

## CHAPTER 2

### READING POETRY

Poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature, saying most in the fewest number of words. Some poems are short and contain relatively straightforward ideas which are easy to understand. Others need to work really hard in order to come to an understanding of them. This is because they might be written a long time ago when a different form of language was used. In other words, it contains archaic words that you need to look up, or it contains certain ideas or concepts that are alien to us today but which need to be understood in order to fully understand the poetry. For example, in order to understand the poetry written in the Middle English you need first to understand the Middle English in which the poet wrote his works. A poet like Milton uses references to mythology, the classical world or the Bible that you might need to research in order to appreciate fully what his/her poetry is saying. The ideas are also complex the ways the poet expresses ideas are obscure, or the content, style or structure of the poem is difficult. In this case you need to work hard to tease meaning from the poem.

There may always be words, phrases and lines that are never fully understood. The poem may appear simple and use simple vocabulary but the ideas that it contains are deceptively complex. In other words, poetry can take many forms and poets can employ a wide range of different structures, diction, the use of imagery, techniques, styles and other poetic features when writing their poetry.

Therefore, readers should read it carefully and thoroughly. Their past experiences, backgrounds, and temperaments will help and hinder enjoyment of poems.

**Some suggestions to help readers understand a poem:** (Croft, 2002, p.57)

1. In order to get the meaning of a poem, it is necessary to read it at least twice to become familiar with the different types and style.

2. Keep a dictionary nearby and use it. You cannot understand poetry or the language of poetry without learning the meanings of the words of which it is composed. A good book on mythology and the Bible are also particularly desirable.

3. Read each poem aloud. The poet has joined sound with sense; a good poet tries to make the sound of poem suit the sense of the poem. Poetry is written to be heard; its meanings are passed to the readers through sound as well as print. Every word is important for many reasons, not only the 'dictionary meaning'. Therefore, reading a poem to hear the sound of the words in your mind is a good habit.

4. Always pay careful attention to what the poem is saying. Think about the ideas in the poems that you read. Though you should be conscious of the sounds of the poem, you should also pay attention to what the poem means. Try to follow the thought continuously and to grasp the full implications and suggestions.

## How to understand a poem:

When reading a poem for the first time it is important to try to establish three key pieces of information about the poem. To do this you need to ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the poet saying in this poem?

What is the poem about?

2. Why has the poem been written?

What is the poet's purpose / intention?

Why was it written?

3. How does the poet use language to express his or her views and achieve the desired effects?

The main thing is to be able to identify what the poet wants to achieve by writing the poem. Of course, poems can serve many purposes including to

amuse

describe

entertain

narrate

inform

celebrate

commemorate

philosophize

express moods / emotions

express grief or sadness

give us some idea or attitude

give a clear impression of a scene

Another important question is **Who is the speaker or persona?** and **what is the occasion?** or **who the 'speaker / persona' of the poem is.**

Beginning readers usually assume that the speaker is the poet himself. But it may be that the words of the poem are 'spoken' through a character that the poet has created or a narrator figure other than the poet. Therefore, it is better to assume that the speaker is someone other than the poet himself. For when the poet speaks directly and expresses his own thoughts and emotions, he does so ordinarily as a representative human being rather than as a particular individual. We must be cautious about identifying anything in a poem too closely with the biography of the poet. He might use his own experience as the 'frame' on which he builds his work. He is fully justified in changing actual details of his own experience to make the experience of the poem more universal.

Whatever the purpose is, we must determine from the poem itself not from external evidence, making inference may be possible; yet only then we can fully understand the function and meaning of the various details in the poem, by relating them to this central purpose; or we can begin to assess the value of the poem and determine whether it is good or poor.

In most poems there are the key elements that combine to create the overall effect of the poem. A close examination of these elements can provide useful clues as to what the poet's intentions are.

**Some elements to find what the poet's intentions are:** (Croft, 2002, p.41)

**Content :** The content of a poem is what it is all about - the ideas, themes and story line that it contains.

**Form :** This refers to the way in which the poem is structured or laid out. The key points here are **why** the poet has chosen a particular form and **what effect** is achieved through the use of that form.

**Tone :** The idea of tone can be closely linked with the 'voice' of the poem. There are many different kinds of tone a poet can employ.

**Mood :** The mood of the poem is closely linked to the tone but this refers more to the **atmosphere** that the poem creates.

**Imagery :** This is created by language being used in such a way as to help us to hear, see, taste or feel and generally understand **more clearly and vividly** what is being said.

**Rhythm :**Rhythm refers to the regular **beat** of the poems. Often the rhythm pattern works on a line basis.

**Rhyme :**Rhyme occurs when the **sounds** of words written in the poem go together. This usually happens at the ends of lines and sometimes within lines when it is called 'internal rhyme'.

**Voice :** The voice, or poetic voice of a poem really identifies the 'speaker' of the poem. This could be the poet 's own voice or it could be the voice of a character that the poet has invented.

**Questions to help in understanding poems:**

The following list of questions (Perrine, 1963, p.25) will help in understanding poems; they may be applied to any poem, in whole or in part, to aid your understanding. Not all of the questions will apply to all

poems, though, many of the questions asked; however, are in fact the mere guidance that lead to the real concerns that actually find their way to the real understanding.

1. Who is the speaker / persona? What kind of person is he / or she?
2. To whom is he speaking? What kind of person is he / or she?
3. What is the occasion?
4. What is the setting in time (time of day, season, century, etc.)?
5. What is the setting in place (indoors or out, city or country, nation, etc.)?
6. What is the central purpose of the poem?
7. State the central idea or theme of the poem in a sentence.
8. Discuss the tone of the poem. How is it achieved?
9. Outline the poem so as to show its structure and development, or summarize the events of the poem.
10. Paraphrase the poem.
11. Look at the author's choice of words. Point out words that are particularly well chosen and explain why.
12. What kinds of imagery are used?
13. Point out significant examples of sound usage and explain their function.
14. Point out the use of figurative language and explain their appropriateness.
13. What is the meter of the poem? Mark its scansion.
14. Describe and explain any symbols.
15. Describe the form or pattern of the poem.
16. Discuss the adaptation of sound and sense.
17. Criticize and evaluate the poem.

Once you have considered these questions and established which of them seem pertinent, pull together the diverse elements to obtain a unified point of view. The total interpretation and evaluation may be a creative experience in itself. From understanding may arise an aesthetic appreciation. That is to say, we should be in a position to give its **general and detailed meaning**. After that try to decide what the **poet's intentions are**. **What feelings is he trying to arouse in you?**

In a nutshell, for full literary appreciation you have to write in continuous prose and clearly divide into paragraphs and say how a particular device employed and found in the poem is suited to the subject matter of the poem. You also must know what type of a poem it is- descriptive, reflective, narrative, the lyric or the sonnet. It will help you get the poet's intentions easily. (Alexander, 1967, pp.42-43) This can be outlined as follows:

### Literary Appreciation

1. Reading : Read carefully; look for a simple meaning.
2. Meaning : **General**  
**Detailed** : do not paraphrase.  
**Intention**
3. Devices : **Sense**  
simile  
metaphor  
personification

## Sound

alliteration

onomatopoeia

rhyme

assonance

consonance

rhythm

### Examples of analyzed poetry:

Read some examples that follow and see how near you come to understanding them according to the given advice.

### When I Was One-and-Twenty

When I was one-and-twenty  
I heard a wise man say,  
“Give crowns and pounds and guineas  
But not your heart away;  
Give pearls away and rubies  
But keep your fancy free.”  
But I was one-and-twenty,  
No use to talk to me.

When I was one-and-twenty  
I heard him say again,  
The heart out of the bosom  
Was never given in vain;  
'Tis paid with sighs a-plenty  
And sold for endless rue.”  
And I am two-and-twenty,  
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis-true.

A.E. Housman (1859 - 1936)

Source : (Palgrave, 1956, p. 540)



This poem is a brief lyric on the unhappiness of love. There are two speakers: a young and romantic man; and a “wise man”. In stanza 1 the wise man advises the young man not to love: better, he says, to give away all one's worldly wealth than give away one's heart and ‘fancy’ (i.e., capacity for love). The young man doesn't listen to this advice because he is idealistic and believes that love is better than everything else. In stanza 2 the wise man explains the reason for his advice: if you give your love to another person you will be unhappy. One year later after the young man has experienced the unhappiness of loving one who does not love him, he agrees with the wise man.

The rhyme scheme and meter are simple and song-like-alliterating iambic 3 ½ and 3 foot lines, made possible by the use of archaic diction (‘one-and-twenty’ instead of twenty-one; ‘tis’, ‘rue’, ‘two-and-twenty’).

The poem is only semi-serious in tone. There is humour in the young man's sudden assumption of wisdom and experience when only 22, after such a brief experience of love. The wise man may be distilling the fruits of a long life : The young man is slightly ridiculous in trying to mimic the wise man. His attitude has swung from one extravagant feeling to its opposite. This humorous tone is emphasized by the number of feminine rhymes (i.e. the rhyming of 2 syllables, one stressed, the other unstressed e.g. twenty / plenty; feminine rhymes give a less serious effect than masculine rhyme, a rhyme of one-syllable words e.g. lies / cries or, if more than one syllable, words ending with stressed syllables e.g. behold / foretold. This type of rhyme is generally more forceful, more vigorous than the feminine one.)

## The Man He Killed

“ Had he and I but met  
By some old ancient inn,  
We should have sat us down to wet  
Right many a nipperkin!

“But ranged as infantry,  
And staring face to face  
I shot at him as he at me,  
And killed him in his place.

“I shot him dead because-----  
Because he was my foe,  
Just so: my foe of course he was;  
That's clear enough; although

“He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,  
Off-hand-like-----just as I-----  
Was out of work-----had sold his traps-----  
No other reason why.

“Yes; quaint and curious war is!  
You shoot a fellow down  
You'd treat, if met where any bar is,  
Or help to half-a-crown.”

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Source : (Perrine, 1963, p.20)

In “The Man He Killed” the speaker is a soldier who has just killed a man in battle for the first time. He is not a career soldier-he enlisted only because he had no job (stanza 4). He was a working man and speaks a simple working-class language (‘nipperkin’, ‘list’, ‘off-hand-like’, ‘traps’). He is friendly and kind and will gladly give money to poor people (stanza 1, 5). Normally, he would never kill anyone. Now he attempts to understand why he has killed. He produces one reason : ‘I killed the man because he was my enemy’ but he is obviously not satisfied by this reason : ‘why is he my enemy’ (stanza 3, 4). He gives up the problem because he cannot solve it

and simply says 'quaint and curious war is'. Although the speaker of the poem is satisfied to say war is 'curious' the reader is forced by this understatement to examine his own feelings about war and to conclude that the poet's purpose in this poem is to present the irrationality and stupidity of war, to make us realize that war is without reason. There is, of course, no intelligent answer to the question 'why is he my enemy' nor to the question 'why do men fight one another'. After reading the poem, we, the readers, should be thinking how irrational it is that men who have no argument and who might normally have been friends, are forced to kill each other.

Notice the repetition in stanza 3-showing that the speaker is thinking aloud and trying to convince himself that this is a sufficient reason. This, together with the simple words and rhyme scheme, build up a picture of a rather simple, unaware man, unaccustomed to analyzing his feelings, aware in a vague way that he has a moral problem, but ultimately satisfied with a simple answer that the reader knows is no answer.

## **Conclusion**

Following the procedure here should help you read poetry successfully with effectiveness and ease. To review briefly the following steps in the process:

1. Keep in mind the first four suggestions.
2. Ask yourself the three questions to understand a poem.
3. Ask yourself some of the guidance questions which can be applied to the poem.
4. Read the poem over and over and brainstorm your thought to find appropriate answers.

5. Discuss with learned persons and organize your ideas.
6. Write and revise your draft.
7. Prepare your final draft.

## Poems for Practice

### A. The Dead Crab

A rosy shield upon its back,  
 That not the hardest storm could crack,  
 From whose sharp edge projected out  
 Black pin-point eyes staring about ;  
 Beneath, the well-knit cote-armure  
 That gave to its weak belly power ;  
 The clustered legs with plated joints  
 That ended in stiletto points ;  
 The claws like mouths it held outside : -----  
 I cannot think this creature died  
 By storm or fish or sea-fowl harmed  
 Walking the sea so heavily armed ;  
 Or does it make for death to be  
 Oneself a living armoury?

Andrew Young

Source : (Alexander, 1967, p.23)

### B. There's Been a Death

There's been a death in the opposite house  
 As lately as today.  
 I know it by the numb look  
 Such houses have always.

The neighbours rustle in and out,  
 The doctor drives away.  
 A window opens like a pod,  
 Abrupt, mechanically ;

Somebody flings a mattress out,-----  
 The children hurry by ;  
 They wonder if It died on that,-----  
 I used to when a boy.

The minister goes stiffly in\_\_\_\_  
 As if the house were his,

And he owned all the mourners now,  
And little boys besides ;

And then the milliner, and the man  
Of the appalling trade,  
To take the measure of the house  
There'll be that dark parade

Of tassels and of coaches soon;  
It's easy as a sign,-----  
The intuition of the news  
In just a country town.

Emily Dickinson (1830 - 1886)

Source : (Alexander, 1967, pp.15-16)

### C. An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above ;  
Those that I fight I do not hate,  
Those that I guard I do not love ;  
My country is Kiltartan Cross,  
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,  
No likely end could bring them loss  
Or leave them happier than before.  
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds ;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.

W.B.Yeats (1865 - 1939)

Source : (Alexander, 1967, pp.27-28)

### D. Lucy

She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove,  
A Maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love:

A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
The difference to me!

William Wordsworth (1770 - 1850)

Source : (Alexander, 1967, p.10)