

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Poetry of Place

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “Hands”

Sign-manual, *n.*

1. A personal signature, especially that of a sovereign or king
2. A hand gesture for conveying a command or message

From “Carmel Point”

Deface, *v.*

To mar, spoil, or disfigure

Milch cow, *n.*

A cow kept for milk

Pristine, *adj.*

From the earliest period or state; exuding original purity

Begin each day’s lesson by reading the poems aloud in class.

For some poets, the place where they live is an essential element of their work. In William Wordsworth’s poetry, for instance, we encounter the beautiful Lake District of England, and in Robert Frost’s we experience the New England countryside. Such poets look closely at the living landscape around them, seeking to capture the sights, sounds, and human drama found there.

To understand the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, one must know where he lived. In 1941, in a rare public lecture, Jeffers described the rocky coast where he lived as “not only the scene of my narrative verse but also the chief actor in it.” Assuming that many people in the Washington, DC, audience had never seen Carmel, California, or its surrounding area, Jeffers offered some descriptive details. “The mountains,” he said, “rise sheer from the ocean; they are cut by deep gorges and are heavy with brush and forest. Remember, this is Central, not Southern California. There are no orange-groves here, and no oil-wells, and Los Angeles is far away. These mountains pasture a few cattle and many deer; hawk and vulture, eagle and heron fly here, as well as the sea-birds and shore-birds; and there are clouds and sea-fog in summer, and fine storms in winter.”



Discussion Activities

Read “Carmel Point,” “Bixby’s Landing,” and “Hands” aloud with your class. Using a map of California, locate Carmel, Bixby Landing, and Tassajara Creek, and study the Monterey County coastline. Have students draw an illustration of the general landscape, using the poems as their inspiration. Students will then research some images and see if they are similar to the illustrations. Did the poems clearly capture what students found in the images?

What does Jeffers see in these three settings? In “Hands” and “Bixby’s Landing,” what do the hand prints and the cable car have in common? What message might they communicate?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to think about the place where they live. Identify its most prominent features. What words describe its distinctive mood? Using Jeffers for inspiration, have students write an essay or poem about their home. To extend the exercise, have them add an interesting character to the setting.



Homework

In the Reader’s Guide, read the introduction to Jeffers on page 3 and his biography on pages 4-6. Read three poems by Jeffers: “Night Without Sleep,” “The Answer,” and “The Day Is a Poem.” Make a list of all the historical references in these poems.