

# Poetry

**Note on Poetry Modules:** The theme of nature in all its manifestations is central to the poetic tradition. These modules are intended to integrate the discussion of sustainability and eco-related topics into the broader enterprise of critical analysis. Each of the works below lends itself to the full range of critical interpretive strategies: formal analysis, psychological, historical, sociological, Marxist, gender, to name a few.

**Seasonal Cycles:** Our relationship to nature is circumscribed by the pattern of seasonal changes. In exploring how these poets responded to the unique qualities of the seasons, students may wish to discuss how the seasons manifest themselves in their locale and try their own hand at finding the poetic diction that best conveys their own emotional response to this yearly cycle of change.

**Hayden, Robert. "Those Winter Sundays," p. 757.**

**Keats, John. "To Autumn," p. 858.**

**Hirsch, Edward. "Fall," p. 1986.**

**Houseman, A. E. "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now," p. 971.**

**Lucas, Dave. "November," p. 1288.**

**Connecting the Green dots:** Working in small groups, choose a season and see which group can come up with the longest, most creative list of seasonal "signs" and unique characteristics. The more subtle and specific the better. This list can include aspects of nature but also cultural indicators, such as the appearance of pumpkins in front yards to mark the fall.

**Nature Woven into Culture and Lifestyle:** As Janisse Ray recounts in her *Memoir of a Cracker Childhood*, living in a long leaf pine forest shaped many aspects of her cultural and childhood experience, from cooking over a fat pine fire to building play houses out of the pine straw in her backyard. Her observation that our lives are woven intimately into the fabric of the natural environment where we grow up might prove a useful topic for conversation in discussing these poems and prompt students to consider how the loss of nature may be felt both culturally, as well as ecologically.

**Parker, Lisa. "Snapping Beans," p. 756.**

**Robinson, Mary. "London's Summer Morning," p. 850.**

**Hudgins, Andrew. "The Cow," p. 938.**

**Frost, Robert. "Birches," p. 1102-03.**

**McKay, Claude. "The Tropics in New York," p. 1208**

**Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," p. 1219.**

**Silko, Leslie. "Love Poem," p. 1285.**

**Connecting the Green dots:** Form groups and create an inventory of those aspects of the natural world that may be threatened in your town or neighborhood. One example might be your local tree ordinance and how effective it might be in saving some of the oldest and most impressive trees in your area. Another inventory might assess those aspects of the natural world that add quality to where you live and whose loss would diminish life in your "backyard".

**Nature as Other: The Post-Descartes Paradigm Shift:** In the introduction to the poetry anthology, *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness*, poet Robert Bly summarizes what he refers to as "The Old Position" as represented by Descartes's philosophy: "Consciousness is human, and involves reason. A serious gap exists between us and the rest of nature. Nature is to be watched, pitied, and taken care of if it behaves." The following cluster of poems invites the reader to consider the ecological implications of humans seeing themselves as apart from non-human nature.

**Stevens, Wallace. "Anecdote of the Jar," p. 901**

**Hopkins, Gerald Manley. "God's Grandeur," p. 929.**

**Chinitz, David. Reading: "The Romanticization of Africa in the 1920's," p. 1234-35.**

**Blake, William. "London," p. 851**

**Connecting the Green dots:** Hold a class discussion about those aspects of the natural world that might instill fear, antipathy, even the desire to eliminate that feature of nature from the planet? How did we form our attitudes about snakes, spiders, swamps, etc., that make them worthy of dismissal or even extermination? If we don't always feel comfortable outdoors, in the "woods," why not?

**Poetic Diction and the Precise Observation of Nature:** Many academic disciplines and careers require the skill of close observation and exact reporting of detail. These skills often employ the power of poetic language and literary devices as witnessed in the poems below. A deeper understanding of our relationship with the natural world is enhanced by our ability to identify and describe its features.

**Bishop, Elizabeth. "The Fish," p. 767-68.**

**Jones, Alice. "The Larynx," p. 829.**

**Frost, Robert. "The Oven Bird," p. 1106**

**Morgan, Robert. "Dew," p. 1319.**

**Connecting the Green dots:** Take a class walking tour of the campus, the SFC zoo, the rock garden, choose a specific place, critter, natural object and try to describe it as accurately as possible. Use poetic devices, metaphors, simile, imagery, etc., to add precision to your description. Return to class and share your results.

**The Natural Cycle of Birth, Life, Death and Rebirth:** The pre-Socratics believed the world existed in a state of "flux" and the concept of "mutability" informs the many poems that explore the eternal mystery of life and death. The poems below reflect the authors' attempts to explore in non-human nature their own passage through the portal of time. Perhaps our ties to, and responsibility towards the natural world would be enhanced by a greater appreciation of both its ephemerality and capacity for regeneration.

**Bishop, Elizabeth. "The Fish," p. 767-68.**

**Morgan, Robert. "Graveyard," p.770.**

**Oliver, Mary. "Oxygen," p. 824.**

**Roethke, Theodore. "Root Cellar," p. 845.**

**Kenyon, Jane. "The Blue Bowl," p. 856.**

**Stafford, William. "Traveling through the Dark," p. 904.**

**Braden, Allen. "The Hemlock Tree," p. 909.**

**Whitman, Walt. "From Song of Myself," p. 913-14.**

**Dickinson, Emily. "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died--," p. 1060.**

**Connecting the Green dots:** Research how different religions and belief systems address the mystery of where we come from and what happens when we die? How are these belief systems linked to what we observe about the rest of non-human nature? What would field such as psychology and anthropology have to say about our complicated emotional responses to what seems like a universal law of nature that things come into being, grow and cycle out?

**Reading Globally, Thinking Locally:** Regionalism and a sense of place are significant features of nature-based literature. Exploring the intimacies of place-bound poetry can awaken us to world we have yet to see in person, and see the landscapes we call our own with fresh eyes. If the poet is someone able to see the world “as if for the first time,” perhaps readers of poetry can be inspired to do so as well.

**Rilke, Ranier Maria. “The Panther,” p. 855.**

**Eberhart, Richard. “Coast of Maine,” p. 1286-87.**

**White, Gail. “Dead Armadillos,” p. 1287-88.**

**Shaw, Robert B. “Wild Turkeys,” p. 1291.**

**Ryan, Kay. “Turtle,” p. 1292.**

**Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “Kubla Khan: or a Vision in a Dream,” p. 1345-47.**

**Connecting the Green dots:** Locate the works of one of Florida’s many nature writers and write an analytical essay that takes note of 1) the unique perspective they bring to their description of a critter, a place, a natural phenomenon and 2) how they translate that unique approach towards their subject into creative prose, poetic language, striking visual imagery.

**Nature and Romantic Poetry:** The relationship between love and nature is an enduring one, most famously exemplified in the works of Shakespeare and the Romantic poets such a Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Keats and Blake. But the diverse manner in which poets marry aspects of the natural world with their personal lives or attitudes about love and romance suggests, from a psychological perspective, the very diversity of romantic and erotic experience itself.

**Shakespeare, William. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” p. 976.**

**Collins, Billy. “Litany,” p. 1139.**

**Blake, William. “The Garden of Love,” p. 1342.**

**Burns, Robert. “A Red, Red Rose,” p. 1344.**

**Olds, Sharon. “Last Night,” p. 817.**

**Whitman, Walt. “I Sing the Body Electric,” p. 1001-02.**

**Williams, William Carlos. “This is Just to Say,” p. 1373.**

**Yeats, William Butler. "Leda and the Swan," p. 1377.**

**Looking Inward, Looking Outward:** For many poets, nature serves as a sort of Rorschach, inviting the author to project their inner feelings in the form of an emotional response to some aspect of the natural world. It might be the contemplation of their own ephemerality, processing stormy emotions, or the sense of emotional release in the sight of nature's grandeur and mystery. Students and readers of poetry have, no doubt, had similar experiences in nature to which they can relate. Becoming more mindful of our emotional linkage with non-human nature can be an essential ingredient in becoming better environmental stewards.

**Arnold, Matthew. "Dover Beach," p. 846-47.**

**Fainlight, Ruth. "Crocuses," p. 849.**

**Whitman, Walt. "A Noiseless Patient Spider," p. 881.**

**Frost, Robert. "Acquainted with the Night," p. 889.**

**Frost, Robert. "Neither Out Far nor In Deep." P. 1110.**

**Oliver, Mary. "Wild Geese," p. 1293.**

**Wordsworth, William. "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," p. 1374.**

**Connecting the Green dots:** Try to capture a strong feeling you have personally felt (e.g., loss, fear, joy, doubt) and pick some aspect of the natural world (e.g., a season, creature, natural phenomenon) that might metaphorically represent this emotion, as the spider does for Whitman, or the Cloud for Wordsworth.