

Introduction to Poetry Lecture Notes

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The Basics of How to Read a Poem

No good poem offers to any reader all that it has on the first reading. Poetry tends to be far denser than prose, requiring concentration on every word, every line, every rhyme, every metaphor, every sound, every image, every punctuation mark. It all matters. Poetry is not throw-away writing, like you might find in a newspaper, to be read quickly and pushed aside. The poet, Ezra Pound, said that “Literature is the news that stays news.” Good poems have something more to say on the second, fifth, or fiftieth reading.

There is no easy formula you can apply to read a poem. Interpretation is not a hard science, but something more like an art. Poetry reading, like violin playing, requires practice, so the more poems you study, and the more you write about them, the better reader and writer you will become. However, there are strategies that you can use from the very beginning that can assist your understanding and make reading unfamiliar poems more fun. I would suggest that when reading a poem for the first time, don’t worry about discovering the overall meaning, but just register your initial impressions. On the second reading—*there always needs to be a second reading*—determine the exact sense of every word. If you don’t know or aren’t sure about a word, look it up in the dictionary. Whenever possible, it’s better to read a poem aloud, for you will hear things you did not see on the page. Another strategy to get into a short poem is to retype it, which gives you something of the poet’s inside view. After two or more readings, jot down a paraphrase of the poem, what you understand it to say in your own words. A paraphrase is not a summary, like “This poem is about how fucked-up love is,” but a rephrasing of the whole poem, line by line, or sentence by sentence.

Two key words: The **theme** of a poem is its central idea; for example “Beauty can surprise our negative thinking.” The same poem’s **subject** might be that what looks like a dying flower turns out to be a butterfly.

There are three main types of poems: lyric poems, narrative poems, and dramatic poems. The lyric is a poem expressing the thoughts and feelings of a single speaker, not necessarily the poet, and lyrics are most often short. A narrative poem tells a story, whether in five or 36,000 lines. A dramatic poem presents the voice of an imaginary character or a dialogue between characters. If there is only one character, we call it a “dramatic monologue,” where typically, we readers learn something the speaker fails to understand. A fourth type of poem, not so popular today, is the didactic poem, which states a moral or seeks to impart a body of knowledge. For example, the Roman poet Ovid wrote *Art of Love*, which gives advice about how to get laid.

Tone & Irony

The **tone** of a poem, generally speaking, is the attitude it takes toward its theme or subject. The tone can tell us whether the speaker is friendly or belligerent, condescending or respectful. We can also get a sense of what the speaker thinks of herself. A poem's tone can be affectionate, angry, honest, deceitful, sarcastic, sad, ambivalent. We often learn what a poem's tone is by paying attention to the poet's choice of words and details. For instance, in Wright's haiku that we examined last week, the single adjective, "laughing," attached to the subject, "boy," leads us to understand that the tone of the poem has to do with happiness and beauty. How different it would have been, had Wright written "a frostbitten boy," "a lost boy," or "a terrified boy," instead of "[a] laughing boy." The whiteness of snow has been used often as a metaphor for death or oblivion, but we know not to read the end of this haiku that way. That the boy "holds out his palms / Until they are white" gives us a concrete detail underlining the sense of happiness and natural beauty. We could also call this a poem about wonder and an earnest poem.

When trying to understand the tone of a poem, look for ways in which the speaker reveals her character. Nowhere in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" does the speaker explicitly state that Aunt Jennifer is oppressed by patriarchy, but a multitude of carefully chosen details point precisely in that direction. You should also look at how the speaker addresses the listener and whether your reaction to the events described differs wildly from how the speaker characterizes them. While some poems, like "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," use strong emotion pointers, like "fear" (3) and "terrified" (9), often poems are very understated, as we have seen with haiku.

It is generally a mistake to assume that the speaker of the poem is identical to the poet. While there are some poets, like Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsburg, who claim to speak directly as themselves, even in their most earnest poems, we can find them creating a persona that is not exactly the man himself, but more like an idealized version of him. Poets often speak as someone else, and there are poets who never speak as themselves. Thus, it is always a good idea to distinguish the speaker of the poem from the poet. They might be very close, or they might be miles apart, as when a poet writes in the voice of a serial killer. One of my favorite poets, Ai, does this in a poem called "The Kid," which we will read later in the semester.

The other big term I want to introduce today is **irony**. Verbal irony signals a discrepancy between what words say and what words mean, and very often the meaning is the precise opposite of what is said. If the irony is bitter, contemptuous, or mocking, we call it "sarcasm." Dramatic irony occurs when a character's words reveal more than she can be aware of, as when King Oedipus vows to punish the person who killed the former King of Thebes. We know that person is Oedipus; and we know that Oedipus is condemning himself, but he doesn't know yet. With Oedipus, the form of irony shades into cosmic irony; that is, when fate undercuts human intention. A poem can also be written from an ironic point of view, wherein there may be a distance between what a character says and what the poem would convey to the reader.

Symbol & Word

Some readers are so sure that everything in a poem is symbol that they overlook the literal meanings of the words. Yet even where there is a symbol, we should assume that the poet has chosen her words carefully and what the words mean on the most basic, dictionary level is important to understanding the poem. Words in poems can be concrete or abstract. Concrete words evoke something we can perceive with sight or with our other senses, like “sunset,” “thunder,” “cherry lollipop,” “diesel exhaust,” or “sand in my bathing suit.” Abstract words express ideas that can’t be visualized: “beauty,” “terror,” “satisfaction,” “annoyance,” “love.” The tendency of poetry in English since the beginning of the twentieth century has been to avoid abstraction, but there are plenty of poems in which abstract nouns are used to good effect.

The dictionary is not only important when you don’t recognize, or aren’t sure of, a word. A good dictionary can help you understand all of a word’s possible meanings. It can tell you how those meanings have changed over time, which becomes important when you’re reading the poetry of the past. Best in all regards is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which is available to you for free through the library’s database website.

An **allusion** can be generally defined as an indirect reference to any person, place, or thing. However, for the purposes of this course, I would like to restrict the word, “allusion,” to references to other cultural productions, be they to poems, movies, paintings, rap songs, whatever. Our anthology provides a lot of footnotes explaining allusions, but if you run into a reference that perplexes you, a simple web search may clarify it.

Today’s English language is an amalgam of several languages: Anglo-Saxon, a Germanic tongue; and Latin and French, both Latinate. Words derived from Anglo-Saxon tend to be simpler and more emphatic, while Latinate words tend to be longer and more abstract. Here are some pairs of Anglo-Saxon and Latinate words: chew and masticate, eat and consume, ask and inquire, belly and abdomen, go and depart, and free and emancipate. Sometimes writers attempt to use Latinate words to sound more educated or intelligent, but the results can sound stilted. Ordinary English speech involves a combination of the Anglo-Saxon and the Latinate.

You know that you don’t address a friend in a text message about the party last night the same way you’d address a grandparent in a thank you note for birthday money. Nor would you write a paper for a college class in the way you’d write your best friend. In the text message, you might write “UR” for “you’re”; for grandpa, you’d spell out “you’re”; and for the academic essay, I would hope you’d know that the second person is not usually appropriate. Poetry, however, can work with all levels of **diction**, from the most familiar to the most formal. It is important to register the level of diction a poem employs and to note when a poem shifts from one level to another.

Poems may also incorporate dialect, which is the particular variety of a language spoken by a particular group of people. If you've ever heard partiers singing "Auld Lang Syne" at New Year's, you've heard a Scottish dialect poem.

Poems can imitate the spoken word—the nineteenth-century British romantic poet, William Wordsworth, famously opined that a poem should sound like a man speaking to ordinary men—but some poems twist syntax and grammar beyond anything you're likely to hear in everyday conversation. When this happens, the trick is to discover why the poem does it.

Imagery

While the word, **imagery**, suggests something to see, in poetry imagery can involve all of the senses. For example, in his haiku, Buson uses tactile imagery—"coolness"—and auditory imagery—"the sound of the bell." Taste and smell imagery is also possible.

The short Ezra Pound and H.D. poems on the second page of the Haiku Handout are examples of Imagism, an early twentieth-century movement that turned away from the abstractions of Victorian and Edwardian poetry in favor of what Pound termed, "direct treatment of the thing." While the reign of imagism didn't last long, it has had a profound effect on the English-language poetry of the last hundred years.

Concrete language allows us to form an image; abstract language is resistant to image-making. So, the word "embarrassment" is abstract. The word "blush" is more concrete. "To go red in the face" is even more concrete, but also a cliché, dead language that everyone has heard before. In a letter, Emily Dickinson writes, "The lovely flowers embarrass me, / They make me regret I am not a Bee." Here is the utmost concretion, a full-blown image.

It is one of the paradoxes of poetry that the more specific, palpable, detailed, and concrete its language is, the wider appeal it will have. Although there is definitely a place for abstraction in poems, general or vague ideas don't tend to move people.

Metaphor & Figurative Language

Figures of speech depart from the usual denotations of words. While we sometimes treat the word, **metaphor**, as synonymous with "figure of speech," there are actually many figures of speech that aren't metaphors.

If I say "Achilles is a lion," I am using a metaphor. While I am not saying the Greek hero is a large, four-legged feline that hunts on the African savannah, I am using the metaphorical identity of "Achilles" and "lion" to suggest the warrior has leonine qualities: he is fierce, he is brave, he is majestic, he is deadly, etc. If, however, I say "Achilles is like a lion," I am using **simile**, wherein the connection between things is indicated by a connective, usually 'like,' 'as,' or 'than.'

An **implied metaphor** occurs when there is neither a connective word, nor the verb, “to be.” If I say, “Achilles roared and unsheathed his sharp claws,” I imply that he is a lion, without saying so explicitly.

A **mixed metaphor** occurs when a writer, usually unintentionally, puts together different metaphors that don’t really match. The effect is often comic, at the writer’s expense. Here’s a famous example of a ludicrous mixed metaphor that Samuel Taylor Coleridge criticizes in *Biographia Literaria*:

No more will I endure love’s pleasing pain,
Or round my heart’s leg tie his galling chain.

Here’s another: “These hemorrhoids are a real pain in the neck.”

If a metaphor covers the entire poem, from beginning to end, it’s called a “conceit.”

Personification is a figure of speech in which a thing, animal, or abstract term is made human. Closely related to personification is **apostrophe**, a direct address to something not normally spoken to, like a flower or the wind. Traditional apostrophes in English-language poetry begin with the single letter, capital “O.”

An overstatement, or **hyperbole**, is a statement containing an exaggeration, like “I could have killed him.” An understatement implies more than is stated outright. Here’s an example from J.D. Salinger’s *A Catcher in the Rye*: “I have to have this operation. It isn’t very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain.”

With **metonymy**, the name of a thing is substituted for the name of a thing closely associated with it. Here’s an example from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.” “Ears” are a metonymy for attention. **Synechocche** is a kind of metonymy in which the part stands in for the whole, or vice versa. If I say, “She lent a hand,” I mean her entire person helped.

A **paradox** occurs when a statement at first strikes us as contradictory, but that makes sense on reflection. In “Holy Sonnet 14,” we might be a little shocked by the concluding couplet,

Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

It seems that the poem equates closeness to God with imprisonment and rape, but on closer inspection, we realize that the poet is describing something life-changing and for him very positive.

Finally, a **pun**, as you probably already know, is a play on words. A word that puns reminds us of another word or words that sound like it, but have a different denotation.

Stanza

The word **stanza** is Italian for “stopping-place” or “room.” It signifies a group of lines whose pattern is repeated throughout the poem. The word, “**verse**,” strictly refers to one line of a poem. A **rhyme scheme** is the order in which rhymed words occur.

For example, listen to the first stanza of “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”:

Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across the screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Because the first two and second two lines rhyme, we call the pattern AABB. This pattern is repeated in each stanza of Rich’s poem. A **refrain** is a series of words, phrases, or lines repeated at intervals in a poem. If the refrain recurs at the end of stanzas, it’s called a **terminal refrain**; if it recurs within stanza, it’s an **internal refrain**. Stevie Smith’s “Not Waiving but Drowning” uses its title as a terminal refrain.

A **ballad stanza** involves four lines rhymed always abcb. A **ballad** is often written in iambic tetrameter, and we’ll discuss meter later in the semester. Ballads are usually narrative poems: they tell a story, often a dark or supernatural one. Ballads in the English language were once the poetry of the common folk: they were passed along orally for centuries until someone finally thought transcription important.

Sound

Euphony occurs when the sound of words, together with their meaning, please the ear. I find the finale of Elizabeth Bishop’s “Fish” full of euphony: “until everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow! / And I let the fish go.” **Cacaphony** occurs when the words have the opposite effect, when they are harsh and discordant. Listen, for example, to the end of Gwendolyn Brooks’ “Boy Breaking Glass”: “A sloppy amalgamation. / A mistake. / A cliff. / A hymn, a snare, and an exceeding sun.” **Onomatopoeia** occurs when word imitates the sound associated with the thing it denotes. Common examples include “buzz,” “pop,” and “cock-a-doodle-doo.” My favorite example is Emily Dickinson’s “I could not see to see,” in which we can hear the fly buzzing. She also uses the word “buzz” in this poem.

Alliteration is simply the repetition of the same consonant sound; and **assonance**, the repetition of the same vowel sound. Much of free verse poetry—that is, poetry that does not involve rhyme schemes or meter—relies heavily on alliteration and assonance, though we find them in older poems, too.

A **rhyme** occurs when two or more words or phrases contain identical or nearly identical sounds. An **exact rhyme** has identical ending vowel and consonant sounds, like “dead” and “red,” or “please” and “cheese.” A **slant rhyme** has joins slightly different vowel sounds, like “moved” and “loved,” or slightly different consonant sounds, like “oddity” and “lobotomy.” **End**

rhyme, as the name indicates, happens at the ends of line; **internal rhyme** occurs within lines. Now here's the sexist terminology part: **masculine rhyme** occurs when the final syllable is stressed, like "divorce" and "remorse"; **feminine rhyme** occurs when the final syllable is unstressed, like "turtle" and "fertile." We will go into stressed and unstressed syllables when we begin our study of meter.

Open and Closed Form

When a poet follows a pre-established metrical pattern, such as that of a sonnet with iambic pentameter, or a ballad with a rhyme scheme, we say the poem is written in **closed form**. All the poems we discussed today are written in closed forms, however much they may be open in other ways. **Open form**, which could be said to begin with Walt Whitman and Arthur Rimbaud in the Nineteenth-Century, and which has become the dominant form of American poetry, discards traditional meter and rhyme. We will talk more about it later. So on to closed forms.

The most common pattern in English-language poetry, the one in which most of Shakespeare's plays are written, as well as John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is **blank verse**, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter.

A **couplet** is a two-line stanza, and traditional couplets are rhymed. The rhyming couplet enjoyed its heyday in the eighteenth century, where it was usually written as an heroic couplet, closed and self-contained, always in iambic pentameter. Here's an example, from Alexander Pope's mock epic, *The Rape of the Lock*:

Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel
A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?

Oh, say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,
Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?

The **tercet** is a stanza of three lines. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante employed a tercet throughout its 14,233 lines in a rhyme scheme called the terza rima, which is very hard to make sound good in English, a language with far fewer rhyming endings than Italian. The terza rima rhyme scheme is aba, bcb, cde, ded, and so on.

The **quatrain** is the most popular stanza in our language for rhymed poems. We have of course already encountered it with ballads. The ballad stanza is written in iambic tetrameter.

While we think of the **sonnet** as an old-timey closed form, it was actually invented by the Italian poet, Petrarch, in the fourteen century. After Petrarch, the biggest innovator of the sonnet is Shakespeare. We speak of two different kinds of sonnet, the Petrarchan, or Italian; and the Shakespearean, or English. The Petrarchan sonnet has an abba, abba scheme in its first eight lines, which are called the octave; the final six, or the sextet, can be rhymed cdcdcd, cdecde, or

in any other rhyming pattern. The Shakespearian sonnet has four clusters: abab, cdcd, efef, and gg. The rhymed couplet at the end is often reserved for a surprise, a twist ending.

An **epigram** is a short, pointed statement. Here's Alexander Pope's "Epigram Engraved on the Collar of a Dog Which I Gave to His Royal Highness":

I am his Highness' dog at Kew;
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

A limerick is a poem with five anapestic lines, usually rhyming aabba. Limericks are funny and often raunchy, as this one, from Clifford Simpson:

Young Joe, while committing no crimes,
Lent a hand helping Tom ring his chimes,
What Tom then requested
Joe gagged on—detested—
At least the first twenty-five times.

Sestina and Villanelle

The **sestina** and the **villanelle** are intricate forms of closed verse that are exceptionally challenging to write. They build more elaborate echoing patterns than most other verse forms, and thereby, when successful, achieve strong musical effects.

The sestina is a thirty-nine-line form that we think was invented by Arnaut Daniel, a twelfth-century troubadour. In a set pattern, the sestina repeats the initial six end-words of the first stanza through five more six-line stanzas. At the end is a three line stanza, called the envoi. Here is the ordering of end-words and stanzas::

ABCDEF
FAEBDC
CFDABE
ECBFAD
DEACFB
BDFECA

The first word of each line of the envoi repeats that pattern, as does the last so that we have a variation like,

B E
D C
F A

The villanelle is a nineteen-line poem featuring two repeating rhymes and two refrains. The form consists of five tercets, followed by a quatrain. The first and third lines of the opening

tercet are repeated alternately in the last lines of the succeeding stanzas; then in the final stanza, the refrain serves as the poem's two concluding lines. The villanelle, which has its roots in Italian and Spanish dance songs, did not start out as such a rigid form. However, probably due to French influence, it became what many believe to be the most difficult of all poetic forms to execute successfully. Villanelles in English not only have an inflexible rhyme and refrain scheme, but they also tend to be written in iambic pentameter.

Open Form

Open form poems are poems that do not employ traditional fixed forms like meter, rhyme schemes, or the intricate patterning we saw in sestinas and villanelles. Open form got its start in the nineteenth century in France and in the United States. In France, Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud pioneered the prose poem. In the United States, Walt Whitman borrowed poetic devices, such as phrasal repetition, from the King James translation of the Old Testament. The translators had not wanted to impose English verse forms on what they saw as holy scripture, so they followed the original Hebrew as closely as possible.

Free verse was widely popularized by the modernists of the first half of the twentieth-century, including such figures as Ezra Pound, H.D., Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams. We are about to read one of its most important practitioners of the latter half of the twentieth century: Frank O'Hara. Today it could probably be said to be the dominant form, though closed forms have proven remarkably resilient.

Open form does not mean total freedom to do whatever. As William Carlos Williams asserts, "Being an art form, verse cannot be 'free' in the sense of having *no* limitations or guiding principles." Yet in open form, the poet must find the guiding principles that suit each poem's subject-material. The poet cannot rely on previously existing forms.