

Poetry Appreciation 2019

March 2019: GRAY'S ELEGY

Our meeting took a more studious than normal turn as we spent the whole afternoon studying just one poem instead of all presenting poems we'd found on a chosen subject as we usually do. Only a small group was able to attend but a very successful meeting resulted.

Although this and most other elegies are concerned with death we discovered that this poetic form could be used for other subjects and a most salacious elegy was discovered by the poet John Donne who was one-time Dean of St Paul's Cathedral. (For further details of this join the Group!)

Gray provided us with a poem that encouraged a stoical acceptance of the inevitability of death plus an appreciation of the value not only of the lives of the famous but also that of the unappreciated rural poor who just got on with the business of living and took joy in its small pleasures and beauties.

We found a surprising number of well-known quotes in this work. "Far from the madding crowd" was originally Gray not Thomas Hardy and it was Gray that told us that "The paths of glory lead but to the grave".

In spite of a rather daunting subject we had a thought provoking but enjoyable meeting. It was decided that another in depth study of just one poem would be done again in the future.

June 2019: G, H and I

*The roses make the world so sweet,
The bees, the birds have such a tune,
There's such a light and such a heat
And such a joy in June.*

This was the first poem read at our June meeting. Unfortunately it was read after 36 hours of continuous rain, with a temperature worthy of February outside and the central heating on inside. Such is an aspect of the English Summer not normally put into verse!

Our subject for June was works by Poets whose name began with the letters "G", "H" or "I" and as usual we had a varied selection which went from sorrow and loss expressed by Seamus Heaney and Ivor Gurney to the slightly incomprehensible (Robert Graves), the rather sexy (Robert Herrick), the beautiful (Gerald Manley Hopkins), the murderous (Hardy) through to Joyce Grenfell's wistfully funny poem about elderly ladies who have to dance together due to the dearth of men.

As usual, we enjoyed a varied selection of poems. Our members often say that searching for their monthly offering is part of the fun.

We certainly dispersed into the gloom feeling that we couldn't have made better use of a wet summer afternoon.

August 2019: GHOULIES AND GHOSTIES

The subject of our August meeting was "Ghoulies and ghosties and lang-legged-beasties and things that go bump in the night" but somehow we first got side-tracked into a non-poetic conversation about hedgehog dropping identification, butterfly sightings and gardening for wildlife.

The Poetic bit was also fruitful. We discovered Australia's great poet "Banjo" Patterson, who was the author of "Waltzing Matilda" as well as "The ghost of the Murderer's Hut" which we read. He wrote mostly about the Outback, its life and its characters in spite of having been a Sydney solicitor and was rewarded with the CBE for services to Australian literature.

Yeats's "Stolen Child" saddened us with the refrain "The world's more full of weeping than you can understand" but Maya Angelou cheered us with the power of Love in her "Touched by Angels". Spike Milligan and Roger McGough made us laugh and Charles Causley's Colonel Fazackarley showed us just how to deal with an intrusive Ghost.

In spite of a lower than normal attendance the meeting had been an unusually spirited one.

September 2019: FEMALE POETS

Our subject was "Female Poets" as our convenor had noted with horror that her 1950's school prize of the "Oxford Book of English Verse" offered only about 2% of works by female poets. It was published in 1957 and was a reprint and did only cover the years 1250 to 1918 but 2% was a very sparse offering so we decided to try to improve on this.

Women were not encouraged to write serious poetry in that period. Tennyson criticised the works of Elisabeth Barrett Browning and inferred that she should focus her efforts on more womanly domestic matters and Christina Rossetti was tolerated only because so much of her work was religious.

Our group found some very feisty and talented women who had produced works that focussed far beyond the domestic and religious.

Irina Ratushinskaya wrote from a Stalin gulag of the suffering that was the price of political resistance. She had scratched her poems on soap with a matchstick and memorised them before smuggling them out. Domesticated that Mr Tennyson!

Aphra Behn in the 16th Cent. not only wrote poetry that actually made it to my Oxford book but was also a professional spy and an accepted playwright.

Emily Dickinson, Emily Bronte, Jo Bell, Adelaide Potter, Elizabeth Bishop and Elizabeth Jennings all were found to have produced thoughtful works on serious matters.

Pam Ayres and Wendy Cope made us laugh.

Time for an Oxford book of women's verse?

November 2019: HEANEY & HOPKINS

Our November meeting took a slightly different format this month. We had decided to discuss the works of the poets **Seamus Heaney** and **Gerald Manley Hopkins**. Members chose poems by these writers and they were read and discussed as usual but with an introduction by Coleen on the life and career of Gerald Manley Hopkins and Rene who introduced Seamus Heaney.

Understanding the background of the poets helped us to appreciate their poetry. Seamus Heaney's Irish background with its conflicting religious and political loyalties and the Irish landscape permeated his works whilst Hopkins' deep religious feelings and love of the beauty of the natural world was strongly impressed into his poetry.

"Mid-term Break" by Heaney touched our hearts with sadness at a family tragedy and Hopkins' "Pied Beauty" was one of those poems many of us had read at school but appreciated much more in our maturity.

This was a good meeting and we will do this with other poets in the future.