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Office of University Communications

April 16, 2014

Dr. Chris Davis Offers Insight for Appreciating Poetry's Historical and Literary Importance

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Some of the first literary pieces introduced to children are nursery rhymes and Mother Goose poems. Little ones may have learned “Little Miss Muffet” and “Jack and Jill” before ever realizing they were reciting famous poetry. The influence of classic poems, short verses and prose continues to offer a substantial impact on people both developmentally, socially, and culturally.

The month of April is designated as National Poetry Month by the Academy of American Poets. Members say the effort was established to increase the visibility and availability of poetry in popular culture while acknowledging and celebrating poetry's ability to sustain itself in the many places where it is practiced and appreciated.

Dr. Chris Davis is a professor of English at Gardner-Webb University, and he believes there are several myths related to poetry composition and comprehension that need to be debunked.

“Many people believe poetry has to rhyme,” Davis shared. “Because we encounter at such an early age so many poems that rhyme, we fall into the trap of believing that all poems must have a rhyme at the end of each line. However, rhyme is not a requirement in poetry.”

While rhyming is not mandatory, there are other differences that are quickly observed. In a visual sense, poetry sets itself apart from other traditional forms of literature. “It has shorter lines that typically do not go all the way across the page. The poet has to make strategic decisions about how long to make the lines, as well as where to break them,” Davis explained. “Imagery is imperative in poetry; the author must use language that appeals to a reader's senses.”

While sometimes challenging to read and comprehend, Davis encourages people not to be intimidated by poems. “Some people believe poetry is too difficult to understand, and therefore is not worth the time investment,” he reflected. “One of the reasons Robert Frost's poems are so popular is because he is seen as being accessible. It's not hard to find other poets who are accessible too.”

So how should a reader approach an unfamiliar poem? “When reading a poem, try not to ask any questions immediately,” Davis suggested. “Simply try to absorb the poem the way one would absorb a painting. However, after an initial read, it can be helpful to ask a few questions. First, who is speaking to me? Can I determine the relationship of the speaker to the subject matter? Understanding this context can be crucial to understanding the poem. Next, what sort of musical qualities do I detect in the poem? Finally, what imagery in the poem helps me to experience it?”

If poetry comprehension is sometimes challenging, the fair assumption is that poetry composition is also a tough undertaking. “Poetry can be very difficult to write. The main difference between writing prose and poetry has to do with the compression of language,” he offered. “Poets want to say as much as possible in as few words as possible. Every word counts in a way that is not true for prose. Poets have to be especially keen for finding the right word. A poet can labor for hours over a single word.”

Davis would love to see the art of poetry elevated within popular culture. “Sadly, poetry gets shortchanged in the modern world,” Davis lamented. “Although the same could be argued about literature in general, poetry seems to have slipped to the ‘bottom of the food chain’ below non-fiction, novels, and movies. Historically, poetry retained a lofty position in the hierarchy of the arts, although that is not true today. That’s a shame because poetry can teach us a lot about life and humanity. National Poetry Month does a great job every year of highlighting and celebrating both poetry’s historic and contemporary achievements.”

For more information on National Poetry Month, visit poets.org/npm. To contact Dr. Chris Davis, contact the GWU Office of University Communications at 704-406-2349.

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University blends a liberal arts core curriculum with more than 55 major and minor professional programs of study, a comprehensive academic experience that flows from our Christian commitment to intellectual freedom, service and leadership.