

## How to Respond to Poetry

Ask the following questions to interpret poetry:

1. **Listen to a poem first.** Try reading it through once without thinking too much about what it means. Read it out loud, so as to hear the poems sound qualities, get a clearer impression of its **tone** and start making sense of it's **syntax**, the way the words combine into sentences.
2. **Articulate your expectations, starting with the title.** Take note of what you expect and where, when and how the poem fulfills or frustrates your expectations.
3. **Read the syntax literally.** What the sentences literally say is only a starting point, but it is vital. You cannot begin to explore what a poem means unless you first know what it says. Though poets arrange words into lines and stanzas, they usually write in complete sentences, just as writers in other genres do. Poets make frequent use of **inversion** (a change in normal word order or syntax). First translate the poem rather than fixing on certain words and free-associating or leaping to conclusions.
  - **Identify sentences.** Ignore the line breaks and look for sentences or **independent clauses** (word groups that can function as complete sentences). These will typically be preceded and followed by a period, semicolon, colon or a dash.
  - **Reorder sentences.** Identify the main elements - subject(s), verb(s), object(s), - of each sentence or independent clause and re-arrange them in normative word order.
  - **Replace each pronoun with the antecedent noun it replaces;** if the antecedent is ambiguous, indicate all the possibilities
  - **Translate sentences into modern prose.** Use a dictionary to define unfamiliar or ambiguous words or words that seem to be used in an unfamiliar or unexpected way. Add any implied words necessary to link the parts of a sentence to each other and one sentence logically to the next. Don't move to outright paraphrase , instead stick closely to the original.
  - **Note any ambiguities in the original language that you might have ignored to your translation.** Look for modifiers that might modify more than one thing; verbs that might have multiple subjects or objects; words that have multiple relevant meanings.
4. **Consult reference works.** In addition to using a dictionary to define unfamiliar words, look up anything else to which that the poem refers that you either don't understand or that you suspect might be ambiguous; a place, a person, a myth, a quotation, an idea and so forth.
5. **Figure out who, where, when and what happens.** Once you have got a sense of the literal meaning of each sentence; ask the following general factual questions about the whole poem.

### Who?

- Who is, or who are, the poem's speakers?
- Who is, or who are, the auditor(s), if any?
- Who are the other characters, if any, that appear in the poem?

### Where? When?

- Where is the speaker?
- Where and when do any actions described in the poem take place? That is, what is the poem setting?

### What?

- What is the situation described on the poem?
- What, if anything, literally happens over the course of it, or what action, if any, does it describe?
- Or, if the poem doesn't have a plot, then how would you describe its internal structure? Even when a poem seems less interested in telling a story than in simply capturing a feeling or describing something or someone, you can still usually read in it some kind of

progression or development or even an argument. When and how does the subject matter or focus or address shift over the course of the poem?

**6. Formulate tentative answers to the questions.** Why does it matter? What does it all mean?

- Why should the poem matter to anyone other than the poet, or what might the poet show or say to readers?
- What problems, issues, questions, or conflicts does the poem explore that might be relevant to people other than the speaker(s) or the poet - to humanity in general, to the poet's contemporaries, to people of a certain type or in a certain situation, and so forth?
- How is each problem or conflict developed and resolved over the course of the poem, or how is each question answered? What conclusions does the poem seem to reach about these, or what are its **themes**?

**7. Consider how the poem's form contributes to its effect and meaning.**

- How is the poem organized on the page, into lines and stanzas like in terms of length, shape and so on? Are they all alike, or do they vary? Are lines **enjambéd** or **endstopped**?
- What are the poem's other formal features? Is there rhyme or another form of aural patterning such as **alliteration**? What is the poem's base **meter**, and are there interesting variations? If not, how else might you describe the poem's rhythm?
- How do the poem's overall form and its various formal features contribute to its meaning and effect? What gets lost when you translate the poem into modern prose?

**8. Investigate and consider the ways the poem both uses and departs from poetic conventions, especially those related to form and subgenre.**

Does the poem use a traditional verse form (or blank verse) or a traditional stanza form (ex: ballad stanza)? Is it a specific subgenre or kind of poem - a sonnet, an ode, or ballad, for example? If so, how does that affect its meaning?

**9. Argue.** Discussion with others - both out loud and in writing - usually results in clarification and keeps you from being too dependent on personal biases and pre-occupations that sometimes mislead even the best readers.

- Effective writing depends on a willingness to listen carefully to the poem and to ask genuine questions about how it works, what it says and means, and how it both fulfills and challenges your expectations about life, as well as poetry.