

Messages in a Bottle

Paul Celan, who was both a 20th Century poet and translator, once wrote: “A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the-not always greatly hopeful-belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense are under way: they are making toward something.”

Message in a bottle: John Mayer, Sting, and rapper Jay Sean are among songwriters who have written songs with this title, while Hollywood films, cartoons, and visual art have also borrowed this concept. American poet and critic Edward Hirsch opens his book “How to Read a Poem” with an extended discussion of Celan’s quote, and challenges readers to read actively rather than passively for the best results.

For many Americans, a message in a bottle seems to be a cliché that has lost its meaning and luster. So is this metaphor a commonplace? Perhaps, but if you can consider this notion with a fresh perspective, it can be helpful as you work your way through the readings. Much modern literary theory emphasizes the role of the reader in creating meaning. Therefore, if you can creatively imagine that the poems you encounter have been set adrift at another time and place your understanding can be enriched. Who wrote it? When? Where? What message were they seeking to send? The meaning of a poem ultimately is determined when a careful reader “decodes” the message.

Critical thinking involves understanding how the parts relate to the whole. For readers to gain knowledge, they must move beyond seeing poems as long lines of verse and consider the relationships between the individual components—word choices, order, tone, images, rhyme, and rhythm. By asking the right questions of the messages which make up the “bottle” of your textbook, you can better appreciate the poems as well as the poets. Close reading can clear up confusion, and help make sense of the complexities of modern poetry. So open the bottle, and see what is written on the manuscript inside.