

About Poetry

Some questions we can (and should) ask of a poem

- What does the poet seem to be suggesting?
- How do you relate to what the poet is saying?
- Does the poem get you going intellectually or emotionally? Or both? How? Why?
- How is the poem structured?
- What is the language of the poem? The tone?
- What connections can you make with this poem?

Some terms and questions for reading a poem closely

Voice

- Who/what is the speaker/persona?
- What is the tone, including irony?

Diction

- What is the level (formal/informal; concrete/abstract; connotative/denotative, specific/general)?
- How does word choice and word order affect your reaction and understanding of the poem?

Imagery

- How does imagery enrich poem?
- Is there a pattern to the imagery?

Figures of Speech

- Is metaphor used? Simile? Personification? Hyperbole? Understatement?
- How does the use of these devices enhance the poem?

Form

- How is the poem constructed?
- Are there distinctive pattern? If so, what?
- How does the form enhance the messages of the poem?

Rhythm and Meter

- Are there regularly recurring sounds (repetitions of words, stresses and pauses)? Identify.
- How does the rhythm affect the mood and the ideas of the poem?
- Is there a recognizable pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables?
- Can you identify this pattern through scansion?
- How does the poet's use of rhythm and meter affect or enhance the poem?
- Are there breaks (caesurae) in the middle of a line/lines? If so, what is the effect?
- Are the lines end stopped or enjambed (no punctuation or strong pause)?

Rhyme

- Can you identify a pattern or parallels of visual or aural occurrences?
- Where do they occur (line end, line beginning, internal, near rhyme)?
- What is the effect of the pattern upon the content, appearance, intent of the poem?

Alliteration, Assonance, Onomatopoeia

- Can you identify the use and effect of alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds)?
- Can you identify use and effect of assonance (repetition of vowel sounds)?
- Can you identify use and effect of onomatopoeia (sound reflects its meaning, e.g., "hiss")?

Use of Myth, Symbol, Allusion

- Can you identify each as it relates to the poem, and its effect?

Theme

- What central theme or themes appear to emerge from the poem?
- How is the theme expressed?
- In what ways does the poem and its ideas and images relate to you?

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Some terms of selected poetic forms (designs of poems)

- Stanza – a group, like a paragraph, of two or more lines with a pattern, usually metrical
- Couplet – a two line stanza of similar rhythmic and rhyming qualities
- Tercet – a three-line stanza of similar rhythmic and rhyming qualities
- Quatrain – four-line stanza of similar rhythmic and rhyming qualities
- Fixed form (sonnet): 14 lines abab,cdcd, efef, gg; or abba, abba, cdecde
- Open form – can use occasional rhyme and meter, but not in a fixed, overarching design

Some qualities of contemporary lyric poems

Contemporary poems often, not always, reflect the following:

- Lyric intensity
- Brief (28 lines or fewer); there are certainly exceptions both ways
- Patterned in stanzas of varying length
- Often enjambed
- Usually no fixed rhyme, but often containing near rhyme, alliteration, assonance
- Non-academic diction
- Limited use of esoteric myths or allusions
- Often relates to personal experiences
- Often uses contemporary images and concerns

Miscellaneous observations and recommendations

The best contemporary poetry addresses age-old themes and concerns about the human conditions in specific ways and with engaging, often challenging, language and images.

The best contemporary poetry is written for people who enjoy and appreciate poetry. Like approaching other kinds of literature, we need to be prepared for, and open our minds to, each poem, its adornments, and its possibilities.

Millions of people write poetry. If you have any attraction to literature, there are poets and poems that will speak to you, touch you, and move you. How do you find them? By reading poetry, attending poetry readings, and talking with those who write and produce poetry. By searching the Internet.

Don't like war? Read Bruce Weigl's *Song of Napalm*

Like funny poems about fishing and other American pursuits? You'll love *Epiphany at Goofy's Gas* by Greg Keeler.

Like personal poems of reflection?

Read *Gold Cell* by Sharon Olds; or *The Simple Truth* by Phillip Levine

Or *Time's Power* by Adrienne Rich; or *The City in Which I love You* by Li-Young Lee

Or *My Alexandra* or *Atlantis* by Mark Doty (written as his partner was dying of Aids)

Or simply go to the library and find an anthology of contemporary poetry and dive in.

Or go Online. Thousands of sites present poetry, some catalogued in detail, some encyclopedic in scope. Online poetry magazines, often thematic in nature, present contemporary poetry