**A General Introduction to Poetry and Poetics**

Organized and Curated

By

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**NOTE**

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**Language**

The problem with any discussion that begins with the phrase “What is…” is that it often leads down the colloquial “rabbit hole.” Questioning one abstraction often causes one to question the abstractions upon which the initial abstraction’s definition is based on. Before we know it, we have over-analyzed the concept to the point where nothing means anything and no one has any better understanding than before. Let's not do that.

Understanding language is the first step to understanding poetry.

There are many ways to "understand" language. There is or basic decoding of the words based on our vocabulary knowledge. Writers and readers have created terms and labels for how words mean different things in context and usage. I used the term “colloquial.” **Colloquial language** is regional or cultural phrasings or understandings of words. The term “rabbit hole” comes from generations of us who have been exposed to the narrative of *Alice in Wonderland* and Alice’s surreal journey down a fantastical rabbit hole. People raised outside of a culture that is familiar with the story of Alice would have no idea what I mean by a “rabbit hole.” By discussing the term “rabbit hole” in this context, we have introduced the notion that **phrases and words can have different meanings depending on context**. We understand “rabbit hole” one way. Others might understand it a completely different way, and still others might have no understanding of what those symbols mean. This is where language fails us and where it saves us. That might seem contradictory, and a reader would be correct to think so. As Whitman writes, “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (“Song of Myself” 51: 6-8). Poetry is often defined by being comfortable with contradictions.

In that first paragraph, I also introduce the concept of an “**abstraction.**” In all languages there are nouns that are “abstractions.” They are the “idea” in person, place, thing, and idea. These are words like “freedom.”

Draw a picture of freedom.

Have someone else draw a picture of freedom without discussing with them what was originally drawn.

There will probably be major differences between the two drawings.

If there are not, it often goes back to the fact that the two people were raised in the same cultural context. They understand (for the most part) what the society wants them to mean when they say “freedom,” but at a different time and in a different context the word might have a different image attached to it.

Colloquialisms and abstractions are not the only obstacles writers and speakers face when trying to communicate. Words are made up of letters and letters are **symbols**. The sounds the symbol make changes depending on the dialect and when those sounds are put together in unexpected ways it can create confusion. Basically, all readers and writers of a language must agree that all letters make a select number of predetermined sounds and when those letters are placed together in specific orders it creates more sounds that are then applied to actions, subjects, and objects in our environment and in our minds. If someone experiences letters in a different way from the predetermined agreement there are often major issues. This is at the root of dyslexia and dysgraphia.

People first learning to read often encounter a problem here too. English as a Second Language Learners often also encounter problems because their symbols for similar sounds may be completely different. When we add the complexities of font size, shape, capitalization, punctuation, word order, script, and colloquial spellings for communications such as texting; language yet again fails us and saves us.

Take the following poem by e.e. cummings for example (notice that he chooses to spell his name in all lowercase letters breaking the agreed upon conventions):

*in Just-*

spring when the world is mud-

luscious the little

lame baloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddyandbill come

running from marbles and

piracies and it's

spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer

old baloonman whistles

far and wee

and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's

spring

and

the

goat-footed

baloonMan whistles

far

and

wee

Cummings works against readers' expectations of grammar and mechanics. He plays with capitalization and spacing to create different meanings. He plays with where the language appears on the page. The **syntax** of the poem also creates different effects for both the ears and the eyes.

There are other difficulties that language presents us with. Even the **concrete words (words that refer to actual objects)** can create difficulties. Words in one English-speaking nation can be a referent for an object within the borders of that nation, but within another English-speaking nation the same word/symbols might refer to something completely different. These sorts of misunderstandings at best create confusion and at worst cause offense. Once time, gender, tribe, race, and any other number of frames-of-reference are thought about, the infinite complexity of the issue is breathtaking. One might think that might not be able to ever write or speak again without a very careful consideration of what they are saying or how they are saying it. This would not be a bad thing. We could all benefit from a bit more thinking before we speak or write.

What does this have to do with poetry? Why do I begin with this discussion of “language’s” complexities and failures? These are the issues with which the poet is primarily occupied. It is these failures and complexities that the poet uses to create their art. Lewis Turco states, “what differentiates the poet from other writers is the *focus on mode*, on language itself” (4). What separates poetry from other modes is that the poet is focused on language. They exploit language’s intricacies to create emotional and intellectual effect. This is why poetry is so hard to define, but very easy to recognize.

**Vocabulary and Concepts**

Colloquial Language

Context

Abstraction

Concrete Words

Syntax/Word order or Letter order

Letters and Words as Symbols

Works Cited

Cummings, E.E. "in Just." https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/In\_Just- 28 August 2019.

Turco, Lewis. *The New Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetry.* U.P. of New England, 1986.

Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself (1892)." *Poetry Foundation.* 2019. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version

**Poems that Play with Language**

In poet Dean Young’s book *The Art of Recklessness* he writes, “Poetry occurs between primaries, the page and the mind, the world and the word” (6-7). This occurrence is largely the result of “play.” Poets play with language. Play can be serious, silly, or something in-between. The following poems represent instances of poets playing with word meaning, colloquialism, syntax, diction, etc...to create the unexpected. Read these and think about how some of the concepts in the “Language” section of the course helps a reader to better understand these poems.

*Jabberwocky*

Lewis Carrol

‘Twas brillig, and the slothy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogroves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!

The jaws that bite! The claws that catch!

Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun

The frumious Bandersnatch!”

He took his vorpal sword in hand;

Long time the manxome foe he sought--

So rested he by the Tumtum tree

And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,

The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,

Came whiffling through the tugley wood,

And burbled as he came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through

The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!

He left it dead, and with its head

He went galumphing back!

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?

Come to my arms, my beamish boy!

O frabjous day! Calloh! Callay!”

He chortled in his joy.

‘Twas brillig, and the slothy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogroves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.’

from *Through the Looking Glass* (1871)

*General Booth Enters into Heaven*

Vachel Lindsey

[To be sung to the tune of 'The Blood of the Lamb' with indicated instrument]

[Bass drum beaten loudly.]

Booth led boldly with his big bass drum -

(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

The Saints smiled gravely and they said: "He's come."

(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

Walking lepers followed, rank on rank,

Lurching bravoes from the ditches dank,

Drabs from the alleyways and drug fiends pale -

Minds still passion-ridden, soul-powers frail: -

Vermin-eaten saints with mouldy breath,

Unwashed legions with the ways of Death -

(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

[Banjos.]

Every slum had sent its half-a-score

The round world over. (Booth had groaned for more.)

Every banner that the wide world flies

Bloomed with glory and transcendent dyes.

Big-voiced lasses made their banjos bang,

Tranced, fanatical they shrieked and sang: -

"Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

Hallelujah! It was queer to see

Bull-necked convicts with that land make free.

Loons with trumpets blowed a blare, blare, blare

On, on upward thro' the golden air!

(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

II

[Bass drum slower and softer.]

Booth died blind and still by Faith he trod,

Eyes still dazzled by the ways of God.

Booth led boldly, and he looked the chief

Eagle countenance in sharp relief,

Beard a-flying, air of high command

Unabated in that holy land.

[Sweet flute music.]

Jesus came from out the court-house door,

Stretched his hands above the passing poor.

Booth saw not, but led his queer ones there

Round and round the mighty court-house square.

Yet in an instant all that blear review

Marched on spotless, clad in raiment new.

The lame were straightened, withered limbs uncurled

And blind eyes opened on a new, sweet world.

[Bass drum louder.]

Drabs and vixens in a flash made whole!

Gone was the weasel-head, the snout, the jowl!

Sages and sibyls now, and athletes clean,

Rulers of empires, and of forests green!

[Grand chorus of all instruments. Tambourines to the foreground.]

The hosts were sandalled, and their wings were fire!

(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

But their noise played havoc with the angel-choir.

(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

O, shout Salvation! It was good to see

Kings and Princes by the Lamb set free.

The banjos rattled and the tambourines

Jing-jing-jingled in the hands of Queens.

[Reverently sung, no instruments.]

And when Booth halted by the curb for prayer

He saw his Master thro' the flag-filled air.

Christ came gently with a robe and crown

For Booth the soldier, while the throng knelt down.

He saw King Jesus. They were face to face,

And he knelt a-weeping in that holy place.

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

*Ulalume*

Edgar Allan Poe

The skies they were ashen and sober;

The leaves they were crisped and sere -

The leaves they were withering and sere;

It was night in the lonesome October

Of my most immemorial year:

It was hard by the dim lake of Auber,

In the misty mid region of Weir -

It was down by the dank tarn of Auber,

In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.

Here once, through and alley Titanic,

Of cypress, I roamed with my Soul -

Of cypress, with Psyche, my Soul.

These were days when my heart was volcanic

As the scoriac rivers that roll -

As the lavas that restlessly roll

Their sulphurous currents down Yaanek

In the ultimate climes of the pole -

That groan as they roll down Mount Yaanek

In the realms of the boreal pole.

Our talk had been serious and sober,

But our thoughts they were palsied and sere -

Our memories were treacherous and sere, -

For we knew not the month was October,

And we marked not the night of the year

(Ah, night of all nights in the year!) -

We noted not the dim lake of Auber

(Though once we had journeyed down here) -

Remembered not the dank tarn of Auber,

Nor the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.

And now, as the night was senescent

And star-dials pointed to morn -

As the star-dials hinted of morn -

At the end of our path a liquescent

And nebulous lustre was born,

Out of which a miraculous crescent

Arose with a duplicate horn -

Astarte's bediamonded crescent

Distinct with its duplicate horn.

And I said: "She is warmer than Dian;

She rolls through an ether of sighs -

She revels in a region of sighs:

She has seen that the tears are not dry on

These cheeks, where the worm never dies,

And has come past the stars of the Lion

To point us the path to the skies -

To the Lethean peace of the skies -

Come up, in despite of the Lion,

To shine on us with her bright eyes -

Come up through the lair of the Lion,

With love in her luminous eyes."

But Psyche, uplifting her finger,

Said: "Sadly this star I mistrust -

Her pallor I strangely mistrust:

Ah, hasten! -ah, let us not linger!

Ah, fly! -let us fly! -for we must."

In terror she spoke, letting sink her

Wings until they trailed in the dust -

In agony sobbed, letting sink her

Plumes till they trailed in the dust -

Till they sorrowfully trailed in the dust.

I replied: "This is nothing but dreaming:

Let us on by this tremulous light!

Let us bathe in this crystalline light!

Its Sybilic splendour is beaming

With Hope and in Beauty tonight! -

See! -it flickers up the sky through the night!

Ah, we safely may trust to its gleaming,

And be sure it will lead us aright -

We safely may trust to a gleaming,

That cannot but guide us aright,

Since it flickers up to Heaven through the night."

Thus I pacified Psyche and kissed her,

And tempted her out of her gloom -

And conquered her scruples and gloom;

And we passed to the end of the vista,

But were stopped by the door of a tomb -

By the door of a legended tomb;

And I said: "What is written, sweet sister,

On the door of this legended tomb?"

She replied: "Ulalume -Ulalume -

'Tis the vault of thy lost Ulalume!"

Then my heart it grew ashen and sober

As the leaves that were crisped and sere -

As the leaves that were withering and sere;

And I cried: "It was surely October

On this very night of last year

That I journeyed -I journeyed down here! -

That I brought a dread burden down here -

On this night of all nights in the year,

Ah, what demon hath tempted me here?

Well I know, now, this dim lake of Auber -

This misty mid region of Weir -

Well I know, now, this dank tarn of Auber,

This ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir."

*Circe*

H. D.

It was easy enough

to bend them to my wish,

it was easy enough

to alter them with a touch,

but you

adrift on the great sea,

how shall I call you back?

Cedar and white ash,

rock-cedar and sand plants

and tamarisk

red cedar and white cedar

and black cedar from the inmost forest,

fragrance upon fragrance

and all of my sea-magic is for nought.

It was easy enough—

a thought called them

from the sharp edges of the earth;

they prayed for a touch,

they cried for the sight of my face,

they entreated me

till in pity

I turned each to his own self.

Panther and panther,

then a black leopard

follows close—

black panther and red

and a great hound,

a god-like beast,

cut the sand in a clear ring

and shut me from the earth,

and cover the sea-sound

with their throats,

and the sea-roar with their own barks

and bellowing and snarls,

and the sea-stars

and the swirl of the sand,

and the rock-tamarisk

and the wind resonance—

but not your voice.

It is easy enough to call men

from the edges of the earth.

It is easy enough to summon them to my feet

with a thought—

it is beautiful to see the tall panther

and the sleek deer-hounds

circle in the dark.

It is easy enough

to make cedar and white ash fumes

into palaces

and to cover the sea-caves

with ivory and onyx.

But I would give up

rock-fringes of coral

and the inmost chamber

of my island palace

and my own gifts

and the whole region

of my power and magic

for your glance.

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Young, Dean. *Art of Recklessness.* Graywolf Press. 2010.

**Recognizing Poetry**

It is important to remember that, “Poetry--like so much we are closest to and know best--is not easy to define” (Mason and Nims xxxvi). I was once told by a teacher (many years ago and she admitted she got the idea from something else she had read) that there are many doors into the mansion of poetry. I would also include windows, cracks, and chimneys as ways into the mansion of poetry as well.

The one thing that almost all poems have in common is an interest in language and how it affects the **senses.** I write “almost all” because the one thing anyone can be certain of is that there are exceptions to a rule or generalized statements. And when I think about my own writing process early on, I did not focus overtly on language. I wanted my poems to sound good, but at the time I could care less about what they looked like on the page. I had almost no understanding of lineation and its effects on the reader. I thought of poems as **sonic** things. I did not think in the context of the visual. I was missing out on a whole element of poetry that was important and related to sound, but I did not feel like I was missing out.

I bring up my experience because it is illustrative that the writers are not always aware of what they are doing. This is why **authorial intent** is such a lousy source for an opinion on a poem in particular. It is quite possible to assume that e.e. cummings was quite aware of what he was doing and had a specific intent for breaking all manner of linguistic expectations, but the same cannot be necessarily written about a performance poet like Big Poppa E. (This is a good chance to do a *YouTube* search for his performance piece "The Wussy Boy Manifesto.") That is not to say that performance poets are unconcerned with language; on the contrary, because so much of what creates the poetry of their poems is dependent on sound, these poets spend an inordinate amount of time on rhythm and rhyme.

To recognize a poem don’t look for meaning. Do not even really look for an emotional effect. Look at the writing’s language. This will almost always point the way to a poem. Students are often baffled by “in Just-,” but when we start thinking about it in the context of what Cummings is doing with syntax and punctuation, it becomes more meaningful. The emotional and intellectual responses are often based on language’s effect. Separating the emotional and intellectual responses from the manipulations of language and thinking of them in terms of cause and effect is not always easy. As a creative writer, I do not often think of those things when I am writing initially. I started working out the language elements during the revision process, and even then I don’t always notice what elements of language I have changed in order to heighten the language of a poem.

**Reading Poetry**

We’ve established a basic parameter for recognizing that a piece of writing or a spoken text is poetry. The text should somehow use language in a unique way that contributes to the emotional and intellectual power of the text. Ezra Pound states that “[l]iterature is language charged with meaning” (28). Let us replace his word “literature” with the label “poetry” and use this phrase as our guide for recognizing poetry.

Now we can recognize poetry, but we may not know how to read it. In grade school the reading of poetry often begins with one of two questions:

How does the poem make the reader feel?

What is the theme of the poem?

Both of these questions serve the purpose of trying to get young inexperienced readers to think about a poetic text personally and globally, but both of these questions are really the wrong sorts of things to be asking of a poem. It is not that a poem’s meaning is beyond understanding, and it is most certainly true that poetry as an artform is usually (not always) evoking an emotional response. The problem with these questions is that they, to use the **idiom,** put the cart before the horse.

None of those things can be truly answered until one understands the poem as a unique artifact of language. Yes, we have an initial gut reaction to the poem. Yes,that gut reaction is followed by an intellectual understanding or misunderstanding of the poem. That is well and how it should be, but if we simply stop with that we have not read the poem. We actually have done the poem a great disservice.

A poem that comes to mind is Archibald MacLeish's “Ars Poetica.” (This is also a good opportunity to do a *Google* search for this poem.) My favorite lines from this poem are “A poem should be wordless/ As the flight of birds” (7-8). How absurd? What is a poem if not a collection of words? And yet, there is truth in MacLeish’s statement.

When we are experiencing the flight of birds we are not thinking of why or how the birds fly. When we are experiencing the poem we are not thinking of why or how the poem was wrought. We want to have that emotional response to it. We want then the intellectual response to it. But are there not some of us who see something beautiful and then want to understand exactly how that beauty came into being?

If we read on in “Ars Poetica,” we get the fantastic closing lines, “A poem should not mean/ But be” (23-24). If this is taken as it is written (and I see no reason why it should not be), MacLeish is stating in no uncertain terms that a poem does not need to mean anything. It should just exist. It should just be. And we could leave MacLeish’s poem there. It’s clear enough, but why did he not then simply write a few sentences where he essentially says, “Poems have no meaning. Good poetry should just exist without interpretation”? Why not write in prose? Why choose to experiment with linguistic form to “charge” the language as Pound would say? So here’s the rub (to be idiomatic again). MacLeish undercuts his whole poem by writing in **poetic diction** and **poetic form**, and if we had just stopped with what MacLeish says we would not have thought of that. *The reason I know MacLeish has manipulated me through language is because I know how to read a poem.* I look for language that is not plain or what students have called in the past “normal.”

The language choices MacLeish makes within “Ars Poetica” are extraordinary. They are the sort of choices that would cause a grade school writer or essayist to receive a failing grade. For example, MacLeish does not write grammatically or syntactically. He **lineates**. He **breaks** the sentences at specific intervals. These breaks are not made to replace punctuation. The poem includes traditional punctuation. There are commas, hyphens, and periods. He organizes groups of lines in twos, or what we call in poetry a “**couplet**.” These couplets are not grouped by rhyme though. The grouping of the lines is rooted in the logic of the images. There are clearly three groups of four couplets divided in this version of the poem by asterisks. I have seen other versions of the poem that do not use the asterisks. This may be a publisher’s choice and not the poet’s choice. Still, we only have the text to go on.

Notice in the previous paragraph that I have not even begun thinking about what the words mean. There is no mention of the **denotation** of words or **connotation** of words. My first recognition that this is a poem is that it has the **shape of a poem**. I certainly could not have made the assumption that this is a poem because of rhyme. There is no clear end rhyme. If I let myself be lost in the analysis of word meanings at this stage, I would have ignored the primary characteristic of this poem. That characteristic is that the language has been “shaped” visually. It is that shape that “charges” the language in the case of MacLeish’s poem. After my initial reading of the poem, I would be correct to return to this poem and analyze its shape before all else as a means to better understand how the poem affects me as a reader.

When we read a poem the first time, we are hopefully moved. When we read a poem the second time, we begin to ask ourselves “what caused us to be moved?” If our initial action is to attempt to interpret the poem’s theme without asking ourselves “what caused us to be moved,” we risk being mislead. As a reader, I typically start with analyzing the shape of the poem. This is a good place to start because it is often the most obvious. In our example from cummings and our example from MacLeish, the shape of the language is clearly poetic. It is not **prosaic**. There are poems, however, where the shape of the language might not be what we consider poetic. An example of this is the **prose poem**. Prose poems do not lineate the language. The look like paragraphs. There are many great examples of prose poetry. Perhaps the most famous is Robert Hass's "A Story About the Body." It is an easy enough poem to find through a Google Search.

At first glance there is little here that makes this a poem. We may even ask ourselves “what makes this a poem?” It is neither shaped, nor sonically constructed. It feels like a story. It is constructed with a beginning, a middle, and an end. There is obviously no rhyme. There are interesting images, but images exist in short stories and novels and plays. **Imagery** is not exclusive to poets. I'm not sure what specific elements of Hass's poem makes it more of a poem than what is called in literary circles **flash fiction**. I have often pondered this poem trying to figure out why it is considered a poem. Ultimately, I still think it has something to do with the language Hass is using and the way the lines are still more important than the plot or characters of the piece.

Another element of reading a poem to consider beyond what we have already discussed is the historical and cultural knowledge the poet includes or **alludes** to in the poem. Certain lines of language, names of people or places or things, mythological and religious references, and naming of historical events have a cultural significance that cause language to be charged. The poet expects their reader to understand these things and almost never gives the reader footnotes to elaborate on these references. These references are called **allusions**. A good example of a poem which is heavy in all the elements we have discussed up to this point is Saul Williams’s “Said the Shotgun to the Head.” A *YouTube* search will bring up video performances of the poem. The text is also readily available through a Google Search or can be purchased in book form.

Williams’s poem is best experienced through thinking about all the ways of reading a poem as discussed up to this point. There is the initial reading/listening to the poem which will cause different reactions in individual readers/listeners. The reason we do not stop there with poetry is because this experience of the poem is so personal as to make it dependent on issues that cannot easily be analyzed and expanded to generalized interpretation. For an **analogy,** think of a scientific experiment. The goal of the experiment is to test a specific **hypothesis**, but we would not assume that a single experiment is enough to give a conclusive answer to the hypothesis. There are **variables** to consider. If we discover the conditions and results of the first experiment cannot be replicated, then we must assume that the results of the first experiment are not valid.

Now, we cannot say the same thing about an individual reader’s experience. We cannot necessarily call their experience invalid, but we can assume a few things about that experience. The reader brings with them all their prejudices, experiences, previous knowledge, biases against or for the particular genre/mode they are reading, and feelings to the reading. The very weather at the moment of the initial reading is a variable that can affect our initial emotional and intellectual response to the text. A reader might detest hip hop. If that is the case, the reader may have not been receptive to Williams’s poem which is clearly influenced by hip hop rhythms and rhymes. A reader may be prejudice and unwilling to acknowledge the validity of a minority’s experience. Such a reader would ignore or pass over specific elements in this poem that could challenge them. Other readers might be invested in certain ways of reading that cause them to experience all texts through the lens of feminism or queer theory or abusive relationships. We all bring our own context (all the experience and knowledge we have) to an initial reading and this is one reason there is such a great variety of interpretations of texts.

Some poems will lend themselves to more time reading one way rather than another. I chose Williams’s poem as an example because it can take a lot of time to read any way it is read. The ways of reading follow below with explanations of how each reading evolves into the next reading:

**One: Initial reading of poem. Note emotional and/or intellectual response.**

**Two: Examine your context.**

What elements affect my experience of the poem? What previous experiences and expectations of the artist or genre do I bring to my experience of the poem?

Once those things have been examined and **annotated**, it is a good idea to read the poem again. It is amazing how our experience of a poem changes in different contexts. One of my favorite poems is by Rives. It is called “Sign Language.” I first encountered it through a performance on the series *Def Poetry Jam*. His performance of the piece can usually be found through a *YouTube* search.

When I first heard this poem I laughed. I did not think about the challenges of creating poetry out of sign language. It did not occur to me to contemplate how the signs altered the effect of the words. At one point I listened to the poem and was offended by Rives’s use of mumbling to imitate a deaf student’s attempt at speech. Those experiences were not simultaneous. They occurred across **multiple readings**.

After perhaps a second or even a third listen/read, the reader now may begin to be interested in other reasons why the language is affecting them. This is where our other ways of reading are often implemented:

**Three: Examine the poem’s shape on the page.**

How is it delivered? What fonts are used? Where are lines broken? What words are capitalized? How is punctuation used? There are so many questions one can ask at this stage, but after the notation of “How” and “What” there needs to be the question “Why?” Why is the poet doing this? Let us return to Saul Williams’s “Said the Shotgun to the Head.”

In its original context as a printed work the poem appears as a book titled *,said the Shotgun to the head.* (And it is important to note that the text of the book's title is punctuated and capitalized exactly as I have typed it in the sentence). Even the title of the book uses what we might call non-traditional grammar and punctuation. It starts with a comma and then a lowercase letter. The first letter of “Shotgun” is capitalized. The whole book follows this approach. Below is an image taken from the text.

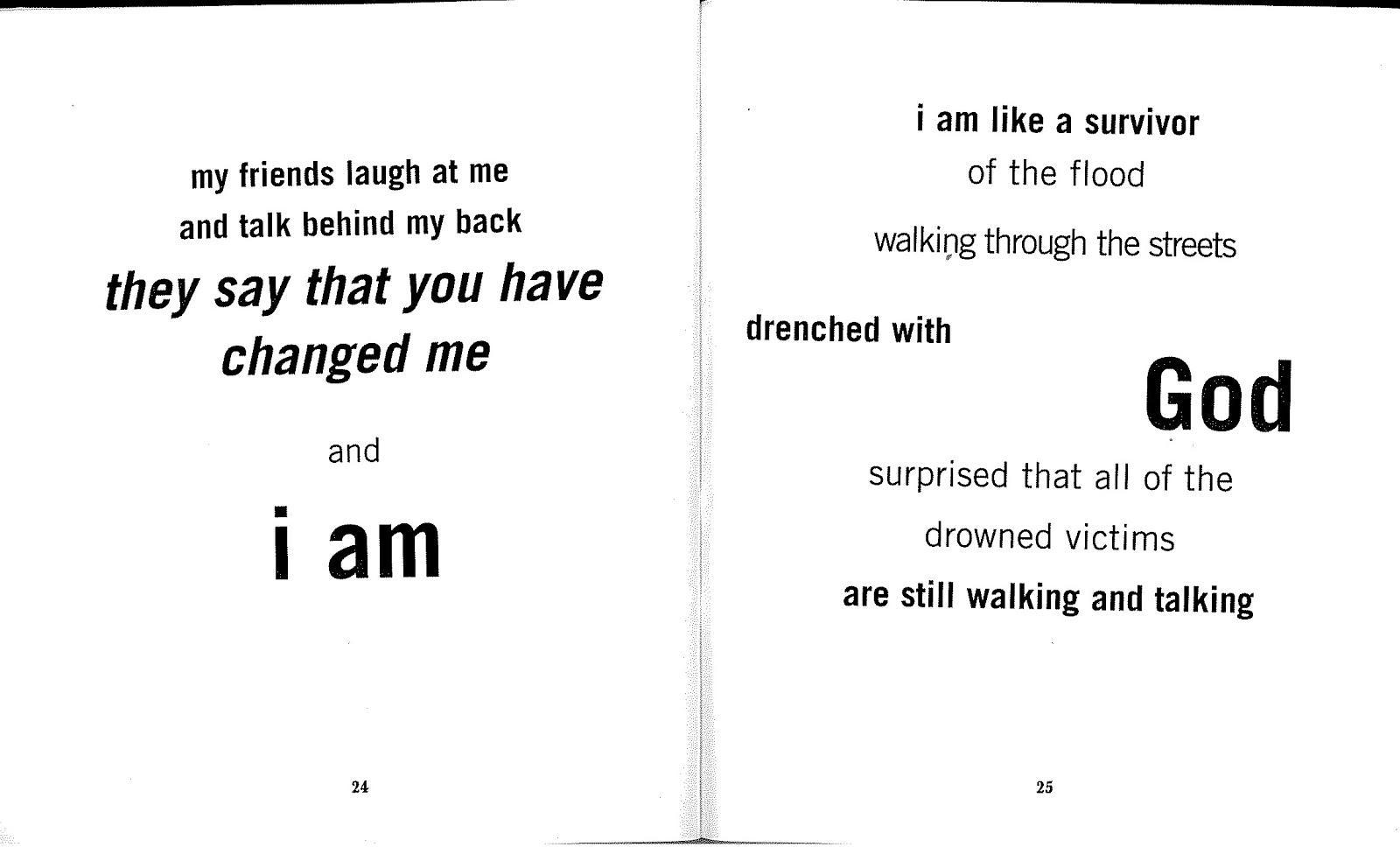


Fig. 1 , said the Shotgun to the Head. Saul Williams. MTV Books, 2003. (24-25).

To examine this poem’s shape on the page a reader would have to find this print book and begin reviewing it. We can see here that each page is in many ways acting as a **stanza**. A stanza is a group of lines much in the same way as a paragraph is a group of sentences in prose. There is a lack of punctuation in the images of pages from the book. There is also the lack of grammatical capitalization. Words are italicized. Words are placed in bold. Words are printed in different fonts. Words are different sizes. Every choice here has a reason. It is done for an effect. During this step of reading, we examine these elements and make note of the choices the author has made and ask ourselves at each choice what the effect is for us as readers.

We may ask ourselves at this step how we can presume to know the answer to the question “why?” This might be particularly true if the reader/listener is relatively inexperienced with reading a text in this way. We are much more experienced with this sort of reading than we think though. We encounter printed and digital texts of an ever-expanding variety daily through social media, advertising, websites, texting, and print. We know that certain colors cause emotional responses in readers. We know that if we capitalize every letter in a text it will...

SEEM AS IF WE ARE YELLING AT OUR READER.

We know, if we have been reading for a time, that punctuation can show the combination of sounds, pauses between sounds, or when a new speaker is speaking. We know that different spellings of words show us different speakers. Misspelled words can also create the appearance of different dialects. We know the simple act of capitalizing a letter can be the difference between a proper noun and common noun even if the word might not seem like a proper noun. We know that blank space on a page means the absence of something (thought or breath). These are all things we know simply be experiencing language in our contemporary environment. We also know that symbols have certain meanings. A “?” is a question. A “!” is an exclamation.

These are things we learn very early as we are learning how to read and write. There are other, more advanced, elements we will go into more detail about later, but generally speaking, most of us have a natural proclivity to reading a text this way. We may not have ever been asked to think about it before though, and that takes practice.

There could be pages of notations on Williams’s poem’s visual elements, but if we stopped there we would be doing the poem a disservice because this poem first was shared as a performance. Many poems are meant to be heard. Not all, but more than enough that critics and poets have spent a considerable amount of time developing a whole vocabulary of words related to the auditory qualities of language. Many **poetic forms** are defined solely by their sonic elements. A reader would also be wise to acknowledge how the sonic element of poetry overlaps with the previous step in the reading of a poem. The shape of the poem often shows how to read the poem out loud. Never assume that this is always the case, but often it is. Williams’s poem is an example of the interrelated nature of the sonic and the visual.

Our fourth way of reading is with our ears open to the sounds of the poem.

**Four: Examine the sounds of the poem’s language.**

Where do words sound similar? What types of rhyme are being used? What **syllables** are emphasized? Where are there pauses? What is the rhythm of the language? How does the shape of the poem on the page affects the way it is read out loud?

This sort of reading does take a specialized vocabulary to describe, but there are some elements that even the most inexperienced of readers may discuss. **Rhymes** are something most people understand from an early age. We may not be able to discuss the different types of rhyme without some knowledge of the vocabulary, but we can point out when words sound the same. We can recognize similar sounds when they come at the beginning or end of words. We can identify pauses through our knowledge of punctuation and what we call “white” space or blank space.

In some instances, the printed version of a poem might mislead the reader’s understanding of its sonic quality. *,said the Shotgun to the head* is an example of this. If the reader/listener would return to Williams’s performance of the poem and listen momentarily to it and then compare it to the printed page of the poem provided, a number of differences appear between performance and print.

Williams’s performance is electric and intense. He uses hip hop **tropes** to deliver the text in a **frenetic** manner. The print version of the poem as exemplified by figure 1 is very different. If the reader took the accepted guidance of the page, they would slow the poem down because all the line breaks and white space on the page. The italics and the bold of text might lead the reader to emphasis different text than what the performer emphasizes. I bring this up to point out that there are no easy and universal rules in poetry.

Everything presented here are simply guidelines and suggestions.

Williams’s poem can be read for the sonic elements of the text and should be for what that might reveal about the poem, but his performance of the poem supersedes the reader’s interpretation of the text of the poem. Williams’s performance is as important to understanding the poem as is the printed text.

Examining the sound qualities of a poem may take the most time at first. It is the element of reading/listening that takes the most practice and most instruction. I will devote a whole section to this later in the text. Once the reader has taken time to examine the sonic qualities of the poem they can move to the next way of reading the poem.

**Five: Read the poem for figurative language.**

Examine how metaphor, simile, and personification are being used. What is meant by these comparisons? How is analogy being used? What other sorts of figurative language are being used here?

This is where the most subject-specific vocabulary comes into play. Readers will learn a whole new vocabulary of literary terms to apply this lens to their reading. We will also dedicate a whole section to this vocabulary later, but for now the process will be illustrated through the three most prevalent forms of figures of speech being examined in Williams’s poem.

The reader or listener can examine Williams’s poem for an example of metaphor or simile or personification. Looking at the online version of the full text linked here “,said the Shotgun to the head” we come across the line “BOOKS ARE CAREFULLY FOLDED FORESTS” (52). This is a **metaphor**. That is, it is a comparison of two unlike things. Books may be made of paper and paper comes from trees which in turn create a forest, but a book and a forest are not in reality the same thing. Metaphors like this jump out at the reader. Here is where intellectual skills come in. We analyze why the author might have created this comparison. What are the possible reasons for this metaphor? What more is revealed by this figurative language? Why does it serve the speaker better than speaking plainly?

There are many things that come to mind for me as a reader when I encounter this metaphor. Forests are dense. They are full of stories. They are full of life. My logical analysis leads me to then assume that the speaker is implying that books are full of life, stories, and density. There is an obvious relationship between paper and trees, but that is too simple for a full analysis. This is where we begin to examine meaning and interpretation. This is also where another way of reading will start to influence the reader’s interpretations.

**Six: Read the poem for images and symbols.**

This reading is very similar to reading for figurative language. The use of images and symbols is a major component of poetry. There are whole poetic schools of thought built around how images are used. In Williams’s poem there are a number of images. The forest image from the previously referenced metaphor is one example. The images of ships referencing the slave trade in the early lines (11-19) are powerful. Strong images like the moon and the sun are present. Images that often appear in literature such as blood are referenced. Images are often repeated across literary history. They reappear from poem-to-poem, song-to-song, and story-to-story.

Sometimes an image can be an allusion.

**Seven: Read the poem for allusions.**

Read the poem for references to history, songs, literature, art , and people.

These readings are often overlapping. An image may have earned its power because of its repeated use in literature over time. Allusions are a tricky business. Non-experienced readers will miss allusions. Readers who lack historical knowledge might not connect to the references to the slave trade in Williams’s poem. Readers who are not familiar with the cultural aspects of the late twentieth century might not pick up on the allusions in the poem to Nirvana singer Kurt Cobain in the performed version of the poem and in the title itself.

Knowing these elements enriches the poem. The poem can still be enjoyed without that knowledge, but it is not the same experience. There are other poems that may be beautiful in their sound and imagery, but that are totally nonsensical if one does not know what the poem alludes to. A good example of this is W.B. Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan.” It will appear on the "Poems that Illustrate Ways of Recognizing and Reading Poetry" page that follows this.

The poem references ancient Greek mythology. In order to fully appreciate the conclusion of the poem a reader needs to know that the rape of Leda by the Greek god Zeus resulted in the births of Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra of Mycenae.

A reader who recognizes those names will most likely know Homer’s *Iliad* and the plays of Euripides. All the **ramifications** of the act and the imagery within the poem will take on the power of this mythological context.

The seven ways listed in this section need not be followed in a **linear fashion**. A reader may begin with the sort of reading they are most comfortable with and then move to ones they are less comfortable with. Some readers may immediately be struck by the references to history or other literary works in a poem. This was my initial response to “Leda and the Swan” when I first encountered it years ago. Some readers may be enamored with the musicality of a poem initially. This is my experience of Saul Williams’s performance *,said the Shotgun to the head* every time I encounter the poem. Still other readers will think about a poem intellectually. Often steps overlap.

We can think about the shape of the poem and the sound of the poem as often intertwined elements. Spaces on the page equal pauses in the **recitation**. Italicized texts points to emphasized **enunciation**. A comma in the middle of a line is a **caesura**, a breath. We read poems different ways under different circumstances.

As students of English literature, we want to understand how the poem is constructed, how the language influences the meaning, and how the context of creator/reader/performance all influence reception and evolution of meaning.

**Vocabulary and Concepts**

Senses - Our five senses are how we perceive the world and they are how we create description. We describe things through sensory details like: taste, touch, scent, sound, and smell.

Idiom - A phrase or way of using a word that is culturally/time specific. To people not of a similar time or culture, idioms usually sound like nonsense or are very strange. Think about midwesterners calling soda “pop,” or the phrase “it is raining cats and dogs.”

Sonic - Refers to sound like a “sonic boom.”

Authorial Intent - The belief that the author’s intent or reasoning behind their work is what the work’s ultimate truth is. Basically, all we need to know or can learn about a piece of writing may be found in what the author tells us about that piece of writing.

Poetic Diction - Diction refers to the way we speak or write. It is often used synonymously with “tone.” We are taught to use different types of vocabulary and tone when speaking to different people. There is this idea that poetry has a certain tone. It is a more refined way of using language. May writers and critics do not like “poetic diction” because it implies flowery language that is often dense and difficult to understand. A good example of this sort of stereotypical poetic diction can be found in Edgar Allan Poe’s writing and many Victorian poets.

Poetic Form - Poets use sound, repetition, and the space of the page to create limits on their writing. Poets will shape poems according to forms. Limiting the language through form whether it is called “closed form” (like a sonnet or villanelle) or “open form” (like Saul Williams’s poems) is one way to create new ways of using language.

Lineation - Poets typically organize their poems by lines. The line is more important than the sentence in poetry. Lines can be determined by the intended rhythm of the poem, a visual effect, or the choice of ending on a particular word or image.

Breaks - In poetry the end of a line is its “break.” Poets break lines usually not because of grammatical conventions (like punctuation), but rather by the issues mentioned in the entry on lineation above.

Couplet - Two lines of poetry that are placed together (coupled). There are specific types like the heroic couplet.

Denotation - This is the dictionary definition of the poem.

Connotation - The definition of words based on culture, time, speaker, and other words used with it. Context creates connotation.

Shape of Poem - Poems are shaped things. They are shaped by sound, visual elements, of the intended emphasis of words or images in the poem. This is also a synonym for poetic form.

Prosaic - In the usage above, prosaic refers to having the same tone as a piece of prose (essay writing or fiction).

Prose Poem - A type of poetic form where the poet has chosen not to lineate (break) their poetic lines. Instead, the poem is shaped according to traditional standard English grammatical conventions.

Imagery - All writing uses sensory detail to create images in our heads. Reading is largely the translation of symbols (alphabetic figures) into sound combinations that we have attached to objects in the world of our senses. All writers use adjectives and adverbs to create images in our mind as we are reading. Many images have cultural connotations and values, and when that happens the image becomes a symbol.

Flash Fiction - A short narrative written in prose that has become popular since the invention of the internet. Some writers refer to this type of writing as “short short stories.”

Allude/Allusion - Referencing another artifact that the author assumes their readership would know. The two most common sources of allusions in poetry are the Judeo/Christian stories found in the Bible and Greco-Roman (Classical) mythology.

Analogy - A comparison that illustrates an idea.

Hypothesis - An educated guess.

Variables - Anything that is subject to change. The antonym of “constant.”

Annotated - A text that has written notes on it discussing key elements of the text’s construction and meanings.

Multiple Readings/ Ways of Reading - There are many ways of reading. We often begin with simple decoding. That is translating the symbols on the page (alphabet) to images in our minds. The reading of literature requires “close reading.” That is, a reader must go beyond decoding and start applying a whole list of different skills and knowledge to help them better understand and learn a text.

Stanza - A grouping of poetic lines.

Syllables - Words are constructed with sounds. Each sound is a syllable.

Rhyme - When two sounds are similar.

Trope - An image, plot point, character, theme that is repeated in a certain culture or type of writing.

Frenetic - Synonym for energetic.

Metaphor - A comparison of two unlike objects.

Ramifications - Implied possibilities or meanings of an action or thought.

Linear fashion - Moving in a straight line or following chronological steps.

Recitation - Reading out loud.

Enunciation - The way we pronounce words.

Caesura - A pause that is usually in the middle of a line of poetry.

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**Poems that Illustrate Ways of Recognizing and Reading Poetry**

Try reading each of these poems in the multiple ways we discussed on the previous page. Think about what elements make these poems poetic. Ask yourself the questions posed on the previous page. If it helps, print these poems and **annotate** them. The professor or instructor of this section might ask you to submit an annotation of one of these poems that shows them that you read one of the poems in a multitude of ways.

*Leda and the Swan*

W.B. Yeats

A SUDDEN blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed

By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,

He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push

The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?

And how can body, laid in that white rush,

But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,

So mastered by the brute blood of the air,

Did she put on his knowledge with his power

Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

*Easter Wings*

George Herbert

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,

Though foolishly he lost the same,

Decaying more and more,

Till he became

Most poore:

With thee

O let me rise

As larks, harmoniously,

And sing this day thy victories:

Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne

And still with sicknesses and shame.

Thou didst so punish sinne,

That I became

Most thinne.

With thee

Let me combine,

And feel thy victorie:

For, if I imp my wing on thine,

Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

*On a Magazine Sonnet*

Russell Hilliard Loines

"Scorn not the sonnet," though its strength be sapped,

Nor say malignant its inventor blundered;

The corpse that here in fourteen lines is wrapped

Had otherwise been covered with a hundred.

*I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing*

Walt Whitman

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,

All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the branches,

Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous of dark green,

And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself,

But I wonder'd how it could utter joyous leaves standing alone there

without its friend near, for I knew I could not,

And I broke off a twig with a certain number of leaves upon it and

twined around it a little moss,

And brought it away, and I have placed it in sight in my room,

It is not needed to remind me as of my own dear friends,

(For I believe lately I think of little else than of them,)

Yet it remains to me a curious token, it makes me think of manly love;

For all that, and though the live-oak glistens there in Louisiana

solitary in a wide flat space,

Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near,

I know very well I could not.

*The Sphinx*

Ivan Turganev *translated by* Constance Garrett

Yellowish-grey sand, soft at the top, hard, grating below . . . sand without end, where ever one looks.

And above this sandy desert, above this sea of dead dust, rises the immense head of the Egyptian sphinx.

What would they say, those thick, projecting lips, those immutable, distended, upturned nostrils, and those eyes, those long, half-drowsy, half-watchful eyes under the double arch of the high brows?

Something they would say. They are speaking, truly, but only Œdipus can solve the riddle and comprehend their mute speech.

Stay, but I know those features ... in them there is nothing Egyptian. White, low brow, prominent cheek-bones, nose short and straight, handsome mouth and white teeth, soft moustache and curly beard, and those wide-set, not large eyes . . . and on the head the cap of hair parted down the middle. . . . But it is thou, Karp, Sidor, Semyon, peasant of Yaroslav, of Ryazan, my countryman, flesh and blood, Russian! Art thou, too, among the sphinxes?

Wouldst thou, too, say somewhat? Yes, and thou, too, art a sphinx.

And thy eyes, those colourless, deep eyes, are speaking too . . . and as mute and enigmatic is their speech.

But where is thy Œdipus?

Alas! it's not enough to don the peasant smock to become thy Œdipus, oh Sphinx of all the Russias!

*The Sick Rose*

William Blake

The invisible worm.

That flies in the night

In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed

Of crimson joy:

And his dark secret love

Does thy life destroy.

**The Shape of Language**

The third way of reading poems requires an analysis of a poem’s shape on the page. In order to discuss this properly, there is a specialized vocabulary literary artists and critics have developed over time. I will not get into all the details here, but I will touch on some of the main concepts.

The primary unit of grammar in poetry is not the sentence. It is the **line**. Poets vary in their approach to English grammar and mechanical rules. Some use standard grammar and mechanical rules, but still use the line as the primary unit of organization. When we discuss how lines are used in a poem we discuss its lineation. There are a number of line types in poetry. Two types are the **enjambed line** and the **end-stopped line**. According to Lewis Turco, the enjambed line is a line of poetry where there is no punctuation and the line runs onto the next line. The end-stopped line ends in **terminal punctuation,** an exclamation point, a question mark, or a period. These two types of lines are easily recognized in a poem like “Poetry” by Marianne Moore. Here is one version of the poem:

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all

this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one

discovers in

it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes

that can dilate, hair that can rise

if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because

they are

useful. When they become so derivative as to become

unintelligible,

the same thing may be said for all of us, that we

do not admire what

we cannot understand: the bat

holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf

under

a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that

feels a

flea, the base-

ball fan, the statistician--

nor is it valid

to discriminate against 'business documents and

school-books'; all these phenomena are important. One must

make a distinction

however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the

result is not poetry,

nor till the poets among us can be

'literalists of

the imagination'--above

insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them', shall

we have

In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,

the raw material of poetry in

all its rawness and

that which is on the other hand

genuine, you are interested in poetry.

In line 1 we have an enjambment. The line ends with the word “beyond” and no punctuation. The next line gives us an end-stop. The terminal punctuation here is a period denoting a statement. The poem alternates between enjambment and end-stopping. It is interesting to note this and to consider the effect on the reader of these choices by the poet. Both terminal punctuation and a line break can serve to signify a pause or a moment of thought between the next thought or image. The question to ask oneself when reading this way is why the line break and enjambment instead of the end-stop? Why make such a choice? How does it cause the words at the end of the lines to be emphasized differently?

Lines are organized into groups. We call these groups **stanzas**. Larger sections can sometimes be referred to as sections, cantos, or movements. The term varies from age-to-age and poet-to-poet. **Epic poems** can be divided into verses and books like the *King James Bible* or Milton’s *Paradise Lost.* Stanzas are the most typical title for groups of lines though. Sometimes a reader might encounter the term “**strophe**.” The two terms are synonymous. There are different types of stanzas. Each type is named as a result of the number of lines it contains.

**Couplet - Two Lines**

**Tercet- Three Lines**

**Quartet - Four Lines**

**Quintet - Five Lines**

**Sextet - Six Lines**

**Septet - Seven Lines**

**Octave - Eight Lines**

It is quite rare for a stanza to include more than eight lines. When this happens other terminology comes into play. These labels are handy cyphers for describing a stanza. The stanza’s length is yet another place for critical inquiry. Why organize the poem in quartets or tercets or couplets? What is gained by the organization? How is each stanza working visually? How does the topic change from stanza-to-stanza. A poem that is a single block of text is called a stichic. This term is not used often, but it is good to remember.

Let’s apply what we have learned so far about the shape of a poem. If we examine the poem, “Like Lilly Like Wilson” by Taylor Mali. This poem can be found by doing a *YouTube* search. Mali has performed it numerous times and a number of recordings of his performance are available. It also appears on his web site: www.taylormali.com. I recommend listening to the poem and looking at the shape of the poem on his website so that as a reader and listener of poetry you can develop an understanding of the relationship between the two aspects of page and performance.

It is clear from examining the poem’s text that it alternates between enjambed lines and end-stopped lines. There is not a set pattern to these alternating shapes, nor does it seem like Mali is attempting to have each line visually be around the same length. The length of the lines vary wildly. There are multiple stanzas in the poem. Thirteen stanzas, in fact. Some stanzas are single lines and others are over ten lines. Again, there is not a visual pattern in this poem. In the case of Mali’s poem we could then argue that the visual element of the poem was not necessarily used to make choices about how the text is organized on the page, but making that argument then inspires the question “why lineate at all?” What purpose is there to having lines broken in the way Mali does if it is not with the visual in mind? “Like Lilly Like Wilson” is a poem that is intended to be performed.

A very different poem is Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz.” Again, this is a poem that is easily found through searching online. There are also recordings of Roethke reading this poem. Before reading further, search for the poem and examine its shape. Make some notes on its shape.

Roethke’s poem is clearly organized visually. It has four stanzas of four lines each. These are quartets. Each line is roughly the same length. Every stanza ends with an end-stopped line. Every second line ends with a semicolon or comma, signifying a longer pause than a break on its own might. If one were to look closer and start thinking about the sonic elements of the poem, they might notice that each line is roughly six-to-seven syllables. It is interesting that visually this poem also capitalizes the first letter of each line. This was common in Roethke’s time, but if it were a poem published since the 1980’s we might question the purpose for this choice. Roethke’s poem is clearly shaped visually. Why?

Another poem we can begin to apply visual analysis too would be “Easter Wings” by George Herbet. This poem was provided for you in the last chapter.

Herbet’s poem is an early example of what we call “concrete poetry.” This poem is very clearly a shaped thing. It’s in two stanzas of ten lines each. The stanzas begin with lengthy lines that narrow as the stanza progresses. Then begin to lengthen again. The effect is to create two sets of wings when the poem is placed on its side. The visual reflects the content of the poem and the speaker’s goals. In this case, the meaning of the poem is connected to its shape.

In each of the previous examples hopefully the reader was able to see that shape plays a role in the poem. In some instances shape plays a major role. Think about the e.e.cummings poem we discussed early on. In some instances the shape is a map for how the poem should be spoken. In some instances it is unclear what, if any, part the shape of the poem plays.

Before we move on to other considerations, we should also briefly mention the effects of font shape, size, and type has on text. We may also think how underlining or bolding effects interpretation of text. We may include in this now the use of emoticons among other things to convey poetic meaning. An interesting example of this is another Rives poem called “A Story of Mixed Emoticons.” Rives’s poem can also be found through an online search. He presented it as a part of a *TED Talk.* It is an interesting piece since it is a poem written completely in **emoticons** and then performed as a **“slam” poem.**

When we discuss poems as shaped language it is also important to recognize that the **“field-of-the-page”** can play a part in constructing meaning. Blank space plays an essential role in encouraging contemplation or breath.

It is also important to note that poets have (like Herbert does with “Easter Wings”) experimented with making language on the page look like an actual object. This movement is often called “**concrete” poetry or “conceptual” poetry** and it blurs the divisions between the visual arts and the literary arts. A contemporary version of these types of poetry can be experienced through digital poetries, memes, and other experimentations with the melding of technology and text. After this page, you will find a link to an external poem generator that helps create Dadaist Poems. Dadaist poetry plays with sound and shape to create absurd and surreal word art. It was quite popular in the early 20th century.

Much of the visual side of poetry is also influenced by sound. We will discuss sound at length in the following section. Keep in mind that the two elements (like in Mali’s poem) are related.

**Vocabulary and Concepts:**

Line- The primary visual unit of most poetry. Poems are divided into lines of text (usually) rather than organized by sentences and paragraphs. The line can be determined by syllables, accents, accents and syllables, or visual cues. When a line is ended we refer to it as a "line break."

Enjambed Line- This is a line that is broken without any sort of punctuation.

End-stopped Line- This is a line that ends in punctuation.

Terminal Punctuation- This is punctuation that comes at the end of a line.

Stanza- A grouping of lines in poetry.

Epic Poems- A lengthy and often serious narrative poem.

Strophe- Another word used to describe a collection of lines in poetry.

Couplet - Two Lines

Tercet- Three Lines

Quartet - Four Lines

Quintet - Five Lines

Sextet - Six Lines

Septet - Seven Lines

Octave - Eight Lines

Emoticons- Symbols developed that represent emotions and ideas. Used primarily in chat/text communication.

Slam Poem- A type of performance poetry that is influenced by theater and hip hop. Relies heavily on rhyme and the voice of its author.

Field of the Page- The space on the page on which text is laid out.

Concrete or Conceptual Poetry- A type of poetry where the visual elements of the alpha-numeric characters is shaped to make a visual image.

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# **Poems that Play with Shape**

The following poems represent interesting examples of poetry that plays with shape. Look at how lines are organized. Look at how they are divided in stanzas (or not). Always ask the question "why?" How is the shape impacting the way the poem is read and understood?

*Sonnet to Liberty*

Oscar Wilde

Not that I love thy children, whose dull eyes

See nothing save their own unlovely woe,

Whose minds know nothing, nothing care to know,—

But that the roar of thy Democracies,

Thy reigns of Terror, thy great Anarchies,

Mirror my wildest passions like the sea,—

And give my rage a brother——! Liberty!

For this sake only do thy dissonant cries

Delight my discreet soul, else might all kings

By bloody knout or treacherous cannonades

Rob nations of their rights inviolate

And I remain unmoved—and yet, and yet,

These Christs that die upon the barricades,

God knows it I am with them, in some things.

*Break, Break, Break*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Break, break, break,

On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!

And I would that my tongue could utter

The thoughts that arise in me.

O well for the fisherman's boy,

That he shouts with his sister at play!

O well for the sailor lad,

That he sings in his boat on the bay!

And the stately ships go on

To their haven under the hill:

But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,

And the sound of a voice that is still!

Break, break, break,

At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!

But the tender grace of a day that is dead

Will never come back to me.

*When you are old*

W.B. Yeats

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,

And nodding by the fire, take down this book,

And slowly read, and dream of the soft look

Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,

And loved your beauty with love false or true,

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,

And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,

Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled

And paced upon the mountains overhead

And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

*Casey at Bat*

Ernest L. Thayer

The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day,

The score stood four to two, with but one inning more to play.

And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,

A pall-like silence fell upon the patrons of the game.

A straggling few got up to go in deep despair.

The rest clung to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast.

They thought, "if only Casey could but get a whack at that.

We'd put up even money now, with Casey at the bat."

But Flynn preceded Casey, as did also Jimmy Blake;

and the former was a hoodoo, while the latter was a cake.

So upon that stricken multitude, grim melancholy sat;

for there seemed but little chance of Casey getting to the bat.

But Flynn let drive a single, to the wonderment of all.

And Blake, the much despised, tore the cover off the ball.

And when the dust had lifted, and men saw what had occurred,

there was Jimmy safe at second and Flynn a-hugging third.

Then from five thousand throats and more there rose a lusty yell;

it rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell;

it pounded through on the mountain and recoiled upon the flat;

for Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat.

There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place,

there was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile lit Casey's face.

And when, responding to the cheers, he lightly doffed his hat,

no stranger in the crowd could doubt t'was Casey at the bat.

Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt.

Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on his shirt.

Then, while the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his hip,

defiance flashed in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.

And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through the air,

and Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.

Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped --

"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one!" the umpire said.

From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,

like the beating of the storm waves on a stern and distant shore.

"Kill him! Kill the umpire!" shouted someone on the stand,

and it's likely they'd have killed him had not Casey raised his hand.

With a smile of Christian charity, great Casey's visage shone,

he stilled the rising tumult, he bade the game go on.

He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the dun sphere flew,

but Casey still ignored it, and the umpire said, "Strike two!"

"Fraud!" cried the maddened thousands, and echo answered "Fraud!"

But one scornful look from Casey and the audience was awed.

They saw his face grow stern and cold, they saw his muscles strain,

and they knew that Casey wouldn't let that ball go by again.

The sneer has fled from Casey's lip, the teeth are clenched in hate.

He pounds, with cruel violence, his bat upon the plate.

And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,

and now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright.

The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light.

And, somewhere men are laughing, and little children shout,

but there is no joy in Mudville --

mighty Casey has struck out.

*Epitaph on Tombstone of a Child*

Aphra Behn

This Little, Silent, Gloomy Monument,

Contains all that was sweet and innocent ;

The softest pratler that e'er found a Tongue,

His Voice was Musick and his Words a Song ;

Which now each List'ning Angel smiling hears,

Such pretty Harmonies compose the Spheres;

Wanton as unfledg'd Cupids, ere their Charms

Has learn'd the little arts of doing harms ;

Fair as young Cherubins, as soft and kind,

And tho translated could not be refin'd ;

The Seventh dear pledge the Nuptial Joys had given,

Toil'd here on Earth, retir'd to rest in Heaven ;

Where they the shining Host of Angels fill,

Spread their gay wings before the Throne, and smile.

*Pied Beauty*

Gerald Manley Hopkins

Glory be to God for dappled things—

For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;

**The Sound of Language**

The shape of a poem often dictates the sound of the poem. The sound of the poem often dictates the shape. These two elements are often intertwined. We may think of the printed text as a script when we look at poems this way. Not all poems follow this pattern, but it is more common than not.

Theodore Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz” is also an example of this (the poem may be found readily online through a search engine). The poem is shaped visually as it is because the music of the language demands that visual shape. The poem is shaped by its sound.

Having this discussion requires some new vocabulary.

English is an **accentual-syllabic** language. This means our **syllables** and the syllables we emphasize or “accent” are both important to understanding our language’s **rhythm**. When we discuss rhythm we use the term **meter**. One way to think of this is that meter is a synonym of measure.

Metered language is measured language. When we speak of a metered poetic line we break that line down into what are referred to as “**feet**.” A metrical foot of language may be one syllable, two syllables, or three syllables. Each metrical foot is labelled according to where the accent of the foot lies and how many syllables it has. The major metrical feet in English are:

1. The ***iamb*** is a verse foot of two syllables, only the second being stressed: ˘ˈ
2. The ***anapest*** has three syllables, only the third of which is stressed: ˘˘ˈ
3. The ***trochee*** consists of two syllables, but the stress pattern of the iamb is reversed: ˈ˘
4. The ***dactyl*** is made of three syllables, but the stress pattern of the anapest is reversed: ˈ˘˘. (Turco 25)

There are minor metrical feet in English. The most common one is the **spondee**. This metrical foot is two consecutively stressed syllables or ˈˈ. The others are of passing interest and if the reader finds themselves really intrigued by this discussion they may explore metrics further through the study of what is called ***scansion****.* There are many resources for scansion. We will practice scanning and looking for the five metrical feet previously mentioned.

Students often find scansion intimidating. The thing to remember is that scansion is not an exact science. Pronunciation and accenting of syllables varies depending on **dialect** and time period. One of the beautiful aspects of language is that it evolves. When we scan we are not looking for a “right” or “wrong” meter. We are attempting to discover as close as possible the meter of the poem or lyric, so that we can through that analysis understand more about the poet’s craft and possible meanings.

Before we practice scansion, we need to learn a bit more terminology. Lines of poetry can also be labelled depending on how many accents and syllables are present in a line. The list of terms follows:

1. Monometer = 1 accent
2. Dimeter = 2 accents
3. Trimeter = 3 accents
4. Tetrameter = 4 accents
5. Pentameter = 5 accents
6. Hexameter = 6 accents
7. Heptameter = 7 accents

It is rare for a poetic line to contain more than seven accents. It is not impossible though. Poems with lines this long though are typically not metrically organized.

When students start practicing scansion, I typically introduce the practice through music. One song that works well for this practice is “Demons” by Imagine Dragons. The song is easy to find on a streaming service such as *Spotify* or linked in video form on *YouTube.* Videos with the lyrics are usually a great way to practice scansion. Music is helpful because in many cases it is quite clear to our ears what syllables the singer is stressing as they rap or sing.

Look at (and listen to) the first verse of "Demons."

"When the days are cold

And the cards all fold

And the saints we see

Are all made of gold"

We can break each line into two metrical feet. The first three syllables make one metrical foot and the next two syllables make a metrical foot. This is typed or written as follows:

When the days| are cold

Now, we know there are only two types of metrical feet with three syllables. This first metrical foot has to be an anapest or a dactyl. If we listen to it we can hear that the singer draws out the word “days.” I would place the accent (or stress) over the word days. This creates an anapest. Continue listening and it is relatively clear that he draws out the word “cold” which is also a single syllable. This creates the two syllable metrical foot known as the iamb. This line of lyrics then is a dimeter line consisting of an anapest and an iamb.

It can be more difficult to discern the accents (or stresses) when we scan. Multi-syllabic words can at times prove a challenge. Later in the song we have the verse:

"At the curtains call

It’s the last of all

When the lights fade out

All the sinners crawl"

In this verse we have two multi-syllabic words. The first line of the verse includes the word “curtains.” In order to match the pattern of previously scanned lines we need to break this word into two syllables and create another anapest/iamb line. It looks like this “At the curt|ains call.” To match the previous pattern the syllables “curt” and “call” are stressed in the line. We would do the same thing with the fourth line in the verse. It would look like this “All the sin|ners crawl.”

Hopefully what is clear by this example is that metrical feet are not limited by the syllables of words. A division of a line of poetry into metrical feet may also divide words into their syllabic parts.

We often associate metrical poetry with lyric poems, but poets have also used metrics to great effect in narratives. One of my favorite examples of this is Robert Frost’s “Out, Out.” This poem is in the public domain, so we can post it here.

*Out, Out*

Robert Frost

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard

And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,

Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.

And from there those that lifted eyes could count

Five mountain ranges one behind the other 5

Under the sunset far into Vermont.

And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,

As it ran light, or had to bear a load.

And nothing happened: day was all but done.

Call it a day, I wish they might have said 10

To please the boy by giving him the half hour

That a boy counts so much when saved from work.

His sister stood beside him in her apron

To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,

As if it meant to prove saws know what supper meant, 15

Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap -

He must have given the hand. However it was,

Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!

Half in appeal, but half as if to keep

The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all - 20

Since he was old enough to know, big boy

Doing a man's work, though a child at heart -

He saw all was spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off -

The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!"

So. The hand was gone already. 25

The doctor put him in the dark of ether.

He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.

And then - the watcher at his pulse took a fright.

No one believed. They listened to his heart.

Little - less - nothing! - and that ended it. 30

No more to build on there. And they, since they

Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

We will not scan every line of this poem in this text. It is enough to point out that its dominant meter is **iambic pentameter**. That means that the majority of its lines are ten syllables long and contain five syllables and that the majority of lines are dominated by the iambic foot. But one of the reasons we scan poems is to identify where meter changes and how this draws both the ear and the eye to the poem. There are significant places in “Out, Out” where changes to the meter take place. One example is the line “To tell them ‘Supper.’ At the word, the saw,” (14).

If we divide this poem into metrical feet we get “To tell|them ‘Supper.’|At the word,|the saw,”. We have a mirrored line metrically. We have a two syllable foot, a three syllable foot, a three syllable foot, and a two syllable foot. Since the primary metrical foot in the poem is the iamb, it is safe to say that both of the two syllable feet are iambs. The question then presents itself to us, “how do we scan ‘them ‘Supper.’?” The way we say “supper” now, I stress the first syllable, but there is no metrical foot in English that has an accent in the middle of the metrical foot. It has to be either the word “them” or the syllable “er.” It makes sense to place the accent over “er” for a number of reasons. If we look at earlier lines of the poem, the “r” sounds are emphasized. The first line of the poem is an example of this “The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard” and the repetition of the words “snarled and rattled” in line seven adds further emphasis. We can also look at line 13 and know that the subject being discussed her is the sister and the saw and in some ways the two are being conflated. The saw is being personified in line 14 (the line we are scanning), and the “r” sounds definitely correspond to the voice of the saw. So we accent “them” and we accent “er.” Then we make the pattern on the next two metrical feet mirror this pattern. We have a second anapest following the period or caesura in line fourteen. A caesura is a pause in a line that is often denoted by punctuation or spacing. This gives the stress to the single syllable word “word” and then we stress the single syllable word “saw.” And in doing so the sound of the line mimics the logical sense of the line and our physical reading of the line mimics the action of the saw. There are other examples of this throughout this brilliant poem by Frost. I urge the reader to spend considerable time scanning the poem and thinking about how each stress and pause is clearly chosen with a purpose by the poet.

Metrics is not the only element of the sound of poems. There is also the quality most commonly associated with poems. That is **rhyme**. There are many who will tell the reader that rhyme has fallen out of favor in contemporary poetry. That is a very narrow view of contemporary poetry. Rhyme is still an integral element in poetic composition and plays a major role in popular poetic forms such as hip hop and slam poetry. If we think back to Williams’s poem or Rives’s poems, we can recall the importance of rhyme in those poems. It is true that there are many poems written that do not concern themselves with obvious rhymes, but rhyme is still very important to poetry.

There are many types of rhyme.

True Rhyme - Identical sounds in two or more words, of an accented vowel as well as one of the sounds that follows the vowel.

Alliteration - is the repetition of stressed initial consonant sounds in a series of words.

End Rhyme - are rhymes that come at the end of poetic lines.

Rich Rhyme - has identical sound in the consonants immediately preceding the accented vowel as well as the sounds that follow it.

Consonance - also called “slant rhyme,” substitutes similar sound for identical sound.

Eye Rhyme - also called “eye rhyme,” is when two words are spelled the same but are pronounced differently.

Onomatopoeia - “describes” something through sound. A word that is a sound like “POW!”

Euphony - is the mixing of pleasant sounds.

Cacophony - is the unpleasant mix of sounds.

These are only a handful of terms that are useful when describing the sonic and rhyming elements of a poem. Like we scan a poem, we can notate a poem’s rhyme. A good example to practice with is Kim Addonizio’s “First Poem for You.” I recommend that you take a moment to find Addonizio's poem online through a quick search and read it. I will be discussing the poem in the following paragraphs.

To notate the end rhyme of this poem we apply the lowercase alphabetical symbol. The first first end sound then receives an “a.” The next end sound will receive either an “a” or a “b” depending on if it is a new sound or a rhyme. Line two is a new sound, so we note it with a “b.” The pattern continues. This poems “**rhyme scheme**” can then be notated as follows: ababcdc||efgfghh. Each stanza contains seven lines. The total lines of the poem are fourteen. The poem ends in a rhyming couplet. The poem also has examples of **alliteration** with the repetition of the consonant sound “s.”

The sound of the poem as revealed through notating the rhyme and alliteration can make clear significant relationships. What is it about the repetition of the consonant sound “s” in Addionizo’s poem that is so interesting? What effect does the “s” sound have on a listener? The answers to these questions might reveal additional meanings and contexts for meaning within the poem that a tertiary analysis might have overlooked. There are other elements of notation we use as well. In the case of the poetic form the **Villanelle** we have whole lines that repeat and we have rhymes. Because of this we need to alter our notation. To illustrate this I will use Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night.” This poem can also be easily found through an online search.

An examination of the poem quickly shows that the first and third line of the first tercet is repeated in subsequent tercets. We assign each of these lines the capital letter “A” because they rhyme and we use the capital letter to show that the line repeats. Since they are two different lines that will be used as refrains (the term we use for repeated lines), we will give line one the subscript number 1 and line three the subscript number 2. The second line of the first tercet is a different sound. The line is not used as a refrain, so we assign it a lowercase “b.” The first tercet is notated as follows: “A1, b, A2.” Now that we have the basic notation, the rest of the poem is easy to notate. We notice that the “A” sound is repeated in the first line of each tercet, but after the first tercet the first line of the subsequent tercets is not a refrain. We can therefore give those lines a lowercase “a.” The second tercet’s notation then looks like this: “a, b, A1.” We can notate the whole poem as follows: “A1ǀbǀA2 ǀǀ aǀbǀA1 ǀǀ aǀbǀA2 ǀǀ aǀbǀA1 ǀǀ aǀbǀA2 ǀǀ aǀbǀA1ǀA2.” Notation is a helpful visual map of the sonic qualities of a poem.

**Vocabulary and Concepts**

Accentual-syllabic - Language's rhythm is examined through either accents, syllables, or a combination of the two. When we discuss the rhythm of English, we use a combination.

Syllables - The number of sounds in a word. Words can be mono-syllabic (one syllable) or poly-syllabic (multiple syllables).

Rhythm - The beat of language. Sometimes connected to the breath of a recitation.

Meter - How we measure out syllables and accents in poetry.

Metrical Feet - A set of one-to-three syllables that are either accented (stressed) or slacked (not stressed).

The *iamb* is a verse foot of two syllables, only the second being stressed: ˘ˈ

The *anapest* has three syllables, only the third of which is stressed: ˘˘ˈ

The *trochee* consists of two syllables, but the stress pattern of the iamb is reversed: ˈ˘

The *dactyl* is made of three syllables, but the stress pattern of the anapest is reversed: ˈ˘˘

The *spondee* is made of two syllables, both syllables are stressed.

Scansion - The study of a poem's meter.

Metrical Lines -

1. Monometer = 1 accent
2. Dimeter = 2 accents
3. Trimeter = 3 accents
4. Tetrameter = 4 accents
5. Pentameter = 5 accents
6. Hexameter = 6 accents
7. Heptameter = 7 accents

Iambic Pentameter - the standard line of English. It has ten syllables, five accents, and the accent usually follows the slack in each metrical foot.

Villanelle - A specific form of poetry originating in France. It relies rhyme and repeating whole lines. The repetition of a whole line is called a "refrain."

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**Poems that Play with Sound**

Poetry was originally an oral art form. Poems were originally written with the intent to be heard. In our current time, there are poetry readings everywhere from laundromats to college campuses. These readings may take the form of recitations or may be competitions as in the Poetry Slams popularized by documentaries like *SlamNation* and television series like *Def Poetry Jam.* Many great performances of poems can be found through *You Tube* and a search. Many of the performances from *Def Poetry Jam* are available there. For this section of our class, I am suggestion that you look up particular poems either in audio or text format rather than providing their full text here. Many of these poems are available online, but are not in the public domain. Because of copyright, you will need to go to the particular site that hosts the text or recording and experience it there.

Search either *You Tube* or the general internet for the following poems/songs:

“Def Poetry” by Rives

“It’s Alright Ma, I’m Only Bleeding” by Bob Dylan

“Fantasize” by Floetry

“Coded Language” by Saul Williams

“We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks

“Dada Sound Poem #1” by Burnell Yow

“Fern Hill” by Dylan Thomas

“Sonnet 55” by William Shakespeare

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” by John Keats

**Figurative Language**

There are many types of **figurative language**. This is an element of reading poems that is not unique to poetry. Almost all language and speech uses figurative language. Many examples of figurative language have entered our common speech as **slang, idioms, and colloquialisms.** The phrase “it is raining cats and dogs” is an example of this. Many readers will immediately understand that a person means it is raining heavily by using that phrase. A person might be confused by the phrase if they think about it literally. It is also interesting to question where this implied comparison comes from. How are “cats and dogs” similar to heavy rain? The literal **denotation** of the phrase is absurd.

The most common figurative language relies on **analogies**. **Metaphor** compares two unlike things. **Simile** compares two unlike things using the words “like” or “as.” **Personification** gives non human objects human characteristics. **Synesthesia** “is the perception or interpretation of the data of one sense in terms of another” (Mason and Nims 33).

Other types of **figures of speech** use **symbolism** to help us state an idea in a unique way. **Synecdoche** gives us the part for the whole. This is when we call technicians in the theater “stage hands.” We mean “stage people,” but use the word “hands” to mean the people. **Metonymy** is very similar. In metonymy we use an object or place very closely related to another object in the place of the other object. We call the executive branch of the United States government the “White House,” but the “White House” is simply the name of the president’s residence. It is not the executive branch. **Symbols** in literature, and more specifically poetry, are extremely common. They do not need to be examples of synecdoche or metonymy to be symbols. Objects often refer to or are used in place of other objects. An image will act as a cypher for an idea. This is very much part of the life blood of poetry. Even the phrase I just used is an example of symbolism. “Life blood” means these the elements that allow us to easily identify poetry, or it means the aspects of language that give poetry its uniqueness. “Blood,” of course, has nothing to do with poetry other than as an analogy or symbol. “Blood” is simply “blood” without all its contextual elements. **Allegory** is a very purposeful use of symbol. This is when a character is identified purely with an idea. A coin is personified to represent greed. A character in a story is named “Greed.” A good example of this from popular culture are comic book characters like “Captain America.” Captain America can be seen as an allegorical figure. He stands for all the things we desire America to mean and be.

Figures of speech can also be interesting ways of phrasing language or organizing language. The most common example of this is the “**pun**.” Puns are frowned on in most serious contemporary poetry, but they still have their place. Poetry is often thought to have “poetic **diction**.” That is a way of writing are speaking that is **antiquated** and not at all how the average person speaks. The more high-sounding the poetic diction, the less poetic the writing actually is. It is a sort of irony. **Irony** is a type of figurative language that can sometimes fall under this category as sell. According to Mason and Nims, “The most familiar form of irony is the statement that means the contrary” (76). There are other types of irony in literature, but when we are discussing poetry Mason’s and Nim’s definition serves us well. **Paradox** is another type of figure of speech. Paradox is quite similar to irony. In paradox with have the implication of contradiction without the stated opposite meaning. Mason and Nims states that “Awareness of paradox is often expressed by means of **oxymoron**, which might translate from the Greek as cleverly stupid or paraphrased as absurd on purpose” (75). We also have the **understatement** which is quite common in our culture. Understatements are using language that minimizes the truth of the experience or event or image. If the reader has ever seen Monty Python’s *Search for the Holy Grail* the black knight’s joke about it “being just a flesh wound” is an example of understatement. We also use **overstatement, or hyperbole**. Hyperbole is becoming increasingly common in the language of the internet. Everything is “extreme” these days, even our potato chips.

Poets use figures of speech to create effect. They make our language more interesting. Poets often seek to create unique metaphors, synecdoches, and paradoxes with their words. Poets avoid cliches and idioms as much as they can. At times a poet may lean into those things (notice the use of figurative language here) to make a point (another instance of synecdoche). The important thing is that we as readers are able to identify these uses of figurative language and discuss how that figurative language is influencing our reading of the poem.

**Symbol, Image, and Allusion**

As we continue to read poetry it becomes more and more apparent that poetry is part of a continuum. As the scholar and critic Northrop Frye states, “in literature you don’t just read one poem or novel after another, but enter into a complete world of which every work of literature forms a part” (69). Earlier in his book *The Educated Imagination* he also argues, “every form in literature has a pedigree, and we can trace its decent back to the earliest times” (40). Reading any sort of literature, but poetry in particular, requires some knowledge of the literature of the past. Yes, a poem may be appreciated without this knowledge. The experience of it will be lessened though, and the reader will not be able to form a complete understanding of the poem.

In poetry we have multiple elements that require **contextual knowledge**. In this section I will only tackle three. They are large enough categories on their own and whole books have been devoted to elements of each. Here, I will only briefly touch on each element and provide an example from poetry to illustrate the point.

Symbols have already been discussed in the context of figurative language. Symbols are important because through them we are able to say much more than without them. They are also fraught with contextual meaning. Remove the context from the symbol and it may be misinterpreted and cause readers much grief. A good example of this is any poem from the Elizabethan era of English poetry. These poems are wrought carefully around symbols that have distinct meanings to the audience of the Elizabethan era. This audience was relatively small, educated in Classical literature and theological discourse. Their whole education system was built around structures of rhetorical discourse and Aristotelian logic. Very few readers today can say the same about their own educations or their own knowledge. A specific example is “Whoso List to Hunt.” This poem appears in its entirety below:

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,

But as for me, *hélas*, I may no more.

The vain travail hath wearied me so sore,

I am of them that farthest cometh behind.

Yet may I by no means my wearied mind 5

Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore

Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,

Sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind.

Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,

As well as I may spend his time in vain. 10

And graven with diamonds in letters plain

There is written, her fair neck round about:

*Noli me tangere*, for Caesar's I am,

And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.

Assuming the reader can muddle through the antiquated forms of Elizabethan English, there should be some symbols that are immediately apparent in the poem. The “deer” or “hind” of the poem is the principle symbol. There is also the necklace around the deer’s neck that has the engraven Latin, “Noli me tangere.” This phrase translates roughly as “Do not touch me.” The image of a hind with a necklace that has a warning upon it comes straight from an earlier poem by Petrarch.

Wyatt’s readers would immediately have recognized the symbol from their knowledge of Petrarch. They would recognize the necklace. They would also understand that the deer represents a woman that the speaker of the poem is in pursuit of but cannot have. This understanding would originate in their knowledge of the culture of courtly love that had been mythologized through Arthurian legends. The knowledge of the hind representing unattainable love would also be understood within the context of mythology when this animal was also sacred to the Greek god Artemis (Roman name Diana). This Greek goddess was a protector of virginity. The latent sexual desire of the symbol is clear in the language of hunting. The act of the hunt is often sexualized in this period (as it is in our own). The practice of pursuing a lover and hunting a deer are often conflated in Elizabethan literature and this in turn stems from an experience of the same conflation taking place in Greco-Roman literature.

Not knowing Petrarch, not knowing the courtly culture of Elizabethan England, not knowing Greco-Roman mythology renders the symbol almost meaningless. A reader may recognize the conflation of hunting and sexual pursuit, but that conflation is not as common in contemporary conversation. Not as many readers hunt. To truly read this poem, we must be well-read. We must have read enough to understand the symbols which are symbols derived from earlier poems and literatures. To be a reader of symbols and images, one must be a reader of allusions.

This is why I combine the three concepts in this section. The symbols of Wyatt’s poem are allusions. The two are often inseparable. When we recognize a symbol, it is not because the symbol is something new. We recognize it because the analogy the symbol represents is familiar. There is a group of writers who are sometimes called the “Deep Image” school that draw upon the familiarity of ancient symbols and words to create reverberated meaning in their poems.

James Wright is one of the most famous poets who are considered part of this school. His poem “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota” is perhaps one of the most famous examples. This is a good opportunity to search for the poem and review it.

The poem is not as heavy-handed as Wyatt’s. Wright relies on images that are common to many readers. He mentions a “butterfly,” “black trunk,” “shadow,” “empty house,” and “golden stones.” The images are supposed to reverberate with meaning and connect the poem to older works and older thoughts. The concrete image in this poem creates the meaning. The images are never stated to be anything other than what they are literally described as in the poem, yet when we encounter the images we bring to them all of our previous readings of literature that include shadows or butterflies.

Another example of symbol, image, and allusion is “Marks” by Linda Pastan. This poem uses the familiar symbol of grades to illustrate a family’s relationship. Here the symbols are quite accessible to all.

If we move to something like the hip hop song “The Corner” by Common and Kanye West and featuring The Last Poets, we begin to see another example of a poem that can only be fully entered into with contextual knowledge. This poem requires a knowledge of urban culture in particular regions of the United States. It requires an understanding of the role “the corner” used to play in those cultural settings. There are references to objects like an “Olds” (a type of car and a car manufacturer that no longer exists). Such references date the verse and create a community of listeners and readers who can share in the references that Lynn (Common) is stating. Again, each image in the poem is tied to a particular time and place. In order to understand the images and what they symbolize one must be familiar with the mythology of that cultural time and place.

Poetry runs the gamut with symbol, image, and allusion. Some symbols are easy to identify. In Pastan’s poem anyone who has been raised in a culture that uses the grading marks common in American culture will be able to understand what each letter symbolizes. Some poems are difficult to understand. Wyatt’s sonnet makes little sense to anyone who does not the history of the “hind” symbol. Some poems require a specific cultural knowledge to recognize symbols and experiences such as Lynn’s “The Corner.”

The danger with symbol, image, or allusion is that reading can become a sort of game for some. We begin to look for the symbol and then argue over what that symbol can mean. This can cause the reader and critic to completely overlook the literal experience of the poem. This can also cause a number of misinterpretations. “The Corner” is fraught with potential for misinterpretation. An overly-zealous scholar may encounter the word “Nikes” in the poem and believe that Lynn is referring to the Greco-Roman deity Nike. Lynn is referring to the shoe brand, but depending on the reader’s experience they may over-read the poem. A reader of literature must walk a fine line with their approach to a text. It is often expected that the criticism of a text will bring something new to our understanding of the text, but if we use too much of a contemporary lens on a text we will misread it. A fine example of this is Shakespeare’s Sonnets.

Many scholars and critics see homoerotic imagery throughout the sonnets. The poems are in part addressed to a male youth and may very well exemplify homoerotic love in places, but not every symbol in these sonnets is homoerotic. Not every allusion or image in the poems reveals latent homosexuality in Shakespeare. To insist on such an interpretation is to apply a contemporary understanding of sexual mores and symbolism to an Elizabethan writer whose cultural milieu was quite different than our own.

A reader must be careful when they are interpreting symbols. Symbols are best approached with a knowledge of the period in which the author is writing or the speaker is speaking. A poet may use the word “fag” to refer to a cigarette. This is perfectly acceptable in British slang. The word will immediately conjure up a cigarette and all the appropriate associations that the symbol of a cigarette has to a British reader. An American may read that same poem and encounter that word and have a very negative experience of the word. They may be offended by the word because of its derogatory connotations in American culture. They may laugh at the term because they see it in a juvenile way. Some may see it as a label. A certain set of readers may even think of the word in terms of its original mean “a stick.” The poet was using it with a British audience in mind, but other English speakers could quite possibly misinterpret the image and the symbol to the detriment of the reader’s understanding of the poem.

Another example that stands out is the poetry of Rumi. Rumi is quite a popular author in the twenty-first century. His poetry represents a spiritual exuberance that is both powerful and meaningful. The poems are full of symbols and images that help the reader to understand Rumi’s often esoteric meanings. The most famous translator of Rumi’s poetry is Coleman Banks. You can search for his translation of “Because I Cannot Sleep.” I discuss it below.

In the poem we encounter images of “spring flowers,” “the moon,” and the image of a wine bottle being “uncorked.” The poem is grouped under Rumi’s love poems. It would then seem that we can associate these images with erotic love, but a person who has read Rumi’s work and studied some of Rumi’s history would know that he was a student of Sufism. His love poems are actually speaking about spiritual love and using erotic elements and symbols to describe spiritual union with the divine. Rumi often brings up drunkenness and uses images related to drunkenness (such us uncorking a wine container) to describe an experience of spiritual union. A reader unfamiliar with the tradition of using erotic language to describe a spiritual experience would not pick up on the practice in Rumi’s poetry. This reader may only understand the erotic context. This would be a great disservice to Rumi’s work.

**Vocabulary and Concepts**

Figurative Language - also called “figures of speech.” A way of expressing ideas through descriptive language and comparisons.

Slang, Idioms, and Colloquialisms- phrases and ways of using words that make sense in particular cultural, regional, or temporal context.

Denotation - the dictionary definition of a concept or word.

Analogies - comparisons.

Metaphor - compares two unlike things.

Simile - compares two unlike things using the words “like” or “as.”

Personification - gives non human objects human characteristics.

Synesthesia -is the perception or interpretation of the data of one sense in terms of another.

Synecdoche - naming an object by its part rather than its whole.

Metonymy - using an object or place closely related to a person or organization to name that person or organization.

Symbols - objects or images that take on the quality of concepts or ideas or specific emotions.

Allegory - the use of specific symbols that represent specific ideas. These symbols become part of the cultural understanding of a specific time or group.

Pun - a play on words.

Diction - the way we speak or write. The vocabulary we use.

Antiquated - out-dated or no longer popular.

Irony - there are many types of irony. Poetry often uses “verbal irony.” That is stating an idea that means the opposite or what is seems to mean.

Paradox - is stating two opposites or contradictions close together that seem illogical, but actually coincide with experience. Think of a “cold fire.”

Oxymoron - similar to paradox in that it is a combination of opposites.

Understatement - sometimes referred to as “litotes.” This is stating a fact in a way that lessens its impact or undermines its severity.

Overstatement - sometimes referred to as “hyperbole.” This is stating a fact in a way that over-emphasizes its impact or severity.

Contextual Knowledge - this is the knowledge of other disciplines and experiences that one brings to understanding and interpreting knowledge.

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**Poems that Play with Figurative Language**

Almost all poetry uses figurative language. Almost all language is figurative. It is difficult for us to think about this consciously because we use it so naturally that we often aren’t aware that we are using it. In the following poems try to identify the types of figurative language used. Try to identify the way it is used. Try to think about the reasons why it is being used. One of the critics many readers have of poetry is that it is too much like a riddle or puzzle, but how might poetry be speaking more clearly by using figurative language?

*The Travelling Bear*

Amy Lowell

Grass-blades push up between the cobblestones

And catch the sun on their flat sides

Shooting it back,

Gold and emerald,

Into the eyes of passers-by.

And over the cobblestones,

Square-footed and heavy,

Dances the trained bear.

The cobbles cut his feet,

And he has a ring in his nose

Which hurts him;

But still he dances,

For the keeper pricks him with a sharp stick,

Under his fur.

Now the crowd gapes and chuckles,

And boys and young women shuffle their feet in time to the dancing bear.

They see him wobbling

Against a dust of emerald and gold,

And they are greatly delighted.

The legs of the bear shake with fatigue

And his back aches,

And the shining grass-blades dazzle and confuse him.

But still he dances,

Because of the little, pointed stick.

*The Cross*

John Greenleaf Whitier

The cross, if rightly borne, shall be:

No burden, but support to thee;"

So, moved of old time for our sake,

The holy monk of Kempen spake. [1]

Thou brave and true one! upon whom

Was laid the cross of martyrdom,

How didst thou, in thy generous youth,

Bear witness to this blessed truth!

Thy cross of suffering and of shame

A staff within thy hands became,

In paths where faith alone could see

The Master's steps supporting thee.

Thine was the seed-time; God alone

Beholds the end of what is sown;

Beyond our vision, weak and dim,

The harvest-time is hid with Him.

Yet, unforgotten where it lies,

That seed of generous sacrifice,

Though seeming on the desert cast,

Shall rise with bloom and fruit at last.

*Sonnet 18*

William Shakespeare

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

And summer's lease hath all too short a date:

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

And often is his gold complexion dimm'd,

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance, or nature's changing course untrimm'd:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,

Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,

When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

*Pan*

Oscar WIlde

I

O GOAT-FOOT God of Arcady!

This modern world is grey and old,

And what remains to us of thee?

No more the shepherd lads in glee

Throw apples at thy wattled fold,

O goat-foot God of Arcady!

Nor through the laurels can one see

Thy soft brown limbs, thy beard of gold,

And what remains to us of thee?

And dull and dead our Thames would be,

For here the winds are chill and cold,

O goat-foot God of Arcady!

Then keep the tomb of Helice,

Thine olive-woods, thy vine-clad wold,

And what remains to us of thee?

Though many an unsung elegy

Sleeps in the reeds our rivers hold,

O goat-foot God of Arcady!

Ah, what remains to us of thee?

II

AH, leave the hills of Arcady,

Thy satyrs and their wanton play,

This modern world hath need of thee.

No nymph or Faun indeed have we,

For Faun and nymph are old and grey,

Ah, leave the hills of Arcady!

*Anthem for Doomed Youth*

Wilfred Owen

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes

Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.

The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

**Poetic Form**

Purpose determines **form**. In writing, the shape a text takes or the way the alphabetical or numerical symbols are organized on the page is determined by its purpose. In speech, the diction and **syntax** the speaker chooses are also determined by purpose. Poetry is no different. As discussed before, poetry is the art of language. It is focused on how language, both its sound and its visual elements, affect readers and listeners. The basic idea is form, which is the shape and sound of the text, in poetry is a way to extend **meaning**. It is difficult to understand what a poem is attempting to explore if one does not understand its **formal elements.**

Most poetry textbooks and poets talk about concepts such as **Free Verse** and **Closed Form**. Many of you will be familiar with the concept of free verse. Free verse is supposedly the primary way of shaping contemporary poetry. It is the idea that somehow the poetry classified as free verse lacks form. This is not true though. All language has form whether it is spoken or written. By its very nature and primary purpose, language must have a shape and a form. It must be organized to convey meaning and ideas. It is important to note that free verse is a bit of an oxymoron. To understand this one needs to know what the definition of **verse** is.

Verse, as opposed to **prose**, is metrical writing. It is writing that is informed by sound qualities such as accents and rhyme. It is therefore formal writing. We have begun to use the term verse as a synonym of poetry, but they are not the same thing. In fact, there is a type of poetry called **Prose Poetry** popularized by poets like Robert Hass. A good example of a prose poem is Hass’s “A Story About the Body.” This poem is not written in verse at all. It is written using standard grammatical rules and organized by sentences and paragraphs. It is not lineated.

A better classification for poems that are not in one of the recognized closed forms is **Open Form.** Thinking of poems outside of the traditional classifications of **sonnet, villanelle, sestina,** or **rondel** as open form poems makes it easier to talk about their formal elements. The mistake many readers and listeners of poetry make when approaching non-closed form poem is assuming that formal elements played no role in the poem’s composition.

Even the choice of not using verse elements in writing a poem, is a formal choice. We can return to the idea of purpose here. What is the purpose of poetry?

This is a big question and not easily answered. Many **poetic schools** and critics have attempted to come up with a **manifesto** or **ars poetica** that defined for readers of poetry exactly what its purpose should be. The study of the history of poetry is often summarized as one generation presenting one idea about what poetry should be and do, and the next generation rejecting that hypothesis and defining poetry in a different way. There are some general things that poetry shares with other writing that can help readers and listeners think about its purpose. The first quality that poetry shares with other writing is that it can be delivered in different **modes**. Poems can be **lyrics**, **narratives,** or in a **dramatic voice.** Whether the poem is constructed as lyric, narrative, or as a dramatic text will influence its form. We use each of these modes for different reasons. Lyrics are often meant to express a moment in time or a moment of understanding. Some might say the purpose of a lyric is to express an **epiphany**. A narrative is meant to tell a story. Stories can be **didactic**. That is meant to express a lesson or moral. Stories can also be like lyrics and simply serve to express a few moments that lead to a realization of some eternal truth for the speaker. Dramatic writing is meant to share knowledge with an audience and entertain. It is geared toward communal experience. The author takes on the role of a **character** and attempts to express experience through that character’s voice. We most experience this mode as **dramatic monologues** when reading or listening to poetry, but they can also appear in poems designed for performance such as slam poems.

A poems form will often be determined by its mode then. Lyrics are traditionally in closed form. Narratives often are structured with some formal elements (such as **blank verse**), but set forms are not common in narrative poetry. Dramatic monologues are often written in closed form because the sonic elements of closed forms will often cause the poetic lines to remain with the reader/listener long after the reader/listener has left the poem. Having said all that, poets do experiment with the different modes and forms. Sonnets are sometimes used to tell a story. If one reads all of Shakespeare’s sonnets, there is an overarching narrative to them. Dramatic monologues are written in open form. This is particularly true of contemporary poetry. Many twenty-first century poets avoid the use of closed form entirely. Lyrics can be written as prose poems. There are performance poets who do not break their poems into lines or stanzas. What we have to do is start from generalizations and then allow for exceptions moving forward. What a lot of readers of poetry want is for the rules to be consistent so that they can be easily examined and evaluated, but poems are human constructions. They evolve. They change. They may retain elements of the past, but appear as something entirely new. This is even true of closed forms.

**Closed Form**

Closed Form is also a bit of an oxymoron. The assumption is that these forms have set rules and that those rules can never be changed. This simply is not true. There are many closed forms, but the most well-known and widely-used are sonnets, villanelles, and sestinas.

The sonnet is a very popular form. It dates from the 1200s. It has been used in numerous European languages as a structure to organize lyrics. In English, the sonnet came to prominence in the 16th century and its two most famous proponents were Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser. For both poets, the sonnet was almost always a 14 line poem. How those lines were grouped is one way the poets differed in their use of the form. Shakespeare’s structure is usually thought of as being three stanzas of four lines each and a final couplet, but I have seen his poetry published in **stichic** form. Spenser uses an octave and sestet structure often. That is a stanza of eight lines and another stanza of six lines. Both poets use different rhyme schemes. Shakespeare’s rhyme scheme is standard across the majority of his sonnets. It is “A-B-A-B//C-D-C-D//E-F-E-F//GG.” Spenser’s rhyme scheme varies but is often similar to Petrarch’s. Petrarch wrote in Italian and popularized the sonnet as a form. It is through translations of Petrarch’s *Conzoniere* that the sonnet was introduced to England.

The villanelle is a French form. I have already explained it at great length in a previous chapter. It has been adapted into other languages and used to great success in English. A famous example of what is possible with the villanelle is Elizabeth Bishop’s “One Art.” The poem can be easily found through an online search.

The sestina is a very unique form. Rather than be structured based on rhyme and rhythmic elements, the poem poem is structured using **refrain**. Six words repeat in a pattern from stanza to stanza. There are six sestets and one tercet in that make up the poem. The pattern looks something like this:

A B C D E F - End words of lines in first sestet.

F A E B D C - End words of lines in second sestet.

C F D A B E - End words of lines in third sestet.

E C B F A D - End words of lines in fourth sestet.

D E A C F B - End words of lines in fifth sestet.

B D F E C A - End words of lines in sixth sestet.

(F A) (A D) (E C) - Middle and end words of lines in tercet.

An example of the sestina is “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape” by John Ashberry. This poem is also readily available online. Examine how Ashberry uses the form and challenges the form.

Closed forms are interesting in the ways poets both challenge the forms and “break” the forms. As one can imagine, writing in a traditional form is not easy. A good question to ask yourself as a reader and thinker is why the poet is making these formal choices? How does the form help extend the meaning? How is the poem in conversation with other poems written in this form. For example, most sonnets traditionally are love poems. They are written to express an unfulfilled desire or a person’s inability to seduce the person to which the poem is addressed. When a poet uses the sonnet to write in a different way or to express a different concern, they are challenging the reader’s expectations.

**Open Form**

As stated before, open form is a bit of nonsense. It is a concept meant to group all poems that are not easily identifiable as a traditional form (closed form). Many readers assume this means that these poems lack form at all, but that is impossible. There are many ways that poems are shaped both visually and sonically and that is exactly what we mean when we examine a poem’s form.

Open form poems are still poems with form. Sometimes the form is quite clear. It is apparent that there is rhyme as in one of the early poems we examined “Ars Poetica” by Archibald MacLeish. Sometimes the form of the poem is not so clear. Poets may be playing with grammar. Poets may be playing with the shape of the line. Not all formal choices will be audible. Not all formal choices will be visual. A formal choice in poetry may simply be ending a line on a specific word. The term for beginning many lines with the same word is **Anaphora.** Walt Whitman is perhaps the most famous poet to use anaphora. For example, we can look at his poem “Beginners.”

How they are provided for upon the earth, (appearing at intervals,)

How dear and dreadful they are to the earth,

How they inure to themselves as much as to any -what a paradox

appears their age,

How people respond to them, yet know them not,

How there is something relentless in their fate all times,

How all times mischoose the objects of their adulation and reward,

And how the same inexorable price must still be paid for the same

great purchase.

In this poem Whitman has made the formal choice of beginning almost every line with the word “How.” It creates a sonic element and a visual element. This poem is classified as open form, but it does have form.

Performance poetry is an interesting example of open form poetry that has many formal elements. Most performance poets do not overtly think about form in constructing their poems. One can look at Taylor Mali’s poetry as an example of this. He rarely uses what one might consider “closed form” in constructing his poems. He does consider the sound of his poems though, and they are often organized by the argument or message the poem conveys. His most famous poem “What Teachers Make” is a good example of this. It is easily found through an internet search and it is posted on his website “TaylorMali.com”. Another performance poet that comes to mind when discussing formal elements and open form is Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg is perhaps one of the most famous poets of the 20th century. His most discussed work is “Howl: For Carl Solomon.” This is another poem that you can find really easily through an online search. Ginsberg also made many audio recordings of the poem and famous actors have also interpreted the poem. A *YouTube* search may bring up some of those interpretations. A not though, the work does have content that is sexually explicit and language/images that many may find offensive. Keep this in mind before listening to or reading the poem.

Ginsberg’s “Howl” uses the tradition of **keening** and chant to create its structure. It close to the traditional formal prayers used by some religions and monastic orders despite it being a quite vulgar poem in places.

**Experimenting with Form**

The story of contemporary poetry is experimenting with form. Since the advent of the printing press poetic form has evolved in response to technology. The typewriter and the computer have accelerated this evolution. Some fairly interesting approaches to poetic form have developed in the last fifty years with groups like the “flarf” poets and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. What they are doing is not exactly new as the Dadaists also played with language. And that is perhaps the most important idea to take away from this discussion. Poetry is playing with language. The formal elements of poetry that we have discussed and examined are ways to make language do unique things. They are ways to experiment with language’s effect on us as readers and listeners.

Many people when they first encounter looking at poetry in this way fall into the trap of thinking about these formal and language elements as “rules.” It is better to think of these formal elements as “tools” to experiment with language.

**Vocabulary and Concepts**

Form - The form of a poem is the technique by which the text or symbols are organized on the page. Form can be organized visually, sonically, or a combination of both.

Meaning - Sometimes used as a synonym for theme. Critics and readers of poetry often wonder what a poem means. This is the "message" of the poem. It should be noted though that many poets resist the idea that a poem must mean anything.

Formal Elements - These are the identifiable structures in the poem such as meter, rhyme, stanzas, lines, and choices related to the symbols across the field of the page.

Free Verse - Sometimes called "Vers Libres." Really a misnomer. A term applied to poetry that does not follow the guidelines of a traditional form, or that does not clearly use elements such a meter, rhyme, or standardized lineation or stanzas.

Closed Form - A "catch-all" term to categorize the traditional forms. These forms are standardized and although they have variations, they usually have specific traits that show the poem to be part of that formal tradition.

Verse - Metered language.

Prose- Un-metered language.

Prose Poetry - A poetic form that does not use the elements of lineation and stanza to organize text. Text is instead organized in a way that is similar to prose. Do not assume that a prose poem lacks rhythmical or rhyming elements.

Open Form - Often synonymous to "Free Verse." This is a more accurate description of poems that are not easily identifiable by a traditional form.

Poetic Schools- These are different groups or communities of poets who share a similar view on what constitutes a poem, how poems should be read, and how to compose a poem. Some notable examples are the Imagists, Dadaists, Beats, Slam Poets, and Confessionalists.

Manifesto and/or "Ars Poetica"- A statement about what the author believes constitutes a poem, how poetry should be read, and/or how to compose a poem.

Mode - A way of writing. Sometimes the term genre is used instead of this term, but modes are larger categories. Genres are more specific and often determined by content or setting of text.

Lyric - A poem that is focused on an epiphany or a particular experience.

Narrative - A story.

Dramatic Voice - Written in the voice of another speaker or as if spoken to an audience.

Epiphany - A sudden awareness of a truth or a realization.

Didactic - Having the quality of an argument.

Character - An individual in a narrative or poem.

Dramatic Monologue - A poetic genre. The poem is written in the voice of a character who is speaking to the reader.

Blank Verse - A form of writing that uses unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Refrain - A repeated line or word.

Anaphora - A word that is repeated usually at the front of each line.

Keening - A cry or scream or wail.

**Poems that Play with Form**

Here is a list of poems you can search for online. They appear in audio, video, and text format. It is a good idea to experience each poem in more than one way. It will help you think about how the form informs the way we read and hear a poem. This is a chance to bring together all the skills and vocabulary that we have discussed in this text. Apply your knowledge of rhyme, scansion, and meter. Think about the poem’s shape on the page. Use all these skills to help you better understand and experience these poems.

Holy Sonnets: Batter My Heart Three Person’d God by John Donne

Unholy Sonnet 14 by Marc Jarmen

How to Write a Villanelle by Elisaveitta Ritchie

Explaining Villanelles to an Alien by Anthony Lawrence

A Sestina for a Black Girl Who Does Not Know How to Braid Hair by Raych Jackson

Sestina: Like by A.E. Stallings

Scenes of Life at at the Capitol by Philip Whalen

Howl by Allen Ginsberg

The Academic Sigh by Russell Edson

Autism Screening Questionnaire-Speech and Language Delay by Oliver De La Paz

Ballad of the Moon Moon by Federico Garcia Lorca

**Conclusions**

There are essentially seven ways of reading a poem:

1. The initial experience.
2. The examining of our own biases and beliefs when approaching the poem.
3. The reading that examines the poem’s physical shape.
4. The reading that examines the poem’s sonic elements.
5. The reading that examines the poem’s figurative language.
6. The reading that examines the use of symbol and image.
7. The reading that examines the use of allusion.

These ways of reading often overlap each other. Once a reader is really adept, the ways of reading a poem will no longer feel like isolated experiences. They will be integrated. The sonic will inform the visual. The symbol will inform the allusion. Figurative language will be tied to image and to the sonic elements of the poem. This is the goal of any reader of poetry.

**Poems for Further Reading**

The following list of poems are meant to give the reader a wide view of poetry. These poems represent a small sampling of the poetry that is available for readers. We are often told that “poetry is dead,” or that “no one reads poetry anymore.” This is simply not true. There are more poetry presses now than at any point in history. Poetry readings and slams are going on all across this country almost every night of the week. If the reader does not believe me, check out Poetry Slam Incorporated’s website linked [here.](https://poetryslam.com/)

[(Links to an external site.)](https://poetryslam.com/)

Poetry Out Loud competitions occur in numerous schools on the local, regional, state, and national levels. Poetry is shared through billboards, social media, in movie quotes, and graffiti. Poetry is very much alive and it is everywhere. Here are just a few poems I think the reader will benefit from knowing. All these poems can be found easily through an online search.

Margaret Atwood “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy”

W.H. Auden “Doggerel by a Senior Citizen”

Amiri Baraka “An Agony. As Now”

Big Poppa E “The Wussy Boy Manifesto”

Elizabeth Bishop “One Art”

Robert Bly “After Long Busyness”

Gwendolyn Brooks “my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell”

Bob Dylan “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”

Thomas Sayers Ellis “All Their Stanzas Look Alike”

Amy Fleury “At Twenty-Eight”

Allen Ginsberg “Howl”

Robert Hayden “Those Winter Sundays”

Geoffrey Hill “Funeral Music”

Susan How “*from* Chanting at the Crystal Sea”

Mark Jarman “From Another Planet”

Shane Koyczan “To This Day”

Philip Larkin “This Be the Verse”

Li Young Lee “Falling: The Code”

Robert Lowell “Skunk Hour”

Jessica Care Moore “Warriors Walk Alone”

Pablo Neruda “The Chosen Ones”

Sylvia Plath “The Colossus”

Adrienne Rich “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”

Arthur Rimbaud “The Drunken Boat”

Beau Sia “Money”

Richard Wilbur “Advice to a Prophet”

Kevin Young “Beyond Words”