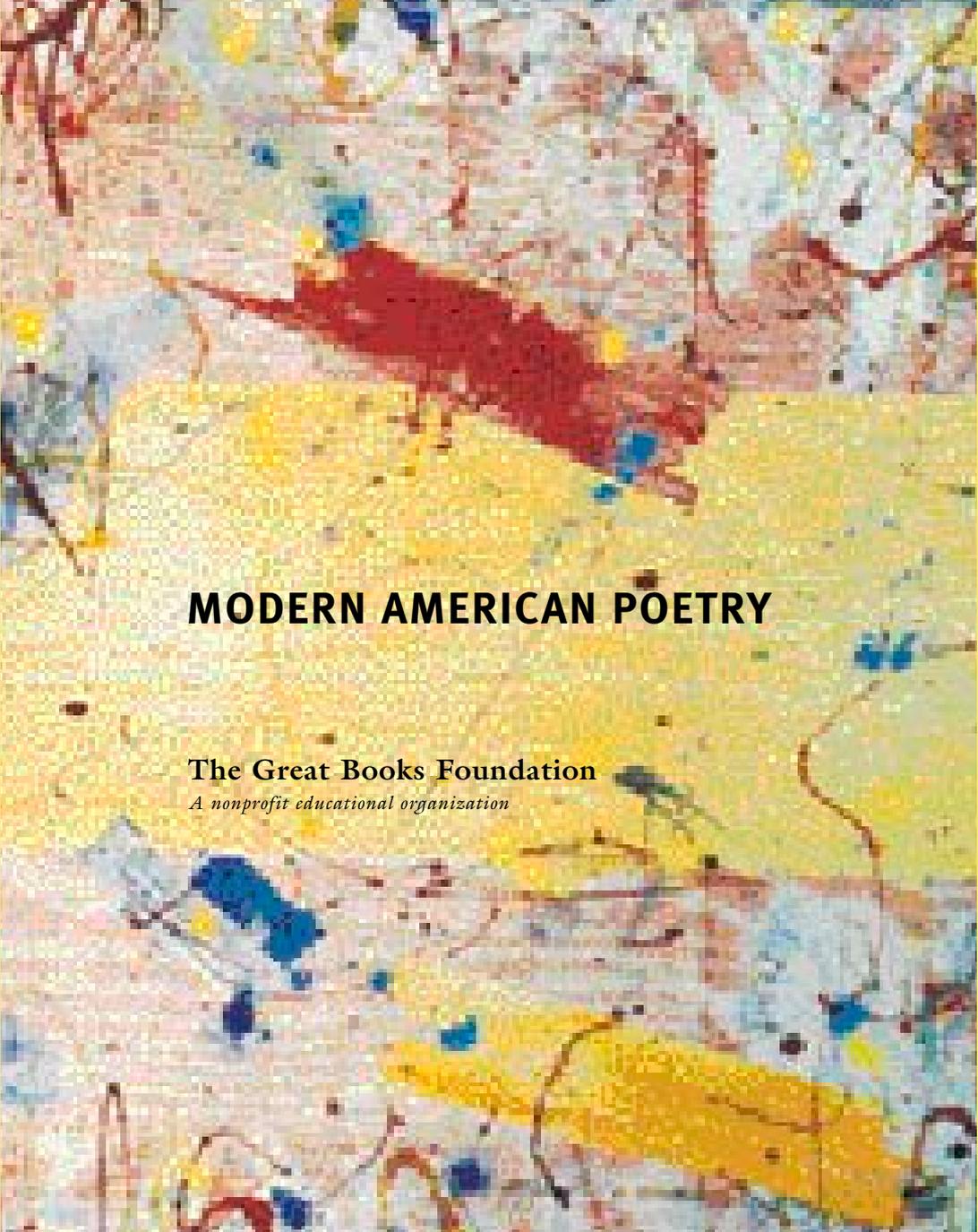


Sample Unit for Modern American Poetry



MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

The Great Books Foundation
A nonprofit educational organization

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

Walt Whitman (1819–1892)	Robert Creeley (1926–)
Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)	Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997)
Edgar Lee Masters (1868–1950)	Frank O’Hara (1926–1966)
Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935)	James Wright (1927–1980)
Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906)	Donald Hall (1928–)
Robert Frost (1874–1963)	Anne Sexton (1928–1974)
Wallace Stevens (1879–1955)	Adrienne Rich (1929–)
William Carlos Williams (1883–1963)	Gary Snyder (1930–)
H. D. (1886–1961)	Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)
T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)	Mark Strand (1934–)
E. E. Cummings (1894–1962)	Richard Brautigan (1935–1984)
Hart Crane (1899–1932)	Marge Piercy (1936–)
Langston Hughes (1902–1967)	Michael S. Harper (1938–)
Theodore Roethke (1908–1963)	Yusef Komunyakaa (1947–)
Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979)	Linda Hogan (1947–)
Robert Hayden (1913–1980)	Ray A. Young Bear (1950–)
Randall Jarrell (1914–1965)	Rita Dove (1952–)
William Stafford (1914–1993)	Naomi Shihab Nye (1952–)
Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000)	Gary Soto (1952–)
Denise Levertov (1923–1997)	Jane Hirshfield (1953–)
John Logan (1923–1987)	Martín Espada (1957–)
Donald Justice (1925–)	Li-Young Lee (1957–)
Maxine Kumin (1925–)	Gerry Crinnin (1958–)
Robert Bly (1926–)	

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

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“The Red Wheelbarrow,” “The Great Figure,” and “This is Just to Say” by
William Carlos Williams, from COLLECTED POEMS: 1909-1939,
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WHAT IS THE GREAT BOOKS FOUNDATION?

The Great Books Foundation is an independent, nonprofit educational organization whose mission is to help people learn how to think and share ideas. Toward this end, the Foundation offers workshops in Shared Inquiry discussion and publishes collections of classic and modern texts for both children and adults.

The Great Books Foundation was established in 1947 to promote liberal education for the general public. In 1962, the Foundation extended its mission to children with the introduction of Junior Great Books. Since its inception, the Foundation has helped thousands of people throughout the United States and in other countries begin their own discussion groups in schools, libraries, and community centers. Today, Foundation instructors conduct hundreds of workshops each year, in which educators and parents learn to lead Shared Inquiry discussion.

WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT MY PARTICIPATION IN SHARED INQUIRY?

The Great Books Foundation offers workshops in Shared Inquiry to help people get the most from discussion. Participants learn how to read actively, pose fruitful questions, and listen and respond to others effectively in discussion. All participants also practice leading a discussion and have an opportunity to reflect on the process with others. For more information about Great Books materials or workshops, call the Great Books Foundation at 1-800-222-5870 or visit our Web site at www.greatbooks.org.

ABOUT SHARED INQUIRY



Shared Inquiry is the effort to achieve a more thorough understanding of a text by discussing questions, responses, and insights with others. For both the leader and the participants, careful listening is essential. The leader guides the discussion by asking questions about specific ideas and problems of meaning in the text, but does not seek to impose his or her own interpretation on the group.

During a Shared Inquiry discussion, group members consider a number of possible ideas and weigh the evidence for each. Ideas that are entertained and then refined or abandoned are not thought of as mistakes, but as valuable parts of the thinking process. Group members gain experience in communicating complex ideas and in supporting, testing, and expanding their thoughts. Everyone in the group contributes to the discussion, and while participants may disagree with each other, they treat each other's ideas respectfully.

This process of communal discovery is vital to developing an understanding of important texts and ideas, rather than merely cataloging knowledge about them. By reading and thinking together about important works, you and the other members of your group are joining a great conversation that extends across the centuries.

GUIDELINES FOR LEADING AND PARTICIPATING IN DISCUSSION

Over the past fifty years, the Great Books Foundation has developed guidelines that distill the experience of many discussion groups, with participants of all ages. We have found that when groups follow the procedures outlined below, discussions are most focused and fruitful.

1. Read the selection before participating in the discussion.

This ensures that all participants are equally prepared to talk about the ideas in the work, and helps prevent talk that would distract the group from its purpose.

2. Support your ideas with evidence from the text. This keeps the discussion focused on understanding the selection and enables the group to weigh textual support for different answers and to choose intelligently among them.

3. Discuss the ideas in the selection, and try to understand them fully before exploring issues that go beyond the selection. Reflecting on a range of ideas and the evidence to support them makes the exploration of related issues more productive.

4. Listen to others and respond to them directly. Shared Inquiry is about the give-and-take of ideas, a willingness to listen to others and to talk to them respectfully. Directing your comments and questions to other group members, not always to the leader, will make the discussion livelier and more dynamic.

5. Expect the leader to ask questions, rather than answer them.

The leader is a kind of chief learner, whose role is to keep discussion effective and interesting by listening and asking questions. The leader's goal is to help the participants develop their own ideas, with everyone (the leader included) gaining a new understanding in the process. When participants hang back and wait for the leader to suggest answers, discussion falters.

HOW TO MAKE DISCUSSIONS MORE EFFECTIVE

- **Ask questions when something is unclear.** Simply asking someone to explain what he or she means by a particular word, or to repeat a comment, can give everyone in the group time to think about the idea in depth.
- **Ask for evidence.** Asking “What in the text gave you that idea?” helps everyone better understand the reasoning behind an answer, and it allows the group to consider which ideas have the best support.
- **Ask for agreement and disagreement.** “Does your idea agree with hers, or is it different?” Questions of this kind help the group understand how ideas are related or distinct.
- **Reflect on discussion afterward.** Sharing comments about how the discussion went and ideas for improvement can make each discussion better than the last.

ROOM ARRANGEMENT AND GROUP SIZE

Ideally, everyone in a discussion should be able to see and hear everyone else. When it isn't possible to arrange the seating in a circle or horseshoe, encourage group members to look at the person talking, acknowledging one another and not just the leader.

In general, Shared Inquiry discussion is most effective in groups of ten to twenty participants. If a group is much bigger than twenty, it is important to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak. This can be accomplished either by dividing the group in half for discussion or by setting aside time at the end of discussion to go around the room and give each person a chance to make a brief final comment.

HOW TO READ A POEM



Reading poetry well is part attitude and part technique. Curiosity is a useful attitude, especially when it's free of preconceived ideas about what poetry is or should be. Effective technique directs your curiosity into asking questions, drawing you into a conversation with the poem.

In Great Books programs, the goal of careful reading is often to take up a question of meaning, an interpretive question that has more than one answer. Since the form of a poem is part of its meaning (for example, features such as repetition and rhyme may amplify or extend the meaning of a word or idea, adding emphasis, texture, or dimension), we believe that questions about form and technique, about the observable features of a poem, provide an effective point of entry for interpretation. To ask some of these questions, you'll need to develop a good ear for the musical qualities of language, particularly how sound and rhythm relate to meaning. This approach is one of many ways into a poem.

TALKING BACK TO A POEM

It would be convenient if there were a short list of universal questions, ones that could be used anytime with any poem. In the absence of such a list, here are a few general questions that you *might* ask when approaching a poem for the first time.

- Who is the speaker?
- What circumstances gave rise to the poem?
- What situation is presented?
- Who or what is the audience?
- What is the tone?
- What form, if any, does the poem take?
- How is form related to content?
- Is sound an important, active element of the poem?
- Does the poem spring from an identifiable historical moment?
- Does the poem speak from a specific culture?
- Does the poem have its own vernacular?
- Does the poem use imagery to achieve a particular effect?
- What kind of figurative language, if any, does the poem use?
- If the poem is a question, what is the answer?
- If the poem is an answer, what is the question?
- What does the title suggest?
- Does the poem use unusual words or use words in an unusual way?

You can fall back on these questions as needed, but experience suggests that since each poem is unique, such questions will not go the necessary distance. In many instances, knowing who the speaker is may not yield any useful information. There may be no identifiable occasion that inspired the poem. But poems do offer clues about where to start. Asking questions about the observable features of a poem will help you find a way in.



We'll now bring inquiry to bear on "The Red Wheelbarrow," by William Carlos Williams. The handwritten notes represent questions that occurred to the reader, questions that can be used to investigate the poem's form and meaning. Different readers will ask different questions about the poems.

THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends
upon

What depends?

a red wheel
barrow

Why isn't there any punctuation?

glazed with rain
water

The long and short lines look choppy!

beside the white
chickens

Nothing could possibly be as simple as this. Could it?

This poem can be infuriating because it appears so guileless and simplistic. The problem is that you can't take anything for granted, not even simplicity.

What are the first things you notice about the poem? Begin with what you know, or what you think you know. First, the poem is arranged in fairly consistent lines. The four units of the poem look somewhat alike. There isn't any punctuation either. What was the poet's intention? Was the shape an accident of the poet's descriptive style? Was the lack of punctuation an oversight? Was the poet being careless or lazy? Was it that he just couldn't think of any better words? Why is this poem so well known, so respected, so well liked?

Denise Levertov, in "Some Notes on Organic Form," says "there is a form in all things (and in our experience) which the poet can discover and

reveal.” But how does a poet make this discovery? One way is to pay close attention to the sound and movement of the first words or lines that begin the act of writing, in which the object, mood, and experience that give rise to the poem will often be expressed through tone and rhythm. Do the words work together to create euphony, dissonance, or something in between? What are the weights and inherent durations of words and lines? The poet who is sensitive to this emerging form can give it full play as writing continues.

Robert Creeley, in “Notes Apropos ‘Free Verse,’” uses the analogy of driving to explain his approach to organic form in writing: “The road, as it were, is creating itself momentarily in one’s attention to it, there, visibly, in front of the car.” He implies that there may be more around the bend or beyond the horizon; but, like drivers, poets can only arrive at that possibility through careful attention to what is immediately apparent. Poets must follow the words, like the road, as they come.

When you read a poem, you must be both observant and patient. Look at the words and the lines as they emerge. What do you recognize? What looks or sounds interesting? Wait a little. Welcome surprises. As more of the poem reveals itself, you may find an exhilarating momentum, recognizable patterns, or a merging of form and content that will carry you along.



So how does “The Red Wheelbarrow” unfold? A helpful exercise is to try to continue writing the poem yourself. Double the length, either by repeating the theme or by adding a new riff about the images of the first eight lines. This is an experiential way of discovering what is noticeable about the poem. You will likely write in two-line stanzas, or *couplets*. Most of the second lines of the couplets will consist of a single word. Many will have those words be nouns, or two-syllable words. Aha! So you have already begun to notice how the poem is put together.

This brings us to the poem’s statement, its meaning. Many poems, especially nonnarrative poems, are difficult—if not impossible—to paraphrase, especially after a first reading or a first listen. And expecting to find

a meaning that's obvious is often frustrating, as it may be here. Why does so much depend? So much what?

Artists often say that a work of art is about itself and something else. In this way, a poem can be an *ars poetica*, a statement by the poet about poetry, about his or her beliefs about what poetry is and about what it does. Asking how this poem might be an *ars poetica* is a great way to further understand both the poem and Williams as a poet. What does the poem demonstrate about poetry? Well, certainly the features of style and form come up again. But the statement that the poem makes, the credo it represents, is right there, too. Another way to ask the question might be, What does this poem value? Common things, clearly. The only objects in the poem are ordinary, enduring, and somehow essential. The scene is rural, perhaps a farm. The chickens are not symbolic; they are white chickens that exist beside equally plain things of the world: a utilitarian barrow that is not exalted, but left out in the rain. And not an apocalyptic rain but a slow drizzle. Why does Williams choose this image, this scene? Why does so much of the poem depend on things so ordinary? Do these concrete things suggest a larger, more abstract idea?

It should be clear at this point that inquiry into earlier questions about form and technique have yielded larger questions of interpretation. So let's return for a moment to a question of form. All that's left from the list of first impressions is the lack of punctuation. How would the lack of stops anywhere in the poem reinforce the idea that ordinary things are of great importance? What does grammar accomplish in any text? For one thing, it helps determine beginnings and endings, and for another, it works with conjunctions to represent relationships among things, time, and ideas in the text. But in this poem, there is none of that. Why? Without the interruptions of commas and periods, the words flow together. They are not discrete parts but one whole unit, differentiated only by the space between couplet or stanza. But the pairing of lines seems to create a unity as well: four equal parts. So the "scene" is integrated further by the lack of any hierarchy imposed by punctuation. The grammar remains, of course.

So the stanzas stand on the page as separate, but the lack of punctuation connects them. Thereby, a tension is created, an independence that somehow is connected. This is beginning to sound like the statement the poem is making: “so much” depends on these humble things. The great and small, apparently distinct objects (and the stanzas) are nonetheless interconnected. Form and content are joined in a dance to create meaning, as is so often the case in art.



Now practice what you’ve learned on two more of Williams’s poems, “The Great Figure” and “This is Just to Say.” Write your questions in the margins. Try some of the strategies we discussed as ways to uncover different layers of meaning in the poems.

THE GREAT FIGURE

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
5 on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
10 to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

5 and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

10 Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

A RICH RESOURCE FOR CLASSES OR BOOK GROUPS, THIS COLLECTION EXPRESSES THE RANGE AND VIGOR OF MODERN AMERICAN POETRY AND OFFERS A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO READING AND DISCUSSING IT. BRINGING TOGETHER POET BIOGRAPHIES, A GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS, AND GUIDELINES FOR CRAFTING EFFECTIVE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND UNDERSTANDING POETIC FORM, *MODERN AMERICAN POETRY* IS AN INDISPENSABLE COMPANION FOR POETRY READERS.

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