UNIT 1 WHY READ A POEM? AND, HOW TO STUDY UNDERSTANDING POETRY?

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1.0 OBJECTIVES
After going through this unit you will be able to,
• explain the purpose of a formal study of poetry,
• appreciate the importance of poetry in life,
• understand the range of topics, poets and poems covered in this course,
gage our expectations from you and thus
• give direction to your study of this course.

1.1 INTRODUCTION
Did you ask yourself why you decided to read this course on poetry? Reading of poetry does not enable a person to do anything such as repair a watch, a mobile phone, an AC or a car. It does not lead to any application in technology as physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology and geology would do. Political science, sociology and economics have social relevance. People also seek the help of psychiatrists and lawyers but poets are of no “practical” use, apparently. I will try to make a few suggestions in the next section; read it and then discuss it in your study group. Just by doing so you will make your study of this course meaningful.

Passive education is no education. The T.V. has been called an ‘idiot box’. People who watch the t.v for long hours are passive learners. They actually learn nothing. Education should make us wise. ‘Read’ wrote Francis Bacon, ‘not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.’ Weighing and considering will indeed make you wiser. Study of literature is part of liberal culture or education. Will reading poetry give more meaning to your life? It is akin to history and philosophy. It is ‘for delight, for ornament, and for ability.’
1.2 ANSWERING THE QUESTION ‘WHAT IS A POEM?’

Self-check Exercises I

1) Have you talked to your friends about any poem that either you or they may have liked? If not, would you like to do so now and record your response below?

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2) Do you like singing film songs? Write down why you do so?

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3) Imagine that the government has banned film songs. What would happen then?

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Answering the question ‘What is a Poem?’

Well, a poem is an instance of ‘poetry’ and ‘poetry is a variety of literature; the other varieties being non fictional prose, fiction - the short story and the novel - drama and literary criticism. We treat the essay - in both its forms, the long ones, or treatises, such as David Hume’s (1711 - 76) An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748) and Treatise of Human Nature (1739 - 40) and the shorter performances such as Charles Lamb’s (1775-1834) The Essays of Elia (1820-23) or Francis Bacon’s (1561 - 1626) The Essays, or Counsels, Civil and Morall (1597, 1612, 1623) – memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, letters, etc. as nonfiction and literary criticism as a major separate variety of it.

We have said that a ‘poem’ is an example of poetic expression. The Oxford English Dictionary calls poetry ‘expression of beautiful or elevated thought, imagination or feeling in appropriate language and usually in metrical form’. Notice the word ‘usually’ since poetry need not always be in verse. We have prose poems such as ‘The Book of Job’ in the Old Testament, ‘Dream Children’
of Lamb, ‘The Vision of Mirza’ of Joseph Addison, The Waves of Virginia Woolf and passages in Jawaharlal Nehru’s autobiography that are pure poetry. Nehru describes the cremation of his father on the banks of the Ganga in the following worlds in his autobiography:

As evening fell on the river bank on that winter day, the great flames leapt up and consumed that body which had meant so much to us who were close to him as well as to millions in India. Gandhiji said a few moving words to the multitude, and then all of us crept silently home. The stars were out and shining brightly when we returned lonely and desolate. (Page 247)

This can be called a piece of prose poem; it has all the qualities of poetry except metre.

Plays have been written in prose as by George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950) and in verse as by T.S.Eliot (1888 – 1965) and William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616). The success of a literary artist rests on many factors but most of all on his imagination, thought and feeling couched in a language that felicitously conveys them to us. Let’s take an example from the fifth act of Macbeth (1605). Macbeth has just heard about his wife’s death and befitting the situation he bursts out thus:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays are lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing. (Act V, Sc. V)

You may ask if Shakespeare was not indiscreet in embellishing a murderer of his friend Banquo and his monarch Duncan with the grand poetry that he has been endowed with? The personification of ‘day’ creeping at a ‘petty pace’ the congeries of metaphors of ‘brief candle’, ‘walking shadow’, ‘poor player’ and ‘a tale told by and idiot’ for life demonstrate the profundity of Macbeth’s imagination. How could a man who was capable of such deep philosophical meditation commit crimes of such ghastly proportions? These are debatable points but we can immediately feel the power of Shakespeare’s poetry. ‘A poem’ wrote Wallace Stevens, ‘must resist the intelligence almost successfully.’ Shakespeare will be read as long as English will be read and understood.

Poets don’t read philosophical treatises before writing their poems but philosophers, scientists, and artists, and people in all walks of life are influenced by the spirit of the age which impacts their work. A student of poetry would do well to explore the political, social and cultural history of the society and the life of the poet whose poem they are going to study. A poem is a product of the man, the milieu and, the moment. Just think of some of W.B. Yeats’s poems:

‘September 1913’, ‘Easter 1916’, ‘Nineteen Hundred Nineteen’ and above all ‘Among School Children’. They were influenced by Irish history but Yeats did not give us the details of events in his poems as a historian does. The poems are simultaneously public and private documents, thoughtful and emotional accounts.
Early Modern English Poets

of experiences at the same time, that Yeats wanted to share with his readers.
‘Poetry’ wrote Aristotle, ‘is finer and more philosophical than history; for poetry expresses the universal, and history only the particular’.

‘Reality’ wrote Wallace Stevens, ‘is a cliché from which we escape by metaphors’. ‘A poet’ Stevens went on, ‘looks at the world as a man looks at a woman.’ Philip Larkin’s ‘Church Going’ is a strange poem about the poet, a disbeliever’s visit to a church. He writes:

Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,
The poet seems to have reverence for the “house of god” notwithstanding his lack of faith. The poem ends with a confessions:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

At the end of the nineteenth century Matthew Arnold (1822 - 88) the great Victorian poet wrote in his preface to the Hundred Greatest Men:

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve.

‘Theories in politics and science change; one dogma in religion founders and a new one arises in its place but poetry stays’. Arnold went on,

Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it… The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.

Is Philip Larkin’s ‘Church Going’ not about the poetry latent in religion? Poetry ‘is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge’ as William Wordsworth pointed out.

How does poetry stand with respect to science? Francis Bacon has been called the first martyr of science because he caught cold while stuffing dead birds with snow and died. ‘Poesy’ he wrote ‘is part of learning in measure of words for the most part restrained, but in all other points extremely licensed, and doth, truly refer to the imagination, which, being not tied to the laws of matter, may at pleasure join that which nature hath severed, and sever that which nature hath joined, and so make unlawful matches’ (The Advancement of Learning, BK II, 1605). He also pointed out that poesy offers ‘magnanimity, morality, and … delectation’ but it is reason which ‘buckle[s] and bow[s] the mind unto the nature of things.’ So reason according to him is superior to poetry.
Another major figure of the age of Scientific Revolution and of Reason was John Locke (1632 - 1704) whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) offers a study of the human mind and the mechanism of understanding. He rejected the doctrine of ‘innate ideas’ and pointed out that the source of ideas is experience. Locke believed that sensation is always of a quality and qualities are either primary, i.e extensions, figure, motion and number or secondary which do not really belong but are imputed to them. Colour, for instance is a secondary quality which is a subjective perception. We are also ignorant of spiritual entities.

John Dryden (1631-1700) a contemporary of Locke seems to have been influenced even more by the scientific ethos of his age. Charles Sedley, Lord Buckhurst as Eugenius in Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatick Poesy* holds the view that his age was superior to the ancients because ‘natural causes [are] more known than in the time of Aristotle.’ So it follows from it that ‘poesy and other arts may with the same pains, arrive still nearer to perfection’. Eugenius wants the method of science to serve as a model for poets. Crites (Sir Robert Howard) shares with Eugenius the euphoria on science. He asks,

Is it not evident in these last hundred years, when the study of philosophy has been the business of all the virtuosi in Christendom, that almost a new nature has been revealed to us? That more errors of the School have been detected, more useful experiments in philosophy have been made, more noble secrets in optics, medicine, anatomy, astronomy discovered, than in all those credulous and doting ages from Aristotle to us? – so true it is, that nothing spreads more fast than science, when rightly and generally cultivated.

Eugenius points his finger at the new discoveries such as those of Galileo (1564 - 1650) and Descartes (1596 - 1650) in optics and physics and Andreas Vesalius (1515 -64) and William Harvey (1578 - 1657) in anatomy and physiology took European science ahead of those of Aristotle, a constant butt of Galileo’s jibes, Galen, the Arabs such as Al Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes and the Schoolmen such as St. Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Duns Scotus and Abelard.

Dryden, as Neander, compares the sub-plots which he calls ‘under-plots or by-concernments’ in drama with phenomenon in Ptolemaic astronomy:

Our plays, besides the main design, have under-plots or by-concernments, of less considerable persons and intrigues, which are carried on with the motion of the main plot: as they say the orb of the fixed stars and those of the planets, though they have motions of their own, are whirled about by the motion of the primum mobile, in which they are contained.

Dryden or Neander, whose role in the essay is to defend English drama against the French stage goes on:

That similitude expresses much of the English stage; for if contrary motions may be found in nature to agree, if a planet can go east and west at the same time – one way by virtue of his motion, the other by the force of the first mover – it will not be difficult to imagine how the under-plot, which is only different, not contrary to the great design, may naturally be conducted along with it.

In the literature of a nation production of works of art are dialogical in nature and also there is a progression in the appearance of literary pieces. Alexander Pope
Early Modern English Poets (1688 - 1744) came at the cusp of the neoclassical era in Western Europe: the two strands of neo-classicism and science meet in poets and critics such as Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson. By readying An Essay of Criticism (1711) against the background of Locke’s ideas on primary and secondary qualities we can appreciate it better. ‘True Wit’ wrote Pope, ‘is Nature to advantage dress’d / What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d;’. The office of the poet was to provide felicitous expression to truth, to ‘Nature’. Pope recommends classical plainness such as we find in the Parthenon on the Acropolis at Athens on the one hand and in the ideas of Sir Isaac Newton (1642 - 1727) in the ground breaking Philosophia Naturalis Principia Mathematica (1687) on the other. Pope’s euphoria can be gaged from his couplet on Sir Isaac Newton:

Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in Night:  
God said, Let Newton be; and all was Light.

Ignorant of India’s achievements in astronomy and mathematics, Pope in his An Essay on Man (1732 – 4) scoffed at us,

Lo, the poor Indian! Whose untutor’d mind  
Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind:  
His soul, proud science never taught to stray  
Far as the solar walk, or milky way;

He did not know about the scientific ideas of the Buddhists, the Sankhya philosophy of Kapil, the theory of the atom of Kanad, the medical ideas of Charak or Sushrut. He also derided, the Persian dervishes for imitating the circular movements of the planets in the hope of knowing god.

As Eastern priests in giddy circles run  
And turn their heads to imitate the Sun,

Against the ‘irrational’ Asians Pope pitted the scientific mind of the English:

Superior beings when of late they saw  
A mortal man unfold all Nature’s law,  
Admir’d such wisdom in an earthly shape,  
And shew’d a NEWT ON as we shew an Ape.

Alexander Pope’s poet plays the second fiddle to a scientist.

When Samuel Johnson, that last of the Romans, tried to define the function of the poet, in The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia (1759) he apparently compared a poet to a scientist. ‘He’, i.e. the poet, Johnson opined, ‘must write as the interpreter of nature, and the legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations, as a being superior to time and place.’

British conquest of India in the eighteenth century changed all this. Sir William Jones translated Kalidas’s Shakuntala into English and in course of time a Wordsworth could say,

The Man of science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion.
Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the
impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science.

We read poetry as the ‘finer spirit of all knowledge’ and so a proper study of
poetry is important.

1.3 THE SCOPE OF THIS COURSE: THE
SYLLABUS

Let’s at the outset find out what you have to study in this course. Read the
syllabus properly and prepare a good strategy for studying it. In other words you
must plan your study of the course.

Understanding Poetry (Revised) BEGE106

This course has eight blocks comprising of 40 units as under:

Block I
Early Modern Period
1) Introductory Unit
2) On metre and poetic devices
3) Shakespeare and his sonnets (29 and 30)
4) John Milton: ‘L’Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso’ ‘On the Late Massacre’ and
   ‘When the Assault’
6) Andrew Marvell: ‘Thoughts in a Garden’, ‘To his Coy Mistress’

Block II
The Long Eighteenth Century
7) John Dryden: Mac Flecknoe
8) Alexander Pope: An Essay on Man
9) Samuel Johnson: The Vanity of Human Wishes
10) Thomas Gray: Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Block III
The Romantic Poets
12) S.T. Coleridge: ‘Kubla Khan’
13) Lord Byron: ‘Roll on Thou Deep and Dark Blue Ocean’, ‘George the Third’
14) P.B. Shelley: ‘Ode to the West Wind’, ‘To a Skylark’
15) John Keats: ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’

Block IV
The Great Victorian Poets
20) Thomas Hardy: ‘To an Unborn Pauper Child’, ‘Great Things’
   D.H. Lawrence: ‘Bavarian Gentians’

**Block V**

**The High Modernist, Postmodernist and Recent Poets**
23) Philip Larkin: ‘Church Going’, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’
25) Seamus Heaney: ‘Death of Naturalist’

**Block VI**

**The American Poets I**
26) R. W. Emerson: ‘The Snowstorm’ and ‘Hamatreya’
27) Walt Whitman: ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’
28) Edgar Allan Poe: ‘The Raven’

**Block VII**

**The American Poets II**

**Block VIII**

**Indian English Poetry**
36) Rabindranath Tagore: ‘I Cast my Net into the Sea’, ‘When I go Alone at Night’
   Sarojini Naidu: ‘Damayanti to Nala in the Hour of Exile’, ‘Cradle Song’
   Kamala Das: ‘The Dance of the Eunuchs’, ‘A Hot Noon in Malabar’
   Jayant Mahapatra: ‘Hunger’, ‘A Rain of Rites’
   Agha Shahid Ali: ‘Postcard from Kashmir’
40) Dilip Chitre: ‘The Light of Birds Breaks the Lunatic’s Sleep’
   Keki N. Daruwalla: ‘Hawk’, ‘Chinar’
1.4 ASSIGNMENTS AND TERM-END-EXAMINATION

As in the conventional universities we ask our students to do some homework and also hold public examinations. Let’s discuss them here one by one.

1.4.1 Assignments

IGNOU earlier had a policy of 3 assignments per eight-credit course. I think it was a good policy for that way we could monitor students’ study better and promote active reading as they could learn form their teachers and discover the finer points as they progressed. Assignments should not only be a ritual, or university requirement.

1.4.2 Why Examinations?

Examinations, tests and assessments are not a necessary evil. They play an important part in our study and mental growth. They tell us where we stand with respect to our peer-group. They also help employers select the right type of employees. Employers often also conduct their own test. Do you know that imperial examinations were held for the first time in ancient China by the Sui Dynasty (581-618 C.E.) in 605. It was abolished by the Qing Dynasty (1644 -1912) in 1905, i.e. 1300 years later. Thomas Taylor Meadows, Britain’s Counsel in Guangzhou (or Canton), China observed in his Desultory Notes on the Government and People of China (1847) that ‘the long duration of the Chinese empire is solely … owing to the good government which consists in the advancement of men of talent and merit only’. He advised against the system of preferment, patronage or purchase and making the civil service a meritocratic institution. The East India Company College had been founded in 1806 to train ‘writers’ (administrators) of the age of 16 to 18, for the EIC. (The officers for the army were trained at Addiscombe Military Seminary, Surrey.) William Gladstone, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, set up a commission under Stafford Northcote (1818-87) and Charles Trevelyan (1807-86) to look into the operation and organisation of the Civil Service. Influenced by the Chinese imperial examination they made their recommendation for recruitment based on merit through standardized written examination. Standardized testing was adopted by the British Universities in the 1850’s.

1.4.3 A Model Term-end-Examination Question Paper

You can take the final examination after studying this course for a year. If you don’t feel sufficiently prepared you can sit for the exam in June or December. Read the handbook and follow the instructions properly.

Now let me give you a few tips for the final examination. These will give direction to your study.

• All good students will learn scansion, taught in the following unit. (‘Here you have a few sections of Block-I, Unit 2 of British Poetry (MEG 01). You can get a copy of it from senior students/Study Centre/ Book Shop.)

• Remember that the more you drill yourself the more confident you will become in scanning units of verse. You must also develop familiarity with poetic devices, genres and various types of metrical compositions.
A close reading of the texts of poems is done through 'reference to context questions. You will be required to explain 4 passages from the texts of poems prescribed for you. This question would carry 32 marks. Each answer may be in 150 to 200 words only. Avoid long answers.

The introductions to the various blocks deal with literary history. They will give your study of the major poets and their poems in their proper perspectives. You may be required to answer one question of 16 marks based on the introductions as in question no 3 on the next page.

Now we move to general questions that carry a total of 32 marks. They will be on the poets, poems, and their age. You may have to write two essays, each in about 750 words.

Finally you must remember that a good question paper is one that covers all segments of the course adequately, i.e. there should be more questions from the largest segment of the course, such as British poetry (Blocks I to V). However, no section should remain unrepresented on the question paper. The purpose of the examinations is not to find out what the student does not know but to find out how well she/he knows what she/he knows. This can be done by giving the student sufficient choice. Below you have a model term-end-examination question paper. Remember that examiners may change the pattern of the question paper but it is advisable not to do so as the course has been planned and executed with certain goals that get reflected in the question paper given here. Moreover students must be told before hand if the pattern of the question paper is to change which is rather difficult in a distance education scenario.

Model Term End Question Paper
Understanding Poetry (Revised)

Full Marks – 100

Answer questions 1 and 2 and 3 and any two of the remaining questions.

1) a) Scan one of the following passages and comment on its prosodic features:
   Scansion 5 + Comments 5
   i) The way was long, the wind was cold,
      The minstrel was infirm and old;
      The harp, his sole remaining joy,
      Was carried by an orphan boy,
   ii) One more unfortunate
      Weary of breath
      Rashly importunate
      Gone to her death!

   b) Write short notes on any two of the following:
      (i) Caesura  (ii) Epic  (iii) Synecdoche  (iv) Spenserian stanza  (v) Aposiopesis

   2) Explain any four of the following passages with reference to their context
      supplying brief critical comments where necessary: 8 × 4 = 32
      a) Let the bird of loudest lay
         On the sole Arabian tree
         Herald sad and trumpet be,
         To whose sound chaste wings obey,
b) Say first, of god above, man below, 
what can we reason, but from what we know? 
Of man what see we, but his station refer?

c) Five years have past, five summers, with the length 
of five long winter! And again I hear 
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs 
With a soft inland murmur.

d) No wonder of it : sheer plod makes plough down sillion 
Shine, and blue-buak embers, ah my dear, 
Fale gall themselves, and gas Gold-vermillion

e) There will be time to murder and create, 
And time for all the works and days of hands 
That lift and drop a question on your plate;

f) we paused before a house that seemed 
A swelling of the ground – 
The roof was scarcely visible – 
The cornice – in the ground –

g) I feel that I would like 
to go there 
and fall into those flowers 
and sink into the marsh near them,

h) I don’t know politics but I know the names 
of those in power, and can repeat them like 
Days of week, or names of months, 
beginning with Nehru,

i) I always loved neatness. Now I hold the half inch Himalayas in my hand.

3) Critically comment on Emile Legouis’ words, ‘The great victories of Edward III were being sung in London, and Minot’s poems were current in the countryside when Chaucer was born and when his mind received its first impressions.’

Or

Write short notes on any four of the following:


4) Attempt an evaluation of any one of the following poets, with special reference to the poems prescribed for you:

a) Andrew Marvell
b) P.B. Shelley
c) Allen Ginsberg
d) Arun Kolatkar
5) Critically evaluate one of the following poems:
   a) ‘Ode to a Nightingale’
   b) ‘Ulysses’
   c) ‘After Apple-Picking’
   d) ‘Hawk’

6) Do you agree with the view that Victorian poetry is a pale imitation of Romantic poetry? Provide reasons for your answer.

7) Examine Langston Hughes’s contribution to the Harlem Renaissance.

8) What are the distinguishing features of Indian Poetry in English? Illustrate your answer with suitable examples.

### Self-check Exercise II

1) Jot down a few points regarding your plans for reading of this course.
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2) How would you prepare for your exams? Note down at least 5 points in the space provided below:
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1.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit was concerned with giving direction to your study of this course. We did this by enabling you to think about poetry and its purpose in our life.

All formal education is an efficient way of acquiring knowledge in a short period of time and that is utilizable. We want to give you a fair understanding of British, American and Indian poetries in English methodically so that you may be able to make the best use of your time.

You should try to meet your counsellor every week and form a study circle in which you can help one another clarify the points in this and other units.

We hope you will enjoy reading this course.

1.6 ANSWERS TO SELF-CHECK EXERCISES

Self-check Exercise I

Answers to the three questions will be unique to each student but don’t ignore them. Think over them and discuss them in your study circle.

Self-check Exercise II

1) Your answer may be somewhat as below:
   - Start with the reading of unit 2 and master scansion.
   - Prepare British Poetry in 5 months, one block every month
     a) Poets’ lives
     b) Poems
   - .................................................................

2) Master scansion and secure 10 marks. 10 days – half-an-hour / day, revision every week for 3 months, then once a month.
   - Draw up a list of literary terms and prepare my notes with the help of a dictionary of literary terms and a search engine on the internet
   - For rhetorical terms such as quesitio, percontatio, epanadiplosis, prosopopeia, aposiopesis, etc. take help of The Growth and Evolution of Classical Rhetoric by Amiya Bhushan Sharma
   - Master the topics for notes and secure 10 marks. 10 days – half-an-hour / day - revision every week for 3 months, then once a month
   - Master the introductions to either 1,2 and 3 or 6,7 and 8 first which will help me attempt question no. 3
   - Read blocks 1 to 5 thoroughly in 5 months and attempt at least 20 reference to context questions from them.