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English 4W

How to Read a Poem

1. Read the Text

Read the text line by line **silently**. Then read it **aloud**. Sound is very important in a poem.

2. Consider the Dramatic Situation

Consider the poem as a **dramatic situation** in which a speaker addresses an audience or another character:

- **What** is being dramatized? What conflicts or themes does the poem present, address, or question?
- **Who** is the speaker? Define and describe the speaker and his/her voice. What does the speaker say? Who is the audience? Are other characters involved?
- **What** happens in the poem? Consider the plot or basic design of the action. How are the dramatized conflicts or themes introduced, sustained, resolved, etc.?
- **When** does the action occur? What is the date and/or time of day?
- **Where** is the speaker? Describe the physical location of the dramatic moment.
- **Why** does the speaker feel compelled to speak at this moment? What is his/her motivation?

3. Pay Attention to Poetic Details

Focus on *how* the poem dramatizes its conflicts or ideas in language:

Form: Does the poem represent a particular form (sonnet, sestina, etc.)? Does the poem present any unique variations from the traditional structure of that form?

Diction:

- *Syntax*: Consider the subjects, verbs, and objects of each statement and what these elements reveal about the speaker. Do the statements have archaic, simple, convoluted, or vague syntax (or a combination of any of these)?
- *Word choice*: Why does the poet choose one word over another in each line? Do any of the words have multiple or archaic meanings that add other meanings to the line? Use the *OED* as a resource.

Figurative Language (Imagery/Metaphors): What kind of images does the poem invoke in discussing its subject matter? What might be the relation between those images and the ideas discussed?

4. Locate Patterns

Look for certain patterns to develop which provide insight into the dramatic situation, the speaker's state of mind, or the poet's use of details:

- *Rhetorical Patterns*: Look for statements that follow the same format.
- *Rhyme*: Consider the significance of the end words joined by sound; in a poem with no rhymes, consider the importance of the end words.
- *Patterns of Sound*: Alliteration and assonance create sound effects and often cluster significant words.
- *Visual Patterns*: How does the poem look on the page?

5. Poetic Scansion: The Art of Writing Metrically

To **scan** a line is to determine its **metrical pattern**. When you “scan” a poem, you look at the meter and rhythm in order to locate some sort of deliberate pattern in terms of accents and stresses. The goal of scanning is to determine how poetic form and meaning interact. In other words, it can help to determine how the form of a poem either upholds or undermines its content.

It's important to know the rules of scansion, so you can tell when—and to what effect—poets adhere to or break them. Since a word's meaning can be very different depending on where its stresses fall, scansion can affect meaning.

Some Key Terms for Scansion

Line: a unit of poetry. A sequence of words printed as a separate entity on the page.

Rhythm: a recognizable though variable pattern in the beat of stresses in a stream of words.

Meter: a rhythm structured into a reoccurrence of regular units of stress pattern. Meter is determined by the number of syllables and number of accents in a line and includes elements from both categories below:

Poetic Feet: a unit of stresses and un-stresses

Iamb/iambic
Trochee/trochaic
Anapest/anapestic
Dactyl/dactylic
Spondee/spondaic
Pyrrhic

Number of Feet (per line):

Dimeter
Trimeter
Tetrameter
Pentameter
Hexameter (alexandrine)
Heptameter (fourteener)

(1) **Iamb/Iambic**: an un-stressed syllable followed by a stressed one

And walked | with in | ward glory | crowned

(2) **Trochee/trochaic**: a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable

Piping | down the | valleys | wild

(3) **Anapest/anapestic**: two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable

The Assy | rian came down | like the wolf | on the fold

(4) **Dactyl/dactylic**: a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables

Woman much | missed, how you | call to me, | call to me

Verse: compositions written in meter.

Blank Verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter; used frequently in English poetry (large portions of Shakespeare's plays, for instance)

Free Verse: like traditional verse, it is printed in short lines instead of with the continuity of prose, but it differs in that its rhythmical pattern is not organized into meter.

Stanza: a group of verse lines in a poem, set off by a space in the printed text

How to Scan:

Perhaps the best way to begin scanning a line is to mark the natural stresses on the *polysyllabic words*. For example:

And walked with in | ward glory | crowned

Then mark the monosyllabic nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that are normally stressed:

And walked with in | ward glory | crowned

Then fill in the rest:

And walked with in | ward glory | crowned

Then divide the line into feet:

And walked | with in | ward glory | crowned

Then note the sequence:

iamb | iamb | iamb | iamb

The line consists of four iambs; therefore, we identify the line as **iambic tetrameter**.

Tips to Keep in Mind

1. Refer to the speaking voice in the poem as "**the speaker**" or "**the poet.**" For example, do not write, "In this poem, Wordsworth says that London is beautiful in the morning." However, you can write, "In this poem, Wordsworth presents a speaker who..." We cannot absolutely identify Wordsworth with the speaker of the poem, so it is more accurate to talk about "the speaker" or "the poet" in an explication.
2. Use the **present tense** when writing. The poem, as a work of literature, continues to exist!
3. Avoid unnecessary use of the verb 'to be.' The following list suggests some alternative **verbs** you can use instead:

dramatizes	asserts	contrasts	addresses
presents	posits	juxtaposes	emphasizes
illustrates	enacts	suggests	stresses
characterizes	connects	implies	accentuates
insists	portrays	shows	enables

185

Emily Dickinson

“Faith” is a fine invention

When *Gentlemen* can see—

But *microscopes* are prudent

In an Emergency.

“Battle Hymn of the Republic” (1861)

Julia Ward Howe

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:

He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are
stored;

He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift
sword:

His truth is marching on.

I have seen him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling
camps;

They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and

damps;

I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring
lamps.

His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel:

“As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall
deal;

Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his
heel,

Since God is marching on.”

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call
retreat;

He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment-
seat:

Oh! Be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant, my feet!

Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the Lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:

As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,

While God is marching on.