



Classic Poems

"Poetry is the music of the soul." — Voltaire

Read and discuss some of the most famous classic poems of all time with your residents!

Some are short and simple, while others are longer and more lyrical. What they all have in common, though, is that they focus on an important aspect of humanity, including: dreams, liberty, love, and life.



After reading each poem, lead a discussion around the included prompt. Let's begin!

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The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost

Robert Frost uses “the road” in this poem as a metaphor for life. The speaker portrays our lives as a path on which we walk toward an undetermined destination. Then, the speaker reaches a fork in the road. The fork is a metaphor for a life-altering choice. The traveler must go one way, or the other.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both.
And be one traveler, long I stood.
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay.
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Discuss: Is it easy for you to make decisions?

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud By William Wordsworth

Our first poem is called "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth. This poem talks about the strong connection between experience, imagination, and language. The poem itself is a memory, focused on bringing the speaker's experience of seeing daffodils back to life on the page through the power of the imagination.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine.
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line.
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they.
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought.
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye.
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Discuss: What is your favorite kind of flower?
Do you think words can bring images to life?

How Do I Love Thee? by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

In this poem, the speaker is proclaiming her love for her beloved. She tells her lover just how deeply her love goes.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level
of every day's.
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely,
as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion
put to use.
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints.
I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

Discuss: Have you ever been in love?

Dreams by Langston Hughes

The speaker in this poem makes the case that dreams are what make life worthwhile. The poem urges the reader to hold onto their dreams no matter what.

Hold fast to dreams.
For if dreams die.
Life is a broken-winged bird.
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams.
For when dreams go.
Life is a barren field.
Frozen with snow.

Discuss: Do you enjoy having dreams when you sleep?

The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus

The poet, Emma Lazarus, wrote "The New Colossus" in 1883 to help raise funds for the construction of the Statue of Liberty's pedestal. Lazarus is presenting the Statue of Liberty as a "new colossus"; or, a welcoming patroness of immigrants rather than a symbol of military power.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall
stand.

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame.
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name.
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes
command.

The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries
she.

With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Discuss: If you wrote a poem about a famous landmark, what would you choose?

The Red Wheelbarrow by William Carlos Williams

This short poem is about how important agriculture and farm laborers are to maintaining life as we know it. The wheelbarrow also represents everyday objects that deserve appreciation.

So much depends
upon

A red wheel
barrow

Glazed with rain
water

Beside the white
chickens

Discuss: If you had to write a poem about any object, what would you pick?

A Dream Within a Dream by Edgar Allan Poe

This poem begins with the speaker parting from their lover and ends with the speaker on a beach, attempting to grasp grains of sand that keep slipping through their fingers. The poem explores the idea that reality is an illusion.

Take this kiss upon the brow!
And, in parting from you now,
Thus much let me avow —
You are not wrong, who deem
That my days have been a dream;
Yet if hope has flown away.
In a night, or in a day,
In a vision, or in none,
Is it therefore the less gone?
All that we see or seem.
Is but a dream within a dream.

I stand amid the roar.
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand —
How few! yet how they creep.
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep — while I weep!
O God! Can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O God! can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?

Discuss: How does the beach make you feel?

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening by Robert Frost

This poem is told from the perspective of a traveler who stops to watch snowfall in the forest. Though the speaker is drawn to the woods and would like to stay there longer, various responsibilities prevent him from lingering and admiring the falling snow. The speaker is torn between duty to others—"promises to keep"—and his wish to stay in the dark and lovely woods.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Discuss: Do you think it's important to sometimes take a pause?

“Hope” is the thing with feathers by Emily Dickinson

In this poem, the speaker honors the human capacity for hope. The speaker perceives hope as a bird that resides inside humans. It persists even in the darkest times, singing no matter what life may throw at it.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without
the words
-And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale -
is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

Discuss: Do you like the way that Dickinson describes hope?

O Me! O Life! by Walt Whitman

In this poem, the speaker questions his own existence and asks what the meaning of life is.

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill’d with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew’d,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad,
recurring—
What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

Discuss: Do you agree with Whitman’s meaning of life?