-spread notion that a poem has to rhyme in order to be a "real" poem, when, in fact, rhyming in strict form was simply a convention once widely used, but which has faded in favor of new poetic techniques. As with any art form, poetry has evolved through the ages in response to various influences, concerns, and human consciousness. There have been many distinct eras in the history of poetry, but for the purposes of understanding contemporary poetry it's perhaps particularly important to begin with the Romantic period. The poetry of that time was characterized by the (then) revolutionary idea that objective truth is arrived at through subjective truth. Thus, the role of poetry and poets was to explore self-consciousness and wholeness of being as a means to arrive at truth through personal experience and insights, with the reader as a witness in that process of discovery. Fast-forward to World War I and World War II ending with the collapse of the old-world order and marked by confusion and skepticism leading to a fragmentation of thought with no single dominant world view. The old conventions of poetry (like rhyming) dropped out, giving way to free verse as the poets of the Modern period sought a new language to create a new order out of the chaos. Today's contemporary poetry is a descendent of these two periods. Poets are still experimenting with language and trying to find order and meaning, but through the lens of subjective experience that the Romantic poetry ushered in. Beyond that, contemporary poetry is marked by a certain de-canonization that gave rise to various school of poetry, the importance of regional and diverse poets, and a focus on race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender, among many other issues of social conscience. All this to say that it's important for students and educators to be aware of the historical evolution of poetry, and the historical context of any particular poem under study.

## Bibliography

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- *Art as Experience* – Dewey [TBC]
- *Poetic Sensibility* – Holzer [TBC]