## Excerpt from "How to Read a Poem"

Reproduced in partnership with the Great Books Foundation

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....

# VOCABULARY

preconceived - (verb) prejudged; formed before having the evidence for its truth or usefulness

**typography** - (noun) the style and appearance of printed matter

metrical - (adjective) describing the basic rhythmic structure of a verse or lines in poetry

**disquieting** - (adjective) inducing feelings of anxiety or worry

### **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 somewhere 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....

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....

#### 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....

http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19882



From *Modern American Poetry*, selected and edited by Joseph Coulson and Peter Temes (Great Books Foundation, 2002). Copyright © 2002 by the <u>Great Books Foundation</u>. Used by permission.