

Teachable MOMENTS

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“Outsider” Poet Kay Ryan Goes from Poetry Club Reject to Poet Laureate

To the Teacher

In October 2008, college remedial English teacher Kay Ryan began her year as U.S. Poet Laureate. She has come a long way from the rejection she got when she applied to the UCLA Poetry Club as a college student. Despite her reputation as an “outsider” and a moderately reclusive poet, Ryan brings warmth, humor, and a down-to-earth style to her work. She is also razor sharp. Use this Teachable Moment to introduce students to the creative force of the nation’s newest Poet Laureate.



Photo by Christina Koci Hernandez

National Language Arts Standards Addressed

- Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

Options for Using Student Activities and Worksheets

- For Question #8, you may wish to divide students into groups and have each group select one of the four poems listed (or others you wish to assign).
- In order to help students warm up for the Poetry Writing Challenge assignment, consider selecting 4–5 idioms or clichés in advance. Have students brainstorm possible poem ideas. Alternatively, divide students into groups. Have each group pick an idiom and develop a short poem or 1–2 stanzas about it.

Teacher Background Information

In July 2008, the Library of Congress appointed California native and college remedial English teacher Kay Ryan the nation’s 16th Poet Laureate. As she stepped into her role, she received a stipend of \$35,000; an office with a nice view of the Capitol; and a mission: to do something, anything to help the “poetic impulse” of Americans. As the new Laureate, Ryan joined an impressive tradition. Past Laureates include Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, William Carlos Williams, Billy Collins, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

To some, Ryan is an unlikely choice and voice for the role of the nation’s biggest poetry cheerleader. Known as a fairly reclusive poet, Ryan describes herself as a consummate “mono-tasker” who loves quiet and simple routines, an outsider uncomfortable with popular

Teacher Background Information (continued)

poetic conventions and practices whose student application to the UCLA Poetry Club was rejected. But poetry wouldn't let her mind rest. In her 30s, during an introspective 4,000-mile cross-country bicycle tour, she decided to commit herself to it fully. She worked quietly and persistently at it until her 50s before accolades started to flow.

Reviewers describe Ryan's poems as "playful gems" and "compact, exhilarating, strange affairs." She is known for brevity—for poems "barely an inch wide" and no more

than 20 lines. She compares her approach to cartooning. Her poems provide a simple outline but are not "overly elaborated" so the reader can fill in the empty spaces. Though short, they are dense or wound tight, and can be quite complex. Favorite inspirations include clichés (the elephant in the room, when the other shoe drops, early bird gets the worm), which she turns inside out or connects to deeper issues. She also likes to bring fresh eyes to familiar objects and ideas such as ladders, cats, and miracles.

Web Sites and Online References

Library of Congress: About the Poet Laureate, Kay Ryan
http://www.loc.gov/poetry/laureate_current.html

Christian Science Monitor: Poet Kay Ryan—A Profile
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0825/p25s01-bogn.html>

NYTimes.com: The Biggest Little Poems
http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/18/books/review/18kirby.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

NYTimes.com: Paper Cuts—Stray Questions for Kay Ryan
<http://papercuts.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/19/stray-questions-for-kay-ryan/>

NPR: Poet Kay Ryan on Words, Writing
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92721707>

Salon.com: Kay Ryan—Poetry for the Rest of Us
<http://www.salon.com/weekly/ryan.html>

New York Times: Selected Poems by Kay Ryan
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/17/books/17poet-extra.html?_r=1&fta=y&oref=slogin

Includes: "A Cat/A Future," "Blandeur," "Home to Roost," and "Things Shouldn't Be So Hard"

The Well or the Cup—Poem by Kay Ryan—OnPoint
<http://www.onpointradio.org/shows/2008/07/poet-kay-ryan/>

The Best of It—poems by Kay Ryan—Writer's Almanac
<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2005/09/12>

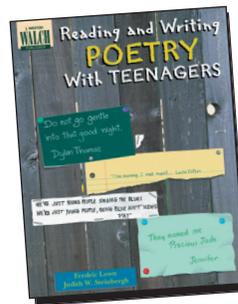
Using English: Dictionary of English Idioms
<http://www.usingenglish.com/reference/idioms/>

Poets.org: Kay Ryan
<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/352?gclid=CJbf3oeVY5YCFQVxFQodsn5Ixw>

Poetry Foundation: Kay Ryan (includes several poems and audio)
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=80608>



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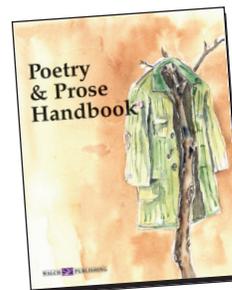


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Worksheet: From Poetry Club Reject to Poet Laureate

In October 2008, Kay Ryan began her tenure as the nation's newest Poet Laureate—not bad for someone rejected by the UCLA Poetry Club as a student. Use your Web resources to learn more about Kay Ryan and her new role of Laureate.

1. Who is Kay Ryan? Find 3–4 interesting or important facts about her that help you understand her as a person and poet.
2. Ryan started as a writer but found that poetry was taking over her mind: “My mind was on its own finding things and rhyming things. I was getting diseased.” What does she like about poetry? How does she compare poetry to writing?
3. “Aren’t you glad none of them are long?” Ryan once asked one of her poetry reading audiences. What are some of the elements of Ryan’s style? Why?
4. Ryan rarely uses the pronoun “I” in her poems. Why do you think this is? Why do authors use—or deliberately not use—various points of view in their writing (first person, second person, etc.)?

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5. According to Ryan, poetry is “the most secret, the most private form of communication in language.” What do you think she means by this?

6. Read the poem “A Cat/A Future.”
 - a. How is a cat like the future?

 - b. Can you think of other familiar objects you might compare to the future? What are some of the typical metaphors we use for “the future”? Can you think of some offbeat examples?

7. Ryan says her poems usually don’t begin with a particular image or personal experience. Rather, they start “the way an oyster does, with an aggravation;” for example, a familiar object insisting she give it a fresh look, like the cat, or—in the case of many of her poems—a cliché or idiom that gnaws at her. She believes poets are meant to “rehabilitate clichés.”

Read the poem “Home to Roost.”

- a. What cliché is the inspiration for the poem? What do you think the poem means?

- b. Kay wrote the poem before 9/11—it was sitting on her editor’s desk that day. She tells this story when introducing it. What added meaning does the poem have in light of that event?

- c. What inspires you? What gets your creative juices flowing?

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8. Though short, playful, and “light” (in her words), Ryan’s poems can pack a heavy message. Choose one of the poems below. Give your interpretation of the poem. Identify several features or elements of the poem typical of Ryan’s poetic style.
- “The Well or the Cup”
 - “Things Shouldn’t Be So Hard”
 - “The Turtle”
 - “Blandeur”
9. Poetry Writing Challenge: Pick a cliché or idiom. Write a short poem that “rehabilitates” it. For example, “if walls have ears,” what might they hear? What would happen if you gave someone a dollar for his or her thoughts instead of a penny?
10. Past Laureate Billy Collins once joked that the job of Laureate is to explain the job of Poet Laureate. Officially, the job is to serve as the “official lightning rod for the poetic impulse of Americans.” Each new Laureate can figure out how best to fulfill that role. Find out about the contributions and special projects of past Laureates. What would you suggest Kay Ryan do to help our “poetic impulse”?

Answer Key

1. Answers will vary.
2. Answers will vary but should reflect some of the following:
 - Poetry is intensely personal for writer and reader—“it’s the most special kind of reading.”
 - Poetry can have “deep currents” under a “simple-looking structure.”
 - Poetry is like biking—rhythmic, provides mental freedom.
 - Poetry is “the most beautiful sport”—she finds release in it.
 - Poetry fits her short attention span.
 - Writing a novel is like a “large knitting project” you can pick up and put down. The poet is “constantly drowning”—creating little islands of words that can quickly sink back down into the sea.
3. Answers will vary but should reflect some of the following:
 - Short: She likes to use brevity and “lightness” to carry deep points.
 - Sly, witty: She believes humor helps her connect with people. She likes to work with clichés.
 - Sparse, simple: She likes leaving “empty space” and likes the surprises readers find in it. (Sometimes the simpler it is, the more complex it is.)
 - Impersonal/third person perspective: she prefers to maintain some distance, omniscience
 - Internal rhyme (or middle rhyme): gives the poem a rhythm but only a subtle, almost undetectable rhyme
4. She wants to maintain some distance and “coolness” so she can touch “hot things.” She finds the use of “I” intrusive and too personal.
5. Answers will vary.
6. a. The future is looking at you and you look right at it. However, you can’t really see into it. It’s impenetrable and unknowable—the way a cat’s eyes sometimes appear.
b. Familiar objects: Answers will vary. Typical examples: door, window, path, road, book; Offbeat examples: Answers will vary.
7. a. “When the chickens come home to roost” is when bad or silly things done in the past begin to cause problems. The poem is playing with the cliché and emphasizes that we let our own “chickens” loose (they seem small, not very notable when we do), but they all come back in a big way, together, in a force big enough to overshadow anything else we see.
b. Answers will vary. The “chickens” are no longer personal decisions and misdeeds but ones related to national policy and politics. They are also symbolic of the planes.
c. Answers will vary.
8. Answers will vary depending on the poem selected.
9. Poems will vary.
10. Answers will vary. Examples of past Laureate projects include the following:
 - Joseph Brodsky: promoted poetry in airports, supermarkets, and hotel rooms
 - Maxine Kumin: introduced poetry workshops for women at the Library of Congress
 - Gwendolyn Brooks: encouraged elementary school students to write poetry
 - Rita Dove: Promoted children’s poetry and jazz with poetry events
 - Robert Hass: Started “River of Words,” an environmental art and poetry contest for students
 - Billy Collins: started the Web site Poetry 180 (www.loc.gov/poetry/180/) for high school students