

How to Define and Read Poetry

Poems - often draw on a fund of human knowledge about all sorts of things;

- What makes interpretation easier? Practice, specific skills, knowledge of basic literary terms to make interpretation easier and better.
- **Poems** refer to people, places and events - things that exist in time; they reflect given moments and they are the products of the potentialities and limitations of the times in which they are created. Many poems have something to say about their times and have timeless human qualities, habits, and relationships.
- **Reading poetry** can be a way to gain knowledge as well as an aesthetic experience.
- You will **read a poem** more intelligently the more you know about its cultural or historical and literary contexts.
- To get an appropriate **factual, cultural and historical information, we must ask** the following:
 1. Do I understand all (or most) of the references in the poem? When events, places or people unfamiliar to you come up, you will need to find out what, where, or whom they are
 2. How do I know, in a poem that does not refer specifically to events, people or ideas that I do not recognize, that I need to know more? How do I know that it has a specific context? References that are not in themselves clear provide a strong clue that you need more information. Often the date of the poem helps, sometimes the title gives a clue or a point of departure.
 3. Why does the poem refer to this particular person instead of some other? What function does the reference serve?
- **Poets** - often collect their poems into sequences or cycles ex: in the Western literary tradition, one common type of poetic sequence is the sonnet sequence; these poems often lack titles so we conventionally use the poems first lines as titles or number according to their place in the sequence.

Sonnet sequence - each of the poems in the sequence can be enjoyed and understood on its own. Yet each also functions as part of the larger literary work that is the sequence. A **sonnet** has precisely 14 lines.

Haiku - has three lines only

Qualities of a Poem - include the following:

- diction
- syntax
- punctuation
- meter
- rhyme
- tone
- persona of the author

Poets - put the unique resources of their individual personalities, experiences, and outlooks into every poem they create without surrendering his / her individuality, without compromising his / her integrity and uniqueness;

- the stamp is there in the very subjects, words, images and forms they choose; every individual's unique consciousness marks what it records and imagines.

- it is important to learn to appreciate the particular, distinctive qualities of a poet's work
- a poet will display a characteristic way of thinking with certain identifiable tendencies
- poets will experiment with various subjects and points of view, formal structures and devices
- poets grow and change over time.
- reading a new poem by a familiar poet can be like meeting an old friend; eventual facts about a writer's life may inform whatever he / she writes; you learn what to expect,

Poetry - often described as the art of brevity, compactness and compression; sentences are usually divided into relatively short lines, lines into stanzas that are traditionally much shorter than prose paragraphs

Speaker: Whose Voice Do We Hear? Poems are personal. The thoughts and feelings they express belong to a specific person. Poems come to use as the expression of an individual human voice. That voice is often a voice of the poet, but not always. The **speaker** of the poem may express ideas or feelings very different from the poet's own.

- Often it is necessary first to **identify the speaker** before we can appreciate what else goes on in the poem.
- The **narrator** can set the scene and then introduce a second speaker.
- With **narrative poems** and **dramatic monologues**, we are usually in no danger of mistaking the speaker for the poet. **Lyrics** present more of a challenge, there it is important to pay attention to characterization carefully.

Situation and Setting: What Happens? Where? When?

Questions about the **speaker** in a poem (Who? questions) lead to questions about What? and Why? as well as Where? and When? First you identify the **situation** in the poem. To whom is the **speaker** speaking? Is there an **auditor** in the poem?

- Situation entails setting
- The place involved in a poem is its **spatial setting** and the time is its **temporal setting**. The **temporal setting** may be a specific date or an era, a season of the year or a time of day. **Temporal** and **spatial setting** often influences our expectations.
- Spring is a time associated with discovery and growth
- Morning is associated with discovery, beginnings, vitality, where the world is fresh and new.
- Many poems depend crucially on a sense of place, a sense of time.
- **Situation** and **Setting** may be treated in various ways in a poem, ranging from silence to the barest hints of description to full photographic detail. p. 913

The Carpe Diem Poem - Carpe diem in Latin means to "seize the day" because the speaker is urging his auditor, his lover, to enjoy pleasures now, before they die. The woman is resisting because of her concern for chastity or social rules. The action of these poems is implied in the shifts in what the speaker is saying.

Epics and Romances - may concern the hero's wanderings or adventures to reach or to defend a realm closely associated with his birth, inheritance or fate. Since the 1500s, global exploration, colonialism, slavery, mass migration and economic transformation have meant that many of the world's populations have experienced dislocation and deracination.

- **We must ask the following:** What is the role of dislocation or altered identity in the poem? How do poems represent the speaker's divided loyalties or distance from home? How do they indicate the passage of time, whether in history, over generations, or within one person's life

Theme and Tone - Letting a poem speak to us means more than merely figuring out its topic; it means listening to how the poem says what it says. What a poem says involves its **theme**. How a poem makes that statement involves its **tone**, the poem's attitude or feelings toward the topic

- **Tone** - refers to the qualities of the language a speaker uses in social situations or in a poem, and it also refers to a speaker's intended effect. **Tone** is closely related to **style** and **diction**: it is an effect of the speaker's expressions, as if showing a real person's feelings, manner and attitude or relationship to a listener and to the particular subject or situation.
- As you read the poem, work first to identify its **speaker, situation** and **setting**. Then try both to capture its **tone** in a single word or two and to figure out which features of the poem help to create that **tone**.
- **Theme** - Our response to the tone of a poem, however it surprises or jars or stirs us, guides us to understand its theme or (themes), what the poem expresses about its topic.
- **Theme** is not simply a work's subject or its topic; it is a statement about that topic. Not only may a **theme** be expressed in several different ways, but a single poem may also have more than one theme. Further study of the poem is necessary to understand how it fulfills - or fails to fulfill - the author's intentions.

Theme and Conflict - theme is an idea implied by all of the elements of the poem working together. Focus first on conflict, exploring conflicts and tensions. To begin to identify these, look for contrasts and think about the conflicts they imply. Starting with questions about conflict often provides not only an easier way into the poem but also a much richer, more textured experience came to be.

Denotation and Connotation

- **Denotation** - a word's direct and literal meaning
- **Connotation** - what is suggested by a word, apart from what it literally means or how it is defined in the dictionary; suggestions of emotional undulation that imply our attitude and invite a similar one from our hearers.

Word Order and Placement - Individual words qualify and amplify one another. Where individual words are located matters. Sometimes poems create a powerful sense of the way minds and emotions work by varying normal **syntactical order** in special ways.

Internal Structure

"Proper words in proper places": That is how one great writer of English prose, Jonathan Swift, described good writing. A good poet finds appropriate words and already we have looked at some implications for readers of the verbal choices a poet makes. But the poet must also decide where to put those words - how to arrange them for maximum **semantic**, as well as **visual** and **aural**, effect - because individual **words, figures of speech, symbols** and **sounds** exist not only within phrases and sentences and **rhythmic patterns**, but also within the larger whole of the poem. How should the words be arranged and the poem organized? What comes first and what last? What principle or idea of organization will inform the poem? How do the parts combine into a whole? And what is the effect of that arrangement? Considering these questions from the poet's point of view can help us notice the effects of structured choices.

It's useful to think of most poems - whether **narrative, dramatic** or **lyric** - as informally divisible into parts, distinguished from each other by shifts in subject matter or topic, in tone, in address, in tense, or in mode (from narration to reflection or description, for example), and so on. As you

read a new poem, look out for such shifts, however subtle, to determine how many parts you think the poem has and how each part relates to, and build on the one before.

To fully understand the meaning and the poem, we would need to tease out all those contrasts and their implications. We would also need to consider the significance of the author's choice not only to make the two parts essentially equal in length, but also to order them as she does. How would the poem and our sense of the speaker's feelings be different if we simply rearranged the lines within the poem?

Internal versus External or Formal "Parts"

Internal and **external** or **formal divisions** need not always coincide with each other. Major shifts in a poem can and do occur in the middle of a stanza, a line, even a sentence.

Making Arguments about Structure

Dividing a poem into parts and analyzing its **internal structure** isn't an exact science. Different readers might well come to slightly different conclusions about the nature, timing, and significance of key shifts and thus about just how many parts a poem might be said to have, how one part relates to another, and what sort of whole those parts create. Ample room is there for disagreement which is in a way precisely the point: Formulating your own ideas about just where important shifts come in a poem and just why they are important, identifying good evidence to support your conclusions and considering alternative ways of understanding the poem's structure may take you far down the path to developing your own particular argument about how the poem as a whole works and means.

Poems Without "Parts"

As we have seen, too, dividing a poem into parts is simply a useful way to begin to explore and analyze its structure rather than the entire point or end of such analysis. And this is all the more obviously the case with those poems that contain no major shifts and thus no distinct "parts" at all. Such poems nonetheless have a distinct structure: their authors, too, must figure out how to organize their material so as to create something like a beginning, middle and end.

External Form

Internal features of a poem that make it unique include the **tone** and **characteristics** of its speaker; its **situation** and **setting** and its **themes**; its **diction**, **imagery** and **sounds**. The **external form** of a poem includes its arrangement on the page and into both **visual** and **verbal** units. These formal aspects are external in being recognizable; like the fashion and fabric of clothing that expresses the personality of an individual, the **external form** is an appropriate garb or guise for the unique **internal action** and meaning of the poem. When reading a poem, you might immediately notice its **stanza** breaks. Or you might quickly recognize that the poem takes a traditional form such as the **sonnet**, or that it simply looks odd. These **formal features** guide the readers as well as the poet. They help readers feel and appreciate repetitions and connections, changes and gaps, in the language as well as the meaning of the poem.

Stanzas

Stanzas are how a poem is divided into a few lines, or a group of lines which are divided from other groups by white space on the page. Putting some space between groupings of lines has the effect of sectioning a poem, giving its physical appearance a series of **divisions** that sometimes correspond to turns of thought, changes of scene or image, or other shifts in

structure or direction. Any **formal division** of a poem into **stanzas** is important to consider; what appear to be gaps or silences may be **structural markers**.

Historically, **stanzas** have most often been organized by **patterns of rhyme**, and often of **meter** too, thus **stanza divisions** have traditionally been a **visual indicator** of **patterns in sound**. In most traditional **stanza forms**, the **pattern of rhyme** is repeated in stanza after stanza throughout the poem, until voice and ear become familiar with the pattern and come to expect it. The repetition of pattern allows us to hear deviations from the pattern as well, just as we do in music.

Traditional Stanza Forms

The forms that **stanzas** can take are limitless. Over time, however, certain **stanza forms** have become traditional or “fixed”. In using **traditional stanza forms**, poets thus often implicitly or explicitly elude and even respond to previous poets and poems that have used the same form. Like musicians, they also generate new effects, meanings, and music through meaningful variations on traditional forms.

Traditional Verse Forms

Though **ballad stanza** (has only one set of rhymes in four lines) takes its name from the fact that it is often used in the particular subgenre of poem known as the **ballad**, **stanza forms** are not themselves subgenera of poetry, but rather a form that can be used for various kinds of poems. The same is true of other **traditional verse forms** - set **patterns of rhythm** and **rhyme** that govern whole poems or parts of them rather than individual stanzas. Three especially useful verse forms to know are the **couplet**, **blank verse** and **free verse**.

Blank verse consists of lines with regular meter, usually iambic pentameter, but no discernible rhyme scheme.

Free verse exploded in the 20th century. Now it is the most common of verse forms, where it is “free” precisely because it’s defined wholly by what it lacks - both regular meter and rhyme.

Fixed Forms or Form-Based Subgenres

Some kinds or **subgenres of poetry** are defined wholly by their use of very particular formal patterns. These include the **sonnet**, the **haiku**, the **limerick**, the **palindrome** and the **sestina**.