The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer Through Frost

Harold Bloom (Selections)

The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer Through Frost

Harold Bloom (Selections)

The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer Through Frost Harold Bloom (Selections)
The great critic presents his personal selection, with commentary, of the finest poems in the English language.

This comprehensive anthology attempts to give the common reader possession of six centuries of great British and American poetry. The book features a large introductory essay by Harold Bloom called "The Art of Reading Poetry," which presents his critical reflections of more than half a century devoted to the reading, teaching, and writing about the literary achievement he loves most. In the case of all major poets in the language, this volume offers either the entire range of what is most valuable in their work, or vital selections that illuminate each figure's contribution. There are also headnotes by Harold Bloom to every poet in the volume as well as to the most important individual poems. Much more than any other anthology ever gathered, this book provides readers who desire the pleasures of a sublime art with very nearly everything they need in a single volume. It also is regarded by its editor as his final meditation upon all those who have formed his mind.

The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer Through Frost Details

Date	:	Published March 16th 2004 by Harper (first published 2004)
ISBN	:	9780060540418
Author	:	Harold Bloom (Selections)
Format	:	Hardcover 1008 pages
Genre	:	Poetry, Classics, Criticism, Literary Criticism, Reference, Anthologies

From Reader Review The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer Through Frost for online ebook

Sara says

Love to read anything from this wonderful selection of poetry! Amazing book!

Rick O'Connor says

I discovered this anthology of poetry for this class, but I absolutely will be using it for my English classes once school starts again. I love books like this, especially when the author calls it "The Best...", which obviously opens the door to controversy and disagreement. To me, this provokes thought and discussion, and you can begin to debate why something made it and something did not.

While I wouldn't say I am a poetry "expert," I have done my share of teaching poetry over the past six years, and I have come to know some of the bigger works from the English language (relatively speaking). In high school, you cover all of the classics and major poems from the various time periods, and many of the ones I have taught are in here. But what makes this stand out is that there are some poems I do not know, and I am now willing to use these poems to complement the poems we are required to read for school. The commentary in this text is also interesting, as some of the things Bloom says I agree with, and some of it just seems forced (his comments on Poe, for instance). Nevertheless, it makes for a great collection and can be used as a supplement for an English anthology class OR it could be used as a primary text for a poetry high school course. It would be great to get students to argue Bloom's comments about each poem and really get kids thinking through this material. Great stuff here and highly recommended for high school teachers.

Steven Peterson says

The author, Harold Bloom, has been an eminent scholar, the Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University, was a MacArthur Prize Fellow, and author of numerous volumes. In his Introduction, he observes that (Page xxvii) "My chronological limits are set by Geoffrey Chaucer, born around 1343, and Hart Crane, born in 1899." There is a useful introductory essay, "The Art of Reading Poetry," that would be of interest to those who take poetry seriously.

But it is the poetry that is at the center of this fat volume (the last poem, by Hart Crane, ends on page 959; I don't know about others, but I like big collections of poetry!

In high school, we read Chaucer, and I still remember the first few lines (repeated in this work) of "The Canterbury Tales."

"Whan that Aprill with his shoures sote
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour."

Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love":

"Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods or steepy mountain yields."

There is a healthy collection of Shakespeare, but since I recently reviewed a volume of his sonnets, no need for overkill here. But the selections do represent Shakespeare's art nicely.

Then there is Richard Lovelace's "To Althea, from Prison," with the well known final stanza:

"Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage. . . ."

And so many more. . . . Thomas Gray's "Elegy written in a country churchyard" or William Blake's "The Tyger" (I still recall and thrill at the following lines:
"Tyger, tyger, burning bright.
In the forest of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?") to the Romantics' poetry (represented by poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lord Byron, Shelley, and Keats). Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Lord Tenneyson, the Rossettis, William Butler Yeats, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and so on.

In short, a cornucopia of poetry in the English language tradition. If that is a genre that you enjoy, running from Chaucer to crane, then this volume should suit you nicely.

Daniel Wright says

Why the low rating? Not because I doubt the quality of the poetry - I most certainly do not - but because Harold Bloom is an annoying smug git. A supremely literate smug git, but a smug git all the same.

Jee Koh says

The Best Poems of the English Language? Who could resist opening an anthology so named to see what's in it? Especially when it has the name of Harold Bloom on the front cover. It's typical of this giant of a critic's eternal self-confidence, of course, that he should name his selection the Best Poems. He begins with Chaucer, born around 1343, and ends with Hart Crane, born in 1899, and admits that by setting the latter limit, he is evading the difficult task of choosing the Best Poems by poets born in the twentieth century. Into his chronological net fall 108 poets (aside from Anonymous), with 24 given "in something like their full abundance." The 24 include poets that Bloom has always championed: Shakespeare, Milton, the major Romantic poets, Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, and Hart Crane.

No anthology is without its critics over who is in and who is out. Such quarrels are par for the course. Bloom himself throws down the gauntlet in the first words of his Introduction when he declares that since the book is intended for personal use, irrelevant to its purpose are both literary history and considerations of political correctness. What he means by "political correctness" becomes clear when he continues, "The best poems published by women before 1923 are here, chosen entirely on the basis of their aesthetic value." The first

woman to appear in the anthology is Julia Ward Howe, represented by a single poem "Battle-Hymn of the Republic." But what about the writing of eighteenth-century women, recovered by such ground-breaking anthologies as Roger Lonsdale's? Are we to believe that not one of their poems has "aesthetic value"? That not one of them is better than the jog-trot of "The War-Song of Dinas Vwar," included as one of two poems by Thomas Love Peacock? Whose fourth stanza begins:

We there, in strife bewildr'ing,
Spilt blood enough to swim in:
We orphaned many children,
And widowed many women.

This strange bias in selection makes Bloom's aesthetic judgment seem more idiosyncratic than authoritative. In the introductions to individual poets, Bloom shares biographical facts such as his early love for Hart Crane, and his growing appreciation for the Pre-Raphaelite poets such as the two Rossettis, William Morris and Swinburne (all represented by at least two poems). He does not seem to see, however, that these personal notes, charming though they are, suggest that aesthetic standards are not absolute and universal, but inflected by personal experience and cultural context. Yes, I too believe that the selection of poems for such an anthology must be based on aesthetic value, but I am not at all certain that my judgment should be taken as the yardstick by everyone.

Bloom's taste is broad and his judgment deep. The poems that he has selected are to be savored. He includes lesser known names but personal favorites like George Darley, Jones Very, John Brooks Wheelwright, Lionel Johnson and Leonie Adams. A number of his introductions to the poets or particular poems are really essays. In them, he still challenges preconceived notions. He considers, for instance, T. S. Eliot's "Preludes" to be his best work. Marianne Moore, he argues less controversially, is at her best in her long collage-poem "Marriage," which he judges, unexpectedly, as better than "The Waste Land." Some readers may find his constant comparisons of poets, and of a poet's poems, irritating. I think these comparisons provoke critical thought and discussion.

Gerbik says

A good selection admirably edited. With the caveat that he will ignore anyone born after 1900, he gets away with the title quite nicely. However, I laughed a bit to notice, within five minutes of skimming, that Bloom's two most annoyingly persistent traits were fully on display:

1. A need to flaunt his cantankerous disregard for the academically/politically "correct."

2. His need to sell Hart Crane.

For under $20, this is a worthwhile book, and it's teaching me stuff I didn't know.

---

max says

Nothing could be more flattering to the amateur than finding his opinion in accordance with a great eminence in the field, as if one’s position, which felt unpopular when formed, was intuitively in tune with a deeper and broader knowledge, waiting for the right moment to commune.

Reading Harold Bloom's boldly titled The Best Poems of the English Language, I had to suppress this feeling on a number of occasions, knowing full well the instances in which I agree with Bloom are as coincidental as those in which we disagree, and that furthermore, the value of a critic as great and as Bloom is not his correctness but his potential to stimulate thinking. A critic should encourage his reader to take risks.

Fortunately, Bloom is terrible lifeguard, and will not save you from floundering out of your depths. Instead, he delights in tricking you to swim out ever deeper, away from safety. While I disagree with much of his theoretical apparatus, I nevertheless highly recommend this book.

But let's start on where I found Bloom vindicating: He deeply distrusts Eliot and Pound, the principal architects of poetry's Modernist movement, and strives to see their status discounted in comparison to other modern eminences, in particular Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens. The problem is of course that Bloom dislikes these two for different reasons than I do. Yes, Bloom is quick to state that Pound suffers from a "...relative failure to transmute or transcend his precursors." Which is obvious enough--most of Pound's poetry is so overburdened by allusion that it is better described as collage. Yet Bloom seems ready to forgive him for this, explaining that his sin merely one of degree, since he believes the same hyperliterary approach is used successfully by others, including Marianne Moore and T.S. Eliot. What he cannot forgive--in several pages worth of scorn--is his mistreatment of Walt Whitman. Bloom feels Whitman is the preeminent influence on 20th century American poetry, and when Pound disavows his Whitman in verse and prose, Bloom is as incredulous as he is appalled.

As for Eliot, Bloom seems to genuinely like much of his poetry, calling "The Waste Land" a "masterpiece", while calling "Prufrock" the "perhaps the slyest and oddest 'Love Song' in the language". "Preludes" and the slightly obscure "La Figlia Che Piange" also make his cut, while oddly, his charming "Four Quartets", and oft-anthologized "The Hollow Men" do not. Bloom's objection to Eliot is not his poetry, chiefly, but the the damage he did as a literary and cultural critic. Personally I am not especially bothered by Eliot has a literary critic; I'm bothered by the pretentiousness of his poetry and find he shares many of the faults Bloom attributes to Pound. But then there is the matter of politics. Bloom singles out both men for their antisemitism, writing of Pound's Cantos that they "contain material that is not humanly acceptable to me, and if that material is acceptable to others, then they themselves are thereby less acceptable, at least to me". And also to me, and hopefully to you.

Bloom hates the politics but loves the method. Personally I am less sure. The attempt to incorporate allusion, paraphrase, and whole phrase from disparate Western traditions (and languages) to forge a Anglo-English racial myth seems like one of the clear missteps of 20th century literature, though given the current level of sophistication of antisemitism and fascism--spread through algorithm, Russian spies, and the giant cudgel of populist anti-intellectual ignorance--seems almost quaint. I acknowledge that their technique of heavy allusion does not automatically lead to Hitler apologetics, but if you examine its track record, this type of top-heavy tradition-worship tends to fracture culture even further, in the same way all eschatologies seem keen on bringing about the end they prophesize.

Bloom needs the Modernists, though, even if he is the only critic I have found who seems to close to redeeming them. He needs them because they enact his critical theories of literature more completely than anyone else. Bloom's central literary concern is influence, and as he rightly believes poetry is an art of remembering and understanding--both equally and at the same time. As a corollary, Bloom posits each new poet recalls and attempts to understand the poems before him, and that one of the central features of any poem is its relation to those before it, in a way that is more intense and more self-conscious than in any other human endeavor.

I have my doubts. Predecessor is certainly an important element to consider when writing a poem. But it is paralyzing to obsess over it. Poets are like athletes. A sprinter knows full well the same course has been

contested by millions of similar athletes before. But at the time of the contest, the only thing that matters is the act itself. It’s key to be in the moment, in the now. Otherwise the energy will be wasted. Anyway, who can compete with Wordsworth? If that’s the standard one aspires to, it’s better to just give up before the starting gun. Worse, any kind of self-conscious comparison between oneself and previous greats is the mark of self-importance and pretension. It’s like when Oasis remarked they were bigger than the Beatles--it’s an idiotic thing to say, and where, exactly, is Oasis now?

Sure, reading the poetry of others--especially the greats--is absolutely critical to developing one’s ear and sensibility. But poets write their best when those voices from the past aren’t so loud as to overwhelm one’s own, when it’s more of a distant chorus than deafening trading floor. So the problem with the Modernist project to me isn’t just politics. It’s aesthetics. A good poem isn’t necessarily about other poems. It’s about the what the poem reports to be about, in the moment it’s read, as the act unfolds.

I think to a large extent Bloom knows this; I pick on him for the Modernists but in reality this a quibble with a handful of poets in a collection containing 108 of them. Most of the time I’ve spent thus far in this anthology was in surprise at discovering another underrated poet who I had only heard of in passing but never read anything of theirs convincing until now. There’s a lot of meat on these bones. Yes, his opinions on the brightest stars are interesting. But his ability to rescue the lesser lights is where this collection comes into its own.

Avital says

This will always be in "currently reading". A constant inspiration!
Harold Bloom stuns me with observations like: We begin to apprehend Blake when we realize that for him "human nature" is a wholly unacceptable phrase, an absolute contradiction, or, as he said, "an impossible absurdity." What was human about us, Blake insisted, was the imagination; what was natural about us had to be redeemed by the imagination, or else it would destroy us."

Joel says

Bloom offers interesting commentary on authors and poems that sets this volume apart from all the other compilations that I own. While I disagree with some of his selections and omissions I applaud his style and ambition. The introductions and commentaries demonstrate Bloom's quality as a writer by presenting higher thinking that is very easy to understand which makes this particular anthology--in my mind at least--my favorite volume to recommend to readers interested in getting into poetry on a deeper level.

James says

An exemplary collection of the most sublime poetry in English, beginning with Chaucer and ending, contra the title, with Hart Crane. Bloom, the world's living expert of the Western poetic tradition, makes consistently exceptional choices for inclusion in this massive volume, and provides profound and scintillating commentary. This book is simply a treasure trove of the greatest cognitive music in our great language.

Laura says

Have to confess I skimmed large parts this one. Read all the commentaries carefully; skimmed a lot of the love and god poems. But the damn thing had 959 pages of text!

I'd never really appreciated Tennyson's Ulysses before. Maybe that's a function of age. But these words hit me like never before:

Come my friends
'Tis not to late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sale beyond the sunset, and the baths
Off all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved heaven and earth; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

I have tears in my eyes. Everything from Robert Heinlein's creepy swan song to Frodo boarding the ship to the western kingdom, to a death well earned, to Angel taking on the dragon.

He also reminded me how much of poetry is about politics. At least from Elizabeth I, poets were in the great battles of the age. Milton, of course, I knew. Propping up or tearing down . . .

Weird bit from Pope's Dunciad, book 4: (261)

Yet, yet a moment, one dim ray of light
Indulge, dread Chaos, and eternal Night!
Of darkness visible so much be lent,
As half to show, have veil, the deep intent.
Ye Powers! Whose mysteries restored I sing,
To whom Time bears me on his rapid wing,
Suspend a while your force inertly strong,
Then take at once the poet and the song.
Now flamed the Dog-star's unpropitious ray,
Smote every brain and withered every bay;
Sick was the sun, the owl forsook its bower,
The moon-struck prophet felt the madding hour:
Then rose the seed of Chaos and of Night
To blot out order and extinguish light,
Of dull and venal a world to mould,
And bring Saturnian days of lead and gold.

She mounts the throne: her head a cloud concealed,
In broad effulgence all below revealed;
('Tis thus aspiring Dulness every shines)
Soft on her lap her laureate son reclines.

Okay, I read the poem as Pope bemoaning the fall and debasement of the Enlightenment in the hands of slackers and posers, but it could also be read to prophesize Dru's siring of Spike. I've always believed Spike was really an enlightenment figure, after all.

Moving on through the scifiverse to William Blake, seems he did work called the "Orc-Urizen" cycle about the fallen existence. In one poem, the Mental Traveller, "The human cycle moves between an infant Orc an aged, beggared Urizen, and then back again. The natural sequence is Tirzah (Nature-as-Necessity), Vala (Nature-as-Temptress), and Rahab (Nature-as-Destroyer) and then back again." 311.

So we get this poem, a classic of the English Canon, which Harold Bloom, Harvard and Yale professor and a man I adore, calls one of the best in the English language. It says in part (spelled as in the original):

I traveld thro' a Land of Men
A Land of Men & Women too
And hard & saw such dreadful things
As cold Earth wanderers never knew

For there the Babe is born in joy
That was begotten in dire woe
Just as we Reap in joy the fruit
Which we in bitter tears did sow

And if the Babe is born a Boy
He's given to a Woman Old
Who nails him down upon a rock
Catches his shrieks in cups of gold

She binds iron thrones around his head
She pierces both his hands & feet
She cuts his heart out at his side
To make it feel both cold & heat

Her fingers number every Nerve
Just as a Miser counts his gold
She lives upon his shrieks & cries
As she grows young as he grows old.

Till he becomes a bleeding youth
And she becomes a Virgin bright
Then he rends up his Manacles
And binds her down for his delight

He plants himself in all her Nerves
Just as a Husbandman his mould
And she becomes his dwelling place
And Garden fruitful seventy fold.

Well, huh. That's . . . making me look at the possible relation between Vala and Danny boy in a whole new light. And there seems to be something of the Go'uld lurking in there too. And certain fan sites I always feel guilty about peaking at.

Other good bits – Whitman's Song of Myself's humanity through reflections –

I Celebrate myself, and sing myself
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Wonderful. Mutability of matter. Matter/mother/matrix/metro . . . . all the same thing . . .

He put Lewis Carroll's Hunting of the Snark in here. I hadn't put together that the Baker, the one who puts together that some Snarks are Boojums, quotes Lord Nelson's signal from the battle of Trafalger; that's the source for "England Expects Every Man to Do His Duty." Or that was a concept communicated by signal flags; mutable in phrasing. The nameless Baker (they are all nameless; his is the only one whose lack of a name is pointed out) tells them all the day the embark – but forgets that they speak English. So the message is not received. The world screaming at us in languages we can't understand.

Bloom utterly rejects the notion that Carroll was a pedophile, or that the Snark is little girls. He suggests the hint to the meaning is in the repeated stanza:

They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope;
They threatened its life with a railway-share
They charmed it with smiles and soap.

Life, itself? Meaning, itself? Whatever the object of our desire might be? The foolishness of using our toolset to find it? What could one find with thimbles, care, forks, hope, smiles, and soap, while armed with a railway share?

And the banker uses a check? The baker comes himself?

Finally, I should look into the poems of John Brooks Wheelwright. Socialist and mythmaker. Hark at "Fish Food: An Obituary to Hart Crane"

As you drank deep as Thor, did you think of milk or wine?
Did you drank blood, while you drank the salt deep?
Or see through the film of light, that sharpened your rage with its stare,
A shark, dolphin, turtle? Did you not see the Cat?
Who, when Thor lifted her, unbased the cubic ground?
You would drain fathomless flagons to be slaked with vacuum –
The sea's teats have suckled you, and you are sunk far
In bubble-dreams, under swaying translucent vines
Of thundering interior wonder. Eagles can never now
Carry parts of your body, over cupped mountains
As emblems of their anger, embers to fire self-hate
To other wonders, unfolding white, flaming vistas.

Fishes now look upon you, with eyes which do not gossip . . .

[skipped a bit]

. . . the will seeped from your blood. Seeds
of meaning popped from the pods of thought. And you fall.
And the unseen
Churn of time changes the pearl-hurled ocean
Like a pearl-shaped drop, in a huge water-clock
Falling from came to go, from come to went. And you fell.

Waters received you. Waters of our Birth in Death dissolve you.
Now you have willed it, may the Great Wish take you.
As the Mother-Lover takes your woe away, and cleansing
Grief and you away, you sleep, you do not snore.
Lie still. Your rage is gone on a bright flood
Away; as, when a bad friend held out his hand
You said, “do not talk any more. I know you meant no harm.”
What was the soil whence your anger sprang, who are deaf
As the stones to the whispering flight of the Mississippi’s rivers?
What did you see as you fell? What did you hear as you sank?
Did it make you drunken with hearing?
I will not ask any more. You saw or heard no evil.

To life, to die, to strive with gods, to try to do no evil. Wonderful stuff. Good book.

Jeremy says

I bought this book for my eldest son (but had a good sneaky glance through before hand) and will probably end up buying another copy for myself. Not so much even for the poetry itself, since I have most of it already in other volumes, but for: Bloom's brilliant and erudite, challenging and politically-empty aesthetic-based readings on the works and workers; his introduction to the volume (which is worth the price by itself); and just to have the poetry he has selected all in the one place, along with his framing materials, so different to everything that is out there at the moment, where edification and diversity-as-demand reign king. Bloom is worth your time, even if you hate him; and maybe particularly if you hate him. Creatively mis-read him. Go on. That's literature.

Linda says

I love poetry and expected this to be a good addition to my collection; something that would cover some of the more well known poets. Unfortunately, they are the 'best poems' as judged by Harold Bloom. Bloom is no doubt an expert in the field and to be admired for his abilities and knowledge, but the poems and poets he selected for this book are not the traditional favourites, but rather a rag tag mix of rather obscure writers. As far as the analysis supplied by Bloom, I slogged through some of it, but honestly, I find him not only difficult to read, but also a rather pompous, elitist ass.

Lillian says

A very comprehensive anthology of English poetry. A must for all who love poetry!

Perry says

Poetry Man
"Talk to me some more
You don't have to go
You're the poetry man
You make things all right."
Phoebe Snow, *Poetry Man*, 1974

“Every heart sings a song, incomplete, until another heart whispers back. Those who wish to sing always find a song. At the touch of a lover, everyone becomes a poet.” Plato

This anthology of poetry in the English language covers a chronology (by each poet's date of birth) from Chaucer, born in 1343, to Hart Crane, born in 1899. For each of the 108 poets in his anthology, Harold Bloom, longtime critic and professor at Harvard & Yale, gives a fine introduction and discussions of some of the poems (widely varying in length) followed by a few or several of each poet's best poems.

Bloom also provides a 29-page introductory chapter on the Art of Reading Poetry, no easy feat. In this introduction, he makes an excellent case that "poetry at its greatest... is the true mode for expanding our consciousness" which it accomplishes by strangeness of meaning. Bloom concludes that:

> "The work of great poetry is to aid *us* to become free artists of ourselves. Even Shakespeare cannot make me into Falstaff or Hamlet, but all great poetry asks us to be possessed by it. To possess it by memory is a start, and to augment our consciousness is the goal. The art of reading poetry is an authentic training in the augmentation of consciousness...."

Below are a few passages I've included from the book:

From "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," Chaucer:

> "My fourthe housebonde was a revelour--
> This is to seyn, he hadde a paramour--"

From "The Dunciad," Alexander Pope:

> In vain, in vain--the all-composing hour
> Resistless falls: the Muse obeys the power.
> She comes! she comes! the sable throne behold
> Of *Night* primeval, and of *Chaos* old!

From "Bacchus," Ralph Waldo Emerson:

> Pour, Bacchus! the remembering wine;
> Retrieve the loss of me and mine!

Vine for vine be antidote
And the grape requite the lote!

From "Song," Christina Rossetti:

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With shower and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

From "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," T.S. Eliot:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

From "Blue Girls," John Crowe Ransom:

Practice your beauty, blue girls, before it fail;
And I will cry with my loud lips and publish
Beauty which all our power shall never establish,
It is so frail.

For I could tell you a story which is true;
I know a lady with a terrible tongue,
Blear eyes fallen from blue,
All her perfections tarnished--and yet it is not long
Since she was lovelier than any of you.

Highly recommended.