

College Guild  
P.O. Box 6448, Brunswick, ME 04011

# POETRY CLUB

## Unit 1 of 7

*“Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.”*  
- Antoine de Saint-Exupery, French writer and poet

Welcome, graduates of Creative Language. In Poetry Club, we'll be discussing poems you write. We'll also be reading and commenting on poems by other prisoners (including CG students) and by masters of English literature. Here are some of the considerations in reading and writing poetry:

- The poet’s message and how successfully it is conveyed
- Creativity of subject and presentation
- Emotional impact
- Clarity
- Flow
- Choice of format
- Choice of words and phrases
- Meter (the “beat” and number of syllables in a line)
- Rhyme (if appropriate) and smoothness of fit into lines
- Visual presentation
- Line breaks
- Punctuation

Taking these into account, it means you will be discussing how a poet approached his or her work and how powerfully the poem conveys its message or story to you. “To you” is important, because there are usually very different opinions and interpretations of any poem. The feedback from College Guild readers reflects their own take on your work. You don’t have to agree!

The power or humor or beauty of a poem does not come from something as simple as finding words that rhyme. POEMS DO NOT HAVE TO RYHME. In each unit of Poetry Club, you will be writing four original poems. You can decide which one, but for the first four units, only one of them can rhyme.

\*\*\*\*\*

### PART 1 – AN ORIGINAL POEM

**1. Write an original poem, one created specifically for this course, on the subject of your choosing. (Your poem is Appendix A.)**

This first poem is one you should spend a lot of time working on. Consider all the factors listed above and don't write just to get your message down. If you are struggling to fit the whole poem around rhyming words, ask yourself if the poem really needs to rhyme. If one line isn't fitting in, try rewording or rearranging the whole line or stanza. Write, then leave the poem for a few days, come back, and read it. Where can it use improvement? Don't rush it, and don't submit a draft just to get it finished. Your goal is to convey your message / story / image in a way it has never been before!

\*\*\*\*\*

PART 2 – “The Sea”

In Appendix B is a poem, “The Sea”, by John Yarborough who is incarcerated in Texas. I'm using his full name because his poem was included in the publication *Boiled White*.

**2. Go back and review the bulleted list of considerations on page 1. Using this list as a guide, write a full critique of “The Sea”. Be sure to include the following:**

- **What is the poet trying to say?**
- **What is your emotional reaction to this poem (amusement, sadness, boredom, anger, confusion, etc.), and why does it make you feel this way?**
- **What is your opinion of its quality (clarity, choice of words, meter, presentation, impact, message, etc.)? Be specific!**
- **Does the format fit the message?**

**3. Write a poem about mountains, the desert, a jungle, or the sea.**

\*\*\*\*\*

Part 3 – “The Perplexing Time Limits of My Modern Era”

The poem in Appendix C, “the perplexing time limits of my modern era”, was written as part of a College Guild assignment.

**4. Write a full critique of this poem, responding to the same questions listed in #2.**

**5. Write a poem about an appliance or a machine.**

\*\*\*\*\*

Part 4 – “Muckers”

In Appendix D you will find the poem “Muckers” by Carl Sandburg, a poet who portrayed the lives of ordinary men and women in verse. One critic observed that he “turned the Mid-western voice into a sort of music.” Carl Sandburg was one of America’s best known poets; he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1951.

**6. What is the message of this poem?**

**7. What is your emotional reaction to this poem (amusement, sadness, boredom, anger, confusion, etc.), and why does it make you feel that way?**

**8. What makes the poem good? What makes it unique?**

**9. Write a poem about a working man or woman, one who is retired, or one who is unemployed.**

**10. What have you learned from any or all of the three poems you've read in this unit that you can apply to your own work?**

Now, reread the quotation at the beginning of this unit. Ask yourself about all of your poems: Are you repeating yourself when fewer words would result in a stronger impact? Are you over-explaining? Is it necessary for every word in your poem to be there?

Here's another important question to ask yourself. Have you read and reread the other poems carefully? The poems of other poets can inspire and teach you.

End every unit with these questions!

\*\*\*\*\*

*Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes*

## APPENDIX B

## The Sea

Timeless rhythm of the Sea  
 Cold and dark and rolling free  
 Shells of death upon the beach  
 Mysteries beyond man's reach

Eternal secrets in your keep  
 Hiding monsters in the deep  
 Do you know love, pain or fear?  
 Are you God's great salty tear?

Brave men sailing 'cross your face  
 Have found their final resting place  
 Beneath your deep green wavy shroud  
 Cunning foe, deathly proud

Yet womb of life to all on earth  
 Who rose up from your watery birth  
 To inhabit land and sea and air  
 All things fierce and all things fair

*John Yarbrough*

## APPENDIX C

the perplexing time limits of my modern era

oh telephone  
 (stainless steel  
 that lets me see  
 all those who have  
 tried before),  
 let me forget  
 that i am standing near  
 to a man  
 who murdered his best friend  
 (as i call home  
 to stop the reinvention  
 of history and time;  
 to find the single  
 grain of sand  
 upon which all  
 may be built.)  
 this is my  
 fifteen minutes

*David D.*

## APPENDIX D

## MUCKERS

Twenty men stand watching the muckers.  
 Stabbing the sides of the ditch  
 Where clay gleams yellow,  
 Driving the blades of their shovels  
 Deeper and deeper for the new gas mains,  
 Wiping sweat off their faces  
 With red bandanas.

The muckers work on . . . pausing . . . to pull  
 Their boots out of suckholes where they slosh.

Of the twenty looking on  
 Ten murmur, "O, it's a hell of a job,"  
 Ten others, "Jesus, I wish I had the job."

*Carl Sandburg*

\*\*\*\*\*

More Sandburg to enjoy!

## TROTHS

Yellow dust on a bumble  
 bee's wing,  
 Gray lights in a woman's  
 asking eyes,  
 Red ruins in the changing  
 sunset embers:  
 I take you and pile high  
 the memories.  
 Death will break her claws  
 On some I keep.

## THEME IN YELLOW

I spot the hills  
 With yellow balls in autumn  
 I light the prairie cornfields  
 Orange and tawny gold clusters  
 And I am called pumpkins  
 On the last of October  
 When dusk is fallen  
 Children join hands  
 And circle round me  
 Singing ghost songs  
 And love to the harvest moon;  
 I am a jack-o'-lantern  
 With terrible teeth  
 And the children know  
 I am fooling.

## CHOOSE

The single clenched fist lifted and ready,  
Or the open asking hand held out and waiting.

Choose:

For we meet by one or the other.

## HAPPINESS

I asked professors who teach the meaning of life to tell  
me what is happiness.

And I went to famous executives who boss the work of  
thousands of men.

They all shook their heads and gave me a smile as though  
I was trying to fool with them.

And then one Sunday afternoon I wandered out along  
the Desplaines River

And I saw a crowd of Hungarians under the trees with  
their women and children and a keg of beer and an  
accordion.