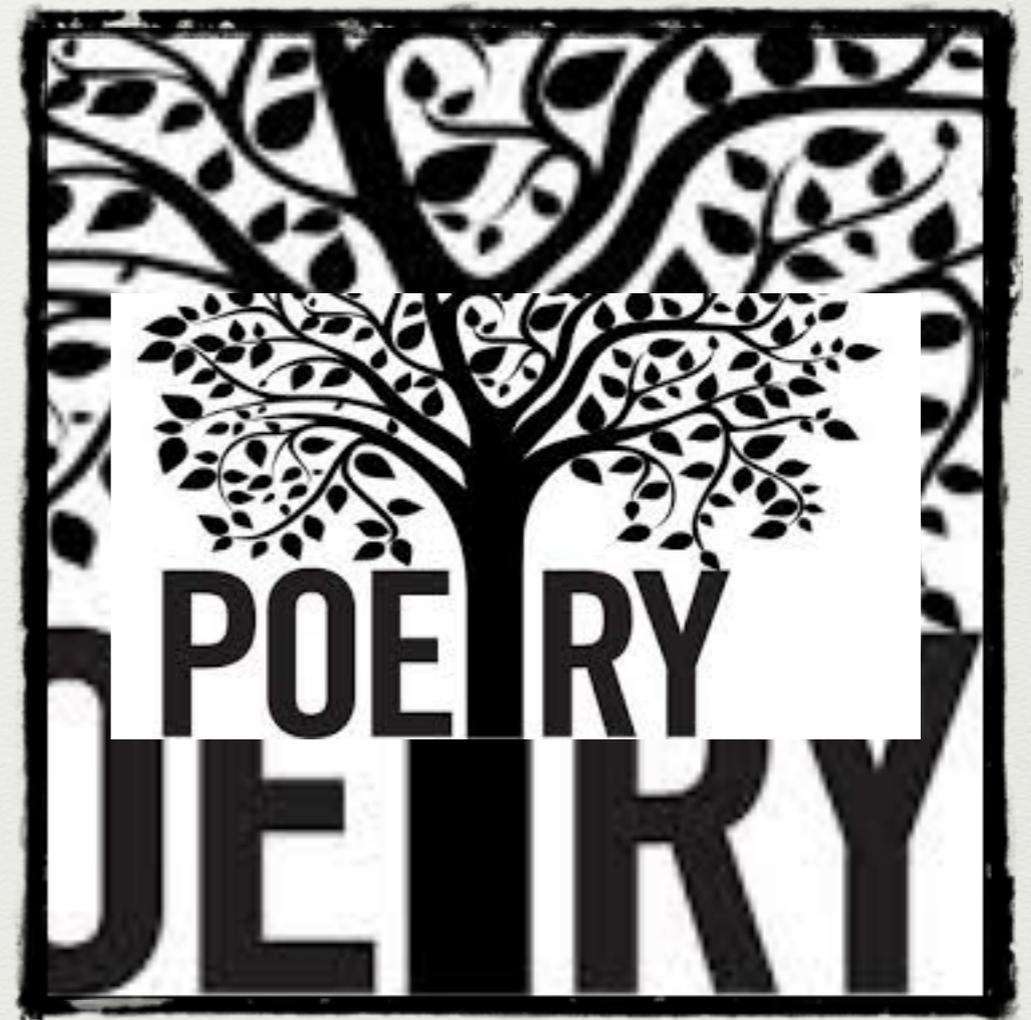


HOW TO DEFINE AND READ POETRY

Professor Caroline S. Brooks
English 1102

What is Poetry?

- Poems draw on a fund of human knowledge about all sorts of things.
- Poems refer to people, places and events - things that exist in time, they reflect given moments which have human qualities, habits and relationships.
- Reading poetry can be a way to gain knowledge as well as an aesthetic experience.



What is Poetry?

- You will read a poem more intelligently the more you know about its cultural or historical literary contexts.
- To obtain factual, cultural and historical information, we must ask the following:
 - Do I understand the references in the poem? When events, places or people unfamiliar to me come up, I will need to find out what, where and whom they are.
 - 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 I need more information. Often the date of the poem helps, sometimes the title gives a clue or a point of departure.
 - Why does the poem refer to this particular person instead of some other? What function does the reference serve?

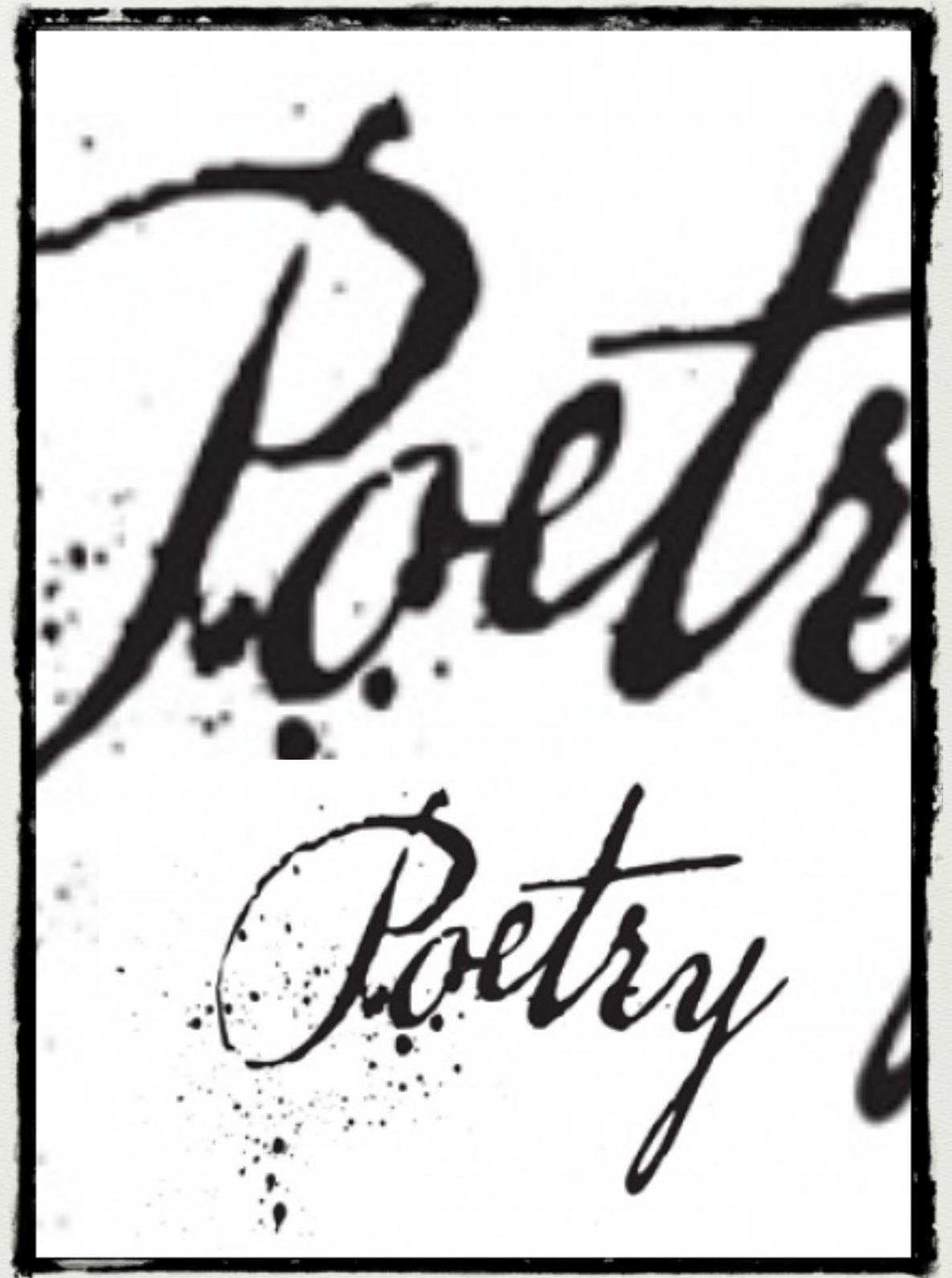
Poets

- Often collect their poems into sequences or cycles. These poems often lack titles. We conventionally use the poems first lines as titles or number according to their place in the sequence. Ex: In a 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.
- Example: Haiku - has only three lines

Qualities of a Poem

Include the following:

- Diction
- Syntax
- Punctuation
- Meter
- Rhyme
- Tone
- Persona of the author



Poets

- Poets put the unique resources of their individual personalities, experiences and outlooks into every poem they create without surrendering his or her individuality, without compromising his or 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 or she writes. You learn what to expect,

Poetry

Poetry often is 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?

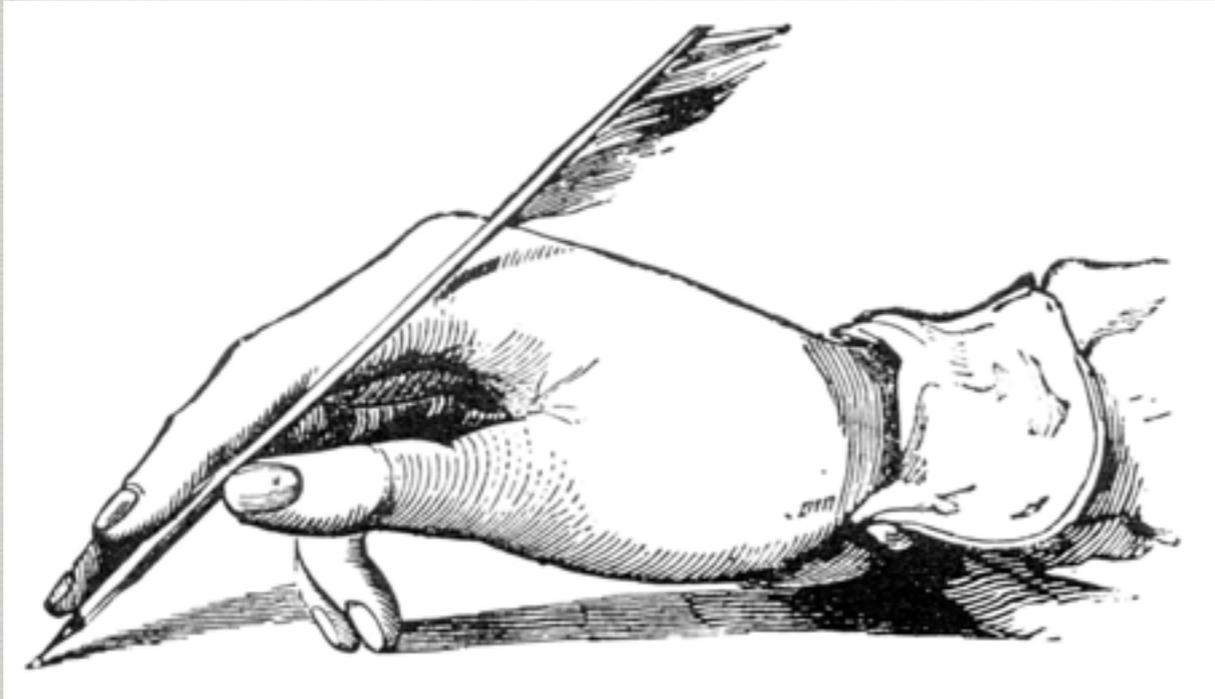
- **Questions about the speaker in a poem** lead to questions about what? why? as well as where? and when? First you identify the situation in the poem. To whom is the speaker speaking Is there an auditor in the poem?
- **Situation** entails setting
- The place involved in a poem is its spatial setting 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 influence 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.



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.



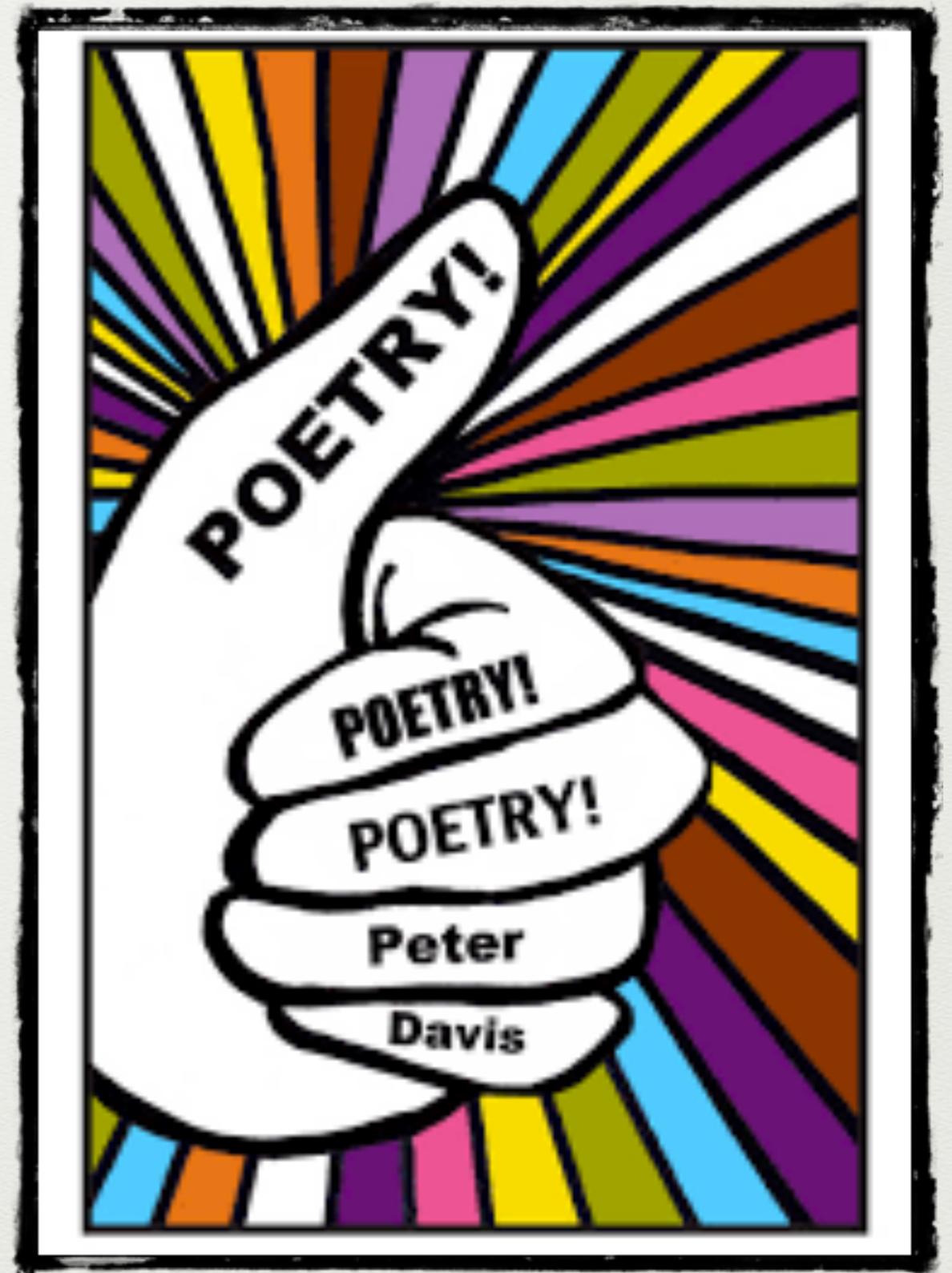


Epics & Romances

- 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 makes that statement involves its tone, the poem's attitudes or feelings towards 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 & 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 to capture its tone in a single word or two and figure out which features of the poem help to create that tone.



Theme and Tone

- **Theme** is our response to the tone of a poem, however it surprises us 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.

POETRY
in VOICE



- **Theme and Conflict** - theme is an idea implied by all 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.

- **Denotation and Connotation** - Denotation is a word's direct meaning. Connotation is 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 listeners.

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 to 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 comes last?** What principle or idea of organization will inform the poem? How do the parts combine into the whole? And what is the effect of the arrangement? Considering these questions from the poet’s point of view can help us notice the effects of structured choices.

- **It is 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 builds 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 differ 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, or 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 there path to developing your own particular argument about how the poem as a whole works and means.

- **Poems without “Parts”** - As we have seen, dividing a poem into parts is simply a useful way to begin to explore & 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. 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 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.



Stanzas

- **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 in traditional forms.
- **Traditional Verse Forms** - Though ballad stanza 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 subgenres 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. Not it is the most common of verse forms, where it is “free” precisely because it is defined wholly by what it lacks - both regular meter and rhyme.