

To the Teacher

There may be no greater challenge, or joy, for the elementary classroom teacher than teaching young children to understand and love poetry. Few areas of high intellect are so inspiring, or have been the victims of such disrespectful stereotypes. Poetry is seen in preposterous terms, as unmanly, overemotional, and spontaneous. People think that poems are supposed to be pretty.

The truth is that poetry is a great intellectual discipline that also creates works of art, and that these works of art represent some of humanity's best efforts to understand the truths of the world.

The Music of the Hemispheres focuses on the traditional elements and techniques of poetry: formal stanzas, rhyme schemes, traditional feet, alliteration—even though they are not always the most salient elements of modern poetry. This may seem stubbornly traditional unless you look as deeply into modern poems as we are looking into traditional poems, for it is not that modern poets do not know or employ these devices; it is that they subtly employ these devices, and hide them under a thin covering of seeming irregularity. But silently, with genius, the traditional techniques are assembled, just under the surface. A perfect example comes from Sylvia Plath, whose poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree” describes the troubled interior landscape of her spirit. Plath wrote:

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary
The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue. . . .
Fummy, spiritous mists inhabit this place.

Ah, we think. No end rhyme. No regular meter. No alliteration. She appears to have just written the lines spontaneously, from her feelings. Well, no, look again. The first line is primarily dactylic, the second line is primarily iambic, and the incredible third line is almost perfect, evil trochees; but for