

Reading Poetry

Poetry differs from prose in that it is most often written in *verse*, thus the main unit of attention is not the sentence but the line. How the poet chooses to break the sentence (a method called *enjambment*) into lines is one of the chief hallmarks of modern and post-modern poetry. Poems are usually brief (a few pages at most), imaginative, lyrical ruminations upon experience and/or observation. The speaker in a poem most often reflects upon an image or a situation or occurrence that yields a theme. The simplest and most direct joy of a poem is in hearing the human voice as it brings the listener some news of the world, some “message in a bottle” regarding the poet’s corner of the world, offering the implied question, “Is it like this, too, in your corner?” Familiarizing yourself with the following “elements” common to poems will help enhance your appreciation.

IMAGE

Language that appeals directly to the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) is called **imagery**. A poet uses images to describe the world. When an image transcends the literal realm of description by engaging in the comparison of dissimilars, it becomes **metaphor**. The presence of imagery and the interplay between imagery and metaphor are the most common markers of modern and post-modern poetry.

DICTION

Diction (word choice) is at the heart of the art of poetry. A concise form of communication, poems seek to convey rich layers of meaning in very few words. Thus, poems appear more dense than prose and more ambiguous because they often suggest non-literal modes of meaning, such as symbolism. It is often necessary to read a poem more than once in order to glean its theme. It is precisely such denseness (or “texture”) and ambiguity that appeals to readers of poems. Therefore, listening for both *denotative* and *connotative* meanings of words and patterns of words is crucial to appreciating poetry.

TONE

The speaker of a poem is like a narrator in a story. Often the poet develops a *persona* (Greek for “mask”) who speaks. Listening to the **tone** that the speaker expresses is essential to ascertaining the poem’s meaning. Try to determine the speaker’s attitude towards his/her subject, self, and/or the reader. You must *speak the poem aloud* to do this. The ability to hear the “voice” of the poem is crucial to comprehending its theme.

RHYTHM

Poems are meant to be read aloud. The **rhythm** of the language is an important effect, and poets take great care to craft poems in which the rhythm (and pace) of the language serves the tone and best communicates the theme. Notice, as you read poems, the musical rise and fall of the syllables. How does the sound echo the sense? These “sonic” effects, along with the images and metaphors, are among the chief pleasures of poetry.

FORM

Poems look different on the page than prose. Read aloud, they sound a little different, too. These differences are due, in part, to the emphasis poetry places upon **form**. Most poems are divided into *lines*. Often the lines are divided into *stanzas*. Whereas in prose, the reader's attention moves from sentence to paragraph, in poetry, the attention turns to the line and the stanza. What effects, however subtle, do these choices have upon the pace, rhythm, and emotional impact of the poem?

THEME

As with any piece of writing, the author wants to communicate with the reader. A kind of formal experiment, with its roots in music, the poem conveys its **theme** in lyrical terms, evoking a "felt idea." Paying close attention to imagery, diction, tone, rhythm, and form will help reveal a poem's theme. What is the subject of the poem? More precisely, what is the poet saying *about* the subject?

Isolating these "elements" can help raise our awareness of the poet's craft, sharpening our skills as readers of poems and lovers of language. However, this is merely an exercise, an artificial approach meant to work the interpretive muscles. Once these muscles are strengthened, we can sit back and take a more holistic approach to our reading, savoring the music, the nuance, and the sheer pleasure of hearing the right words in the right order. To aid in this endeavor, here is my condensed version of Billy Collins' advice on reading poems from his web site *Poetry 180*:

1. Read the poem slowly. Reading a poem slowly is the best way to ensure that the poem will be read clearly and understood by its listeners. Learning to read a poem slowly will not just make the poem easier to hear; it will underscore the importance in poetry of each and every word. A poem cannot be read too slowly, and a good way for a reader to set an easy pace is to pause for a few seconds between the title and the poem's first line.
2. Read in a normal, relaxed tone of voice. It is not necessary to give a dramatic reading as if from a stage. Most poems are written in a natural, colloquial style and should be read that way. Let the words of the poem do the work. Just speak clearly and slowly.
3. Obviously, poems come in lines, but pausing at the end of every line will create a choppy effect and interrupt the flow of the poem's sense. Readers should pause only where there is punctuation, just as you would when reading prose, only more slowly.
4. Use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words and hard-to-pronounce words. To read with conviction, a reader needs to know at least the dictionary sense of every word. In some cases, a reader might want to write out a word phonetically as a reminder of how it should sound. Learning to read a poem out loud is a way of coming to a full understanding of that poem, perhaps a better way than writing a paper on the subject.