Reading and Writing POETRY With Teenagers

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Introduction

Nature is universal to the collective human experience. Poets have always found a rich source of images in their surroundings: the earth, the sea, the rivers, the weather, the heavens. In fact, Rainer Maria Rilke said nature was "infested with poetry." Good nature poems try to make use of all five senses, evoke a place by using specific details pertaining to smell, sound, texture, color, light, and taste. Poets often connect images to each other, or an image to a human experience or feeling through the use of simile and metaphor. These techniques help make the message of the feeling in the poem more concrete.

Poet Sherrod Santos says, "Rather than the poet *closing* his eyes and turning inward, the poet must *open* and turn inward." Nature images provide a centered quality to a poem, whether it is celebratory, meditative, or violent. Images from nature seem to be a kind of common reference point for much of humanity. Storms, wildflowers, and constellations are familiar enough to allow a reader to connect easily to these poems.

The poems included for discussion in Chapter 1, "Nature and the Environment," all draw on nature, using vivid sense imagery. Several poems were chosen for the way nature imagery symbolizes human experience and feeling.

Reading Aloud

Poetry comes from an oral tradition as old as language itself. The Reading Aloud sections found here and in the next chapter, "Animals," serve as an introduction to this oral tradition.

The following Reading Aloud poems were selected for the variety of voices that can be used to read them. "Moon Tiger" contains very vivid and visual imagery that appeals to students. It evokes both fantasy and mystery in the young listener. Ask your students to imagine snow falling in Emily Dickinson's poem "Snow" and to let their imaginations drift with the snowdrifts. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" was nearly sung by William Butler Yeats. The repeated "I" phrases have a sing-song chantlike quality. The respectful tone implicit in the Native American poem "The Shining Mountain" allows students to hear how poetry harmonizes with nature. "Mending Wall" is rich in conversation and narration in the context of rural New Hampshire Yankee. The voice in each poem presents its own unique cadence, a music and rhythm that emerges from the choice and arrangement of words.

Reading these poems aloud repeatedly will help students to hear internal and slant rhyme, alliteration, and assonance (repeated vowel sounds). Recognizing these techniques enhances the pleasure and appreciation of poetry.

Have your students read these poems many times, experimenting with different effects, imagining they are reading to various audiences, or arranging the poem for more than one reader.

Moon Tiger

The moon tiger.
In the room, here.
It came in, it is
prowling sleekly
under and over
the twin beds.
See its small head,
silver smooth,
hear the pad of its
large feet. Look,
its white stripes
in the light that slid
through the jalousies.
It is sniffing our
clothes, its cold nose
nudges our bodies.
The beds are narrow,
but I'm coming in with you.

—*Denise Levertov*

Snow

It sifts from leaden sieves,
It powders all the wood,
It fills with alabaster wool
The wrinkles of the road.

It makes an even face
Of mountain and of plain, —
Unbroken forehead from the east
Unto the east again.

It reaches to the fence,
It wraps it, rail by rail,
Till it is lost in fleeces;
It flings a crystal veil

On stump and stack and stem, —
The summer's empty room,
Acres of seams where harvests were,
Recordless, but for them.

It ruffles wrists of posts
As ankles of a queen, —
Then stills its artisans like ghosts,
Denying they have been.

— *Emily Dickinson*

The Shining Mountain

Let us go together
up the shining mountain

let us sit and watch
the sun go down in beauty

Nanibonsak, the Moon
the Night Traveler
will climb into the skyland

The Awatawesu,
those far-off beings overhead,
the small stars will follow

now we hear
the drums of Thunder
now sparks fly from
the pipe of the Lightning

now Great Owl sings
all must sleep
the Awatawesu and their chief
are in flight across the sky

we sit together in beauty
upon the shining mountain.

— *Western Abenaki*
translated by Joseph Bruchac

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear the lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

— *William Butler Yeats*

Mending Wall

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard
  them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good
  neighbours."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"*Why* do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are
  no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves"
  to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying.
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good
  neighbours."

— *Robert Frost*

Poems for Discussion

1. Swift Things Are Beautiful

Swift things are beautiful:
Swallows and deer,
And lightning that falls
Bright-veined and clear,
Rivers and meteors,
Wind in the wheat,
The strong-withered horse,
The runner's sure feet.

And slow things are beautiful:
The closing of day,
The pause of the wave
That curves downward to spray,
The ember that crumbles,
The opening flower,
And the ox that moves on
In the quiet of power.

— *Elizabeth Coatsworth*

2. The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden back.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

— *Robert Frost*

3. The wind tapped like a tired man

The wind tapped like a tired man,
And like a host, "Come in,"
I boldly answered; entered then
My residence within

A rapid, footless guest,
To offer whom a chair
Were as impossible as hand
A sofa to the air.

No bone had he to bind him,
His speech was like the push
Of numerous humming-birds at once
From a superior bush.

His countenance a billow,
His fingers, if he pass,
Let go a music, as of tunes
Blown tremulous in glass.

He visited, still flitting;
Then, like a timid man,
Again he tapped—'twas flurriedly—
And I became alone.

— *Emily Dickinson*

4. Mushrooms

Overnight, very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air.

Nobody see us,
Stops us, betrays us:
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on
Heaving the needles,
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.
Our hammers, our rams,
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies,
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,
On crumbs of shadow,
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.
So many of us!
So many of us!

We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.

— *Sylvia Plath*

5. From Blossoms

From blossoms comes
this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the boy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward
signs painted *Peaches*.

From laden boughs, from hands,
from sweet fellowship in the bins,
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.

O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilance of peach.

There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible
blossom.

— *Li-Young Lee*

6. Night Gives Old Woman the Word

Dark whispers
behind the echo
of the wind. Mind
is trapped by patterns
in the sound.
Night works a spell—
Moon spills her naked light.
Reflected fire illuminates
the ground. The pull
of night words makes Earth-Woman
give off heat. Soil glistens
dampened by her sweat.
Corn seed feels the planet's turn
unrolls her root,
prepares to send a shoot
above the dirt. Moon
attracting water in the veins
makes corn leaves uncurl
and probe nocturnal air.
The leaves stretch out
to catch the coming dew.

Clan mother, watching,
hears the planets move.
Old, clan mother listens
to the words—all nature
speaks as slowly seasons
turn—marked by the waxing,
waning Moon; messages
become imprinted on old bones.
Earth words in dark
as well as light. Life
moves through the sky. We plant;
we harvest, and, at last,
we feast. Clan mother listens
and is filled with thanks.
Night murmurs and plants
grow in the fields.
Old Woman hears dark
speak the ancient word.

— *Gail Tremblay*

Questions for Discussion and Analysis

1. How has Elizabeth Coatsworth structured her poem "Swift Things Are Beautiful"? Look at the number of lines, the rhyme pattern, and the meter. Does the structure fit the subject matter? how so? Why does Coatsworth title this poem "Swift Things Are Beautiful" when half of the poem is about slow things? What does the tone of the poem tell us about the narrator's feelings? Every image Coatsworth mentions is beautiful. Is there ugliness in nature? Explain. (See Glossary for tone and meter.)
2. In Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," what is the format and rhyme scheme, and why do you think the poet chose an odd number of lines for each stanza? What options could these two roads represent? Does the title and last line

suggest a tone of acceptance or regret or neither? Explain. Can you think of decisions you have made that you later came to regret? What actual life events could explain "And that has made all the difference"?

3. (*Note:* After rereading the opening line of Emily Dickinson's poem, "The wind tapped like a tired man," stop and ask students what images, symbols, feelings, and meaning are conveyed by this one line.) Show the different ways Dickinson personifies the wind. For a woman who led such a solitary life in the mid-1800's, what expectations might be evoked by the tapping of the wind? How does the wind reflect the inner feelings of the narrator? Compare this Emily Dickinson poem with her poem "Snow" in the Reading Aloud section. How are the narrative voices different? Are there similarities between the wind tapping in Dickinson's poem and the raven who "suddenly there came a tapping" in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven"?
4. "Mushrooms," by Sylvia Plath, can be read on a number of levels. On a literal level, how does this poem trace the growth of mushrooms? What characteristics do mushrooms have that allow them to thrive? What is the voice in this poem? In what other ways are mushrooms personified? According to Plath, will "the meek inherit the earth" as the Bible states? Who are the meek, and how are they like mushrooms? What does the "door" in the last line lead to?
5. What sense imagery does Li-Young Lee use in "From Blossoms"? Describe the narrative sequence of events in the first two verses of "From Blossoms." In the third verse, what might the peach represent? How is Li-Young Lee describing human potential in verse three when he says, "O, to take what we love inside, / to carry within us an orchard . . ."? How are peach blossoms a metaphor for life itself? What do you think the poet means by "the sweet impossible blossom"?
6. Gail Tremblay, a Native American poet, creates a sense of nocturnal magic through personification in her poem "Night Gives Old Woman the Word." List all the ways in which nature is personified in her poem, for example, "Night works a spell . . . ." Who is the "Old Woman" in the poem? What is the Old Woman's relationship to the "clan mother and to "Earth-Woman," or are they different ways of saying the same thing? What is the message the Old Woman is hearing in the night?

Bibliography of Additional Poems

"Mushrooms," Margaret Atwood
"The Peace of Wild Things," Wendell Berry
"March," Elizabeth Coatsworth
"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Robert Frost
"I Have Been One Acquainted with the Night," Robert Frost
"Pied Beauty," Gerard Manley Hopkins
"In Fields of Summer" and "Blackberry Eating," Galway Kinnell
"Sunflowers," Mary Oliver
"Summer Sun," Robert Louis Stevenson
"Georgia Dusk," Jean Toomer
"October," Margaret Walker
"Daffodils," William Wordsworth

Writing Exercises

1. Sense Imagery, Simile, and Metaphor

When we read or hear a successful poem, we can experience with all of our senses the place described in it close to the way the writer experienced it. In addition to sense images, poets will often compare what they are describing to something else. This is called either simile or metaphor (techniques of figurative language). A simile uses "like" or "as"

to make the connection. A metaphor connects two ideas using "is" (or other forms of "to be"), suggesting equivalence, or "of" as connecting words, or may imply a comparison without using any connecting words as in Pablo Neruda's "Ode to a Watermelon": star-filled watermelon . . . *It's* the green whale of the summer . . . . Jewel-box *of* water). When a metaphor is sustained throughout a poem, it is called an "extended metaphor."

The more unusual the simile or metaphor, the more interesting it is to the reader. Similes and metaphors help the reader to experience a place in a fresh or original way, sometimes familiar, sometimes strange. In the following lines, poet Galway Kinnell gives lemons and cabbages new dimensions through similes and metaphors. Notice how vivid and lush Kinnell's use of sense imagery is in describing his pushcart market.

When we read or hear a successful poem, we can experience a place described in it.

The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World

(excerpt)

In the pushcart market, on Sunday,
A crate of lemons discharges light like a battery.
Icicle-shaped carrots that through black soil
Wove away lie like flames in the sun.
Onions with their shirts ripped seek sunlight
On green skins. The sun beats
On beets dirty as boulders in cowfields,

On turnips pinched and gibbous
From budging rocks, on embery sweets,
On Idahos, Long Islands, and Maines,
On horseradishes still growing weeds on the flat ends,
On cabbages lying about like sea-green brains
The skulls have been shucked from,
On tomatoes, undented plum-tomatoes, alligator-skinned
Cucumbers, that float pickled
In the wooden tubs of green skim milk—

— *Galway Kinnell*

Poetry Exercise #1

Write a poem about a place in nature, using sense images and similes. Choose a place in nature that is vivid in your mind. It may be a place you visited long ago, but you need to remember some details about it. It might be a place in the mountains, by the sea, at a nearby park, by the river, or simply up in a tree. Focus on this one place and describe it, using all of your senses and similes, wherever possible. Try to avoid using clichés in your comparison, such as "the sky was as blue as the sea." If you can't remember all of the details, start with what is still clear in your mind and invent the part that is missing. This is common practice among writers.

A variation on this exercise is to use the classical form of the ode. In this form, the writer addresses the subject of the poem, in this case an element of nature, for example, "Oh spring, you came so unexpectedly," or "Star, you are the guard of the sky." In an ode, the writer often uses figurative language to elevate or glorify the subject. The use of personification is implicit in the ode form. (See Glossary.) Pablo Neruda wrote many wonderful odes in Spanish.

Student Examples

Rainy Day

Soiled clouds hang,
A clap of thunder sounds,
The air is still.
There is not a breath
of wind.
A tree stands,
The monarch of a field.
It moves not one leaf.
Then lightning flashes
through the dark sky.
The clouds gather,
and slowly the rain
begins to fall.

— *Philip*

Winter Forest

The snow falls,
gently, quietly down
to blanket the trees
as nature puts them to bed.

Long, gleaming crystal icicles
hang from my window
like fangs dripping clear blood,
one falls to the ground
and shatters like a glass cup
dropped by the busy housewife.

All is quiet outside
except for the snow falling
gently, quietly down
to blanket the trees.
Nature puts them to bed.

— *Lisa*

Snowflake

I once found a snowflake in a field
an utterly exquisite crystal from god
and yet I found it odd
that it was unlike all
in this field
it was without flaw
with lines made out of lace
and nothing out of place
unique by itself
even though very small
about the size of a minute elf
I shall take it to school with me
and it shall be
the nicest flake they ever beheld
it shall be with me not on a shelf
I shall be the one who holds
the precious flake of glass
but alas
when I got to school the flake was no longer
there
it was just water like any other melted
snowflake

— *Brendan Dickinson, #11*

Oda a la noche

Noche,
viniste sola en el aire
como guitarro volante.
Llena de brisas
Que me acariciaban en la noche.
Tus grandes ojos
Me miraban desde la ventana.
Llegaste con pequeñas lágrimas
Que refrescaron la natureleza.
Noche,
Llegaste oscura y desolada
Como la capa del día.
Siempre alumbrada
Por pequeñas estrellas brillantes.
Las flores bailaban
Con tu pequeña brisa.
Y tu hermosa luna brillante
Me acompañaba en mis sueños.

— *Karla Figueróa*

Ode to the Night

Night,
You came alone in the air
Like a flying guitar
Full of breezes
That caressed me in the night.
The great eyes
watched me from the window.
You came with small tears
That refreshed nature.
Night,
You came dark and desolate
Like the cape of the day.
Always illuminated by small bright stars.

The flowers danced with your small breeze.
And your beautiful, bright moon came
with me in my dream.

— *Karla Figueróa*
translated by Josefina Bosch

Ode to a Blackberry

Blackberry
Oh I love your taste
Your juices fill my mouth with water and flavor,
Your color tempts me
to suck all the juice and dry you out.
You are the fruit of my dreams,
you are my thoughts and my pleasure,
your tremendous taste has no name.

— *Misael Venturo*

Ode to Ants

Oh what mysterious creatures.
They creep around as little Kings and Queens
of shining armor.
They work twenty-four hours to serve
their kingdom
and excite themselves with a crumb.
They live happy lives as little peasants
on a distant farm
building castles and villages and storerooms
to fill with leftover food.
Everything from crumbs of pizza
to little leaves for shoes.
The little magical workers working every day
to store food for the long winter days.
Winter comes and they go away
along with trees and the other prey.
But as sure as there's day and night,
as soon as the spring sprouts out,
so do the little creatures pour out.

— *Manny*

2. Symbolism in Nature

Poets have often chosen symbols from nature to make a visual picture of an abstract idea or emotion. The place or object has a literal meaning and a meaning beyond its physical re-creation. In this way, poets speak on two levels at the same time.

In the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Langston Hughes uses rivers to symbolize the flow of human civilization from ancient times. He even expands the river symbols to represent the flow of time before humans inhabited the earth. He identifies so strongly with the river that the river comes to represent his own life force. The poem becomes an extended metaphor for the continuity of his race.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

(*to W.E.B. Du Bois*)

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and
older than the flow of human blood in
human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns
were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me
to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids
above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when
Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and
I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in
the sunset.
I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

— *Langston Hughes*

Here again, in Linda Hogan's "To Light," the "great seas" and the movement of water is a metaphor for the preservation and retelling of cultural history. The analogy of the stories carried in the great sea with the living whose stories break through the chest demonstrates the importance of natural imagery to help explain the continuity and persistence of human existence.

To Light

At the spring
we hear the great seas traveling
underground
giving themselves up
with tongues of water
that sing the earth open.

They have journeyed through the graveyards
of our loved ones
turning in their graves
to carry the stories of life to air.

Even the trees with their rings
have kept track
of the crimes that live within
and against us.

We remember it all.
We remember, though we are just skeletons
whose organs and flesh
hold us in.
We have stories
as old as the great seas
breaking through the chest
flying out of the mouth,
noisy tongues that once were silenced,
all the oceans we contain
coming to light.

— *Linda Hogan*

Mary Oliver uses the striking images of her Cape Cod environment to speak about the life cycle in both plant life and human life. The focus of the poem quickly changes from milkweed to the inexorable cycles of the generations. Oliver's astonishing simile of the drying milkweed pods as aging women changes the reader's perception of both plants and aging women.

Milkweed

The milkweed now with their many pods
  are standing
like a country of dry women.
The wind lifts their flat leaves and drops them.
This is not kind, but they retain a certain
  crisp glamour;
moreover, it's easy to believe
each one was once young and delicate, also
frightened; also capable
of a certain amount of rough joy.
I wish you would walk with me out into
  the world.
I wish you could see what has to happen, how
each one crackles like a blessing
over its thin children as they rush away.

— *Mary Oliver*

Poetry Exercise #2

Write a symbol poem choosing some aspect of nature to represent an emotion, a human trait, or a global issue. Discuss how natural phenomena, such as a river, valley, rock, flower, seedpod, shell, mountain, wind, drought, or tornado, might stand for anger or joy (emotion), greed or compassion (human trait), or war and peace (global issues). Using wind as an example, a morning breeze could represent peace and harmony, hurricane winds could represent the combat of war, and tornadoes could symbolize nuclear explosions.

Students can focus on one or two natural images, developing figurative language that allows the similes or metaphors to work at both a literal and symbolic level.

Student Examples

Untitled

She bubbles with divine
elegance, speaking to anyone who will notice
her presence.

Her voice is wise and
well traveled, like that
of a gazelle
having had many homes.

Branching out at frequent
intervals, to aid others
and help them prosper.
She never dies.

Her quest to reach a
final destination shall
never end. For there
is always somewhere
to flow.
She is the River

— *Shannon Kos*

Nature

Powerful is the sun, who stretches his
hands out to warm people's hearts,

Powerful is the wind, who fills our
minds with songs,

Powerful is the earth, who feeds all
living creatures,

But even more powerful are spiritual gifts:

Love and caring, without beginning or end,

Healing and wholeness, lasting for eternity,
Everlasting hope and faith.

— *Francisco E. Moris*

There Is a War

There is a war going on
Right there on the sidewalk
under my feet.
The small green soldiers
Advance persistently.

Guerrilla warfare
Finding the weak spots
And pushing through
Wherever there is the
Least resistance.

The green blades
Are sharp under my hands
and their pungent odor
Fills the air
I leave them there
To win or lose.

— *Eva*

The Path of Life

Who knows where this road is going,
Who knows what is on the way,
Through the woods and through the forest,
Going forward night and day.
There are lots of paths to follow,
No one knows which way to turn,
There's no telling what you'll find,
There's no telling what you'll learn.
It'll be hard to pass the mountains,
But you know you'll pass them by,
And you know that once you make it,
It'll be peaceful, then you die.

— Olga Gliks