Kind of an Ode to Duty

by Ogden Nash

A bit of beginning humor to decipher and to help with your ubiquitous work ethic needs.

Oh Duty,
Why hast thou not the visage of a sweetie or a cutie?
Why glitter thy spectacles so ominously?
Why art thou clad so abominously?
Why art thou so different from Venus
And why do thou and I have so few interests mutually in common between us?
Why art thou fifty per cent martyr
And fifty-one per cent Tartar?

Why is it thy unfortunate wont
To try to attract people by calling on them either to leave undone the deeds they like,
or to do the deeds they don’t?
Why art thou so like an April post-mortem
Or something that died in the ortumn?
Above all, why dost thou continue to hound me?
Why art thou always albatroussly hanging around me?

Thou so ubiquitous,
And I so iniquitous
I seem to be the one person in the world thou art perpetually preaching at or to who
Whatever looks like fun, there art thou standing between me and it calling “yoo-hoo”
O Duty, Duty!

How noble a man should I be hadst thou the visage of a sweetie or a cutie!
But as it is thou art so much forbiddinger than a Wodehouse hero’s forbiddingest aunt
That in the words of the poet, “When Duty whispers low, thou must”
This erstwhile youth replies, “I just can’t.”
Dutiful Questions to Help Decipher “Ode to Duty”

Pair share to come up with as many answers as possible; then we will share as a class. By the end of our discussion, this weird and difficult piece of writing will seem easy (even if work ethic is not). You will be expected to understand literature that is increasingly “dense” as your school life and FCAT life continue. I want you to be suited up for the battle. I will begin by sharing with you the answers to #4 e and f because those would be most difficult for you to find out about and really “get it” without teacher help. Teacher help, by the way, is not a bad method for finding out some answers after you’ve exhausted other methods on your Strategic Readers Strategies handouts and your Googling.

1. What words might you need to check the meaning of?

2. What words seem to be misused or misspelled? Why might Nash be doing this? Is he lazy or stupid or does he have something else in mind?

3. What examples of old-fashioned diction do you see? Why might Nash be using this diction? Hint: the title

4. How does each of these allusions he uses add to the poem’s tone and message? (By the way, do you know the difference between illusion and allusion? Learn it, and knowledge of allusions won’t be such an illusion anymore.)
   a. Venus
   b. Tartar (not the teeth stuff)
   c. April post-mortem (hint: April 15)
   d. albatross
   e. Wodehouse aunt
   f. erstwhile poet and his lines, “When duty whispers low…”

5. What seems to be the tone and message of the poem and how does the diction you’ve noticed help Nash achieve the tone and message he seems to be going for?

6. Why might it be more effective to write a poem about duty as Nash did rather than in a didactic tone?

7. What kind of poetry might you expect from Ogden Nash? Does he seem to be well-educated? Why or why not? What then are some marks of a well-educated person?

8. Now, get ready to try this process on your own with another Ogden Nash poem. Do your duty, but have fun.