

Prof. Bishop

How to Read a Poem

(and perhaps even enjoy it)

The first thing most people want to do when they hear the word “poetry” is to gouge out their eyes and ears. Okay, so maybe not really, but we do have an aversion to poems. There’s a good chance this is because we don’t *really* know how to read a poem. A lot of people have pointed to reasons why we do not know how to read poems, and some have even tackled the reasons why we do not want to know how to read poems. I do not purport to have the answers to these issues, but I do want to offer a different way to think about poetry.

Think about poems like this: they’re simply new ways to look at the world. Every time a poet writes, she or he is trying to make readers see, feel, experience, touch, or talk to the world in a new way. Poems should make us think about the world in a way that we did not previously think about it. Take this line from one of my favorite poets, Paul Guest¹: “A lifetime peels away like wet bandage” (“The Invisible Man Looks into a Mirror”). We tend to think of lifetimes as grand and important things, and they often are. But think about how the metaphor works—if someone you know dies, that lifetime is peeled away from yours, and there is bound to be some residue left. On this level, the metaphor is apt. But the success of this line goes far beyond the aptness of the metaphor. Its simplicity is beautiful. The line is not “high art;” it is probably not even what we would typically consider poetry. Make no mistake, though; this is poetry at its best. There is a sweet melancholy in the line, in the poem as a whole. The poem asks us to slow down, to reconsider the world we are living in. Instead of focusing on the slipping of the bandage, the poem asks us to miss the lifetime, yes, but it wants more for us to not forget that tiniest residue.

Percy Bysshe Shelley claims, “[poetry] make familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (694). Chad Davidson, one of my former professors and one of my mentors, revises this statement a bit. He argues that poetry should “defamiliarize” the world for us, which is to say that the language should make the world new to us. Now, he offers this advice to budding young creative writers, but he would also contend that it should apply to reading poetry. I want you to be open to the immense possibility of language. I want you to be open to having language move you in a way that makes you appreciate **BEFORE** you ever try to analyze it. If you can’t appreciate the language you will have a hard time trying to analyze it. Prose, such as fiction and essays, works (too often, it seems) on the premise that more is better. Most people think that poetry works on the premise that less is more. This simply isn’t true. Instead, what poetry strives for is the economy of language. Poetry wants to make the most of each word; it wants to be precise and careful while still being playful enough to move us in a particular way.

Using your textbook as a jumping point, I offer you the following methodology for reading a poem.

Step 1) Read the poem without worrying about meaning. Don’t even worry about what’s happening in the poem. Take in the words. Do you notice any words that seem interesting, odd, or especially evocative? Circle them. Make a note about why this word or these words seem to jump out at you.

Step 2) Read it again. Underline any words that you don't understand or that you don't know. Break out the dictionary—or oed.com—and look it up. Try to figure out a few different connotations for the meanings of the words.

Step 3) Read it again. This time, look for what happens in the poem. Write a summary of the poem, and be completely sure that you understand the poem. Is there a story being told? Is it a narrative poem? Or, is the poem describing, in particular detail, something else? Is it a lyric poem?

Step 4) Read it again (notice a pattern here?). This time, read the poem aloud. Pay attention to the possible rhythms of the poem. Read it to someone, or record yourself reading it aloud. Try reading at different speeds. Try reading with different inflections and annunciations. Slow down. Speed up. Read to the punctuation. Read to the line breaks. Try to establish what you think is the “right” way to read it aloud. There isn't necessarily a “right” way, but there is the way you think is best.

Step 5) Read the poem again. Examine the form this time. Are there patterns that you notice? What do you make of the line breaks? Is there any kind of rhyme scheme? End rhyme? Internal rhyme? Slant rhyme? What do you make of the stanza breaks? What about the punctuation of the poem? Where do sentences begin and end in the poem? What does this do to the poem? Is there anything about the shape of the poem that seems important?

Step 6) Start writing about what you've read. Do you “like” the poem? Does it speak to you? Does it defamiliarize you? How so? What works in the poem? What does not work? Why do you think someone wrote this? Why do think people would want to read this poem? How would you rewrite this poem? At this point, you've enough work toward appreciating the poem to have some opinion of the poem.

Step 7) Now, you're ready for analysis. Start playing the text and context game. Ask some driving questions. Ask some more driving questions. Answer those questions. Examine the meanings of the poem.

ⁱ Guest currently teaches at UWG; he is the author of three books of poetry: *My Index of Slightly Horrifying Knowledge* (2008); *Notes for my Body Double* (2007), and *Resurrection of the Body and the Ruin of the World* (2003).