

10

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Poet?

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “To the Stone-Cutters”

Oblivion, *n.*

The state of being forgotten

Scale, *v.*

To lose layers; to wear away

Blithe, *adj.*

Without thought or regard;
heedless

Poets articulate and explore the mystery of daily life in the context of the human struggle for meaning, purpose, and value. The writer’s voice, style, and symbols inform the *themes* of the work. A great poem is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Robinson Jeffers once said: “Poetry has been regarded as a refuge from life, where dreams may heal the wounds of reality; and as an ornament of life; and as a diversion, mere troubadour amusement; and poetry has been in fact refuge and ornament and diversion, but poetry in its higher condition is none of these; not a refuge but an intensification, not an ornament but essential, not a diversion but an incitement . . .”

?? Discussion Activities

In “To the Stone-Cutters” and “Love the Wild Swan,” Jeffers expresses both humility and pride in regard to his work. Discuss the thoughts about poetry that inspire these emotions.

Read the Jeffers quote above to the class. Can students think of examples of other poems (or lyrics of popular songs) that provide refuge, ornament, or diversion? Do they agree with Jeffers that poetry can offer more than that? What does he mean by such words as “intensification,” “essential,” and “incitement”? Are these, in fact, characteristics of great poetry? Can students provide examples of poems that possess these characteristics? Based on his own criteria, is Jeffers a great poet?



Writing Exercise

These ten lessons have highlighted only some of Jeffers’s poems and beliefs. Have students write a short essay that explains one central theme or major feature of his work. Discuss the theme or feature in detail, referring to specific quotations from more than two poems to support the argument. Which poem illustrates the theme or feature most effectively? Why?



Homework

Jeffers directs our attention to the nobility and beauty of nature. Have students write a paragraph describing Jeffers’s legacy in the twenty-first century.