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Studying Poetry

Activities, Resources, and Texts

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Introduction

To the Teacher

This book offers an approach to poetry study that is significantly different from other textbooks currently available. The majority of poetry texts used in schools today fall into two categories: anthologies, which generally offer little in the way of practical guidance for poetry study, and ‘experience-oriented’ resource books, which often emphasise performance and personal response over analysis. Many of these books make excellent resources, but in both types a lingering attachment to Romantic conceptions of poetry often narrows the ways in which students are encouraged to explore poetry texts.

In contrast, this book openly emphasises analysis and inquiry, though without ignoring the connections poetry can have to individual and social experience. It treats poetry not as a mystical, heightened mode of expression but as a form of *discourse*. It argues that poetry, like all discourses, is governed by conventions of thought and action that are embedded in historical and social contexts. By making some of these conventions explicit, the book tries to give students a clearer understanding of how poetry works. Instead of leading students through a study of decontextualised terms and concepts, the book examines poetry in terms of the beliefs and values, practices and contexts that writers, readers, publishers and teachers work with and within.

The six chapters that follow have a roughly sequential structure that leads from experience, through exploration, to theorisation; but individual chapters and sections can be used equally well in isolation, to fit in with each teacher’s preferred approaches and programs of study.

Chapter 1 introduces poetry study through shared readings of poems that students themselves choose. In part, this is an attempt to break down some of the antipathy that students may have built up toward poetry. But the chapter goes beyond the ‘experience’ approach, to show that readings and performances of poems are themselves forms of analysis, and that such activities also function as interventions in the construction of meaning from poems.

Chapter 2 invites students to investigate the ‘nature’ of poetry. This section of the book introduces the idea of poetry as discourse: that is, the idea that poetry is not merely a kind of writing with inherent qualities, but a set of *practices* (of reading, teaching, publishing, and so on) related to certain kinds of social action and interaction.

Chapters 3 and 4 lead students through practical activities in the reading and writing of poetry. Chapter 3 introduces the ideas of word and connotation, while Chapter 4 focuses on the relationship between forms, meanings and the social functions of poetry. These chapters take a ‘workshop’ approach to the reading and writing of poetry texts offering students practical methods for analysing and constructing poetic texts.

Chapter 5 provides models and guidelines for writing *about* poetry. This section will be especially useful for students in senior years who have to write formal analyses and critiques of poetry texts. It offers annotated examples of student critiques, as well as a step-by-step guidelines that students can follow in their own writing.

Finally, Chapter 6 introduces students to some theoretical accounts of poetry. It shows how ideas about poetry are related to specific social and historical contexts, and how specific critical methods are developed to deal with specific forms of poetry. The chapter introduces students to the thinking of some influential critics and theorists, from Plato to Roland Barthes. The aim in this section is not to turn students into ‘theorists’, but to show that there are different ways of looking at poetry, none of which is natural or timeless. This material will be most suitable for senior students, and teachers may find it helpful to work through study of the various theories over a period of weeks, perhaps devoting part of one class each week to reading and discussion of a specific critical orientation.

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