

How to Read a Poem

Poetry is as a form of writing in which language is used not only to relay meaning, but also to convey evocative and aesthetic effects. Poetry is perhaps best defined as the highly charged arrangement of language. We usually think of poetry as a rhyming sequence of lines with a set structure and certain number of stanzas when, in fact, poetry can take many shapes, and often does not follow any structure or rhyme scheme. For a piece of writing to be a poem, or for a piece of writing to even be poetic, it does not have to rhyme or be structured in a particular manner or in accordance with any poetic tradition. A poem, put most simply, is a piece of writing in which each word, sound, and image that is presented is packed full of meaning, style, sense and emotion.

Poems come in a variety of styles and formats. In fact, many of the most respected and acclaimed poets in the English language write (or wrote) in radically different styles. Consider the range of different stylistic qualities associated with some of the greatest poets in the canon: The poems of William Shakespeare tend to be lyrical and written in the form of the sonnet or in blank verse. The poetry of T.S. Eliot, on the other hand, tends to be precise and formal in terms of style and structure. Meanwhile, Lord Byron's poems are structured around a precise rhythm but also contain plenty of humor and jest, while the poems of his contemporary, William Wordsworth, are often written in rather ordinary language in order to capture the voices of common people. Jack Kerouac's poetry tends to consist of unstructured ramblings, while Alan Ginsburg's poetry is full of repetition, cursing, ranting, religious chants, and popular culture references. Gertrude Stein's poems are dense and decidedly prose-like in style, while Sylvia Plath's poems often make use of foreign words and phrases as well as baby-talk and song lyrics. Often, the line between what makes a piece of writing a poem or a piece of prose is rather thin. A poem written in free verse (i.e., a poem that consists of variable lines of writing with no fixed metrical pattern) might, in fact, appear to be quite like a piece of prose (i.e., a writing that follows no fixed rhythm or meter). Especially in the context of modern and contemporary poetics, it is often the writer him or herself who determines whether his or her piece of writing is to be understood as a poem or not. That said, a poem—whether or not it follows a set meter—is a piece of evocative writing that demands greater attention to its structure, diction, and impression than a piece of prose writing does.

As readers, we must approach the poems we read in a manner different from the way in which we approach prose writings. What follows are some general guidelines for reading poems:

1. Read every poem you encounter carefully. Rarely will the full meaning of a poem become apparent after a single reading. Instead, the full meaning of a poem—especially a short poem—will come to light after multiple readings. When reading a poem, be sure that you understand the meaning(s) of every word you

Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl404/>

come across. If you find yourself uncertain of the meaning of any words you encounter, check their definition(s) in a dictionary. Remember that every word used in a poem has been carefully chosen by the author, sometimes *because of* the various meanings the word might suggest or imply. If you are not sure how an author intends for a particular word to be understood within the poem, try to approach the word in question in accordance with the different meanings it might have until you come across a meaning (or meanings) that make(s) sense within the poem.

2. Poems, while often more ambiguous than prose stories, almost always tell a story. While the story of the poem might not be immediately clear to the reader, do remember that there is some sort of a narrative behind every poem you read. As you begin to interpret a poem, ask yourself what story is being told through the poem and try to piece together what actions and events are occurring throughout it. Figuring out the nature and meaning of a poem's story will help you to begin to develop a sense of its meaning.

3. Do not assume that the narrator of a poem is an autobiographical reflection of the author him or herself. Remember that a poem—just like a fictional story—can be narrated by a fictional character. As you read a poem, ask yourself who the narrator might be and what the poem tells you or suggests to you about who the narrator is. As you begin to formulate a reading of a poem, consider how the narrator relates to and informs the poem's meaning(s). Ask yourself what ideas and emotions the narrator is trying to relate to you. Factor the emotions you feel and the ideas you come across into the reading of the poem that you develop.

4. Many poems can be understood and interpreted in a variety of ways. Rarely will a poem have only a single meaning. Keep your mind open as you read a piece of poetry; seek the different and sometimes contradictory meanings it might possess. Aim to be able to realize and accept a poem's sometimes contradictory meanings as you develop your own reading of it. The ideas that are offered in a poem aren't always logical or delivered in a straightforward, linear fashion. In some cases, poets are exploring contrary or radically different ideas and emotions at the same time—even within the same line. We often arrive at the ultimate meaning of a poem by realizing and understanding how the different and sometimes contrary ideas presented within it relate to one another other.

5. Pay attention to and appreciate a poem's aesthetic and evocative qualities.

Reading a poem is not just about understanding its narrative and story. It is also about enjoying the depths of language it explores and the ideas, images, and sounds it evokes in you. We shouldn't aim to understand a poem in a purely narrative or logical sense. Rather, a poem is a piece of writing that we should *feel*—sometimes at a subconscious level—via its emotional and sensory connotations.

Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl404/>