

Poetry: An Overview

If you're the type who's always felt that you didn't see the point in poetry, you're not alone. It might surprise you to know that for a good portion of my early life, I didn't get poetry either. Although I was an English major and had to pretend to both like and understand poems, poetry didn't "click" with me until I was about twenty-five or so. Then, finally, I got it. Part of the reason I got it was that I stopped trying too hard, and I also figured out some things about poetry that some of my teachers had forgotten to tell me--or maybe that teachers had tried to tell me, but I had forgotten to listen.

Most students seem to regard poetry as this giant mystery. Ask someone who doesn't "do poetry" what a poem is about and you're likely to get wild-eyed stare and an "I don't know. Am I supposed to know? Who knows?" kind of response. Lean in closer now, because I'm going to tell you a secret--poetry is a mystery. Never thought you would hear a teacher admit it, huh? But just as with any good mystery, it is easier to figure out if you pay attention to the clues.

One of the things my teachers forgot to tell me about poetry is that, in some ways, it is like a mystery--something I liked reading from an early age. The poet has left clues as to meaning and purpose and by figuring out the clues, a reader can solve the mystery. The best thing about the "poetry mystery" is that you don't have to get all of it at once--or even all of it ever. You get the pieces you can. Some of my favorite readings of choice are mysteries. So, looking at poetry as a mystery to be solved creates some interest for me. Of course, any good detective needs skills to help in his or her detective work. The purpose of English 251 is to give you those skills you need to help you begin to solve the "poetry mystery."

One of the first things good detectives must do is to decide what case or crime or criminal they will be looking at or for. They want a description of the suspect. So, what's a description of poetry?

To begin with, withhold judgments or at least delay making a decision about what poetry is--and we will. But I know most of you think you know what poetry is. However, most of you--when you think of poetry--think of the poetry you hear in church or the sappy love poetry you read in greeting cards. Real poetry isn't that. While these rhymed verses masquerade as poetry, real poetry is usually something else. But detectives need something to go on. Because we're withholding judgment and delaying decisions, maybe we should talk about what poetry isn't.

- ***Poetry isn't always sweet.***

Poetry is not emotional gush. Poetry is not written by little old schoolteachers, silly teenagers in love, or other tortured souls. It is not sentimental indulgence. Poetry courses wouldn't be permitted if it were widely known what kind of people write poems--people very much alive, people concerned with what it is to be alive, living, and human, which isn't always beautiful with a capital "B."

- ***Poetry isn't always concerned with a deep meaning.***
Poetry is not moral truism. Poetry is not bent upon being uplifting and edifying--poetry is not a sermon. Poetry gets at you at levels deeper than Sunday School rules. And poems are not written to conform to our preconceptions: good poems refuse to sell their birthright for a pot of message. Poems aren't aimed at agreeing with us, but at making us disagree with what we thought we knew.
- ***Poetry isn't always necessarily rhymed.***
Poetry does play with words, yes. But while poetry plays with how the words sound together, rhyme does not a poem make. Often, it is the pattern of the words and how they are put together on a page and in a human voice that defines poetry.
- ***Poetry isn't always about beauty, or truth, or love, or death.***
Poetry is not about abstract principles. Poetry is about life--its good and bad moments, its indescribable moments--what makes us uniquely human.
- ***Poetry isn't always easy.***
Poetry is not trivial. We read poetry not only with our feelings, not only with our minds, not only with our souls: We read poetry, if we read it all, with our whole selves. Poetry appeals to all that is in us--to the deepest in us, to the best in us. And poetry, as Emily Dickinson reminds us, expands our selves:

To make a prairie it takes one clover
And a bee.
One clover, and a bee,
And reverie.
The reverie alone will do
If bees are few.

- Poetry can create thoughts and avenues in our lives that may never be open to us otherwise. The wind in the grass cannot be taken into the house insists a Russian proverb... except maybe in poems.

Reading a Poem

Reading poetry has its own techniques. You can't read a poem like you read a cereal box, a newspaper, a website. Since poetry is its own genre, you need some techniques to help poetry become more meaningful. Below are some strategies:

1. Read the poem aloud. Don't stop for a breath until there's a punctuation mark. Read through the ends of lines if there is no punctuation.
2. Read the poem aloud again. Get someone else to listen to you. Listen to yourself. What words come together in a different way? Do the sounds mean something different when you hear them than when you read them? What words don't you understand?

3. Read the poem a third time. Are there words you don't know? Do you need to look them up? Poets try to give their readers as much information as they can, but because they are working within a limited form--limited sometimes by pattern, other times by space--they must choose the right word--and that one word must do everything the poets need it to. We'll talk more about this later--but don't be afraid to look up words.
4. Identify "catch moments." What lines or even words really "catch" you? What words, phrases, or images do you savor? Are there places in the poem that surprise you? What lines or phrases do you want to repeat? Here's a place where poems can "begin in delight."
5. Ask questions. One of my friends, who is a poet, suggests asking Who, What, When, Where, How and Why questions. For instance, *who* speaks? To whom? *What* do I (the reader) feel? *What* does the poem make me feel? *What* is happening in the poem? Do I understand the event in the poem? *When* is the poem taking place? *When* is the occasion for this poem? *Where* does the poem take place? Is it a physical or a mental place? *How* is the poem formed? *How* are the patterns displayed? Repeated? *Why* did the poet want to share (which may be different than what we readers feel)? All of these questions can create a strong basis for beginning to solve the poetry mystery. We'll add terms and strategies for answering all of these questions as we go along, but let's practice by reading a poem first.

Let's begin with a poem by Robert Frost "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

If you have a friend--have him or her read the poem aloud to you. If you have no friends, read the poem aloud to yourself. While listening, draw a picture of what the poem makes you see, but rely only on what you hear. (If you have to label your artwork, go ahead--mine always has big labels.)

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

What kind of picture do you have? Are you on a deserted rural road on a winter night? Read the poem again: are there words or phrases that jump out at you? What words, ideas, or images do you savor? Any word or words you need to look up? Why does the poet pick certain words?

How is the poem set up? What patterns do you see? Are there ideas or words that are repeated? Is that important? Should it be important? What kinds of emotions do you feel? When does the poem take place? Are there a couple of clues that you should catch?

Think about these questions. We'll come back to them and this poem in a few minutes--or a few pages, whichever comes first.

One of the things any good poetry detective must do is read lots of poetry. You're in luck because we'll provide that practice.