



Understanding Poetry

Cleanth Brooks , Robert Penn Warren

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The fourth edition of Understanding Poetry is a re-inspection of poetry. Keeping it teachable and flexible, the material allows for full and innocent immersion as well as raising inductive questions to develop critical and analytical skills. Students will be led to understand poetry as a means of imaginatively extending their own experience and indeed, probing the possibilities of the self. This latest incarnation of the landmark text facilitates a thorough study of poetry.

Understanding Poetry Details

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Author : Cleanth Brooks , Robert Penn Warren

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Brent says

This textbook was around the house as I used other textbooks, and I would page through it, though I did not read it cover to cover.

I always liked Penn Warren, and I liked this: I would like to find it again.

J Crossley says

This huge academic book covers all types of poetry from all time periods.

Laboratory Books says

This is the book from which we finally learned something about prosody, after having been allowed to graduate college without a single English course. Enjoyable.

Steph says

Great teacher resource or reference for people who enjoy good poetry and good criticism of poetry as well. Also recommend for college students who are required to critique/explicate poetry; this anthology will give you excellent examples of poetry explications using different poetic devices and techniques.

Dara Salley says

I decided to read this book because I generally claim to dislike poetry. I had a sneaking suspicion that my dislike of poetry was due more to a deficiency in myself rather than a deficiency in the entire genre of poetry. I thought this book might help me develop a deeper appreciation. After reading this book I still can't say I'm a huge fan of poetry. However, I got more from this book than instruction.

I was able to identify my main barrier to appreciating poetry, namely, that I read too fast. When reading novels I tend to barrel through sentences and paragraphs absorbing the main ideas, character descriptions and plot without lingering over every sentence. However, this does not work with poetry because the characters and plots are worth nothing if you don't pay attention to the style and form. Once I slowed down a little, reading each sentence and digesting it before moving on, I got a lot more from the poems. It's a revelation that has also increased my appreciation for the novels I read and helped me absorb more information from scientific journal articles.

In addition to improving my reading comprehension skills, the book caused me to reflect on many larger topics, such as the purpose of art, the relationship of humans to their world and even the meaning of life. I did not expect to get all of that from a poetry textbook.

The book also contains many wonderful poems that I'd never heard of before. I've always been a huge fan of Thomas Hardy's novels, but I didn't realize he was an amazing poet as well. After I return my library book I plan to invest in a personal copy and continue to re-read it for years to come.

Stephen says

I knew this in an earlier edition co-edited with Robert Penn Warren which was used in my high school English class. Good on the bookshelf for its application of New Criticism in the 1960s. If you just want an anthology of American and English poetry this has less poetry per page than one and more commentary.

Lady Jane says

Cleanth Brooks is famous for making the interesting claim that the structure of a poem or tragedy is similar to the structure of a kite. In order for a kite to function properly it must include its tail. One would imagine that the tail of a kite would weigh the kite down, but paradoxically, it is a requirement that allows the kite to rise to unprecedented heights. The same is true for a work of literature as shall be henceforth explained. Irony in literature works in the same manner as the tail to the kite. As a result of adding irony and paradox to a work, instead of simply applying an ordinary meaning to a particular linguistic statement, irony opens the gateway to a variety of interpretations to the statement, and it is this which makes poetry and tragedy enjoyable to the reader. Contemplating the complexities of an ambiguous meaning in an ironical statement found in a text leads to a heightened perception of how it is shaped by the context, as well as how it affects the whole work. Therefore, it is irony that is the main structuring principle in literature and poetry because it is irony which gives life and flavor to a work of art.

Brooks implies that there is no point in tragedy if there is no irony which to decipher in the same way that there is no point to a puzzle if it is already put together. Likewise, the irony of the kite is that its tail is supposed to weigh it down, but does not. In fact, it is what gives it support and even serves to propel the kite even higher, just as the "counterthrust" that Brooks talks about gives more force to the "thrust." It is the harmonization of opposites that composes the organic whole. Contradictions only remain as such until the reader applies his critical thinking and explication skills and can then understand them as parts of the organic whole. Every unit of the literary work is crucial in finding the text's meaning, in assisting the text's growth, and in balancing the text's tensions. Brooks utilizes this metaphor to exemplify that which illustrates the substance of organic units in a text. He illustrates this organic unity of literature by focusing on the function of irony in its structure, as is implied by the appropriate title of his essay.

Irony, paradoxes, contradictions, and "counterthrusts to the thrust" create literary situation that set up a certain tone and mood for the reader. It is irony which makes a work of art delectable to its consumer, and metaphors which paint a agreeable picture in the reader's mind to make the work more interesting. Brooks claims that "The poet wants to 'say' something. Why, then, doesn't he say it directly and forthrightly? Why is he willing to say it only through his metaphors? Through his metaphors, he risks saying it partially and obscurely, and risks saying nothing at all. But the risk must be taken, for direct statement leads to abstraction and threatens to take us out of poetry altogether" (758). The poet could have adopted the alternative path and say what he needs to say in a direct manner rather than in a manner embellished by metaphors and irony, but that would have literally squeezed the artfulness of the poem. Irony focuses on what is real and what is believed to be real. It is the co-existence of two opposing forces that are metaphorically represented, that exist in such a way that they create harmony like the ying and the yang in the popular harmonizing symbol.

An ironical and even paradoxical level of meaning produces the wholeness and integrity of a literary work. No matter how disparate or fragmented is its language and its surface meaning, there is an unstated layer of meaning concealing itself beneath the former which holds the work of art together and gives it the sense and coherence of a literary masterpiece. As with verbal irony, the stated and the unstated meanings may conflict only initially, but ultimately they combine to produce an integrated and meaningful whole.

Given the complexity of the ideal literary work that Brooks prescribes, it is not surprising that he was such a strong proponent of close readings, critical thinking, and explications. Given the arcane nature of the ideal poem, the double entendre of its metaphors, and the irony of its manifold situations, there may be no other alternative but to employ analytical methods and explication tactics. Yet, despite all of the intricacies of an ideal work, Brooks would claim that if it were not for the balance of its seeming opposites and metaphors which to decipher, there simply would be no greatness to the so-called "great" work of art. The tail of the kite does not bring the kite down, in fact it propels it. So does irony and contradiction to a literary work. Just like the kite paradoxically cannot do without its tail, neither can a literary masterpiece do without its dose of irony.

Nicholas says

Understanding Poetry provides a good anthology for those who wish to read a variety of poets. The analysis by Brooks is helpful to understand the methodology of the New Critics, and each section guides the reader in a holistic approach to critical thought concerning each poem.

Peggy says

Goodreads doesn't have my book, but this is the closest version. Mine is the THIRD rather than the FOURTH Edition, and both Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren are acknowledged as editors / compilers. Perhaps Warren was not around by the time Brooks did the 4th Edition on his own.

Samet says

?iiri anlamak ne kolay ya. Ehe.

Ariadna73 says

I read this book not because I had the faintest hope for ever understanding such a complicated matter as poetry, but because I thought that the selection of poems in the book would be sufficiently interesting and beautiful o enjoy some reading without having to dig it out too much. I am not totally disappointed by the author's selection, but I recon now that this book is more intended for students and teachers of "serious" literary matters, rather than for an amateur poetry reader.

Here are the cover, editorial info and the first page of the preface from the book I read. This is a thick volume, but it is printed in thin paper with soft cardboard covers, so you can easily keep with you in your

student's backpack.

A fraction of the contents. Here you can see that the contents is much more dense than the intended reader I was:

Some of the first works of the book:

A long and full-of-words poem by R. Kipling:

"Elegy" by Thomas Gray (I tried hard. I really did. I promise)

Cleopatra's Lament by W. Shakespeare:

"In time of need" by William Stafford:

"Lucifer in Starlight" by George Meredith

A I said, and I repeat it now: I really tried to understand, and I think I did a little... a teeny tiny little. I think this book will work better if I take the accompanying class.

I also have a blog! Link here:

<http://lunairereadings.blogspot.com>
