

Poets Laureate

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When I was assigned “Poets Laureate” as my paper topic my first thought was *Dead Poets Society*. I loved the movie, but I’m not so sure about all those dead poets. Of course, I grew fond of some of them and their stories.

My first task was to do some research on what constitutes poetry. My understanding was not very deep. Of course, I know the Psalms, but I discovered that although the Psalms are beloved and many are poetic, they do not entirely comply with the technical understanding of poetry. Still, in many homes they are the first religious poetry we memorize, particularly Psalm 23 (in the King James’ English, of course).

Defining poetry seems simple; like pornography, you know it when you see it, or more accurately, you know it when you hear it. Poetry’s structure and sound are usually obvious to us. Poems are different than other literary forms like novels, short story, essay, or play. We hear poetry because it uses rhythm and metaphorical language to evoke emotions, convey ideas, and create imagery. It often plays with structure, sound, and the meaning of words to express complex feelings and thoughts in a condensed manner.

That being said, poets use various forms, such as sonnets, haikus, or free verse, to achieve their artistic vision and purpose. Occasionally poems are as long as a short story. But we recognize the other characteristics that define them as a poem.

Poetry is characterized by its use of aesthetic qualities, such as meter, rhyme, and imagery. Often, we expect rhyming poems, because that’s what we learned as children. Rhyming poems are easier to remember. But that rhyming characteristic is easily abused to create a poem that is too cute, or simple. Those usually end up in Hallmark cards. Regardless of the form, the point of poetry is to evoke emotions and convey meaning in a condensed fashion.

As the experts say, all poetry is literature, but not all literature is poetry. You’ll know it when you hear it.

After considering what poetry is, my quest turned to ancient history, particularly the Greeks. You know, togas and laurel wreaths. Turns out I was not far off, because even though the genesis of Poets Laureate dates much closer to our time than to ancient Greece, the tradition of Poets Laureate draws deeply on the symbolism of ancient Greece.

The ancient Greeks theorized that poetry is the highest means of expression, because of the aesthetic pleasure we derive from a well-crafted poem, but also with poetry’s ability to concentrate emotions into a concise and accessible form.

For the Greeks, the practice of crowning athletes, leaders, and poets with laurel wreaths stemmed from the association of laurel with the god Apollo. The laurel was thus used as a symbol of victory and honor. In ancient Greece, athletes who won at the Pythian Games (held in honor of Apollo) were crowned with laurel wreaths. The practice became a popular and recognized symbol and was later extended to poets and other individuals thought worthy of recognition, to signify their excellence and connection to the divine.

We may think of Roman Caesars with laurel crowns, but the Romans, as with their statues and architectural aesthetics, were drawing on the tradition of the Greeks.

The practice of crowning poets with laurel wreaths in ancient Greece laid the foundation for the later concept of the Poet Laureate, a title that signifies a poet of great distinction and recognition. Still the concept evolved significantly over the years.

Generally, a Poet Laureate is an officially appointed poet who serves to promote poetry within a specific community or country. The role often involves writing poems for special occasions, public events, or national celebrations. Poets Laureate are typically recognized for their contributions to poetry and may use their position to advocate for the arts and engage the public in literary activities.

Today the Poet Laureate is expected to promote poetry as an art, but frequently Poets Laureate are also expected to create and promote poetry that reflects the values, culture, and significant events of the nation. In many cases, they were expected to write poems for royal or state occasions, serving as a voice of the people, and chronicling their significant experiences. The role has changed and developed over time, but the essence remains a connection between poetry and the public sphere.

From the beginning there has been a tension, a tug and pull, between the poet's artistic independence and the interests of the poet's patron in using poetry to advance a personal agenda.

Now a little history of the evolution of the role.

The Poet Laureate tradition actually began in Britain in the 17th century. At first it was an informal appointment of royal court poets until eventually it became a formalized royal office with a title and a stipend.

The British Poet Laureate position finds its earliest roots in a pension granted to Ben Jonson by King James I in 1616. You've heard of King James, the Protestant king who succeeded Elizabeth I and authorized a translation of the Bible into English. King James, in 1616 awarded a pension to Ben Jonson of 100 marks per year in quarterly installments. Much to Jonson's dismay his payments were frequently late. In 1630 Jonson's pension was renewed and increased by James's successor, Charles I, who added an annual "butt of Canary wine" (meaning, a barrel of sherry) to the payment.

The official post of Poet Laureate was then established 38 years later in 1668 when Charles II appointed John Dryden to the role. This marked the beginning of the position as a recognized royal office.

John Dryden looked the part of a royal poet. Unfortunately, he served during a period of civil wars and great conflicts between monarchs and would-be monarchs. During the Glorious Revolution (1688–89), Dryden was dismissed from the position for refusing the oath of allegiance to the new king.

In the never-ending struggle between artistic freedom and royal patrons, that is when the office of Poet Laureate turned most markedly from a recognition of artistic literary achievement to the appointment as a political favor to an ally. It retained that reputation for more than 200 years.

Dryden's successor, Thomas Shadwell, learned from Dryden's experience and didn't try to hide his loyalty to the king. He inaugurated the custom of producing New Year and birthday odes to the king. The king liked it. The practice hardened into a tradition between 1690 and about 1820, becoming the principal responsibility of the Poet Laureate. The odes were set to music and performed in the sovereign's presence. I'm speculating, but it sounds like these were likely clever rhyming poems.

More than one hundred years after Shadwell, Poet Laureate Robert Southey in 1813, sought unsuccessfully to end the custom of odes to the king. But the king, well, the king liked it. Still over time it was allowed quietly to lapse, but it was only finally abolished by Queen Victoria.

In 1843 Victoria appointed William Wordsworth, who accepted the role under the condition that nothing would be required of him. Now that's a great job! He accepted the honor without any responsibility. That move signified that the laureate had again become a reward for eminence in poetry, not a mouthpiece for the crown.

The position of Poet Laureate continues in Great Britain. The office still has no specific duties. Simon Armitage is the current British Poet Laureate, appointed by Queen Elizabeth II in 2019. King Charles III will appoint the next British Poet Laureate in 2029.

The Poet Laureate tradition jumped the pond to the United States in 1937 (later than I would have guessed). Here it has also struggled to avoid political and nationalistic entanglements from time to time.

Joseph Auslander was an American novelist and lyric poet who was noted for his war poems inspired by the Great War, World War I. In 1937 he became the first poet selected to serve in the newly created role, not of Poet Laureate, but of Consultant in Poetry to the U.S. Library of Congress. Consultant in Poetry remained the title for decades until Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry became the official title.

The patriotic nationalism of the American Poet Laureate was accepted between the wars. But after WWII the office was upset when political considerations sought to overpower artistic and literary value.

Robert von Hallberg described the political conflict, “Civil poets often or ordinarily do not try to use their office to assemble sticks and stones, or poetic verse, to rally for a new order of things. Their language tends toward fulfilling the expressions shared by contemporary citizens in social, political, economic, legal circumstances. Their poems imply not only legitimacy but even hope for the survival of existing social institutions...Rather than art from the edge, one may prefer poems that engage life at some distance from boundary conditions. The objective, ...is to see life steadily and whole. ...Or is it to change life?”

[paraphrase of Robert von Hallberg in *Lyric Powers*]

There was and remains a tension in publicly supported poetry between content that is conservative of an idealized past or present order, and content that expands the horizon, invites a different view, a reconsideration of perspective. That came to full light as a result of an award in poetry given by the Library of Congress. Philanthropist Paul Mellon in 1948 established a fund for achievement in American poetry to be conferred by the Library of Congress.

The next year the Library, through a selection committee, awarded the first prize to Ezra Pound for *The Pisan Cantos*. At the time Mr. Pound was in prison, under indictment for treason based on his anti-Semitic and pro-Fascist broadcasts from Italy during World War II. The selection committee argued for artistic achievement without regard to the poet’s political viewpoints. But the look was bad for the Library of Congress. The newspapers pounced. A congressional committee requested that the Library disassociate it self from the award.

The next year, in 1950, it was transferred to the Yale University Library. Yale has given the prestigious award ever since, every two years. That marked a move of poetry’s growing edges to the academy and away from the Library of Congress.

Still the Library continues to appoint Poets Laureate, distinguished, just safer, more accessible poets. The most famous of whom is probably Robert Frost. Frost was appointed Poet Laureate in 1958. He was 84 years old. His poetry is traditional in form and content. He was and remains popular. Who doesn’t know “two roads diverged in the woods”? Frost laughed at experimentation and literary trends. But he won the Pulitzer prize in poetry four times.

Still Robert Frost may be best known for being the first poet to do a reading at a presidential inauguration, President Kennedy’s in 1961. The editor of *Poetry* magazine said inauguration poetry is unique both in terms of form and content. An inaugural poem is an “occasion poem,” she explains, written specifically to commemorate a day or event, and its purpose is to uplift community and unify while reflecting the times during which the poem

is performed....” All of these “...poems talk about the citizenry and talk about the people of the place in a way that invites communion with our neighbors...”

[Adrian Matejka]

At Kennedy’s Inauguration, it was a cold January day, sunny but with a steady breeze. Frost had written out his poem *The Dedication* on paper to read from the podium. It didn’t go well. The wind and the breeze prevented him from reading the poem on his paper, so he recited a poem he knew from memory *The Gift Outright*. At the president’s request he altered the wording of the final line slightly from the published original.

The poem he attempted to read, *Dedication*, acknowledged first the unique position of the poet:

*“Summoning artists to participate
In the august occasions of the state
Seems something artists ought to celebrate.
Today is for my cause a day of days.
And his be poetry’s old-fashioned praise
Who was the first to think of such a thing...”*

It’s interesting that one of the television news commentators covering the event said of the “grand old man,” “if ever there was a poet laureate of the United States it is him.” He had only vacated the official post of Poet Laureate at the Library of Congress the year before.

But poetry finds no bigger stage than a Presidential Inauguration. Not every President invites a poet to read at the inauguration. It was thirty years after Frost before another poet was invited to read. The most recent was Amanda Gorman in 2021 at President Biden’s inauguration. Gorman was 22 at the time, the youngest poet to be elevated to such a stage. She read her poem, *The Hill We Climb*.

Maya Angelo read, *On the Pulse of the Morning*, at President Clinton’s inauguration in 1993. Four Years later, in 1997, Clinton invited Miller Williams to read his poem *Of History and Hope*. Hope being a favored theme of the “boy from Hope.”

Elizabeth Alexander read her poem *Praise Song for the Day* in 2009 at President Obama’s first Inauguration, and Richard Blanco read *One Today* at Obama’s second Inauguration in 2013.

Blanco was interviewed about being chosen as the poet to read at an Inauguration. Blanco said finding the right tone for the poem was a challenge — not too critical, but also not overly positive and cloying. He said, “One of the hardest things about writing the poem was you don’t want a Hallmark poem. But you still want a little bit of critique and tension while at the same time having hope. So the idea of the poem, thinking about community as a more perfect union also implies that we’re not perfect quite yet. And if you read in between the lines of my poem, it’s sort of, ‘We’re supposed to be all one today, but we’re kind of not quite connected. We’re still not quite there.’”

You may have noted that all these readings were for the inauguration of Democratic presidents. Nixon, Ford, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, and President Trump have all declined to invite a poet, but so did Johnson and Carter. It took Clinton, who idolized Kennedy, to revive the Presidential Inauguration poem.

Still the honor of the U.S. Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry continues at the Library of Congress. Today the honor pays an annual stipend of \$35,000, all from the original endowment (none from tax dollars).

But the most cherished benefit of the Laureate is the office at the Library of Congress. It is high in the building and tucked away but it has a celebrated view of the Capital Building. That view inspired Elizabeth Bishop, Poet Laureate in 1949 and 1950, to write *View of the Capital from the Library of Congress*, which begins:

*“Moving from left to left, the light
is heavy on the Dome, and coarse...”*

She goes on to describe the sound of a bass band playing in front of the capital, its music rising through the flags and trees to her office, high in the library.

I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge Indiana connections to poetry, the most impressive of which is the Lilly Endowment's \$100M grant to *Poetry* magazine in 2002. The magazine struggled for decades but continues, without concern for budget, because of Ruth Lilly's gift.

Closer to home, Indiana also appoints a Poet Laureate. The current Laureate is Curtis Chrisler, an English Professor at Purdue Fort Wayne.
[Professor Chrisler attended Quest for the presentation of this paper and spoke to his activities as Indiana Poet Laureate. He also recited a poem.]

I'll admit that my knowledge of poetry was and remains pretty shallow. Like most of you, I suspect, I know a few popular poets, like Mary Oliver, David Whyte, Maya Angelo, and Amanda Gorman, but not very well.

We live in a TikTok world, an Instagram world, a world where images are more powerful and compelling than words. Given my profession, I could say, no one comes to listen to the preacher anymore. Maybe they are waiting to see what we tweet. But words are as important as images in forming our identity as persons, as citizens, and as a nation.

Literature professors report that students arrive today with little or no experience reading a full-length novel in high school. Students find it nearly impossible to get through a typical semester's reading list. So maybe poetry provides a route to more accessible reading while a new generation rebuilds its reading endurance. Poems pack a lot into few words. That might work. But poetry and literature rely on literacy, and literacy takes practice. I hope this inspires you to read more, and to read to your children and grandchildren.

Books

Amy Paeth, *The American Poet Laureate: A History of U.S. Poetry and the State*, 2023, Columbia University Press

Elizabeth Hun Schmidt (in association with the Library of Congress, *The Poets Laureate Anthology*, 2010, W. W. Norton and Company

Web Resources

U.S. Poet Laureate at the Library of Congress:

<https://www.loc.gov/programs/poetry-and-literature/poet-laureate/about-the-position/>

Indiana Poet Laureate:

<https://www.in.gov/arts/programs-and-services/partners/indiana-poet-laureate/>

The Bollingen Prize at Yale University:

<https://bollingen.yale.edu/>

The Psalms as Poetry:

<https://yalebiblestudy.org/courses/psalms/lessons/psalms-of-poetry-study-guide/>

John Dryden:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Dryden/>

English Civil Wars:

<https://www.britannica.com/event/English-Civil-Wars>

The King James Bible:

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/King-James-Version>

How the Presidential Inauguration became Poetry's Biggest Stage, *WGBH*:

<https://www.wgbh.org/news/national/2025-01-17/how-the-presidential-inauguration-became-poetrys-biggest-stage>

Presidential Inaugural Poems in History:

<https://www.poetry.com/article/presidential-inaugural-poems-in-history>

Every Presidential Inauguration Poem Ever Performed (there are fewer than you think), *Literary Hub*:

<https://lithub.com/read-every-presidential-inauguration-poem-ever-performed-there-are-fewer-than-you-think/>

Robert Frost Inauguration Poetry video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AILGO3gVITU>

Maya Angelo Inauguration Poem video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQQThav41o>

Elizabeth Alexander Inauguration Poem video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLBnFk-OFc>

General Article on Poetry, *Britannica*:

<https://www.britannica.com/art/poetry>

So What's a Poet Laureate Anyway?, *New York Public Library*:

<https://www.nypl.org/blog/2017/06/19/so-whats-poet-laureate-anyway>

Richard Blanco Inauguration Poem:

<https://blogs.loc.gov/catbird/2013/01/richard-blancos-inaugural-poem-one-today/>