**How to Read a Poem**

There’s really only one reason that poetry has gotten a reputation for being so darned “difficult”: it demands your full attention and won’t settle for less. Unlike a novel, where you can drift in and out and still follow the plot, poems are generally shorter and more intense, with less of a conventional story to follow. If you don’t make room for the *experience*, you probably won’t have one.

But the rewards can be high. To make an analogy with rock and roll, it’s the difference between a two and a half minute pop song with a hook that you get sick of after the third listen, and a slow-building tour de force that sounds fresh and different every time you hear it. Once you’ve gotten a taste of the really rich stuff, you just want to listen to it over and over again and figure out: how’d they do that?

Aside from its demands on your attention, there’s nothing too tricky about reading a poem. Like anything, it’s a matter of practice. But in case you haven’t read much (or any) poetry before, we’ve put together a short list of tips that will make it a whole lot more enjoyable.

* **Follow Your Ears.** It’s okay to ask, “What does it mean?” when reading a poem. But it’s even better to ask, “How does it sound?” If all else fails, treat it like a song. Even if you can’t understand a single thing about a poem’s “subject” or “theme,” you can always say something – anything – about the sound of the words. Does the poem move fast or slow? Does it sound awkward in sections or does it have an even flow? Do certain words stick out more than others? Trust your inner ear: if the poem sounds strange, it doesn’t mean you’re reading it wrong. In fact, you probably just discovered one of the poem’s secret tricks!
* **Read It Aloud.** OK, we’re not saying you have to shout it from the rooftops. If you’re embarrassed and want to lock yourself in the attic and read the poem in the faintest whisper possible, go ahead. Do whatever it takes, because reading even part of poem aloud can totally change your perspective on how it works.
* **Become an Archaeologist.** When you’ve drunk in the poem enough times, experiencing the sound and images found there, it is sometimes fun to switch gears and to become an archaeologist (you know -- someone who digs up the past and uncovers layers of history). Treat the poem like a room you have just entered. Perhaps it’s a strange room that you’ve never seen before, filled with objects or people that you don’t really recognize. Maybe you feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland. Assume your role as an archaeologist and take some measurements. What’s the weather like? Are there people there? What kind of objects do you find? Are there more verbs than adjectives? Do you detect a rhythm? Can you hear music? Is there furniture? Are there portraits of past poets on the walls? Are there traces of other poems or historical references to be found?
* **Don’t Skim.** Unlike the newspaper or a textbook, the point of poetry isn’t to cram information into your brain. We can’t repeat it enough: poetry is an experience. If you don’t have the patience to get through a long poem, no worries, just start with a really short poem. Understanding poetry is like getting a suntan: you have to let it sink in.
* **Memorize!** “Memorize” is such a scary word, isn’t it? It reminds us of multiplication tables. Maybe we should have said: “Tuck the poem into your snuggly memory-space.” Or maybe not. At any rate, don’t tax yourself: if you memorize one or two lines of a poem, or even just a single cool-sounding phrase, it will start to work on you in ways you didn’t know possible. You’ll be walking through the mall one day, and all of a sudden, you’ll shout, “I get it!” Just not too loud, or you’ll get mall security on your case.
* **Be Patient.** You can’t really understand a poem that you’ve only read once. You just can’t. So if you don’t get it, set the poem aside and come back to it later. And by “later” we mean days, months, or even years. Don’t rush it. It’s a much bigger accomplishment to actually *enjoy*a poem than it is to be able to explain every line of it. Treat the first reading as an investment – your effort might not pay off until well into the future, but when it does, it will totally be worth it. Trust us.
* **Read in Crazy Places.** Just like music, the experience of poetry changes depending on your mood and the environment. Read in as many different places as possible: at the beach, on a mountain, in the subway. Sometimes all it takes is a change of scenery for a poem to really come alive.
* **Think Like a Poet.** Here’s a fun exercise. Go through the poem one line at a time, covering up the next line with your hand so you can’t see it. Put yourself in the poet’s shoes: If I had to write a line to come after this line, what would I put? If you start to think like this, you’ll be able to appreciate all the different choices that go into making a poem. It can also be pretty humbling – at least we think so. Each poet has an unique style of writing. Soon, you’ll be able to decipher a T.S. Elliot poem from a Wallace Stevens poem, sight unseen. Everyone will be so jealous.
* **“Look Who’s Talking.”** Ask the most basic questions possible of the poem. Two of the most important are: “Who’s talking?” and “Who are they talking to?” If it’s a Shakespeare sonnet, don’t just assume that the speaker is Shakespeare. The speaker of every poem is kind of fictional creation, and so is the audience. Ask yourself: what would it be like to meet this person? What would they look like? What’s their “deal,” anyway?
* And, most importantly, **Never Be Intimidated.** Regardless of what your experience with poetry in the classroom has been, no poet wants to make his or her audience feel stupid. It’s just not good business, if you know what we mean. Sure, there might be tricky parts, but it’s not like you’re trying to unlock the secrets of the universe. Heck, if you want to ignore the “meaning” entirely, then go ahead. Why not?

Poetry is about freedom and exposing yourself to new things. In fact, if you find yourself stuck in a poem, just remember that the poet, 9 times out of 10, was a bit of a rebel and was trying to make his friends look at life in a completely different way. Find your inner rebel too. There isn’t a single poem out there that’s “too difficult” to try out – right now, today. So hop to it.

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