

## Poetry Response #5-6

**Rather than selecting two poems, complete a total of 10 questions. You may combine any 2-4 poems of your choosing, as long as 10 questions are answered. You must answer *all* questions for each poem, even if this makes you exceed 10 questions.**

### Harlem

Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
Like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
Like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

1. Of the six images, five are similes. Which is a metaphor? Comment on its position and effectiveness?
2. What specific denotation does the word “dream” have? Since the poem does not reveal the contents of the dream, the poem is general in its implication. What happens to your understanding of it upon learning that the poet was a black American?

### A Noiseless Patient Spider

Walt Whitman

A noiseless patient spider,  
I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,  
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you, O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,  
Till the bridge you will need be formed, till the ductile anchor hold,  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere,  
O my soul.

1. In “Harlem,” Langston Hughes compares a frustrated dream to a bomb. Whitman compared the striving human soul to a spider. Why is Hughes’s comparison a metaphor and Whitman’s a symbol? What additional comparison does Whitman make to the soul’s quest? What figure of speech is it?
2. In what ways are the spider and the soul contrasted? What do the contrasts contribute to the meaning of the symbol?
3. Can the questing soul represent human actions other than the search for spiritual certainties?

## Bereft

Robert Frost

Where had I heard this wind before  
 Change like this to a deeper roar?  
 What would it take my standing there for,  
 Holding open a restive door,  
 Looking down hill to a frothy shore?  
 Summer was past and day was past.  
 Somber clouds in the west were massed.  
 Out in the porch's sagging floor,  
 Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,  
 Blindly struck at my knee and missed.  
 Something sinister in the tone  
 Told me my secret must be known:  
 Word I was in the house alone  
 Somehow must have gotten abroad,  
 Word I was in my life alone,  
 Word I had no one left but God.

1. Describe the situation precisely. What time of day and year is it? Where is the speaker? What is happening to the weather?
2. How does the comparison in lines 9-10 reflect the state of mind of the speaker?
3. The word "hissed" (9) is **onomatopoeic**. How is its effect reinforced in the lines following?
4. Though lines 9-10 present the clearest example of the implied form of metaphor, there are others. To what is the wind ("it") compared in line 3? Why is the door "restive" (4) and what does this do (figuratively) to the door? To what is the speaker's "life" (15) compared?
5. What is the tone of the poem? How reassuring is the last line?

## It Sifts from Leaden Sieves

Emily Dickinson

It sifts from Leaden Sieves--  
 It powders all the Wood.  
 It fills with Alabaster Wool  
 The Wrinkles of the Road—

It makes an Even Face  
 Of Mountain, and of Plain—  
 Unbroken Forehead from the East  
 Unto the East again—

It reaches to the Fence—  
 It wraps it Rail by Rail  
 Till it is lost in Fleeces—  
 It deals Celestial Veil

To Stump, and Stack—and Stem—  
 A Summer's empty Room—  
 Acres of Joints, where Harvests were,  
 Recordless\*, but for them—

## It Ruffles Wrists of Posts

As Ankles of a Queen—  
 Then stills its Artisans—like Ghosts—  
 Denying they have been—

\*unrecorded

1. This poem consists essentially of a series of metaphors with the same literal term identified only as "It." What is "It"?
2. In several of these metaphors the figurative term is named—"Alabaster Wool" (3), "Fleeces" (11), "Celestial Veil" (12). In two of them, however, the figurative term as well as the literal term is left unnamed. To what is "It" compared in lines 1-2? In lines 17-18?
3. Comment on the additional metaphorical expressions or complications contained in "Leaden Sieves" (1), "Alabaster Wool" (3), "Even Face" (5), "Unbroken Forehead" (7), "A Summer's empty Room" (14), "Artisans" (19).

### **The Road Not Taken**

Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

1. Does the speaker feel that he has made the wrong choice in taking the road “less traveled by” (19)? If not, why will he “sigh” (16)? What does he regret?
2. Why will the choice between two roads that seem very much alike make such a big difference many years later?

### **The Sick Rose**

William Blake

O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm,  
Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy,  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

1. What figures of speech do you find in the poem in addition to symbol? How do they contribute to its force or meaning?
2. Several symbolic interpretations of this poem are given below. Can you think of others?
3. Should symbolic meanings be sought for the night and the storm? If so, what meanings would you suggest?

### To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

Robert Herrick

Gather ye rosebuds, while ye may,  
     Old Time is still a-flying;  
 And this same flower that smiles today  
     Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the Sun,  
     The higher he's a-getting,  
 The sooner will his race be run,  
     And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,  
     When youth and blood are warmer;  
 But being spent, the worse and worst  
     Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time;  
     And while ye may, go marry;  
 For having lost but once your prime,  
     You may forever tarry.

1. The first two stanzas might be interpreted literally if the third and fourth stanza did not force us to interpret them symbolically. What do the "rosebuds" symbolize (stanza 1)? What does the course of a day symbolize (stanza 2)? Does the poet narrow the meaning of the rosebud symbols in the last stanza or merely name *one* of its specific meanings?
2. How does the title help us to interpret the meaning of the symbol? Why is "virgins" a more meaningful word than, for example, *maidens*?
3. Why is such haste necessary in gathering the rosebuds? True, the blossoms die quickly, but others will replace them. Who really is dying?
4. What are "the worse, and worst" times (11)? Why?
5. Why is the wording of the poem better than these possible alternatives: *blooms* for "smiles" (3); *course* for "race" (7); *used* for "spent" (11); *spend* for "use" (13)?