

# Activities for Teaching Poetry

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## Introduction

Poetry is probably the most practised and least understood of any creative enterprises. Most teachers may have realised how complex good poetry can be and how difficult it is to know about all the various techniques that can be used for teaching poetry. It is indispensable that the sense of wonder and enthusiasm should be in the forefront in enjoying poetry. However, poetry is too often taught under duress for both the teacher and student. It is probably because we at once jump to dig out and analyse the hidden meaning of poetry which not only destroys its joy but also makes it more complicated.

Keeping this fact in view we are trying to suggest some simple and practical ideas for teaching poetry at higher secondary level so that the teachers can encourage young readers to enjoy poetry with greater pleasure and understanding. This article develops some possible activities and tasks for teaching the poem 'On the Vanity of Earthly Greatness' by Arthur Guiterman which are mostly based on the format provided by Gillian Lazar in his book *Literature and Language Teaching (1993)*. Though the same steps and activities may not be strictly useful for all poems, we expect that they will give the teachers an insight for teaching poetry by providing them with some generalisable procedures and techniques which they can adapt in their own poetry class.

## Abstract

*Literature is a rich source of language teaching. Among the different genres of literature, poetry is the most difficult one because of deviant use of language. It also includes metaphoric and ironical meaning of language. Thus, activities for teaching should inculcate multiple aspects of language used in the poetry. This article presents activities for teaching poetry at higher secondary level.*

## Pre-reading activities

### A. Stimulating students' interest

#### Activity 1

#### **Predicting the theme from the picture**

Show the pictures given in the activity 4 below removing the detail information in the class and ask the students to guess who/what they

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are. Help them to recognize each of the pictures and say that Charlemagne and Julius Caesar were great people in the past and mastodons and grizzly bears were strong animals.

Now ask the students what they have in common. Then write their responses on the board. Ask them which common adjectives can be used to describe each of them. Their responses might be *big, strong, powerful, fearful, awesome, great* etc. Ask them if they are great or powerful any more.

#### Activity 2

##### **Predicting the theme from the title**

Tell the students that they are going to read the poem 'On the Vanity of Earthly Greatness'. Then ask the students to guess/predict the theme of the poem from its title and write their predictions on the board. Finally, tell them that the theme of the poem might be 'nothing can last forever'.

##### **B. Providing the historical or cultural background**

#### Activity 3

##### **Reading text on historical/cultural background**

Tell the class that the poem was written by Arthur Guiterman. Then give them in groups the following flashcard that contains information about Guiterman and ask them to read.

Arthur Guiterman, born of American parents in Vienna, Austria on November 20, 1871 graduated from the college of the city of New York in 1891. The editor of the *Woman's Home Companion* and the *Literary Digest* he cofounded the Poetry Society of America in 1910. Best known for his humorous poems dealing with American history and legends, Guiterman is the author of over a dozen collections of poems, including *Betel Nuts*, *What They Say in Hindustan* (1907). The *Laughing Music* (1915), *Wildword Fables* (1927) and *Gaily the Troubadour* (1936). On the *Vanity of Earthly Greatness* is taken from *Gaily the Troubadour*.

In the light of this information about Guiterman ask them to tell what they think the poem 'On the Vanity of Earthly Greatness' is going to be about? Ask them what they can expect in the poem and write their responses on the board.

##### **C. Helping students with the language of the poem**

#### Activity 4

Tell the class that they are going to read about two great people in the past and two great animals which are mentioned in the poem. Then give them the following flashcards in groups and ask them to read.



##### **Mastodon**

Mastodons were elephant-like giant animals. They disappeared from North America about 10,000 years ago. Mastodons were furry like woolly mammoths, and similar in height at roughly three meters at the shoulder. The tusks of the mastodon sometimes exceeded five meters in length, and were nearly horizontal. The tusks were probably used to break branches and twigs and to fight with each other.



##### **Grizzly bear**

The grizzly bear is a powerful bear that lives in the uplands of western North America. Grizzly bears reach weights of 180–680 kilograms and stand 2.44 m tall on their hind legs.; the male is on average 1.8 times as heavy as the female.

In spite of their massive size, these bears can run at speeds of up to fifty-five kilometres per hour (thirty-five miles per hour).



### Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar, born 100 BC in Italy was a great Roman general and powerful dictator. A very powerful leader with a huge army under his command, he defeated many countries and became the sole ruler. He was stabbed to death outside the building where the senate of Rome met.



### Charlemagne

Charlemagne the Just, born about 742 probably in Aachen, Germany was the king of the Franks who united Western Europe and established Holy Roman Empire. He built magnificent palaces and cathedral. His palaces were centre for learning. He ruled for 40 years and died in 814 at the age of 72.

### While-reading activities

#### Activity 5

Give the students a jumbled version of the poem as below and ask them to put it together again in groups.

#### On the Vanity of Earthly Greatness

Is ferric oxide known as rust.  
Great Caesar's bust is on the shelf,

The tusks that clashed in mighty brawls  
Was feared by all is now a rug.

The sword of Charlemagne the Just  
And I don't feel so well myself.

The grizzly bear whose potent hug  
Of mastodons, are billiard balls.

- Arthur Guiterman

Now, ask them to turn over the poem in their book and compare their version with the original poem. Ask them if their version is same as or different from the original. Ask them to tell the reason why they ordered the poem in the way that they did.

#### Activity 6

Ask the students to read the poem and find words for each of these definitions.

- long pointed teeth as in the elephant.
- a game for two people played with cues and three balls on a long table covered with green cloth.
- large extinct mammals like elephants.
- large variety of brown bear found in North America and North Russia.
- a powerful Roman Statesman and general.
- a king who united Western Europe.
- a stone or metal model of a person's head, shoulders and chest.

After they complete, they can be asked to compare their answer with their partners.

#### Activity 7

Ask the students to read the poem again and find synonyms for each of these words.

- fight
- powerful
- spear
- embrace

#### Activity 8

Tell them that column A below has four things of great importance in the past which have been compared to the trivial things at present in column B. Then ask them to match.

A	B
the tusks of mastodons	rug
the sword of Charlemagne	bust
the grizzly bear	rust
Julius Caesar	billiard balls

They can be asked to compare their answer to see if they have matched correctly. Ask them what might be the intention or purpose of the poet in comparing the great things with the trivial things. Write their responses on the board. After that ask them what figure of speech this type of comparison is. If the responses are not correct, explain as below.

*The poem involves four comparisons between things which are different or unlike each other. This type of figure of speech is called metaphor.*

#### Activity 9

Ask the students under which column above A or B does the narrator/poet keep himself. Why does he keep himself in column A, that is, with the great things, not in column B with the trivial things? Then write their responses on the board and explain as below.

*The narrator is trying to convey a message that nothing great lasts forever. Therefore, it is vain to pride yourself on earthly greatness. On the other hand, the narrator is keeping himself in the rank of great people like Charlemagne and Julius Caesar. This is irony. Irony results from the gap between the expressed meaning and intended meaning. By telling other people not to boast the narrator is boasting. It's his vanity. The tone of the poem is ironical towards all who pride themselves on earthly greatness.*

#### Activity 10

Ask the students to read the poem aloud with appropriate rhyme and rhythm and ask them to find two rhyming words in the poem for each of the following.

falls	must	mug	elf
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Ask the students if they know the rhyme scheme of the poem. If incorrect answer comes, explain that AA, BB, CC, DD is the rhyme scheme of the poem. Ask them to read aloud again to find which sounds get repeated frequently. Write their answers on the board and ask what the effect of the repetition of /t/ /d/ and /r/ sounds in the poem is.

#### Activity 11

Tell the students that they are now going to discuss and answer some questions from the poem in group and give them the following questions:

- a. Which stanza compares the tusks of mastodons to billiard balls?
- b. Why does the poet compare the grizzly bear with a rug in the third stanza?
- c. Why does not the narrator feel so well in the last stanza?
- d. What four great things are mentioned in the poem? Does their greatness still exist?

Now ask them to write their answers and compare in pairs.

#### Post-reading activities

##### Activity 12

Give the students the following statements about the possible underlying meanings of the poem and ask them to decide which ones are true or false.

- a. The poem makes us realize that nothing is more powerful than time.
- b. The poem tries to glorify human greatness.
- c. Humour in the poem arises from its ironical tone.
- d. The poem presents a serious subject matter in a playful way.
- e. The narrator of the poem is not vain at all.
- f. The message of the poem is nothing lasts forever.

##### Activity 13

Give the students the following critical comments and ask them to find which is more convincing and why.

*'On the Vanity of Earthly Greatness' uses four different metaphors to convey the message that 'nothing lasts forever' or 'nothing good can stay'. Great emperors will eventually crumble to nothing. Powerful mastodons and grizzly bears in the past are now no more powerful. Time devours everything;*

time destroys everything. So it is vain to boast upon anything.

The poem captures the readers' attention with its deceptively simple rhyme scheme, that is, AA, BB, CC and DD. The poem has a fun and somewhat comic feel or tone brought by this rhyme scheme. The poet seems to be trying to give a serious message in a playful way. The poem gets straight to the point and rhymes nicely.

'On the Vanity of Earthly Greatness' uses four impressive comparisons to give its message to the readers that the objects of art like the sword of Charlemagne and the bust of Julius Caesar are everlasting. Such great things are to be preserved forever.

#### Activity 14

Ask the students to discuss in small group what could be the possible summary of the poem. Then ask them to present it orally.

#### Activity 15

Call 8 students to the front of the class and give the pictures of Charlemagne, Julius Caesar, Mastodons and grizzly bear to four of them. Similarly, give the flashcards of rug, rust, billiard balls and bust of Julius Caesar to four of the rest and ask them to find their partner when you say 'rust', 'grizzly bear' etc.

#### Activity 16

Ask the students to practise reading the poem aloud with suitable mime and gestures.

### Follow-up activities

- a. Ask the students to paraphrase each stanza in their own language.
- b. Ask them to write an essay on 'The Vanity of Human Greatness'.

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