



# To the Teacher



## POETRY, PLATO, AND THE PROBLEM OF BEAUTY

The aim of *Poetry, Plato, and the Problem of Beauty* is to bring three powerful components of intellectual content to a mutual focus, creating a rigorous curricular experience that is extraordinarily academic.

### POETICS

First, **poetics**. There is a need to go very far beyond the limits of typical texts, so far as poetic techniques are concerned. We cannot be content with the most introductory terms, with merely scratching the surface of poetics, from fear of driving away those who feel intimidated by the complexity of poetry. This rich array of levels of techniques that we call *poetry* is precisely what attracts us to it; it is its very complexity that provides the freedom to create with language. As scholars, we are less able to notice devices when we don't know their names. So the attempt with poetics is to educate students far beyond what may be typical, to give them a serious

academic foundation for the understanding and appreciation of poetry. Within this effort, we take the opportunity to introduce students to great poets and classic poems, some of which are centuries old.

We cannot imagine that we will be teaching students to become poets, any more than we expect every math student to become an architect or engineer. We do seek to give them an elaborate academic exposure to poetics, enabling them to perceive poetics deeply, and to apply it even in their prose. We also seek to disabuse students of the stereotypes that afflict poetry: that poetry is a pretty sentences with rhymes at the ends, to mention just one.

## BEAUTY

Second, **beauty**. Research consistently shows that talented students benefit when academic content is developed within the framework of an organizing concept. In this case, the concept of beauty is used to integrate the questions, terms, and examples of the book into a whole, with the Socratic purpose of exploring the concept to see what can be learned. The concept of beauty is especially appropriate in this context, since so many poems are themselves beautiful, since so many poems are about exploring the beauty of the world, and since so many poets have admitted that the beauty of the world and of poetry in response to it, is their primary motivation as poets. If we add to this the fact that the concept of beauty is particularly profound and enigmatic, we have a challenging conceptual basis that is difficult to improve upon. It is in this sense that the word *problem* is used in the title; beauty is a problem in the best sense—a challenging and thought-provoking concept that has depth, rich elements, and the allure of serious difficulty.

## PLATO

Finally, **Plato**. If we are going to explore a concept in elaborate depth, as we do in this book, there is no better intellectual spice to throw into the mixture than the approach of Plato. Plato is simply the single most influential thinker in intellectual history, and there is good reason that this is so. From Plato the western world acquired its ceaseless inquiry, its standpoint of determined open-ended dialogue. Plato is the antithesis of dogma, the apotheosis of the open mind. Not from Plato will we receive

quick answers, and then drive away. Plato means think, think, think. And then, if you still aren't sure, tell the truth and say so.

It is the insistence on truth that Plato established as the standard of validity, and this insistence—even if it means that the truth is that we don't know—now permeates all of our intellectual endeavors at their best.

The attitude of this book is Socratic, which is another word to describe the philosophy of Plato. The book proposes a great number of open-ended discussions, with no preference for what the answer might be. There is no hidden agenda, only an enthusiasm for discussing what beauty is and whether any of its properties can be distinguished. As is the case in many programs that feature Socratic thinking, the plan is that after reading and studying, we open a question for student discussion, with the teacher being a fair moderator. At no point would the teacher begin steering students toward a supposed right answer; in fact, the questions relating to beauty are so challenging that they defy the simplistic idea of a “right answer.” With any luck, the outcome of a discussion will be that some students feel persuaded of one possibility, while others are leaning toward another; this is perfect, since that divided situation inherently galvanizes students to keep thinking, to think with greater intensity, and to take the question more seriously.

I have included passages from a number of Plato's *Dialogues* in this text, usually as isolated ideas that will (I hope) complicate and extend the discussion. If, however, you and your students feel inclined to read one of Plato's *Dialogues*, then there is only one that I would recommend for the purpose, and that is the *Apology*. There are a number of factors that make other choices less appropriate, but the *Apology* is an outstanding introduction to the philosophy of Plato. It is the first one to read.

And so let us swing for a triple-whammy: first, the great academics of poetry; second, one of civilization's most meaningful and important concepts; and third, an introduction to the classic founder of western thought. Yep, that should do it.



## CONDUCTING SOCRATIC DISCUSSIONS

Since *Poetry, Plato, and the Problem of Beauty* incorporates open-ended questions so extensively, it is worthwhile to delineate the elements of Socratic discussions. Even though these types of questions should be the most exciting of all for students, it is possible to go awry, and to conduct a discussion in a way that may seem to be, but is not actually, Socratic.

Every true Socratic discussion must be grounded in the Socratic paradox, sometimes called the Socratic wisdom: I know that I know nothing. What this means, as the greatest thinkers of history have almost unanimously confirmed, is that the world is a most perplexing place. The great questions that absorbed the attention of the first philosophers (What is justice, what is truth, what is beauty...) still do not have decisive answers. Just imagine what it would mean to the world if we understood things like justice, love, and hate enough that we could end war, end divorce, end the problems that divide humanity from itself. But millennia after Plato's death, we still do not have the answers to Plato's questions.

What we do have is his wisdom: that the pursuit of truth gives meaning to life, that perplexity is real, that an honest admission of ignorance is starkly superior to the shallow pretense of knowing. Exploration and integrity.

The implication of this wisdom for the classroom is that in our curricula we do not stop with verifiable facts; we move through what is (apparently) known, on to what we *think* we know, and on into what we still do *not* know.

For any of the open-ended questions in this text, a proper procedure for the teacher would be something like:

- 1) Have the class read the appropriate text carefully.
- 2) Review the supporting details and terms together.
- 3) Read the open-ended question together for the first time.
- 4) Give students, either alone or in very small groups, time to reflect.

- 5) Have students write down their preliminary hypotheses or reflections.
- 6) Discuss the question as a whole group, letting students present their thoughts.
- 7) The teacher moderates but maintains permanent neutrality in the discussion.

The key is that the teacher does not have a personal position in the discussion. If the teacher privately views one answer as right, and begins to steer the students to that conclusion, the Socratic openness is lost, and “wrong” students will begin to lose their unencumbered enjoyment of the discussion. The teacher must simply appreciate all of the angles, let the discussion go where it will, and probe for clarification from everyone. The teacher must also establish the rules before the discussion, making sure that everyone understands that all suggestions and views will be respectfully received, and no ridicule or negative behavior will be allowed. During the discussion, the teacher monitors this affective element, and leads the way in welcoming and appreciating all views.

What if the discussion ends with the students sharply divided?

Good.

Once, we were discussing whether, in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa was really a bug or not. Half the class thought so, the rest not. Students were citing the text to make their cases. Finally, I had students change seats; if you think Gregor is a bug, sit on this side... If you become persuaded that the other side is right, get up and move. We kept debating. Once in a while, a student would get this startled look, look at me, and get up and move to the other side.

After two days, I still had a divided class. I told them that the question would be on their final exam, and that by then they had better have a good argument to make. I got wonderful essays on the exam.

Socratic discussions don’t just *seem* (“Nay, madam,” said Hamlet, “I know not seems.”) to be open-ended, with the teacher finally guiding students to what was all along the right answer. Socratic discussions truly are open-ended. They often stay open-ended. They tend to be deep questions, and to be just as open at the end of the discussion as they were at the beginning. They are, in fact, Socratic.

## THINGS TO TALK ABOUT AND THINK ABOUT

Many of these questions are open-ended, Socratic questions.

### Sound

1. Are some consonants more beautiful than others?
2. Why might you choose perfect rhymes rather than the alternatives?
3. When might intense assonance be better than intense consonance?
4. What vowels and consonants suggest the sounds of the sea?

### Meter

1. Why might someone use dactyls instead of trochees?
2. Why do we say that iambics sound natural and normal?
3. Why are entire poems not made of spondees?
4. Why would Shakespeare have used trochees for the evil chant in *Macbeth*?

### Stanza

1. Is the pure quatrains-couplet stanza form of an English sonnet beautiful?
2. Why do you think so many love poems use the ballad stanza?
3. Which is more challenging to write: ottava rima or rime royal?
4. Would it be better if there were no stanza forms to limit our creativity?

### Figures of Speech

1. What is the difference between a symbol and a metaphor?
2. What is the difference between synecdoche and metonymy? If you were going to abolish one of the two, which one would you keep? Why?
3. If I we said that apostrophe is old-fashioned and would no longer be permitted, would you agree or argue to retain it? Why?
4. If you were going to personify a jar of peanut butter, what would the character be like? What about a perfectly still lake at sunrise? Think of something else that would make a good object or natural phenomenon to personify, and explain its characteristics.



## THINGS FOR STUDENTS TO DO

### Sound

1. List the vowels and consonants, then try to sort them into two groups, one to use in a poem about something beautiful, and the other group to use in a poem about something scary.
2. Write two quatrains about a branch scratching on a screen window in the moonlight.

### Meter

1. For each of the four traditional meters (iamb, trochee, dactyl, anapest), personify the meter. Give each meter a name, and a behavior that is appropriate to its metrical qualities. You can add the spondee if you like.
2. Write a rime royal or a sonnet, then try to rewrite the poem, but instead of iambs use either dactyls or anapests. Then write a paragraph explaining what it was like to try to make that change, and what it taught you.

### Stanza

1. Write a dialogue between two creatures. One speaks in heroic couplets, and the other speaks in ballad stanzas (but only two lines at a time). Then write a paragraph trying to describe how the two styles make the two characters seem different.
2. Write a funny love sonnet, with funny characters, such as: the sonnet is from a Jello to a grape. A bicycle to a toad. You decide!

### Figures of Speech

1. New rule: in the universe to come, only two figures of speech are allowed. Which two figures should survive? Write a short essay (introduction, body, conclusion) explaining and defending your decision.
2. Write a short play between two characters: one can never use a figure of speech, the other can speak only in figures of speech. The situation results in both characters becoming completely confused.

## QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

This review may be copied and distributed to students.

1. The words *bough* and *tough* are an example of:  
a. end rhyme  
b. eye-rhyme  
c. internal rhyme  
d. alliteration
2. The words *crash* and *plop* are examples of:  
a. end rhyme  
b. eye-rhyme  
c. alliteration  
d. onomatopoeia
3. The two words *livid* and *lived* are an example of:  
a. apophany  
b. amphisbaenic rhyme  
c. elided rhyme  
d. reverse rhyme
4. When we begin words with the same sound, like *smash*, *soup*, and *soul*, that is:  
a. eye-rhyme  
b. alliteration  
c. onomatopoeia  
d. end rhyme
5. A line of iambic tetrameter has:  
a. one foot  
b. four feet  
c. three feet  
d. five feet
6. The words *meet* and *moot* are an example of:  
a. apophany  
b. feminine rhyme  
c. onomatopoeia  
d. eye-rhyme
7. A trochee has:  
a. two unstressed syllables  
b. two stressed syllables  
c. the first syllable stressed  
d. the second syllable stressed
8. The words *survive* and *career* are examples of:  
a. iambs  
b. dactyls  
c. trochees  
d. anapests