

Read a Poem

Reading poetry can be tricky. It's so different from the way that we speak or the stories we read. It may even seem like its own language at times. A lot of poetry is shorter than prose -- ordinary writing -- and can be packed with all sorts of hidden meanings and symbolism. The best thing to keep in mind when starting to tackle a poem is to be patient.

First, look at the title. The title can give you hints about the content of the poem. Use it to give the poem context. Next, make out the shape of the poem. Just like how a square peg won't fit in a circular hole, you know a haiku won't be a three page long poem. You might be able to guess what type of poem it is just by looking at it, but a lot of poetry doesn't have a concrete shape.

Now, when you first read the poem, don't try too hard to look for meaning. Just read it all the way through and let yourself react to it. The meaning might come on soft and sweet, like the smell of apple pie, or it might roll on strong and hit you like a truck. After you've read it the first time, it might be helpful to read it outloud to get a sense of the rhythm. At the end of your first reading, jot down whatever you don't quite understand so, as you go into the second reading, you know what to look for.

When you read a poem, look for patterns in the way a poet uses imagery, sound, color, and arrangement of words. Break the poem down into smaller parts and find the meaning of words within the context of the poem. It's a lot like breaking down an equation and taking it one step at a time. Pay attention to breaks between stanzas, aka poetry paragraphs, or between lines. Once we've identified the patterns or shifts, see if those patterns change. The meaning of a poem might hinge on a shift in the rhythm.

Another important thing to pay attention to is the use of literary devices. Look for alliteration, the repetition of sounds at the beginning of words, and assonance, sounds within words that are repeated. Alliteration always adds additional adventurous articulation. Also, keep an eye out for metaphors and similes, which are used in both prose and poetry. Watch for how punctuation and capitalization are used. Sometimes an author uses capitalization, or the lack there of, to emphasize certain words.

Make sure you know who the speaker is, because the meaning of the poem is likely to hinge on their perspective. There's a big difference between a 5 year old girl talking to you and a grizzled truck driver. If you're having trouble identifying the narrator or patterns or rhythm or anything like that, try talking to someone else about the poem and getting it out in open air to gain a better understanding.

Reading poetry isn't always the easiest thing, but using these tools can make it enjoyable. Poetry is an important part of culture that brings people together. It's a treasured form of expression. If approached with an open mind, reading poetry might just become your passion.
