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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Rhythm

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “Continent’s End”

Ground-swell, *n.*

A broad, deep rolling of the sea due to a distant storm or gale

Migration, *n.*

The act of moving from one country or region to another

Insolent, *adj.*

Rude; contemptuous

A poem’s meaning can be found within its structural, stylistic, and verbal components. One such component is *rhythm*, long regarded as a distinguishing feature of verse. Rhythm is created by the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poetic line. Metrical poetry follows a predetermined pattern (such as iambic pentameter, which has five regular beats in a ten-syllable line); *free verse* is open to rhythmic invention. When reading or reciting poetry, rhythm can also be influenced by a variety of other factors, including rhyme (when present), tempo, cadence, and inflection.

Jeffers occasionally wrote poems that employed traditional rhythms. Most of his work, however, obeyed rhythmic laws of his own devising. Read aloud this statement by Jeffers: “My feeling is for the number of beats to the line; there is a quantitative element too in which the unstressed syllables have part; the rhythm from many sources—physics—biology—the beat of blood, the tidal environments of life to which life is formed—also a desire for singing emphasis that prose does not have.”



Discussion Activities

Ask students to discuss how Jeffers’s statement on rhythm helps them understand his poems “Continent’s End” and “Gray Weather.”

Ask the three previously chosen students to take turns reading either “Continent’s End” or “Gray Weather” out loud—one student should read fast, one at normal speed, and one slowly. Which tempo sounds right? Why?

To further explore this, use the NEA’s Poetry Out Loud Web site (www.neapoetryoutloud.org) as a resource and stage a recitation contest in your classroom.



Writing Exercise

In the last lines of “Continent’s End,” Jeffers identifies the ultimate source of his sense of rhythm. What is it? Look at your own writing. What is the ultimate source of your own rhythms? What do people commonly feel, hear, or see that might contribute to a shared sense of rhythmic repetition? Have students write a brief essay that compares Jeffers’s rhythm to other sources.



Homework

Read two poems by Jeffers: “Hurt Hawks” and “Rock and Hawk.” Then read Handout Three, “Rock and Hawk,” in this guide. Look up the word “hawk” in a dictionary of symbols, or use several websites to find information about hawk symbolism.