

## How to read a poem

By Edward Hirsh

Reading poetry well is part attitude and part technique. Curiosity is a useful attitude, especially when it's free of preconceived ideas about what poetry is or should be. Effective technique directs your curiosity into asking questions, drawing you into a conversation with the poem.

The goal of careful reading is often to take up a question of meaning, an interpretive question that has more than one answer. Since the form of a poem is part of its meaning (for example, features such as repetition and rhyme may amplify or extend the meaning of a word or idea, adding emphasis, texture, or dimension), questions about form and technique, about the observable features of a poem, provide an effective point of entry for interpretation. To ask some of these questions, you'll need to develop a good ear for the musical qualities of language, particularly how sound and rhythm relate to meaning. This approach is one of many ways into a poem.

### Getting Started: Prior Assumptions

Most readers make three false assumptions when addressing an unfamiliar poem. The first is assuming that they should understand what they encounter on the first reading, and if they don't, that something is wrong with them or with the poem. The second is assuming that the poem is a kind of code, that each detail corresponds to one, and only one, thing, and unless they can crack this code, they've missed the point. The third is assuming that the poem can mean anything readers want it to mean.

[William Carlos Williams](#) wrote a verse addressed to his wife in the poem "January Morning,":

All this—  
                                  was for you, old woman.  
I wanted to write a poem  
that you would understand.  
For what good is it to me  
if you can't understand it?  
                                  but you got to try hard—

Williams admits in these lines that poetry is often difficult. He also suggests that a poet depends on the effort of a reader; somehow, a reader must "complete" what the poet has begun.

This act of completion begins when you enter the imaginative play of a poem, bringing to it your experience and point of view. If a poem is "play" in the sense of a game or a sport, then you enjoy that it makes you work a little, that it makes you sweat a bit. Reading poetry is a challenge, but like so many other things, it takes practice, and your skills and insight improve as you progress.

Literature is, and has always been, the sharing of experience, the pooling of human understanding about living, loving, and dying. Successful poems welcome you in, revealing

ideas that may not have been foremost in the writer's mind in the moment of composition. The best poetry has a magical quality—a sense of being more than the sum of its parts—and even when it's impossible to articulate this sense, this something more, the power of the poem is left undiminished.

Poems speak to us in many ways. Though their forms may not always be direct or narrative, keep in mind that a real person formed the moment of the poem, and it's wise to seek an understanding of that moment. Sometimes the job of the poem is to come closer to saying what cannot be said in other forms of writing, to suggest an experience, idea, or feeling that you can know but not entirely express in any direct or literal way. The techniques of word and line arrangement, sound and rhythm, add to—and in some cases, multiply—the meaning of words to go beyond the literal, giving you an impression of an idea or feeling, an experience that you can't quite put into words but that you know is real.

### **Reading a Poem Aloud**

Before you get very far with a poem, you have to read it. In fact, you can learn quite a few things just by looking at it. The title may give you some image or association to start with. Looking at the poem's shape, you can see whether the lines are continuous or broken into groups (called *stanzas*), or how long the lines are, and so how dense, on a physical level, the poem is. You can also see whether it looks like the last poem you read by the same poet or even a poem by another poet. All of these are good qualities to notice, and they may lead you to a better understanding of the poem in the end.

But sooner or later, you're going to have to read the poem, word by word. To begin, read the poem aloud. Read it more than once. Listen to your voice, to the sounds the words make. Do you notice any special effects? Do any of the words rhyme? Is there a cluster of sounds that seem the same or similar? Is there a section of the poem that seems to have a rhythm that's distinct from the rest of the poem? Don't worry about why the poem might use these effects. The first step is to hear what's going on. If you find your own voice distracting, have a friend read the poem to you.

That said, it can still be uncomfortable to read aloud or to make more than one pass through a poem. Some of this attitude comes from the misconception that we should understand a poem after we first read it, while some stems from sheer embarrassment. Where could I possibly go to read aloud? What if my friends hear me?

### **The Line**

What determines where a [line](#) stops in poetry? There is, of course, more than one answer to this question. Lines are often determined by meaning, sound and rhythm, breath, or typography. Poets may use several of these elements at the same time. Some poems are metrical in a strict sense. But what if the lines aren't metrical? What if the lines are irregular?

The relationship between meaning, sound, and movement intended by the poet is sometimes hard to recognize, but there is an interplay between the grammar of a line, the breath of a line, and the

way lines are broken out in the poem—this is called *lineation*. For example, lines that end with punctuation, called *end-stopped lines*, are fairly simple. In that case, the punctuation and the lineation, and perhaps even breathing, coincide to make the reading familiar and even predictable. But lines that are not end-stopped present different challenges for readers because they either end with an incomplete phrase or sentence or they break before the first punctuation mark is reached. The most natural approach is to pay strict attention to the grammar and punctuation. Reading to the end of a phrase or sentence, even if it carries over one or several lines, is the best way to retain the grammatical sense of a poem.

But lineation introduces another variable that some poets use to their advantage. [Robert Creeley](#) is perhaps best known for breaking lines across expected grammatical pauses. This technique often introduces secondary meaning, sometimes in ironic contrast with the actual meaning of the complete grammatical phrase. Consider these lines from Creeley's poem "The Language":

Locate I  
love you some-  
where in  
  
teeth and  
eyes, bite  
it but

Reading the lines as written, as opposed to their grammatical relationship, yields some strange meanings. "Locate I" seems to indicate a search for identity, and indeed it may, but the next line, which continues with "love you some-," seems to make a diminishing statement about a relationship. On its own, "eyes bite" is very disturbing.

Hearing Creeley read his poems can often be disquieting, because he pauses at the end of each line, and these pauses create a kind of tension or counterpoint in relation to the poem's sentence structure. His halting, hesitant, breathless style is immediately recognizable, and it presents writers with new ideas about meaning, purely through lineation. But many poets who break lines disregarding grammatical units do so only for visual irony, something that may be lost in performance. Among metrical, free verse, and even experimental poets of today, there are those who do not interrupt grammatical sense when reading a poem aloud as much as they interrupt it in the poem's typography. What to do as a reader? Try a variety of methods. It's fun to "Creeleyize" any poem, just to hear what the lineation is doing. But if the results seem to detract from the poem's impact, in terms of its imagery or concept, drop the literal treatment of line breaks and read for grammar or visual image. Reading a poem several ways allows you to see further into the poem simply through repetition.

With poets who use techniques drawn from music—particularly jazz, such as [Michael S. Harper](#) or [Yusef Komunyakaa](#)—or poets like [Walt Whitman](#) who employ unusually long lines, there may be another guiding principle: breath. Some poets think of their words as music flowing from a horn; they think of phrases the way a saxophonist might. Poems composed in this way have varied line lengths, but they have a musicality in their lineation and a naturalness to their performance. They may have a recognizable sense of measure, an equivalent duration between

lines, or, for the sake of contrast, one rhythmic pattern or duration that gives way to successive variations.

For some poems, visual impact may also be important. In "shaped poetry," as well as many other types of writing that are meant to be seen as a painting might be seen, the line is determined by its placement in space. Some visually oriented poets present real challenges in that the course of the poem may not be entirely clear. Visual choices presented by the poet may be confusing. Sometimes the arrangements of words on a page are intended to represent different voices in a dialogue, or even a more complex discourse on a subject. Overlapping and layering might be the poet's intent, which no single voice can achieve. It's best to be aware that poems with multiple voices, or focuses exist and, again, looking for the inherent rules that determine the shape of the poem is the best approach.

Remember that the use of these techniques, in any combination, pushes the words of the poem beyond their literal meanings. If you find more in a poem than the words alone convey, then something larger is at work, making the poem more than the sum of its parts.

### **Starting the Conversation**

We mentioned earlier that encountering a difficult poem is like a game or sport, say rock climbing, that makes you work a bit. The idea of finding handholds and footholds and ascending one bit at a time is apt. But some climbs are easier than others; some are very easy. You may enjoy an easy climb for a while, but you may also find that you want a bigger challenge. Reading poetry works the same way, and, fortunately, poets leave trails to help you look for the way "up" a poem. You'll have to do some work, hard work in some cases, but most of the time, the trails are there for you to discover.

The best way to discover and learn about a poem is through shared inquiry discussion. Although your first experience of the poem may be private and personal, talking about the poem is a natural and important next step. Beginning with a focus question about the poem, the discussion addresses various possible answers to the question, reshaping and clarifying it along the way. The discussion should remain grounded in the text as much as possible. Responses that move away from what is written into personal anecdotes or tangential leaps should be gently urged back into analyzing the text. The basis for shared inquiry is close reading. Good readers "dirty the text" with notes in the margins. They make the inquiry their own.

### **Talking Back to a Poem**

It would be convenient if there were a short list of universal questions, ones that could be used anytime with any poem. In the absence of such a list, here are a few general questions that you might ask when approaching a poem for the first time:

- Who is the speaker?
- What circumstances gave rise to the poem?
- What situation is presented?
- Who or what is the audience?

- What is the tone?
- What form, if any, does the poem take?
- How is form related to content?
- Is sound an important, active element of the poem?
- Does the poem spring from an identifiable historical moment?
- Does the poem speak from a specific culture?
- Does the poem have its own vernacular?
- Does the poem use imagery to achieve a particular effect?
- What kind of figurative language, if any, does the poem use?
- If the poem is a question, what is the answer?
- If the poem is an answer, what is the question?
- What does the title suggest?
- Does the poem use unusual words or use words in an unusual way?

You can fall back on these questions as needed, but experience suggests that since each poem is unique, such questions will not go the necessary distance. In many instances, knowing who the speaker is may not yield any useful information. There may be no identifiable occasion that inspired the poem. But poems do offer clues about where to start. Asking questions about the observable features of a poem will help you find a way in.

We'll now bring inquiry to bear on two very different poems, each of which presents its own challenges:

- ["The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams](#)
- ["Diving into the Wreck" by Adrienne Rich](#)

### **Text and Context**

Some people say that a poem is always an independent work of art and that readers can make full sense of it without having to use any source outside the poem itself. Others say that no text exists in a vacuum. However, the truth lies somewhere in between. Most poems are open to interpretation without the aid of historical context or knowledge about the author's life. In fact, it's often best to approach a poem without the kind of preconceived ideas that can accompany this kind of information. Other poems, however, overtly political poems in particular, will benefit from some knowledge of the poet's life and times. The amount of information needed to clearly understand depends on you and your encounter with the poem. It's possible, of course, even for someone with a deep background in poetry to be unaware of certain associations or implications in a poem. This is because poems are made of words that accumulate new meanings over time.

Consider this situation, a true story, of a poet who found a "text" at the San Mateo coast in northern California. As she scrambled over rocks behind the beach, near the artichoke fields that separate the shore from the coast highway, she found a large smear of graffiti painted on the rocks, proclaiming "*La Raza*," a Chicano political slogan meaning "the struggle." She sat down and wrote a poem. Why? her poem asked. I understand, she wrote, why someone would write *La Raza* on the side of a building, or on public transport. There it would be seen and would shout its

protest from the very foundations of the oppressive system. But why here, in nature, in beauty, so far from that political arena. Couldn't you leave the coast unspoiled? Then, one evening while reading the poem in Berkeley she got her answer. A man came up to her and asked her, "Do you want to know?" "I beg your pardon," she said. "Those fields," the man went on, "were where Chicanos had been virtually enslaved, beaten, and forced to live in squalor for decades." The landscape was not innocent of political struggle. The text was not out of place.

## **Embrace Ambiguity**

Here's a tricky issue: the task is to grasp, to connect, to understand. But such a task is to some degree impossible, and most people want clarity. At the end of class, at the end of the day, we want revelation, a glimpse of the skyline through the lifting fog. Aesthetically, this is understandable. Some magic, some satisfaction, some "Ahhh!" is one of the rewards of any reading, and particularly the reading of poetry. But a poem that reveals itself completely in one or two readings will, over time, seem less of a poem than one that constantly reveals subtle recesses and previously unrecognized meanings.

Here's a useful analogy. A life partner, a husband, a wife—these are people with whom we hope to constantly renew our love. Despite the routine, the drone of familiarity, the daily preparation of meals and doing of dishes, the conversations we've had before, we hope to find a sense of discovery, of surprise. The same is true of poems. The most magical and wonderful poems are ever renewing themselves, which is to say they remain ever mysterious.

Too often we resist ambiguity. Perhaps our lives are changing so fast that we long for stability somewhere, and because most of the reading we do is for instruction or information, we prefer it without shades of gray. We want it to be predictable and easy to digest. And so difficult poetry is the ultimate torment.

Some literary critics would link this as well to the power of seeing, to the relationship between subject and object. We wish the poem to be object so we can possess it through our "seeing" its internal workings. When it won't allow us to "objectify" it, we feel powerless.

Torment, powerlessness—these are the desired ends? Well, no. The issue is our reaction, how we shape our thoughts through words. We have to give up our material attitude, which makes us want to possess the poem. Maybe we've bought the book but we don't own the poem. We have to cultivate a new mindset, a new practice of enjoying the inconclusive.

Embracing ambiguity is a much harder task for some than for others. Nothing scares some people like the idea (even the *idea*) of improvisation as a writing or analytical tool. Some actors hate being without a script; the same is true of some musicians. Ask even some excellent players to improvise and they start to sweat. Of course, actors and musicians will say that there is mystery in what they do with a script or a score, and it would be pointless to disagree. The point, after all, is that text is mysterious. Playing the same character night after night, an actor discovers something in the lines, some empathy for the character, that he or she had never felt before. Playing or listening to a song for the hundredth time—if it is a great song—will yield new interpretation and discovery. So it is with great poetry.