

How to Read Poetry

The following suggestions are meant to provide you with a basic method for analyzing and understanding poetry, particularly for those who haven't done much poetry-reading. It's not in any way a comprehensive guide to poetry, and for those who are familiar with basic literary analysis, it can certainly be adapted to your own needs or abandoned altogether. Certain poems may require more focus on particular elements-- language, sound, form, etc.-- and *every* poem will require multiple readings. Each time through, you should give your attention to *one* of the following aspects of the poem.

1. Read slowly for comprehension. Try to paraphrase the poem in your own mind.

- What is the action of the poem? Is there a narrative or story?
- Who or what is speaking? Can you infer anything about the character or situation of the speaker? Is there more than one voice speaking, and, if so, what is their relationship?
- Who or what is being addressed? Is it being spoken to another person, an object, God, etc., or is it being addressed to some abstract idea or symbol like Love, Death, Beauty, etc.?
- What *kind* of address is it-- a monologue, a dialogue, an exclamation, a reflection or meditation, a narrative, a song? This may tell you something about the situation and action of the poem.
- What is the poem explicitly *saying*? What is the surface meaning of the words? Remember that the literal level is only one of many ways to understand the poem, but it is an important one!

2. Analyze the language of the poem.

- Pay attention to syntax (word order), punctuation, and word usage. Is it standard English, or does the poet manipulate language and grammar to some special effect?
- Look closely at what the possible referents for pronouns such as "I", "you", "they", "it", etc., might be, and what individual adjectives and adverbs are describing. Sometimes they may be purposely vague to allow for various different readings, or they may refer to several different objects at once.
- Consider alternative meanings of particular words and phrases; look them up if necessary. Usually, the key words in a poem carry several different possible meanings. Try out variations to see what alternate readings of the poem are created.
- Look for repetitions or re-phrasings of words and lines. Think about why the poet does this: to stress a point, to create a rhythm, to mimic a natural sound, to reveal a psychological or symbolic meaning?

3. Listen to the sound of the poetry

- Read the poem, or sections of the poem, aloud (or at least move your lips) to get a sense of how the words are supposed to sound together. Try reading all the way through without worrying about the meaning. Often there is an *implied* meaning simply in the *sound* of the language (as in a chant, a hymn, a ballad, etc.).
- You'll become more aware of poetic devices, such as alliteration, assonance, rhythm, and off-rhyme, etc. (look these up in a guide to literary terms), by saying and hearing them. These devices are used by poets give the poem a particular sound and to reinforce certain patterns of meaning.
- Try varying your speed over certain parts, or stressing different words in a line to see what some of the possible alternative readings might be. For example, look at these variations in stress on a famous line:

"To **be** or not to **be**, that is the question."--emphasizes "being", and the problems of existence.
 "To be or not to be, **that** is the question."--emphasizes this particular question as opposed to others that the speaker is considering.
 "To be or not to be, that is **the question**."--emphasizes that this is a question and not a statement; the speaker is *wondering* about the possibilities, not saying that he knows the answer.
 Note: none of these variations are necessarily the "right" one, but by changing the stresses, we become aware of multiple possibilities.

- Consider the *tone* and *mood* of your reading. Try various "voices": quick and ecstatic, slow and contemplative, dreamy, visionary, dark and brooding, etc. Which one seems to fit the character of the speaker or the situation best?
- Pay attention to the *shape* and look of the poem on the page. Does it affect how you read or how the poem flows? Long, sparsely punctuated lines (see Walt Whitman) carry a different rhetorical and emotional energy than short, heavily punctuated lines (see Emily Dickinson).

4. Think about the larger themes and subject of the poem

- What is the poem *about*--not simply "literally", but figuratively as well? What is the author's attitude towards his or her subject? Sometimes a "love poem" is not, in fact, primarily about "love". It could be about loss, anger, politics, art, God, war, fear, or just about anything else, but uses "love" as a convenient (and artistic) starting point.
- Are there patterns of thinking in the poem, or between several poems that address the same issues? Do they display the same attitude throughout, or differing perspectives? Poems are not necessarily all spoken by the same speaker, and *none* of them should be ascribed to the "author" of the poem, even if the author includes his or her own name (as Walt Whitman often does).
- Make note of any ambiguities or contradictions in meaning or tone, and consider what the poet is trying to say about his subject through those uncertainties. Is it because the speaker is confused, trying to mislead you, covering up his/her actual meaning, trying to suggest multiple meanings, conveying the complexity of the issue, etc.?
- Think about the possible symbolism or deeper meanings of each word or line. Does the word or line refer to something other than what's explicitly stated (i.e., is Frost's "Apple Picking" really about picking apples)? Does it carry any specific cultural or historical "baggage" (for example, "virtue" means something different for a Roman Senator than for a 19th century "lady")? Does it have a special significance for the speaker or author (for example, "Nevermore", in "The Raven")?

4. Do some creative interpretation and speculation.

- Remember that the author's "intention" is not all there is to a poem. Often language reveals more than an author consciously planned on saying. Once it's in your hands, what you get out of the poem (or what other readers *might* get) is as important as what the author purposely provides. Don't be afraid to "read against the grain" and come up with new understandings of the text.
- Think about other things that you've read, seen, heard, or experienced about the subject in question. Does the poem resonate with any other possible meanings for you?
- Consider the *context* of the poem: historical, literary, political, religious, etc.. How does the poem relate (or fail to relate) to that context? Does it echo the sentiments or views of the time, or does it challenge them in subtle or unsubtle ways? Does it shed light on some aspect of the culture in which it's written (for example, on issues of "childhood," "gender," "morality," etc.)?
- What questions does the poem fail to address? What remains ambiguous or contradictory? What significance does this have for the poem or the author (or you)? Ask this question: "Why is this poem worth reading today?". Now answer it.