

## the lesson of the moth

Poem by Don Marquis

## Identity

Poem by Julio Noboa

# Does **BEAUTY** matter?

### COMMON CORE

**RL 1** Cite the textual evidence that supports inferences drawn from the text.

**RL 4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning. **RL 5** Analyze how structure contributes to meaning.

What is our standard of beauty? A recent study found that people judged the beauty of strangers differently than they judged the beauty of people they knew. With strangers, people took into account only physical appearance. With familiar faces, the participants considered characteristics such as intelligence, courage, and dependability. The speakers in the poems you're about to read have their own ideas about beauty.

**SURVEY** Survey your classmates to find out what five or six characteristics they think make someone beautiful. List the ten answers that were given most often, and then separate them into internal and external characteristics. According to your survey, is beauty only skin deep?



## Meet the Authors

### ● POETIC FORM: FREE VERSE

It is often said that to write poetry, you first have to learn the rules—then you can break them. **Free verse** is poetry that “breaks the rules” because it does not contain regular patterns of rhythm or rhyme. However, writers of free verse often use repetition and other sound devices to emphasize meaning. As you read, notice the way the poems sound like everyday speech.

### ● TEXT ANALYSIS: SPEAKER

In a poem, the voice that “talks” to the reader is called the **speaker**. Readers often assume that the speaker and the poet are the same, but this is not always true. The speaker may be a character created by the poet. For example, the speaker in “the lesson of the moth” is a cockroach named Archy. As you read each poem, use clues from the text to infer the speaker’s identity.

### ● READING SKILL: CLARIFY MEANING

Poets use line breaks, stanzas, and punctuation to help emphasize ideas. For example, look at how the punctuation and line and stanza breaks in the first stanza of “Identity” affect meaning.

*Let them be as flowers,  
always watered, fed, guarded, admired,  
but harnessed to a pot of dirt.*

In the first two lines, commas cause you to pause and linger on words that are associated with positive feelings. However, the third line, which ends with a period, abruptly undercuts these comforting words. Because the stanza ends with this line, it emphasizes that the speaker sees confinement where others see beauty. As you study each poem, think about how the line breaks, stanzas, and punctuation affect the way you read and understand it. Use a graphic organizer like the one shown to note these elements and the effects they create.

Elements	Used?	Effects
line and stanza breaks	yes	separate positive and negative ideas
commas		
end marks (question marks, periods, etc.)		



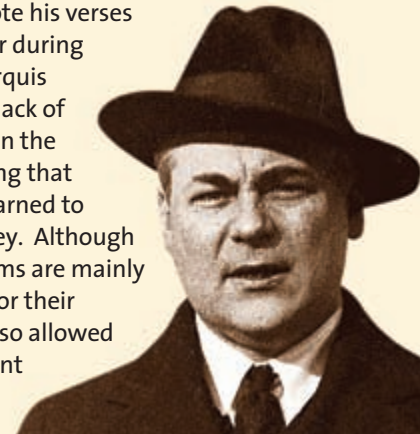
Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## Don Marquis

1878–1937

### Talented Newsman

Don Marquis published novels and worked as a screenwriter, but he was mainly a newspaper writer. A daily column in the *New York Evening Sun* led Marquis to create a character called Archy the cockroach, who helped Marquis see life from a different perspective. “the lesson of the moth” is one of many poems Marquis wrote in the voice of Archy. Marquis pretended that Archy wrote his verses on a typewriter during the night. Marquis explained the lack of capitalization in the poems by saying that Archy never learned to use the shift key. Although Marquis’s poems are mainly remembered for their humor, they also allowed him to comment on society.

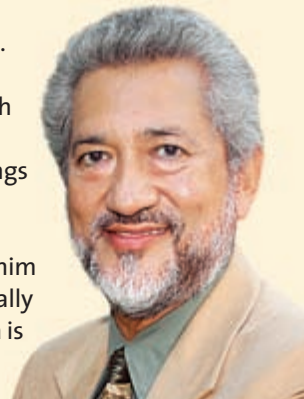


## Julio Noboa

born 1949

### Poet and Educator

Julio Noboa was born in the Bronx. He credits his Puerto Rican father and a high-school English teacher with encouraging him to write. Noboa wrote “Identity” when he was in the eighth grade. The poem was inspired by Noboa’s feelings after a breakup with a girlfriend, an experience that he says encouraged him to think “about what’s really important to me.” Noboa is now a college professor.



Authors Online

Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML8-617



# the lesson of the moth

Don Marquis

i was talking to a moth  
the other evening  
he was trying to break into  
an electric light bulb  
5 and fry himself on the wires **A**

why do you fellows  
pull this stunt i asked him  
because it is the conventional<sup>1</sup>  
thing for moths or why  
10 if that had been an uncovered  
candle instead of an electric  
light bulb you would  
now be a small unsightly cinder<sup>2</sup>  
have you no sense **B**

15 plenty of it he answered  
but at times we get tired  
of using it  
we get bored with the routine

## Analyze Visuals ▶

What might the light bulb **symbolize**?

### **A** SPEAKER

What are your first impressions of the speaker?

### **B** CLARIFY MEANING

Imagine that this stanza was punctuated like regular text. Where would the punctuation appear?

- 
1. **conventional**: customary; usual; accepted.
  2. **cinder**: a piece of burned material.



and crave beauty  
20 and excitement  
fire is beautiful  
and we know that if we get  
too close it will kill us  
but what does that matter  
25 it is better to be happy  
for a moment  
and be burned up with beauty  
than to live a long time  
and be bored all the while  
30 so we wad all our life up  
into one little roll  
and then we shoot the roll  
that is what life is for  
it is better to be a part of beauty  
35 for one instant and then to cease to  
exist than to exist forever  
and never be a part of beauty  
our attitude toward life  
is to come easy go easy  
40 we are like human beings  
used to be before they became  
too civilized to enjoy themselves **C**

and before i could argue him  
out of his philosophy  
45 he went and immolated<sup>3</sup> himself  
on a patent<sup>4</sup> cigar lighter  
i do not agree with him  
myself i would rather have  
half the happiness and twice  
50 the longevity<sup>5</sup> **D**

but at the same time i wish  
there was something i wanted  
as badly as he wanted to fry himself

—archy

**C FREE VERSE**

In what ways do the lines in this stanza sound like the way people really talk? In what ways do they sound different?

**D SPEAKER**

In what way does the speaker compare himself to the moth?

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3. **immolated** (ɪm'ə-lātd'): killed as a sacrifice.

4. **patent** (pāt'nt): patented; covered by a lawful grant that gives the inventor the exclusive right to manufacture an item for a certain time period.

5. **longevity** (lɒn-jěv'ĭ-tē): length of life.

# IDENTITY

Julio Noboa



*The Mountain* (1991), Albert Herbert. Oil on canvas, 50.8 cm × 61 cm. Private collection. © Bridgeman Art Library.

Let them be as flowers,  
always watered, fed, guarded, admired,  
but harnessed to a pot of dirt.

I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed,  
5 clinging on cliffs, like an eagle  
wind-wavering above high, jagged rocks. **E**

To have broken through the surface of stone  
to live, to feel exposed to the madness  
of the vast, eternal sky.  
10 To be swayed by the breezes of an ancient sea,  
carrying my soul, my seed beyond the mountains  
of time  
or into the abyss<sup>1</sup> of the bizarre.

I'd rather be unseen, and if,  
  
then shunned<sup>2</sup> by everyone  
15 than to be a pleasant-smelling flower,  
growing in clusters in the fertile valley  
where they're praised, handled, and plucked  
by greedy, human hands. **F**

I'd rather smell of musty, green stench  
20 than of sweet, fragrant lilac.  
If I could stand alone, strong and free,  
I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed.

## **E** SPEAKER

Reread lines 1–6. How does the speaker's view of himself or herself contrast with the way the speaker views "them"?

## **F** CLARIFY MEANING

Reread lines 13–18, paying attention to the commas. What effect do they have on the way you read this stanza?

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1. **abyss**: a seemingly bottomless space.
  2. **shunned**: deliberately avoided; shut out.

## Comprehension

- Recall** According to “the lesson of the moth,” why do moths fly toward light?
- Represent** Create a sketch that shows the differences between the flower and the weed described in “Identity.” Make sure your sketch reflects at least two specific details from the poem.

## Text Analysis

- Make Inferences** What does the **speaker** learn about himself in “the lesson of the moth”? Support your response with evidence from the poem.
- Examine Stanza** In “the lesson of the moth,” how does the poet use **stanzas** to help you follow the conversation between the cockroach and the moth?
- Analyze Metaphor** What kind of person does the speaker in “Identity” want to be? What kind of person does he not want to be?
- Clarify Meaning** Refer to the charts you created as you read. For each poem, tell whether the line breaks, the stanzas, or the punctuation did the most to help you understand the poem’s meaning. Explain what and how that element helped you understand.
- Compare and Contrast Views** In “the lesson of the moth,” what is the moth’s attitude about the price of beauty? In “Identity,” what is the speaker’s attitude about the price of beauty? Explain whether you think their views are more similar or more different.

- Evaluate Free Verse** Use a chart like the one shown to list examples of rhyme, repetition, or other sound devices, such as **alliteration** (the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words). What images or ideas do these devices emphasize?

	<i>“the lesson of the moth”</i>	<i>“Identity”</i>
<i>Rhyme</i>		
<i>Repetition</i>		
<i>Sound Devices</i>		

## COMMON CORE

**RL 1** Cite the textual evidence that supports inferences drawn from the text. **RL 4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning. **RL 5** Analyze how structure contributes to meaning.

## Extension and Challenge

- SCIENCE CONNECTION** How do the qualities of real cockroaches and moths correspond to the poetic creations Don Marquis presents in “the lesson of the moth”? Research to find out about each creature’s habits and life span. Display your findings in a poster, and be ready to explain how the poem does—or does not—relate to reality.



Cockroach

### Does BEAUTY matter?

How has reading these poems influenced your thoughts about beauty?

## Language

### ◆ GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT: Use Commas Correctly

By using commas properly to indicate a pause, you can avoid confusing your readers. When writing a sentence that lists **items in a series**, insert a comma after every item except the last one. (A series consists of three or more items.) Also insert a comma between two or more **adjectives** of equal rank that modify the same noun.

*Original:* Both the moth in “the lesson of the moth” and the speaker in “Identity” find beauty in unusual surprising places.

*Revised:* Both the moth in “the lesson of the moth” and the speaker in “Identity” find beauty in unusual, surprising places.

**PRACTICE** Insert commas where needed in the following sentences.

1. The moth would rather take risks get injured and die young than be bored.
2. He thinks that the dangerous exciting heat of fire is beautiful.
3. I wouldn’t mind being unseen shunned and alone like a weed.
4. Unlike flowers, weeds are strong free and independent.

For more help with using commas correctly, see page R49 in the *Grammar Handbook*.

### READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Continue to explore the meaning of “the lesson of the moth” and “Identity” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

#### WRITING PROMPT

**Short Constructed Response: Paragraph**  
Choose one of the “characters” from the poems— Archy, the moth, or the speaker in “Identity.” Write a **paragraph** answering the question, “Does beauty matter?” from the point of view of this character.

#### REVISING TIP

Review your response. Have you used commas correctly in a series or between adjectives of equal rank that modify the same noun? If not, revise.



**L 2a** Use punctuation (comma) to indicate a pause or break.  
**W 10** Write over shorter time frames.

Interactive Revision **THINK central**  
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KEYWORD: HML8-623