

A Basic Approach to Reading & Understanding a Poem

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Before you even begin to read the poem, look at it on the page. Visually, you can get a sense of the poem's approximate length, and from that some idea of its likely scope, and perhaps an indication of its structural divisions (e.g. repeating stanzas, typographically separated sections of varying length, formally numbered parts, etc.).

Plan on a minimum of three readings:

The **FIRST** time through, read at close to your normal pace right through to the end. You'll miss things, of course, but this is a first reading. The point is to get a general idea of what the poem is about and where it goes. (GETTING THE BIG PICTURE).

The **SECOND** time through, more slowly, find the *sentences* within the poem. Often inexperienced poetry readers read by the line, but the sentence is still the unit of meaning—a subject and a predicate. This second reading should tell you what each sentence says and how, in sequence, they lead to the conclusion. Needing to know what each sentence says means this is the time to look up any words that you don't know. Concentrating on sentences also helps resolve the momentary confusion caused by poets altering what we consider normal English word order in order to match their words to a poem's metrical design. (GETTING THE MEANING).

The **THIRD** reading is for the specifics of expression: connotation, figurative language, imagery, allusion, significant juxtapositions, noteworthy effects of sound—rhythm, rhyme (within the lines as well as at the ends), assonance, consonance, alliteration (look these terms up). Not all of these facets of poetry will appear in every poem, and the ones that do appear will not all be equally important to the poem's meaning or impact. Try to notice everything, but concentrate on the ones that matter most, and how they work together. Deciding what matters most is a critical decision you have to make, and also makes good material for class discussion. (GETTING THE DETAILS).

After these three layers of reading, you should be ready to pose at least tentative answers to these questions:

- What is the dramatic situation? Not all poems will be dramatic in the sense of telling a narrative, but there is nearly always some relevant *context*, an occasion for the words. How do we know what that context is? How important is it?
- What kind of voice speaks in this poem? The answers to this one can be many and various, covering emotional range, a sense of relative “volume,” the degree of formality or informality, distance or intimacy, etc.
- What sorts of subjects does the voice talk about? There’s likely to be more than one even in a single short poem, and sometimes there are different levels of subjects as well, as when a couple of explicit subjects help to reveal an implicit one. When you’re dealing with several poems by one writer, you’re looking for habits, characteristic subjects, and recurrences.
- What attitudes toward those subjects does the poet reveal, and is there a pattern discernible in the attitudes or *expressions* of them? This important question moves the discussion to consideration of tone, imagery and theme.
- How is the poem organized—e.g. by chronology, by observation of a landscape or an event, by a sequence of memories, by a logical argument....? Keep in mind that strategies of organization can be readily combined, as, for example; in a poem that contrasts a present view of some scene with a memory of it. What is the principle of the poem’s unity? How/Why does it begin and end where it does? How, if at all, does its structure affect your response to it?
- What kind of relationship, if any, does the poet seem to want with the reader? Is the speaker trying to anger you? Provoke you? Seduce you? What kinds of assumptions does the poet make about the reader? Here we approach the issues of distance and sympathy and the problem of allusion.
- What is the range of form and technique in the work? Is there any relation between subject and/or theme and form? These are partly matters of style and partly matters of a poet’s sense of his or her place in a poetic tradition.

For a useful glossary of poetic terms, go to:

http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/display_rpo/poetterm.cfm

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