

## How to Read Poetry

### Lesson 1: How to read poetry.

Poetry is concentrated language and as such every word counts. We need to learn to read it differently than we read normal language, that is we need to pay attention to the way in which things are said, not just what is said. We need to think about why the author chose, for example, the verb 'glanced' instead of 'looked.' Often if we read poems in this way their meaning becomes clear even if we do not at first understand.

The following are five basic questions to keep in mind when first reading a poem.

1. What does the title tell us?
2. Who is the speaker?
3. Who is the speaker speaking to?
4. Who/what acts/speaks first and how?
5. Who acts/speaks second and how?

Here's an example I will do, (just the first stanza of the poem):

#### The Prodigal Son by Rudyard Kipling

Here come I to my own again,  
Fed, forgiven and known again,  
Claimed by bone of my bone again  
And cheered by flesh of my flesh.  
The fatted calf is dressed for me,  
But the husks have greater zest for me,  
I think my pigs will be best for me,  
So I'm off to the Yards\* afresh.

1. The title clearly tells us that the poem is a version of the story of the prodigal son from the Gospels. So the poem is going to be a retelling, but possibly with a twist or difference.
2. The speaker is the prodigal son himself, and we know this because he says, "Here come I."

3. He is speaking to himself in thought, because he doesn't address the audience/reader, or his father, but only himself, "The fatted calf is dressed for me."
4. The prodigal son is the first to act. The first verb in the poem is the second word, "come." He is the one acting, initiating, and therefore in control. Coming is a rather neutral verb – not like dragging oneself back which implies sorrow, or returning which implies absence, but simply coming as if he'd just gone round the corner.
5. The second people to 'act' in the poem are the prodigal's family. "Fed, forgiven and known again." Note however, that we do not see who does these actions, but have to assume that it's his family. He still sees everything in reference to himself: he is fed, they do not feed him.

As you can see, the poem gains much richness from looking at in this way, but this is still a step to getting to and enjoying the full meaning of the poem. Read the following poems and ask yourself the above questions about each. In class we'll talk about what the poems say, and where it applies we'll discuss whether we think what the poet has expressed is true, for example is it really more honourable to leave your love to go to war?

*The Eagle* - Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

To Lucasta, on Going to the Wars - Richard Lovelace (1618-1657)

Tell me not, Sweet, I am unkind,  
That from the nunnery

Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind  
To war and arms I fly.

True, a new mistress now I chase,  
The first foe in the field;  
And with a stronger faith embrace  
A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such  
As you too shall adore;  
I could not love thee (Dear) so much,  
Lov'd I not Honour more.

The Conqueror Worm - Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

Lo! 'tis a gala night  
Within the lonesome latter years!  
An angel throng, bewinged, bedight  
In veils, and drowned in tears,  
Sit in a theatre, to see  
A play of hopes and fears,  
While the orchestra breathes fitfully  
The music of the spheres.

Mimes, in the form of God on high,  
Mutter and mumble low,  
And hither and thither fly—  
Mere puppets they, who come and go  
At bidding of vast formless things  
That shift the scenery to and fro,  
Flapping from out their Condor wings  
Invisible Woe!

That motley drama—oh, be sure  
It shall not be forgot!  
With its Phantom chased for evermore  
By a crowd that seize it not,  
Through a circle that ever returneth in  
To the self-same spot,  
And much of Madness, and more of Sin,  
And Horror the soul of the plot.

But see, amid the mimic rout,  
A crawling shape intrude!  
A blood-red thing that writhes from out  
The scenic solitude!  
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs  
The mimes become its food,  
And seraphs sob at vermin fangs  
In human gore imbued.

Out—out are the lights—out all!  
And, over each quivering form,  
The curtain, a funeral pall,  
Comes down with the rush of a storm,  
While the angels, all pallid and wan,  
Uprising, unveiling, affirm  
That the play is the tragedy, “Man,”  
And its hero, the Conqueror Worm.

*April Rain Song* - Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Let the rain kiss you  
Let the rain beat upon your head with silver liquid drops  
Let the rain sing you a lullaby  
The rain makes still pools on the sidewalk  
The rain makes running pools in the gutter

The rain plays a little sleep song on our roof at night  
And I love the rain.

Nothing Gold Can Stay     -Robert Frost, 1874 – 1963

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.