

Word: The Poet's Voice

Oak Meadow Coursebook

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Unit I

Nature

In nature poetry, the five senses are perhaps the poet's greatest tool in crafting a poem. From early Native American tribal stories and speeches, to early American poetry, to modern environmental writers and poets, nature has been one of the consistent threads uniting literature throughout history. Two people observing the same tree may verbally describe it in a similar way, but when asked to compose a poem about that tree, the differences in style and sentiment, and imagination, are endless. Art allows a person to express themselves in a way totally unique way. When nature becomes the focus of art, the possibilities for expression are as boundless as the root system of an old tree, ever growing and expanding beneath the earth.

In this unit, you will be asked to complete a series of observation exercises that will take you into the world outside your front door. The world you can see from your window, be it a backyard or a small patch of grass, the rolling hills of farmland, a river, or an apartment building, will become your literary laboratory. You will carry with you five senses: hearing, seeing, smelling, feeling, and tasting. Along with these universal tools, let imagination and memory work together to connect you with the world around you. Always bring your notebook and a pen or pencil, and be ready to document what you see and experience in the natural world, keeping in mind that a single leaf found on a sidewalk among the gray of a city landscape can hold just as much beauty, just as many stories needing to be told, as a countryside teeming with color. As the poet, you bring as much to your subject matter as it brings to you.

UNIT I ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

- Complete Unit I Reading Journal reading and questions.

“Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

Chief Seattle

Unit I: Nature

(continued)

“Life is divided into three terms—that which was, which is, and which will be. Let us learn from the past to profit by the present, and from the present, to live better in the future.”

William Wordsworth

Unit I Reading Journal: Nature

With each unit of this course, you will be asked to keep a reading journal on a book of poetry that corresponds to each topic. Choose a book from the suggested reading list for Unit I (found below and in the introduction of this course), or choose one of your own. Choose four poems to write about in your journal—this lets you develop a clear picture of how the poet writes. You are highly encouraged to try to read as much of the book as possible to gain a better sense for the writing style of each poet.

Choose one poem in the book that particularly resonates with you, and answer the following questions about the craft of the poem:

1. Create a list of images you find in the poem. Describe these images and what they evoke in you as a reader.
2. Read the poem out loud and see if you can discover how the poet uses diction and syntax. Is the order of the words in each line different from what you are accustomed to reading? If so, what do you think this does to the overall mood and sound of the poem?
3. Identify three examples of metaphor and three examples of simile in the poem. List them and explain what makes them work as either a metaphor or a simile.
4. Read the poem once more and think about the poet’s use of language. Is the vocabulary accessible to you as the reader? Is it over your head? What kind of impact does language, the choice of words in the poem, have on your reading of the poem?
5. How does the poem conclude? Is the ending dramatic? Does the ending serve the poem well, or is it confusing? Does the ending leave you, as the reader, wanting to know more? If you could change one thing about the ending, what would it be?
6. After reading the poem several times, how has your comprehension of the poem changed? Has the focus on the craft of the poem altered your initial reaction when you first read the poem? Please explain why or why not in as detailed a way as possible.

Suggested Reading List for Reading Journal Unit I: Nature

- Mary Oliver, *White Pine: Poems and Prose Poems*
- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*
- W. S. Merwin, *Migration: New and Selected Poems*
- Pablo Neruda, *Odes to Opposites*
- Pablo Neruda, *Neruda’s Garden: An Anthology of Odes*
- William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*
- Emily Dickinson, *Acts of Light*
- Gary Synder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*
- Wendell Berry, *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*
- Robert Bly, *Silence in the Snowy Fields*
- Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems*

Remember to keep your reading journal with you at all times, as this will serve as your reading journal, poetic notebook, and toolkit throughout this course. When you have ideas inspired perhaps by what you have read, jot them down in your notebook. When you see something, or hear something that you think could be used in a poem later on, jot it down. As is often said in a poetry workshop, “Throw away nothing. Keep everything. You never know when it might be needed in a poem.”

You will be sending your reading journal to your teacher at the end of each unit.

Unit I: Nature

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Section



Painting Pictures with Words

A blank canvas awaits you. Your colors are not made of pigment, there are no brushes to learn to use, but you have language and imagination—and endless possibility. In this section you will be asked to create rich images of nature, and of memories that you have, feelings and ideas, all the different things a poet calls on for inspiration. You will choose your first book of poetry to read and discuss in your reading journal, and you will add your first writing tool to your poetic toolkit.

Thus begins your journey through the literary world of *Word: The Poet's Voice*.

Poetic Toolkit: Imagery

Imagery is the name given to the elements in a poem that spark off the senses. Imagery is a tool every poet uses to describe the setting for a poem, and to assist in creating the impression of a subject matter in the reader. Imagery in literature can direct the thoughts of a reader to a specific moment, or inspire feelings of wonder and memory. For example, when a writer describes a bank of clouds in the sky as *perching on the horizon*, immediately the idea of birds may come to mind, and an experience of waiting for something to happen, both of which a poet can consciously choose to include in the poem for a specific reason. When imagery is not intentional, the reader can just as easily be thrown off course and miss the meaning behind the poet's words.

Describing something without using *metaphor* or *simile* allows the poet to focus specifically on what picture is being created in the mind of the reader. Later on in this course, you will add metaphors to imagery, and your intentions as a poet will become even more focused, yet at the same time multi-layered so that the reader must peel away line after line to discover what it is you are expressing. A poet can simply

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

Section 1: Painting Pictures with Words

- Read the poetic toolkit (imagery).
- Read “Crossings” by Ravi Shankar and answer questions.
- Complete nature imagery writing exercise.

“. . . there's a standing invitation to lie back as sky's unpredictable theater proceeds.”

from “Crossings” by
Ravi Shankar

Unit I: Section 1

(continued)

write, “I see an old tree” or “I see a blue cloud,” but it is much more rewarding to be more specific with the imagery created—using tools like simile (“an old tree like an old chimney missing bricks after a storm”) or metaphor (“a blue cloud swimming across the sea of sky”).

Mastering this technique is not unlike the layering of paint on a canvas to create a desired effect, or the way shadows move and change not what exists before you, but how you see what is actually before you. Let your language become the different colors of a palette waiting to be mixed.

When you know exactly what you intend to say in a poem, you can then go about the great work of using poetic craft to say it in new ways, unique only to you as the poet!

Read and Reflect

Read “Crossings” by Ravi Shankar. This poem, and all the poems you will read in this course, can be found on the Oak Meadow course web page: <http://oakmeadow.com/curriculum-resource-links-the-craft-of-poetry/>

After reading the poem, answer the following questions.

1. List three examples of imagery found in the poem and explain how the poet uses imagery to create an experience of being in nature for the reader.
2. What feeling does the poet evoke in you in the first stanza? Explain what it is and how the poet achieves it through his writing.
3. Given everything we know scientifically about the sky, how can the sky still be an “unpredictable theater”?
4. Using Shankar’s opening phrase “Between forest and field,” write a stanza or create an entire poem incorporating imagery and your own experience with nature.

Writing Exercise

Go to a place in your yard that you remember spending time in when you were younger (or if you have recently moved, find a place outside

Unit I: Section 1

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Share Your Work

When you are ready, please share your completed poem with your teacher, along with your writing exercise notes (sensory pages), and the answers to the questions above.

It's always a good idea to read over what you are submitting, and make any small edits that you feel are necessary. Formal revising will come later, at the end of each unit, but in general, reading over your poem before handing it in is a good habit to get into.

For Your Consideration

Step back from an image you have written to decide why it is there. Remind yourself of the purpose of your poem so that the images you include have reason and are not just imagery for its own sake, but have actual meaning that is true to your poem.

Section



Nature and the Self

How do you relate to the natural world? What aspects of nature exist inside you as a human being? While the wildness of nature can at times be difficult to relate to and find comfort in, the connection the human being is able to feel to nature in a familiar field or along a path littered with footprints through a stand of trees, or even from the view out a bedroom window overlooking a garden, strikes a chord in us that we can all experience. The question then becomes: Where in the natural world can we find reflections of ourselves waiting for us to discover?

Poetry demands that the kind of observation skills you explored in section 1 be put to good use. When we use our senses, we are able to penetrate beyond the surface of what we see immediately before us. A poem can then become a stage for us to translate what we have witnessed, from a minute detail to the profoundest of feelings, and through words we recreate the experience for the reader.

In this section, you will be asked to find your own unique way of expressing what you can find in nature that relates to your experience as a human being. When you take the time to explore a tree with your eyes, where in the shape of the limbs or the bark formations along the trunk can you find something to relate to? Is there a face in the tree, or the shape of an eye? Do the limbs stretch out into delicate fingers? Look closer.

You have already described nature using imagery, now you will learn to create metaphors and similes that help bring your subject matter to life in a new way. Instead of simply stating what you see, this section invites you to create a fresh world *within* the natural world, using imagination and your own human experience. **Look closer.**

ASSIGNMENT SUMMARY

Section 2: Nature and the Self

- Read the introduction and poetic toolkit (metaphor and simile).
- Read “The Weed” by Elizabeth Bishop and answer questions.
- Complete metaphor/simile writing exercise.

“The stem grew thick. The nervous roots reached to each side; the graceful head changed its position mysteriously, since there was neither sun nor moon to catch its young attention.”

from “The Weed” by Elizabeth Bishop

Unit I: Section 2

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Poetic Toolkit: Metaphor and Simile

Of all the tools to learn about poetry, *metaphors* and *similes* are often the most referred to, and the most important. A metaphor makes a specific, implied, or hidden comparison between two things or objects that are different yet have some common characteristics.

A simile makes a comparison, showing similarities between two distinctly different things. Unlike a metaphor, a simile creates a likeness by using the words “like” or “as,” and is a direct comparison between two things. While it may sound like there is a bit of magic involved in creating a metaphor that contains a hidden comparison, there is just as much magic when creating a unique simile that works best in your poem. There are so many common similes in the English language, such as being *as slow as a snail* or *as fast as a cheetah*; it truly takes effort to find the right kind of simile to add to your poem.

Here is a great example of a common metaphor: *Her laughter was music to my ears*. This is a beautiful way to imply that a person’s laughter alone took on all of the wonderful qualities of music, which in turn created a pleasant listening experience. How different would this sentence sound without a metaphor: *Her laughter made my ears feel good*. Anyway you try to capture the meaning of the experience without using a metaphor or a simile fails to fully embody it properly, which is what sets poetry apart as a written art form. Poetry seeks to enliven language, and to embody the true sensory, emotional, and intellectual experience of the reader. Adding a clear understanding of how to create and use metaphors and similes to your poetic toolkit will assist you greatly in expressing yourself in original ways.

A simple example of the difference between metaphor and simile:

Metaphor: *Your eyes are sparks from a fire.*

By adding one word (“like”), it becomes a simile: *Your eyes are like sparks from a fire.*

Unit I: Section 2

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Do the exercise again, but this time find some natural object *inside* the house first, and then go outside and find another object that isn't natural, such as a metal gate, mailbox, bike, etc. You do not need to be able to carry the non-natural object you find. Identify it and remember what it is and what it looks like when you come back inside to write your next set of metaphors and similes.

Make another list of five metaphors and five similes using these two objects.

Now read over the lines you have created and see if one of them triggers you to write something more. If you feel inspired by one metaphor or simile, begin writing a poem with it as your first line. If you do not find inspiration in your lists, try the exercise once again, or simply pick one line randomly and trust that inspiration will strike. Once you begin writing a poem using one of the metaphors or similes, try to incorporate a few others into your poem (either the ones you've already come up with or new ones that come to you).

Share Your Work

When you are ready, please share your completed poem with your teacher, along with your writing exercise notes and the answers to the questions above. Remember to read over your poem before handing it in so you can catch and correct anything that doesn't look right—a single misspelled word can change the entire meaning of your piece.

For Your Consideration

Stay aware of where in a poem you are every now and then. Be your own sign post as the writer. If you feel lost as the poet, your reader will be too.