**Poetry: Reverse Interpretation**

This is a poetry reading exercise best done in the early stages of the semester. It consists of interpreting a poem before reading it. It works well with poems that appear to have a lot of symbolism or allegory. For an example, let us take Robert Frost’s *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.* The purpose of this exercise is to highlight how poems play with the connotations of words, and show students that they already possess some tools to interpret and discuss poetry, with or without knowing it.

Before students know that this is the poem they will be reading/analyzing, divide them into five groups, and give each group a single word from the poem. Let us say “Woods”, “Snow”, “Village”, “Horse”, “Sleep”. Then ask each group to note down any associations they can think of for that word, based on how they have encountered them before in other literature, films, folklore, mythology, expressions, etc. The “Woods” group might bring up fairies, the supernatural, a sense of disorientation or wonder. The “Snow” group might think of tranquility, purity, quietness. “Horse” might bring up communication, travel, war, civilization. “Sleep” might conjure peace, a dream world, the sleep of death…

After these are shared with the class, either the same or the next day, pull out the poem and work out together how these associations factor into our interpretation of the poem. For this poem you will almost always end up with something like “the speaker longs for an escape from the toil of civilization and into a more pure, peaceful, imaginary state such as what may come with death.” Many students may not have thought of such a reading if they had looked at the poem first, and thought it was just about a man daydreaming on his horse by some woods.

It is a fun exercise to try with different poems and may give students a boost of confidence in their ability to analyze word-choice and connotations in poetry.