

Professor Theresa Kelley

English 167

(adapted, with thanks, from Prof. Lynn Keller's handout, "Reading Modern Poetry")

Reading Poetry

Many people duck for cover when asked to read and analyze poems because its language, sentence structure and use of poetic features (rhyme, form, figures of speech) can seem daunting. It is also true that reading poetry usually takes more time than reading the same number of lines in prose. But for all these reasons, reading poetry is a perfect way to discover the sense of possibility, excitement and difficulty that is the work of close reading, whatever the text at hand. So, let me begin with some account of why we need to slow down radically to read poems, then I'll suggest strategies to help you read slowly and well.

Poems often use language in slightly unconventional or aberrational ways, and that can be confusing. Sometimes sentence structure (*syntax*) is chopped up and punctuation is used oddly; sometimes words are used in ambiguous ways that suggest multiple meanings. These deviations from ordinary language are deliberate and usually serve an expressive function. Then too, a great deal of poetry, including all the poems we will read in E 167, employ rhyme, various forms and unusual sound effects, as well as figures of speech, beginning with metaphor and simile but including a great deal more. All of these elements combine with the meaning of words to create the poetic argument. I will, in the course of the lectures, present definitions of key poetic terms as you will need them. You'll need to keep those definitions and terms at the ready and use them to think and write, but I don't want you to be overwhelmed by them. The point of reading poetry has more centrally to do with its economy, its compression as a mode of writing. Don't try to avoid the elements that create this compression by rephrasing the poem in prose. You'll be tempted to do this but don't! Grapple instead with how the poem looks on the page; how it sounds when you read it aloud; how it delivers its ideas; how rhyme assists or impedes one way of reading or assists another; how figures of speech work in specific poems (not just how to define them).

How to read so that you grasp what poems say and how they say it:

1) Always read a poem more than once, and—if circumstances permit—read it aloud. Don't rush. Poetry is meant to be heard and contemplated. This is the most difficult request to act on in part because we are more used to reading novels and papers and the net quickly but also because our lives are very hectic. To read poetry at all well, you have to slow down, take some time, put other work to the side. I guarantee that it's worth the effort.

Most poems are made of sentences or grammatical units that approximate *sentences*. Start by reading for the sentences to grasp what the poem says on the most literal and direct level. That means reading past the line breaks if there is no punctuation at the end of the line, looking for grammatical completion. (If a line has punctuation at the end, we say it is *end-stopped*; if not, it is *enjambéd*.) Sometimes you will need to untangle complicated syntax or fill in implied bits in order to reconstruct the sentences. If the poem tells a story, identify the circumstances and summarize the narrative.

Once you've got a sense of the sentences—of what the poem straightforwardly says—read the poem again pausing at the *line breaks*. Since the line is the fundamental unit in a poem, think about the effect of ending each line where it ends*. Does the pause leave you expecting something that does not in fact follow? Does the line sound as if it means one thing when you

pause, and another if you read on to the next line? Consider the fact that the beginning of a line usually gets a slight emphasis when read aloud. What are the effects of emphasizing the particular words that begin the lines? How would the meaning of this text be reduced or altered if it were written in prose, or if it were written with different lineation?

Read the poem again thinking about how it *sounds*. Is there *rhyme*? (If so, trace the rhyme patterns through the poem.) Does the rhyming occur at the end of lines (*end rhyme*) or within them (*internal rhyme*)? Is it exact or slightly off? Is the rhyming subtle or emphatic? Do the rhyming words relate to each other in any significant way? Answering questions like these will help you answer the more sweeping question of what effect the rhyme has and what it adds to the poem. What else do you notice about the poem's sound? DO you find repetitions of initial consonant sounds (alliteration) or of vowel sounds (assonance)? Are the lines short or long, and what effect, if any, is created by the line length? Are there repeating rhythmic patterns? Again, *ask yourself how the sounds of the poem enhance or alter the poem's meaning.*

2) Now start focusing on *language*. *Using a good-sized dictionary (especially the OED on line), look up any words you don't know and write down their *definitions*. Pay attention to all the definitions, since poets often want to draw upon a word's several meanings. Because the OED traces the meanings of words historically, it allows us to learn the meanings words held in the past; poets often want to invoke the ghosts of those earlier meanings. Also look up the meanings of words that you think you do know but that seem particularly important, in case some of those secondary meanings or historical meanings turn out to be relevant. Think about how the definitions you've learned add to the paraphrase you generated earlier. Think also about the suggestions or implications of a word, not just its literal meaning.

Think about the *diction* of the poem—that is, the kind(s) of language it contains. Is the language formal or informal, abstract or concrete, simple or elaborate? Are the words ones you'd expect to encounter in an academic essay, a conversation heard on the street, a scientific article?* What kind of person might use these kinds of words and in what circumstances*? What kind of *voice* is being created by their presence in the poem?

3) Consider the *figures of speech*. One pleasure offered by many poems is attention to sensory experience—how things in our world look, feel, smell, etc. In the most general sense figures of speech refer to all the details that work to conjure sensory experience in the form of mental images. Some figures of speech that are often used to convey images are *simile* (a figurative comparison that uses “like” or “as”) and *metaphors* (a general term for other figures of speech that do not use “like” or “as”). I will introduce kinds of metaphor as we need them. Consider the effect of the particular comparisons in the metaphors and similes. If I say “still as a corpse” I create quite a different impression than if I say “still as a pond at daybreak.” Do different bits of imagery in the poem seem related to each other, helping to create a particular effect? For instance, if the poem includes the simile “still as a corpse,” are there other details that might also be associated with death?

4) Consider the *tone*—that is, the emotional tone of *voice* that is created. For example, the speaker might sound angry, penitent, joyful, horrified, nostalgic, anxious, gloomy, contemplative, etc. Be as specific as you can when trying to identify the emotional character of the poem. What details give the work its emotional qualities? Does the tone change over the course of the poem? And is the speaker of this voice a reliable speaker? or not? what cues does the language of the poem give you for making such judgments?

5) Consider the *form* of the poem: is it divided into *stanzas* (paragraphs of lines of poetry)? If so, are the number of lines consistent across stanzas? Is there a name for the stanza? Does it have a recognizable set of elements, including rhyme, internal shifts? Is this a form that has been in use for a long time, or is it new? Does it tweak or alter traditional forms? More generally, what kind of poem is it: a *lyric* expression of what its speaker thinks or feels or does it primarily tell a story? Or does it put lyric feeling and idea with a story? If so, how? Which gets the upper hand?

6) Consider possibly relevant *contexts* for the poem—in literature (how does this sonnet relate to earlier sonnets or to sonnet conventions generally?); in history (why does Wordsworth write about unimportant people? at the beginning of the nineteenth century). Be very careful with biographical readings: it's all too easy to play amateur psychologist in ways that may be completely unjustified, and it's too easy to imagine that the speaker is identical with the poet when in fact the poet has generated a persona (a character). Ask yourself what considering these contexts might add to your understanding of the poem.*

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7) Now, with all this work behind you, focus on the poem as something dynamic—as a text that starts in one mental space and leads somewhere else. Although structured in lines, modern poems are often non-linear communications, not so much proclamations of messages as models of the mind at work, or of the human heart working toward an understanding. Ask yourself what changes or evolves or is revealed over the course of the poem? What distinctive significance comes to be attached to the material you were able to paraphrase when you first read the poem? Often the answer to this kind of question will give you a good thesis to argue if you decide to write about the poem.