

The Blue Guitar

P. K. Page

*They said, 'You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.'
The man replied, 'Things as they are
are changed upon the blue guitar.'*

— “The Blue Guitar” by Wallace Stevens

I do my best to tell it true
a thing exceeding hard to do
or tell it slant as Emily
advises in her poetry,
and, colour blind, how can I know
if green is blue or cinnabar.
Find me a colour chart that I
can check against a summer sky.
My eye is on a distant star.

They said, ' You have a blue guitar. '

‘I have,’ the man replied, ‘it’s true.
The instrument I strum is blue
I strum my joy, I strum my pain
I strum the sun, I strum the rain.

But tell me, what is that to you?
You see things as you think they are.
Remove the mote within your ear
then talk to me of what you hear.’
They said, ‘Go smoke a blue cigar!
You do not play things as they are. ’

‘Things as they are? Above? Below?
In hell or heaven? Fast or slow...?’
They silenced him. ‘It’s not about
philosophy, so cut it out.
We want the truth and not what you
are playing on the blue guitar.
So start again and play it straight
don’t improvise, prevaricate.
Just play things as they really are.’
The man replied, ‘ Things as they are

are not the same as things that were
or will be in another year.
The literal is rarely true
for truth is old and truth is new
and faceted — a metaphor
for something higher than we are.
I play the truth of Everyman
I play the truth as best I can.

The things I play are better far
when changed upon the blue guitar. ’

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Dive in:

1. “The Blue Guitar” is filled with vivid sensory images. Which image do you find most memorable?
2. There are many noteworthy structural patterns throughout this poem. For example, how many lines are in each stanza? What is the rhythm of each line? Which lines rhyme with one another? Why has the poet italicized the last line of each stanza?
3. In the poem, the man who plays his blue guitar has a fairly philosophical discussion with his audience. The audience states that they “want the truth and not what you / are playing on the blue guitar.” What do you think this poem is saying about the different ways that people perceive the world? About the way that artists transform what they see in their lives? About the challenges and rewards of staying true to their artistic visions?
4. As a glosa poem (see link below for more details), “The Blue Guitar” directly engages with an older poem by Wallace Stevens titled “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937); in turn, Wallace Stevens’s poem was at least partly influenced by Pablo Picasso’s painting “The Old Guitarist” (1904). How can engaging with other works of art, literature, music, or film help you write your own poetry? What artists, writers, singers, or filmmakers inspire your own creative ideas?
5. “The Blue Guitar” includes a few different voices/characters in dialogue. If you were to recite this poem, what subtle nuances in your performance could help convey to your audience the switch between perspectives?
6. Think about one of your favourite songs, paintings/pictures, books, or movies. Write a poem of your own that draws on that artwork for inspiration. Which personal experiences, memories, and feelings do you associate with that artwork? Write all of these associations down in your draft. If you really want to challenge yourself, pick a four-line verse from your favourite lyric or poem and try writing your own glosa!

Useful links:

Learn about the structural conventions of the glosa in this clearly
written blog post: <http://www.johnwheway.com/?p=4>

Read an excerpt from the Wallace Stevens poem that inspired P.K.

Page's "The Blue Guitar" here:

<https://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/blueguitar.html>

See Pablo Picasso's painting "The Old Guitarist" here:

<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/28067/the-old-guitarist>

In this video, learn about P.K. Page's final book of poetry, *Coal and Roses*, and watch Dionne Brand read "The Blue Guitar":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzYY-UJkhJ0>

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