

# 1

## *Strategies for Interpreting Literature*

### **Why Do People Read Literature?**

People read literature for many reasons, but the two most likely reasons are for pleasure and for meaning. We read literature because it is fun and because it speaks to us about important things.

When we read purely for pleasure, we do not usually care what the work means. We just want to escape from the concerns of the day and let the work perform its magic on us. You may remember your first great reading experience, when you were so caught up in a work that you were oblivious to everything else. Reading just for pleasure is like that. We sit down with a book and say to ourselves, "I don't want to think. I just want to enjoy."

But on a more thoughtful level, reading for pleasure and reading for meaning are related. Part of the pleasure of reading comes from the meaning it gives us. On first reading a Raymond Chandler detective novel, for example, we may be gripped by the suspenseful plot. We eagerly turn pages just to find out what will happen next. But upon rereading the novel, and possibly reading other works by him, we discover a thematic and artistic richness we may not have noticed before: how he uses conventions of the detective story—wise guy dialogue, intrigue, suspense, urban settings, stereotypical characters, melancholy hero—to render a moral dimension to his fictional world. We notice his poetic language, his mastery of tone, his insights about American cities, about American obsessions, about high life and low life, wealth and

poverty, innocence and crime. As we continue to read Chandler, we move from one level of enjoyment—reading for “escape”—to another—reading for meaning. Or, put another way, we find ourselves reading not just for pleasure and meaning but for pleasure *because* of meaning.

In this book we will explore how to uncover the meanings of works of literature. These include the themes of a work (its comments about the human condition) as well as the workings and effectiveness of such devices as characterization, setting, plot, and language. Although one can study the aesthetic qualities of literature—the devices authors use to give us pleasure—for themselves, here we will consider them as integral to meaning. They are the means by which authors deliver ideas, they influence our response to these ideas, and their appeal often arises from the ideas they embody. On the one hand, we like the ideas in a work because of its artistic devices; on the other, we admire the devices because we like the ideas. Form and content, beauty and truth—they can hardly be separated.

How do we discover meaning in works of literature? We do so through interpretation.

## What Is Interpretation?

*Interpretation* is a process. It is the process of examining the details of works of literature in order to make sense of them. John Ellis, the literary theorist, describes the goals and process of interpretation in this way: interpretation “is a hypothesis about the most general organization and coherence of all the elements that form a literary text.” This “organization and coherence” emerges from a “synthesis” between a work’s themes and its details. “The most satisfying interpretation,” he says, “will be that which is the most inclusive. The procedure of investigation will be that of any inquiry: a continual move between general notions of the coherence of the text, and consideration of the function within the whole of particular parts of it. General conceptions will change in the light of particular observations, and new particular observations will then become necessary in the light of the changed conceptions” (202). Ellis is saying here that as we read, we encounter details of a work and begin to draw conclusions about how they relate to one another, what they mean. As we continue to read, we encounter more details. These may confirm our hypotheses or cause us to replace them with new ones. Once we have finished reading the work, we can decide

which hypotheses account for the most details; those hypotheses, Ellis says, constitute the best interpretations.

Many critics today would disagree with Ellis that the best interpretation “covers” or accounts for the most details in a work or that it establishes a “coherence” that unifies the whole work. For one thing, it is hard to say which interpretation covers the most details. For another, the most comprehensive interpretation may not be the most satisfying to a particular reader. We might, for example, want to focus on just one aspect of a work, such as the motivation of a character or the influence of setting. Many works, furthermore, stubbornly resist complete “coherence.” But Ellis is correct about how the process of interpretation works. Interpretation is a quest for ideas manifested by a work’s details. To be believable and convincing, therefore, interpretations must emerge from the details of the work. If we encounter details that contradict our interpretations, we must adjust the interpretations to accommodate those details.

Interpretation is something we do with more than just literature. It is an unavoidable process in any thinking person’s life: Why is Miriam angry with me? Why did Jonathan go to pieces when he took the test? Would this job be better for me than that one? How will my blowup with Lucy affect our relationship? Is the defendant guilty? Should we legalize late-term abortions? What were the causes of World War II? Do human beings have free will? Answering questions like these, from the trivial to the profound, requires interpretation.

A crime scene, for example, demands a similar interpretive process as a work of literature. You, the detective, have just arrived at the scene of the crime. As you examine the details of the scene, you formulate hypotheses about what happened and who is responsible. With the discovery of new evidence, you adjust your hypotheses until, having sifted through all the evidence, you decide who committed the crime. A key difference between crime scenes and works of literature, however, is that literature has authors. Criminals may be “authors” of a sort; they create the crime scene, but they do not want us to know what they have done. Authors, in contrast, want to reach us. The following diagram represents this process of communication:



Authors have ideas, express them in works of literature, and “send” the works to us, their readers. We read (“receive”) the works. As receivers, our challenge is to understand authors’ ideas. But this challenge is complicated

by the nature of literature. Instead of just telling us what their ideas are, authors use “literary” devices—metaphor, symbol, plot, connotation, rhyme, meter, and so forth—to convey ideas. Such devices communicate meaning indirectly. They force us to figure out authors’ ideas. It is as if an author says to us, “I want to state my ideas about something, but instead of saying them straight out, I will tell a story and let you figure out what I’m trying to say.” Or the author says, “The woman I’m in love with is wonderful, but instead of telling you directly how this is so, I’m going to say, ‘My love is like a red, red rose.’” Most authors impose the task of “figuring out” on us, the readers. Such a task requires interpretation. The craft of interpreting literature is called *literary criticism*. Anyone who interprets literature is a literary critic.

## How Do We Interpret?

*Interpretation* of works of literature is the process of thinking about their details in order to see how the details interconnect and what ideas they convey. Interpretation requires us to be active rather than passive readers. When we read purely for pleasure, we are generally “passive,” letting the work wash over us, not trying to figure it out. But when we interpret, we need to pay close attention to the potential meaning of details. Keeping in mind the model of author→work→reader, we can think of the author as using literary devices to manipulate our emotions and our beliefs. As interpreters, we should be alert to authors’ wiles. Do we agree with the ideas authors try to foist on us? The following are suggestions about how to be active, interpreting readers.

1. **Get the facts straight.** The first, most fundamental step in interpreting anything is to see clearly what is in the work, its “facts.” For some works, this is easy to do; the details in them are accessible and understandable. But for other works, getting the facts straight may not be so easy. The poetry of seventeenth-century poets like John Donne and George Herbert is notoriously dense and requires close study to understand. Modernist and Post-Modernist authors such as T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison employ innovative techniques that obscure the details of their works. The language of Chaucer and Shakespeare is not quite our language. To understand it we have to rely on glosses (definitions) that editors often place at the bottom of the page. In short, we sometimes have to work hard just to recognize the facts of

literary works. When we read, then, we should look up words we do not know. We should track down allusions (to myths, the Bible, historical and biographical events). We should read works slowly and more than once.

2. **Connect the work with yourself.** For each of us, the most important meanings of works of literature will arise from our own experience and beliefs. This does not mean that the reasons people value great authors like Sophocles, Sappho, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Emily Dickinson, and George Eliot are unimportant. Such reasons are part of our cultural heritage. Not to be interested in them is to deny ourselves the wisdom of that heritage. Even worse, to care only about our own “meanings” is to cut ourselves off from the rest of humankind. But, that said, unless we can connect a work of literature to our own experiences and interests, it will not live for us.

The “connection” strategy is to actively project ourselves into works of literature, especially ones that seem disconnected from us. We ask, “How would I live under these circumstances?” Take, for example, the writings of the New England Puritans, which may seem remote and forbidding. If you use your imagination to place yourself in the Puritan world, you can capture its connection to your life. How would you think and feel had you lived then—about your family, the wilderness around you, the difficulty of scraping out a living, the harsh winters, the imperatives of your religious beliefs? What would your psychological state—emotional conflicts and tensions—have been? Authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne (in his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850); Arthur Miller (in his play *The Crucible*, 1954); and Maryse Condé (in her novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, 1986) have done just this—projected themselves into Puritan culture and produced highly imaginative rethinkings of it. As readers, we can do the same. By asking questions like the following, we can recover the appeal of works of literature that may at first seem distant from our own lives:

- How are things in the work (characters, incidents, places) similar to things in our lives?
- How does this work challenge our beliefs?
- What new things does the work bring up for us?
- How does this work give us pleasure?
- What is upsetting or unpleasant about it?

3. **Develop hypotheses as you read.** As John Ellis says in the passage on page 8, when we read works of literature, even for the first time, we generate ideas about them. The “hypothesis” strategy makes this action intentional and constant. As you read, raise questions about what the details mean: Why does a particular character act the way she does? What ideas does a character espouse? Why does the author keep using a particular image? rhyme scheme? metrical pattern? As you read, do not feel that you have to give final answers to these questions. Plan to come back to them later. Such questions and tentative answers get us thinking, help us pick up important details that pop up later, and make reviewing the work easier.
4. **Write as you read.** Writing generates ideas and helps us think creatively. By putting concepts in our own words, we make them our own and embed them in our memory. If you own copies of works of literature, write in them: underline passages, circle words, draw arrows from one passage to another. In the margins, write questions, summaries, definitions, topics the author addresses, and tentative interpretations. If something is repeated in a work, note where it first appears (“see page xxx”) and make comparisons later. Such notations help us generate ideas about what we are reading. When we review, our markings highlight important places in the work and lead us to synthesize details.
5. **Learn from the interpretations of others.** Although we read alone, interpretation is most fruitful as a shared activity, something we do with others. Knowing what others think helps us decide what we think. One critic wrote that even blurbs on book jackets helped him get his bearings in a work. By learning from the insights and knowledge of others, we place ourselves in a dialogue with them. We listen, agree, disagree, share, and thereby clarify what we believe. Interpretations by professional critics are readily available in books and articles. But equally stimulating are the ideas of people we know—friends, classmates, teachers, colleagues. These people are often nearby, ready to share what they think.
6. **Analyze works of literature.** To *analyze* is to examine the “parts” of something and discover the relationships among them. Analysis is a powerful, necessary strategy for generating and communicating interpretations of anything, not just literature. If, for example, you sell computers, you will do it better if you can analyze them—know how they work and what they can do, thus what they “mean” (how, for example, they can help your customers). The same is true for inter-

preting literature. Being able to analyze literature helps us see how each “part” contributes to the meaning of a work.

In the next chapter, we will consider the “parts” of literature itself and how they contribute to the meaning of works of literature.

### Works Cited

Ellis, John. *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1974.

## Questions

1. Why does Amy put up with a house full of crazies? Why does she tolerate the situation around her?
2. How do you interpret the central metaphor of burning?
3. J.D. says to Amy, "I believe all that wicked fairy-tale crap: your heart will break, your house will burn." Do you regard the story as an updated version of a traditional fairy tale?

1) Always read author introduction - preferably do brief author/text search on "google" or another search engine

What the themes of Böll's work are

these are all tangible, real-abs: his, cannot the

## Heinrich Böll

(1917-1985)

Germany

The fiction of Heinrich Böll, who has been described as the most popular of all German writers, has been translated into 45 languages; more than 20 million copies of his books have been sold worldwide. Böll was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972. A prolific writer, he published novels, stories, plays, poetry, and essays that consistently reflect his blend of Christian ethics and social commitment. One of the few postwar German writers to take public positions on the social and political issues that had debilitated Germany, Böll was frequently identified by his German (and other) contemporaries as the moral conscience of his era. However, Böll repudiated this label, remarking that if writers, rather than public leaders, were the sole bearers of Germany's moral conscience, his country was doomed.

- 1) Böll's strong social commitment was forged by his own personal circumstances. Born in Cologne during the middle of World War I, the son of a wood sculptor and master furniture maker, he saw his family's economically comfortable life vanish precipitously during the Depression of 1930. Although during the early years of Hitler's reign his family tried to remain neutral, Böll was drafted into military service and sustained several serious injuries during his service in France, Poland, and the Crimea. His mother died during an air raid; Böll was taken prisoner by American troops in 1945.

Following his release at the end of the war, Böll returned to Cologne with his wife and young family and wrote while he remained involved with political issues, particularly as an advocate against war, militarism, and hypocrisy in all forms. His most widely praised novels, Group Portrait with a Lady (1973) and The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum (1975), demonstrate his consistent ideal: to conserve traditional human values while maintaining a healthy suspicion of power based on wealth, social position, or military force. Other highly regarded novels include The Clown (1963) and Safety Net (1975). In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Böll observed, "Art is always a good hiding-place, not for dynamite, but for intellectual explosives and social time bombs." → How might "The Laughter" demonstrate

Böll's short stories that have been translated into English include Traveler, If You Come to Spa (1950), Eighteen Stories (1966), and The Stories of Heinrich Böll (1986). "The Laughter" (translated by Leila Vennewitz) effectively captures the poignant melancholy that characterizes Böll's bittersweet view of human experience.

## THE LAUGHER

When someone asks me what business I am in, I am seized with embarrassment and blush and stammer, I who am otherwise known as a man of poise. I envy people who can say, "I am a bookkeeper."

→ what does embarrassment evoke? why should we be embarrassed?

Why these are "good" jobs that do not cause embarrassment HEINRICH BOLL

their avowal for all these professions speak for themselves and need no lengthy explanation, while I am constrained to reply to such questions: I am a laughter. An admission of this kind demands another, since I have to answer the second question: "Is that how you make your living?" truthfully with "Yes," I actually do make a living at my laughing, and a good one too, for my laughing is commercially speaking—much in demand. I am a good laughter, experienced, no one else laughs as well as I do, no one else has such command of the fine points of my art. For a long time, in order to avoid tiresome explanations, I called myself an actor, but my talents in the field of mime and elocution are so meager that I felt this designation to be too far from the truth: I love the truth, and the truth is: I am a laughter. I am neither a clown nor a comedian. I do not make people gay. I portray gaiety: I laugh like a Roman emperor, or like a sensitive schoolboy, I am as much at home in the laughter of the seventeenth century as in that of the nineteenth, and when occasion demands I laugh my way through the centuries, all classes of society, all categories of age; it is simply a skill which I have acquired, like the skill of being able to repair shoes. In my breast I harbor the laughter of America, the laughter of Africa, white, red, yellow laughter—and for the right fee I let it peal out in accordance with the director's requirements.

I have become indispensable; I laugh on records, I laugh on tape, and television directors treat me with respect. I laugh mournfully, moderately, hysterically; I laugh like a streetcar conductor or like an apprentice in the grocery business; laughter in the morning, laughter in the evening, nocturnal laughter, and the laughter of twilight. In short: wherever and however laughter is required—I do it.

It need hardly be pointed out that a profession of this kind is tiring, especially as I have also—this is my specialty—mastered the art of infectious laughter; this has also made me indispensable to third- and fourth-rate comedians, who are scared—and with good reason—that their audiences will miss their punch lines, so I spend most evenings in nightclubs as a kind of discreet claque, my job being to laugh infectiously during the weaker parts of the program. It has to be carefully timed: my hearty, boisterous laughter must not come too soon, but neither must it come too late, it must come just at the right spot: at the prearranged moment I burst out laughing, the whole audience roars with me, and the joke is saved. ... he is a savior

But as for me, I drag myself exhausted to the checkroom, put on my overcoat, happy that I can go off duty at last. At home I usually find telegrams waiting for me: "Urgently require your laughter. Recording Tuesday," and a few hours later I am sitting in an overheated express train bemoaning my fate. ... what does his job do to him?

I need scarcely say that when I am off duty or on vacation I have little inclination to laugh: the cowhand is glad when he can forget the cow, the bricklayer when he can forget the mortar, and carpenters usually have doors at home which don't work or drawers which are hard to open. Confectioners like sour pickles, butchers like marzipan, and the baker prefers sausage to bread; bullfighters raise pigeons for a hobby, boxers turn pale when their children have nosebleeds: I find all this quite natural, for I never laugh off duty. I am a very solemn person, and people consider me—perhaps rightly so—a pessimist.

During the first years of our married life, my wife would often say to me: "Do laugh!" but since then she has come to realize that I cannot grant her this wish. I am happy when I am free to relax my tense face muscles, my frayed spirit, in profound solemnity. Indeed, even other people's laughter gets on my nerves, since it reminds me too much of my profession. So our marriage is a quiet, peaceful one, because my wife has also forgotten how to laugh; now and again I catch her smiling, and I smile

Whereas theirs is self-explanatory, his requires follow-up explanations

2) the phrase "commercially speaking" suggests that his laughing is for mass consumption & not for personal use → what does this mean in terms of why we laugh?

his laughter crosses over time & space & place

what he really is if he is really a pessimist, so w does that affect his attitude towards his part, his job, what commentary is Boll making about laughter as medicine?

too. We converse in low tones, for I detest the noise of the nightclubs, the noise that sometimes fills the recording studios. People who do not know me think I am taciturn. Perhaps I am, because I have to open my mouth so often to laugh.

I go through life with an impassive expression, from time to time permitting myself a gentle smile, and I often wonder whether I have ever laughed. I think not. My brothers and sisters have always known me for a serious boy.

So I laugh in many different ways, but my own laughter I have never heard.

[1966]

Translated by LEILA VENNEWITZ

public person private life

he considers laughing an art → explains

what does the word gaiety mean? How do you use this word? What are the meanings of this sentence?

Questions

- 1. How would you characterize the narrator of the story? How can he be so successful in his profession and at the same time be incapable of genuine laughter?
2. What does the narrator mean when he says, "I do not make people gay. I portray gaiety"?
3. Is the story a satire? If so, what is Böll satirizing?
4. Does the story make you laugh? If so, what is the source of its humor? If not, what emotional response does it evoke in you?

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### Note on Dates

After each poem, we cite the date of first book publication on the right; in some instances, this date is followed by the date of a revised version for which the author was responsible. In a few instances (when the information may be relevant to the reading of a poem), we cite the date of composition on the left.

## INTRODUCTION

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# What Is Poetry?

When we turn on the radio or put on a CD, we hear poetry's most popular form: song. In fact, lyrics that are set to music might be considered the most *poetic* of all poems, because anything written in meter is poetry, and we can best define meter as music. In the lines of poetry, stressed and unstressed syllables rise and fall with a musical lilt. These rhythms are most obvious in songs: we've all sometimes felt the spell, the almost physical power, in the music of our favorite lyrics. When we replay the lyrics of a favorite song in our heads, we often remember the band's music and the singer's voice. And if we say the lines aloud, we often even mimic the rhythms given to them by the band and singer. If you're familiar with Bruce Springsteen's "The River," when you read his lyrics on page 174, the music of the recording probably will invade your mind. The song's power will reach you through the tones of the harmonica or through your memory of Springsteen's unique singing style.

Literary poems, including those printed here, have this disadvantage: no instruments play the rhythm and no singer conveys the phrasing. The music can come to you through your own voice only. Try reading aloud these lines from the end of Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses":

*Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are,  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

Read it two or three more times, slowly, letting the rhythms settle themselves in your speech. Leaving aside any consideration of the words' meaning, their sound has a pleasure and a musical power. The meter directs you to say the lines a certain way. We can hear the difference from prose, even literary prose. Consider this passage for comparison:

The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

These lines, from the opening of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, capture the elegance and pleasure of natural speech at its best. But they are not musical, not in the way Tennyson's are.

If ever you've been moved to tears by a song, or if you have a favorite tape you blast in the car with the windows rolled down in the sun, if listening to a good song can change your mood, then you have a talent for poetry. And who does not? No matter how educated or unsophisticated, we all know the pleasure of listening to song. The root of that pleasure may be a mystery, but we all know it's true: that words wrestled into music have a charm and power ordinary language does not.

Like most descriptions of literary genres, this definition is fuzzy. Some prose writers do write in an almost musical style, while some poets consciously suppress the music in their poems. But roughly speaking, the definition will serve our needs: poetry is writing that sounds musical. A lyric poem is a short poem. There's no specific length requirement. We call a poem a lyric if it's about the size of a song. Of course, some songs are longer than others, so the division between lyrics and narratives can blur. And we can divide lyric po-

etry into more genres, like the **sonnet**, **dramatic monologue**, **elegy**, **ode**, and **ballad**. These special genres are defined in the section devoted to the structure of poetry.

## How Do You Read Poems?

The literary forms that you know well, whether they're movies or TV shows or novels or popular songs, have laid the groundwork for reading poems. Songs, whose conventions you probably have been internalizing your whole life, are especially close to the poems in this volume. You're not learning new skills so much as becoming more aware of what you already can do pretty well. But as you become more aware, you'll find yourself able to handle these analytical tools with more precision and confidence.

### □ Speaker

Every lyric poem has a **speaker**. You should imagine that every poem is a little speech by a real person: the speaker. Sometimes, the speaker's identity is a total mystery, but usually a poem will give you some clues. More often than not, it will tell you a lot about the speaker. The first thing to do when you analyze a poem is define the speaker as precisely as you can. For example, take this poem by William Wordsworth:

*She dwelt among the untrodden ways  
Beside the springs of Dove,  
A Maid whom there were none to praise  
And very few to love;*

*A violet by a mossy stone  
Half hidden from the eye!  
—Fair as a star, when only one  
Is shining in the sky.*



*She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
The difference to me.*

The speaker tells very little about himself, but we can speculate about him. In fact, it's really speculation to say the speaker is male. He sounds like he was in love with Lucy and perhaps was courting her. From the way he describes Lucy we might further guess that he was a little older than she was, perhaps he is a bit cosmopolitan, probably he has seen some of the world. But even if he's seen some of the world, we also might assume that he's lived near the Dove River or that he's had a reason to spend some time on the "untrodden ways," or he never would have discovered Lucy himself.

We are often tempted to associate the speaker with the singer or poet, and sometimes this works. Some poems are obviously autobiographical. Poems from the Romantic era especially often invite us to equate the speaker with the poet. But it is good practice to assume that the speaker is a fictional persona unless you have evidence to prove otherwise. In other words, don't say, "William Wordsworth loved a girl named Lucy, but she died before he ever married her." In this case, though Wordsworth is a Romantic poet and did write many autobiographical poems, "She Dwelt Among Untrodden Ways" does not tell a "true" story. We should always begin by assuming the poet is playing a role.

## 2) Audience and Rhetorical Situation

If every poem has a speaker, you might logically assume that every poem also has a listener or audience. Ultimately, of course, anyone who reads the poem is the audience, just as anyone who hears a song in concert or on a CD is the singer's audience. But as a literary term, "audience" has a specialized meaning. It is the character(s) or persona(e) whom the speaker is addressing.

In Wordsworth's poem, we have a much tougher time defining the audience than the speaker. This is not always the case. Most love poems, for example, are addressed to the speaker's lover. Turn to

page 12 and look at Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." From clues in the poem we can guess that the audience is the speaker's beloved.

We can also determine the rhetorical situation of "Dover Beach," what occasions the speaker to address the audience in these words. We might guess that the speaker and his audience are newlyweds, because many English couples in the nineteenth century spent their wedding night at Dover and then took the ferry to the Continent for their honeymoon. Whether the speaker and his lover are embarking on a honeymoon or not, they seem to be on a vacation, because the speaker marvels at the seascape in a way that a local probably wouldn't. He and his lover may be in a cottage or house or a hotel room. We can't be sure, but we know they are inside some building, because they are looking out a window at the ocean.

In Wordsworth's poem, we don't have many clues about the rhetorical situation. The speaker's audience doesn't know Lucy, but he or she seems to be on fairly intimate terms with the speaker, since the speaker is unburdening his grief. Perhaps the audience is the speaker's close friend, someone from the city far from Lucy's home near Dove River. But where are they? Are they talking late at night before a hearth fire? Are they old men recounting their youth and their regrets? We don't really know.

The first couple of times you read a poem, you should focus on these three elements: speaker, audience, and rhetorical situation. Try to figure out the story of the poem, who is speaking to whom on what occasion. If you read a poem that confuses you, guess who the speaker is. Then try out your hypothesis by rereading the poem. You'll probably have to adjust your idea. That's normal. Even professional critics have to reread poems to understand them. Keep rereading until you're confident you know who the speaker is and to whom he or she is talking.

## Paraphrase

The next thing you should do is make sure you understand the literal level of the poem: the basic meaning of the speaker's words. Some poems, like Wordsworth's, are so clear that you don't have to

paraphrase at all. But most poems have at least a few lines that are challenging to figure out even on the literal level. Let's look again at Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," for example. The first eight lines are straightforward. If you read them slowly and carefully, you will probably understand the literal level. The following lines are a little more difficult:

*Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.*

Arnold is taxing our sense of grammar to its limits. It helps, of course, to know that "strand" is an English word for "beach." A good dictionary would tell you that, and a good dictionary is an indispensable tool for reading poetry. But even knowing the meaning of "strand" doesn't clear things up totally. Where does that "Begin, and cease" belong, for example? Is the speaker telling his lover to begin and cease and then again begin?

By translating these lines into your own language, you can usually clear up those grammatical confusions. Here's one paraphrase of Arnold's lines:

Listen to the loud noise of the pebbles. When the waves go out they drag the pebbles out to sea, and when the waves come crashing back they throw the pebbles up on the beach. You can hear the noise of the pebbles begin and stop and begin again, almost like they are beating out a slow rhythm. The sound they make makes me feel sad.

A paraphrase should be as straightforward as this. You should be able to read it aloud to your roommate, and your roommate should understand perfectly, without the slightest confusion, everything you say. If something in your paraphrase sounds a little unclear, then you should try again.

Note that this paraphrase used sixty-six words to express in prose

what Arnold said in forty-one words of poetry. That's typical. Poetry is economical. In a paraphrase, you should expect to use at least one and a half times as many words as the poet, and you should suspect you've omitted some important details if you use fewer. Notice also that this paraphrase broke Arnold's single sentence into four sentences. This technique of separating out the details can help you see the big picture. For instance, after paraphrasing the second and third lines of the selection from Arnold's poem you may be able to see that "Begin, and cease" were not commands. They simply complete the thought that begins with these words: "you hear the grating roar / Of pebbles." Everything in between is an interruption. When you skip the interruption, the sentence makes more sense: "Listen! you can hear the grating roar / Of pebbles . . . / Begin, and cease, and then again begin."

You don't need to paraphrase every line of a poem. When you read through a poem, you should mark the parts that don't seem to make sense to you grammatically. Then go back and spend some time paraphrasing those lines. You don't have to actually write them down, but you should work them out in your head. When verbs seem to dangle by themselves, hunt down their subjects. When you see descriptive phrases, find out what thing they describe. Fill the margins of your book with the results, so you'll remember them.

Sometimes you'll find that you do have to write down the paraphrase. Sometimes, only by taking a pen to a blank piece of paper can you unravel the syntax of unclear lines. You should do this for any poem that you're writing a paper about, just to make sure that you understand the literal level perfectly, because the success of your interpretation hinges on accurately reading the poem's literal level. For example, to say that the speaker in "Dover Beach" is standing on the beach along the *French* coast rather than the *English* coast is just dead wrong. It would set your interpretation off in the wrong direction, and you would never get back on the right track.

After you've mastered the literal level of a poem, you should begin examining the figurative levels. As you read the poem over and over again, you'll begin to recognize how it communicates much more than what is conveyed by the literal meaning. Through metaphors and patterns of images and symbols, even through the physical sound of the words, a poem conveys meanings that deepen

and amplify the literal level. What might have seemed a flat piece of writing suddenly explodes into a third dimension, and you'll find your emotions and your intellect caught up in the complexities. The following sections should help you see, understand, and feel this dimension.

### 3) Tone

Tone in a poem is the same as tone in speech. When someone is talking to you, you unconsciously determine the tone of their voice. By visual clues, like facial expression, you determine their emotion, and that information helps you to fully appreciate the meaning of their words. Take this dialogue, for example:

"How are you doing?"  
"I'm doing all right, I guess."

Compare it to this version, which includes tonal clues:

"How are you doing?" he asked lightly.  
"I'm doing all right," she said slowly, with a resigned look on her face. "I guess."

Sometimes, tone does not just contribute to the meaning of the words: it reverses the literal meaning. Someone asks you how you are doing, and you answer sarcastically, "I'm doing all right," and they know that you are *not* doing all right. You convey the sarcasm through tonal qualities in your voice, and maybe by rolling your eyes.

The text of a poem, of course, can use neither facial expression nor voice. Therefore, the tone of a poem is harder to detect than the tone of someone speaking to you. Nevertheless, with some careful attention, you should be able to determine the tone of the speaker in a poem, even though you cannot hear him or her.

Sometimes you might notice a difference between the speaker's tone and the poet's tone. In a poem like Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool," for example, we get a strong sense that the poet does not entirely approve of the speakers' swagger, especially when they

nonchalantly conclude, "We / Die soon." Brooks's attitude is more knowing and more critical than the speakers'. When you recognize such a difference, you have detected irony. What the poet means is different than what the speaker means. Often the degree of irony in a poem is a matter of interpretation and debate. Does Ulysses speak for Tennyson in that dramatic monologue? Is Poe critical of the hypersensitive narrator in "The Raven"? These are matters that cannot be decided with finality, but it is nearly always useful to entertain the possibility that the speaker is ironized.

### 4) Imagery

An image is anything you see, hear, smell, touch, or taste in a poem. Anything "concrete" (to use a familiar metaphor) as opposed to "abstract" is an image. Images are the basic building blocks of just about any poem.

Consider these two poems, the first by A. E. Housman and the second by W. B. Yeats:

#### When I Was One-and-Twenty

*When I was one and twenty  
I heard a wise man say  
'Give crowns and pounds and guineas  
But not your heart away;  
Give pearls away and rubies  
But keep your fancy free.'  
But I was one-and-twenty,  
No use to talk to me.*

*When I was one-and-twenty  
I heard him say again,  
'The heart out of the bosom  
Was never given in vain;  
'Tis paid with sighs a plenty  
And sold for endless rue.'  
And I am two-and-twenty,  
And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true.*

## Down by the Salley Gardens

*Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;  
She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white feet.  
She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree;  
But I, being young and foolish, with her would not agree.*

*In a field by the river my love and I did stand,  
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand.  
She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs;  
But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears.*

The first poem doesn't give us many vivid images. Some vague pictures might come to your mind when you read them. You might picture a wise man speaking to a young man, though even that rhetorical situation is hardly described. There are some concrete nouns (currency and coins, hearts and bosoms) but for the most part the poem functions in the abstract. The lines do convey information (love leads to heartache), but they don't engage our imagination.

The second poem delivers the same information, but it conveys it through a series of evocative images: two young lovers meeting under willow trees; the woman is small, perhaps even frail in stature, with very white skin; we see the two argue, perhaps playfully; we see them by a river; we see the girl leaning her head on the speaker's shoulder; we see the speaker weeping. The final lines of the two poems will drive this point home: " 'The heart . . . / [is] sold for endless rue.' / And I am two-and-twenty, / And oh, 'tis true, 'tis true," compared to "But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears." *Rue* is an abstraction; *tears* are an image.

If you read the two poems over and over again, you'll probably find yourself more attracted to the second. Housman's poem is pithy and witty, and, though it's light verse, perhaps it is laced with serious undertones. Yeats's poem conveys the same information about young lovers, but it interests us more. It excites our imagination and draws out our emotions. That's why poets use images more than abstractions.

Most poems lay out their images in a pattern. Take this poem by Robert Browning:

## Home-Thoughts, from Abroad

1

*Oh, to be in England  
Now that April's there,  
And whoever wakes in England  
Sees, some morning, unaware,  
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf  
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,  
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough  
In England—now!*

2

*And after April, when May follows,  
And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!  
Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge  
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover  
Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge—  
That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,  
Lest you should think he never could recapture  
The first fine careless rapture!  
And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,  
All will be gay when noontide wakes anew  
The buttercups, the little children's dower  
—Far brighter than this gaudy melon flower!*

The speaker, living or vacationing abroad, feels nostalgia for the springtime sights and sounds of his native country. It is a sentiment *anyone* from *anywhere* might feel when abroad for a long time, and it could be summed up by this short sentence: I miss home. But if we examine the images in this poem—the details the speaker chooses to mention—we can begin to see that the poem communicates much more than this universal statement of homesickness. We can detect a moral judgment about England.

Here are the images:

low branches with tiny new leaves  
 dense underbrush with tiny leaves surrounding the trunk of an  
 elm  
 a chaffinch singing from the branch of a tree in a (pear?)  
 orchard  
 a whitethroat building a nest  
 many swallows  
 the little white blossoms of a pear tree  
 a hedge  
 clover, sprinkled with pear blossoms  
 dewdrops on clover  
 a thrush singing  
 fields all white with dew  
 buttercups in a yard reserved for children

When we list these images, we can begin to see some commonalities among them. All of the images are natural, and nearly all are small. Buttercups, pear blossoms, and clover blossoms are all tiny flowers, yellow and white. We see small young leaves. The animals—a chaffinch, a whitethroat, swallows, and a thrush—are small songbirds. The only big image is an elm tree, and all we see of this is its trunk surrounded by bushes and its branches that hang down low. The combination of these images makes us feel as if England is a place where everything is on a small scale, unthreatening, and comfortable. The only humans mentioned are children, and they along with the white flowers and young leaves and the little birds suggest an innocence, as if life in England were free of the complexities that plague grown-up life.

Contrasted to all of these images is the “gaudy melon flower” that concludes the poem. From what we know of Robert Browning’s life, that flower is probably in Italy, but even without that knowledge we could guess that the speaker is in a semitropical locale where colors are brilliant, noises are loud, and the sun is blazing hot. If we think of the small, white pear blossom next to the colorful, big melon flower, we might even detect some sexual connotations. If England is the place of childhood’s prepubescent innocence, the semitropical place abroad is associated in the speaker’s mind with sexual knowledge, perhaps even promiscuity. The tropics

themselves tend to have these connotations to people in colder climes, and Italy has long figured in the English imagination as a place where the staid, respectable English citizen can enjoy sensual pleasures. So the pattern of these concrete images—the generalizations that tie the specific images to each other—reveals an otherwise obscured theme in the poem.

It is especially important that you learn to track such patterns, because they’re working on your unconscious mind whether you know it or not. Even if you had not recognized the qualities that the images in “Home-Thoughts, from Abroad” have in common, on some level you would have been *feeling* England’s innocence and youthful wholesomeness, and you would have sensed the corruption of the locale abroad. It is good to be able to recognize consciously these manipulations of your unconscious mind. Certainly if you want to articulate how a poem affects you, you need to trace these patterns.

If you analyze the imagery of almost any poem, you’re bound to find patterns like this. Obviously, you don’t want to write out a column of images for every poem you read, nor should you. That would ruin the pleasure. But you should foster the habit of looking for these patterns. And for any poem you write about in an English class, you probably should actually write the images down.

### Metaphors

A **metaphor** is a comparison. For example, *the ship plowed through the water* is a metaphor: a ship does not literally plow through water. The expression is a **figure of speech** that compares the way the ship’s prow moves through water to the way a plow moves through soil. To interpret the metaphor, we imagine to ourselves the work a plow does: it throws the earth up to the side in long ridges as it digs a straight shallow furrow. The prow of the ship, then, must have been rolling up the water on either side in ridges higher than the level sea. And it must have left behind a shallow trough like a furrow in a plowed field.

Without even knowing it, your mind went through a shorthand version of this process when you first read the words *plowed through the water*. In an instant you pictured the water spurting up on either

side of the ship's nose. More than likely, you skipped the step of picturing the plow in the earth. We've seen this metaphor so often in our lives that it has lost its ability to conjure up any comparison. The verb "plow" seems to have taken on a second literal meaning, so that it refers not only to what plows do but also to what plows do.

When a metaphor becomes so overused that it brings to our mind only one image rather than two, we call it a "dead metaphor" or a "cliché." You could hardly utter a dozen words without using one. *The Yankees got slaughtered last night* and *I was just cruising home when out of nowhere this ambulance flies through a red light* and *I'm dying to get those tickets* all use metaphors. A baseball team's loss is compared to the butchering of cattle or swine; a car is compared to a boat; an ambulance is compared to an airplane; and a person's eagerness is compared to a fatal illness. But these metaphors might as well be literal, because they don't conjure up any figurative images anymore. To be slaughtered now literally means to be beaten badly in a game. To beat someone is itself a dead metaphor: no one pictures one team punching or clubbing the other team into submission.

But new, fresh metaphors will conjure up *two* images in your mind. Take these famous lines from T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

*Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table.*

We see two images here. One is the evening sky (which is *literally* there in the poem). The other is a body anesthetized and awaiting surgery (which is there in the poem *figuratively* but not literally). You might wonder how these two things could be compared. How can an evening be like a surgery patient? They seem to have nothing in common. By answering that question you interpret the metaphor. Remember to ask the correct question: we're not interested in how a patient can be like a sky, but in how a sky can be like a patient. The metaphor is about the literal term in the comparison, not about the figurative term.

So the first step is to think about the figurative image. What is an

etherized patient like? An etherized patient is senseless, dulled to pain, horizontal, apparently lifeless though living, completely still though slightly breathing. Many of these ideas might apply to the evening sky. Perhaps the air is so still that there is only the slightest breath of wind, or no wind at all. The clouds and the colors of twilight might stretch horizontally just above the horizon. There might not be any motion, not even a single bird, to suggest life.

We could develop the comparison even further by thinking about our associative responses to the image of the patient, even the emotions it arouses in us. We might recoil slightly from the image of the etherized patient as if it were something creepy. If we imagine the patient's cool, clammy, bloodless skin that's hardly more animate than a corpse's, we may get a difficult-to-define, unsavory feeling. Those are the feelings that the evening sky arouses in the speaker.

Some metaphors are easy to spot. Eliot's comparison is a simile, which is a metaphor that announces itself with the word "like" or "as" and is hard to miss. But some metaphors are so subtle that half the work of interpreting them is recognizing them in the first place. Take these lines from Eliot's poem: "And I have known the eyes already, known them all— / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase[.]" The speaker is remembering the way women look at him at tea parties: they "fix" him, which we know cannot be literally true. Even so, we might forget to ask, *To what, exactly, are the eyes being compared?* Have the eyes repaired the speaker? Have they put him in a fix? Or have they fastened him to something? In this case, the following lines leave no doubt: "And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall . . ." The eyes, then, are like a scientist fixing an insect specimen to a display with a needle. The woman's clever, withering phrase is the pin. And Prufrock, the speaker, is the not-yet-dead insect under scrutiny. This particular example is an **extended metaphor**, because Eliot draws out the comparison over a few lines.

## Symbols

A **symbol** is an object that represents something else, sometimes another object but more often an abstraction. For example, consider General Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomat-

tox. One object represented another: Lee stood for the defeated Army of Northern Virginia, and by surrendering himself to Grant he surrendered his entire command. So he dressed in his last clean uniform and belted on his sword in order to present his ragtag army in the best possible light. Grant might have taken Lee prisoner, but he didn't. He refused, even, to confiscate Lee's sword. In this context, the sword represented a number of abstractions, not the least of which was Lee's honor. Grant's refusal to take the sword communicated his esteem for Lee and for the soldiers who had until that minute been his enemies.

Some things seem to carry the same symbolic meaning in just about any culture. The sunrise will probably call to mind birth or new beginnings no matter where you go, just as the sunset seems to naturally represent death or ending. They are the same in Bali as they are in Belgium. Ferocious predators might represent evil in many different cultures. A dense forest might symbolize the unknown. These are universal symbols, and typically they are drawn from the natural world that every culture experiences.

Poets use universal symbols. Look at Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," for example. The island represents isolation, but Yeats did not invent this symbol himself. Whether you are in Ireland or in Argentina, an island seems to naturally represent isolation and seclusion. Other objects carry meaning only in the context of a particular culture. The rose is a good example. In North America and Great Britain, a red rose symbolizes love. But if you went to a town whose inhabitants never read Western literature, saw Hollywood movies, or heard of Valentine's Day, the citizens might look at a rose as they do a daffodil or tulip. The symbol is not universal: it is a convention contrived by a particular population of people. The rose, then, is a conventional symbol.

Sometimes, it is obvious that the symbolic meanings of conventional symbols are contrived. Consider the regalia of clubs and political organizations: the mascot of a sports team is chosen by the team's owner or by a committee of professional marketers, and thereafter the Major League baseball team in Arizona is symbolized by a rattlesnake. A flag is sewn by Betsy Ross and adopted by a committee, and instantly it symbolizes a nation.

But most conventional symbols have a mysterious pedigree. It is

impossible to say who invented them, as if they arose anonymously out of the culture itself. Who can say when apple pie came to symbolize the values of middle America? Did anyone decide that the Midwest would represent wholesomeness and naïveté? Or that the American West would symbolize rugged individualism? Show a picture of John Wayne on a horse in a Western landscape to people raised in North America, and they will understand the symbolism. In fact, most people in Europe would recognize it too, for the icon of the American cowboy, and the notions of self-reliance and freedom and violence that he represents, is one of America's cultural exports. But show the picture of John Wayne to farmers in China, and they would see just a man on a horse. No one person or committee decided that these objects would convey symbolic meaning in our culture; nevertheless, they do. And outside our culture they are often meaningless.

William Blake's "The Sick Rose" provides a good example. Most of us probably would jump to the conclusion that the flower represents love, and this connection does yield a coherent interpretation of the whole poem. In our post-Freudian culture, we might even guess the worm in the poem represents a penis. The rose, then, would symbolize not only love but also a woman's virginity. Both of these interpretations are provided by our culture. (Some might argue that the symbols Freud interpreted are *universal*, not *conventional*, and perhaps they'd be right.) But most North Americans would miss something obvious to most British: (the rose is a symbol of England.)

Your ability to recognize conventional symbols is exactly proportional to your familiarity with a culture. You are probably adept at recognizing symbols that arise out of general North American culture, but the symbols of particular subcultures in America might escape your notice. And many of the poems in this book come from outside North America—many from England, a few from South America, Africa, Wales, and Ireland. Certainly North Americans share a lot of culture with these continents and countries, but there might be some things that are symbols in, say, England that are not symbols in North America. For example, Dover means something to the English, as discussed above. It brings to mind newlyweds the way Niagara Falls might for Americans, and its tall chalk cliffs sym-

bolize England the way the Statue of Liberty, which greets people arriving in New York harbor, symbolizes the United States. Dover may not mean anything to you. Likewise, quite a few of these poems were written generations ago, and objects that might have carried symbolic meaning three hundred years ago no longer do. In this case, only familiarity with the culture will help you to recognize conventional symbols and their meanings. If you haven't lived in a culture, you might have seen enough movies or TV programs or read enough books or listened to enough music to recognize its symbols. Or you might study the culture, or learn about it in a footnote. Otherwise, you'll need to treat these conventional symbols as if they were literary symbols.

A **literary symbol** is an object that represents something else only within the very narrow context of a particular work of literature. Outside the poem the object does not mean what it does inside the poem. A literary symbol, then, is authored neither by nature nor by a culture, but by a writer. As with a conventional symbol, when you take a literary symbol out of its original context, it stops being a symbol.

You need a good deal of ingenuity to recognize that an object in a poem not only is its literal self but also represents something else. There are a few clues you can count on to help you. If the title of a poem is a literal object in the poem, you can assume it also symbolizes something. That was the case in "Dover Beach" (Dover represented something), and it's true in most poems. For instance, the title to Elizabeth Bishop's poem "The Fish" tips us off to the fish's importance. We should expect the fish to carry meaning beyond the literal level of the poem. Right away you should be asking yourself, *what could the fish represent?* William Blake's "The Tyger" and "The Lamb" also call attention to important symbols.

For the most part, it is impossible to teach someone how to recognize which objects are symbolic and which are not. You have to trust your own gut feelings. If you find your attention drawn to an object, if you suspect that something might have more than literal significance, you're probably right. The text itself will call attention to its literary symbols: Listen to what the poem tells you. For example, "Dover Beach" tells us that the sea is a symbol. It appears in the first line of the poem ("The sea is calm tonight"), we hear its sound

throughout the first stanza, and it figures again in the second stanza. The poem calls so much attention to the sea that, in a second or third read through the poem, we should guess that the sea is there to represent something other than its literal self. But what?

The second task in interpreting a literary symbol is to figure out what the object represents. Again, you have to trust your instincts. Read the poem a few times and an idea will more than likely come to you: the object represents the speaker's love; it represents death; it represents the American dream; it represents hope. Usually, a symbol represents abstractions: love, death, dreams, hopes. And often it represents a range of things, not just one.

To come back to the "Dover Beach" example: we wonder, *what could the sea represent?* The speaker makes it easy for us when he says, "The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore[.]" We know that it represents "faith." But we might further ask, *faith in what?* Some possibilities: faith in God; faith in political institutions; faith in traditional mores and values; perhaps all of these. We'll have to see if any or all of these abstractions work in the poem.

Be prepared to revise your hypotheses. If you try to interpret an object symbolically and it just does not seem to work, maybe you were wrong. To paraphrase Sigmund Freud, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. Or maybe you were wrong about what the object represents. Keep revising and refining your ideas always until you think you get it exactly right.

You can tell if you got it right by interpreting the **symbolic action**. Look at what happens to the symbol in the poem; the same thing happens to what the symbol represents. Think of the symbol of the rose again. The morning after two college sophomores' first date, the young man gets up at dawn to bring a dozen roses to the apartment door of the woman. He knocks on the door and runs downstairs and around to the parking lot where he can see without being seen. The young woman opens the door, finds the roses at her feet, picks them up, smells them. She knows that roses symbolize love, so she can interpret the symbolic action: the guy likes her a lot. By leaving these flowers at her door, he is offering his esteem, his affection, even his love. In short, he has given her his heart. Now the young man, from the parking lot, watches her pick up the flowers,



smell them, think for a moment about what they mean. He sees her toss them on the ground. He watches in horror as she stomps them. She grinds the petals with her heel. She's grinding more than the flowers: she's stomping his love into the ground. And we know that he won't be calling her for a second date.

So interpreting a literary symbol takes three steps (the first two steps are automatic with universal and conventional symbols):

1. identify which object(s) you think might be symbols;
2. establish what the object(s) represent(s);
3. interpret the symbolic action.

For example, let's consider the symbolic action of the sea in "Dover Beach." The tide is going out, and the speaker hears a note of sadness in its "long withdrawing roar." Similarly, then, faith is withdrawing from Europe, and its departure leaves people in misery. All of the earlier possibilities—faith in God, in political institutions, in traditional values—work in this context. According to Arnold, periods of faith and faithlessness go in cycles, like the tides, and the mid-nineteenth century was a low point in the cycle.

## Structure

### Prosody

**Prosody** is the study of poetry's rhythms. We can describe the rhythms of a poem by scanning its meter. To scan a poem, first read it aloud two or three times, until you can feel yourself using the rhythm dictated by the words. Then mark the stressed syllables by putting an ictus (´) above them. Mark the unstressed syllables with a mora (˘). A scanned line might look like this one from Shakespeare's Sonnet 73:

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold*

Once you've identified where the stresses fall, you should see a pattern. In this case, the pattern is unstressed/stressed. This repeated unit of unstressed/stressed syllables is called a foot. Feet are marked with slashes (/):

˘ ´ / ˘ ´ / ˘ ´ / ˘ ´ / ˘ ´ /  
*That time / of year / thou mayst / in me / behold*

You can scan just about any line of poetry in English if you know six different kinds of feet:

iamb:	(˘ ´)	as in "the book"
trochee:	(´ ˘)	as in "printer"
anapest:	(˘ ˘ ´)	as in "intercede"
dactyl:	(´ ˘ ˘)	as in "willow"
spondee:	(´ ´)	as in "big truck"
pyrrhic:	(˘ ˘)	as in "of the"

So the line from Sonnet 73 has five iambs. Our shorthand designation for lines of five iambs is "iambic pentameter." If the stresses had been reversed, the line would have been "trochaic pentameter." The names for the line lengths are

one foot:	monometer
two feet:	dimeter
three feet:	trimeter
four feet:	tetrameter
five feet:	pentameter
six feet:	hexameter
seven feet:	heptameter

By combining the names of the feet and the line lengths, you can describe the rhythm—the meter—of just about any line of poetry.

But don't get the idea that poets are thinking about spondees and iambs and heptameter when they compose their poems. Nearly all good poets know how to measure their own lines, just as carpenters know how to measure the wood they work with. Yet poetry is unlike carpentry in this way: you do not measure the lines before you put

them together. You do not work from a plan. Poets don't sit down and say to themselves, "All right, to complete this line I need three more iambs." Poets trust their own ears to get the line to sound right. In revision, they might scan their lines and tinker with the stresses with some conscious purpose. But for the most part, they just listen to the music. Prosody is a way of measuring lines *after* they have been composed.

Further, poetry violates regular rhythm all the time. For example, you will never find a poem written entirely in iambic pentameter. If you ever came across such a poem, say a sonnet, with fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, you'd be reading a hundred and forty straight syllables with the unstressed/stressed rhythm. It would sound like a metronome. Its music would be the unrelenting, steady beat of a drum, which is fine if you're marching, but otherwise it's pretty boring. Instead, the poet will substitute a spondee or a trochee or a pyrrhic here and there, or maybe an anapest, for a few iambs. For example, here is how we might scan the first four lines of Shakespeare's sonnet:

That time / of year / thou mayst / in me / behold

When ye / low leaves, / or none, / or few, / do hang

Upon / those boughs / which shake / against / the cold,

Bare ru / ined choirs, / where late / the sweet / birds sang.

Depending on how you read the poem, some of these lines could be scanned differently. Does "those boughs" have two stressed syllables? Is "which shake" a spondee? It's not certain. But the first and last feet of the fourth line are definitely spondees. It is completely unnatural to say "bare" without stressing it, just as it is impossible to say "birds" without a stress. By the fourth line of the poem, Shakespeare has disrupted the rhythm he laid down in the first two lines.

Usually, the disruptions happen much sooner. Sometimes a poet disrupts the rhythm so often that it's hard to find a single line with a string of perfectly regular feet.

With so many disruptions to the rhythm, you might at first find it hard to scan poetry. Consider this tip. Most monosyllabic nouns will take a stress, just as most articles ("a," "an," "the") and one-syllable prepositions ("of," "in," "on," etc.) will be unstressed. After scanning a few poems, you'll begin to get a feel for such shortcuts. But the best advice is to read the poem aloud again and again, and mark where you find yourself giving stresses. Listen for the rhythm. Mark where the stresses are trying to fall, even if it doesn't quite work. More than likely, you'll find a lot of iambs. At least four out of five poems written in English use iambs as the basic foot. But whether you discover that the underlying rhythm is iambs or trochees or anapests, mark the whole poem as if it were perfectly regular. (Note: some poems might combine types of feet. The basic rhythm of a poem might begin each line with three iambs and conclude with an anapest.) Your goal at this stage is to recognize such regularities.

Then go back and find the spots that disrupt the rhythmic pattern. Properly mark those feet. The point to scanning a poem is not to figure out what the underlying rhythm is. Knowing that a poem is written in iambic pentameter doesn't help us understand it at all. We analyze a poem's regular rhythm only so we can figure out where it breaks the rhythm. In other words, we scan Shakespeare's sonnet not to see the iambs, which are all over the place, but to find the spondees.

What's the point of finding those irregularities? That's the toughest question to answer. It is not always possible to link such rhythmic irregularities to the meaning of a poem. Who can say with any confidence what is the effect on a reader of the spondee opening line 4 of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73?

Bare ru / ined choirs, / where late / the sweet / birds sang.

All we can say for sure is that such irregularities call attention to themselves. They add a bit of "umph" to the feet that contain them.

The barrenness of those choirs might stick in our mind a little more emphatically than if we heard about them in another iamb.

Surely the rhythms of a poem contribute to its tone, but, again, it is a delicate business to claim something like this: *the two spondees of line 4, following as they do on three lines of regular iambic pentameter, give us a sense of the echoing hollowness of the silent church ruins described in the line.* The images convey this melancholic tone more ably than the rhythm. As you begin your study of poetry, then, you should make only the slightest claims about how the meter of a poem contributes to its meaning. Probably the best use of prosody is to help you compose your own poetry. It is the basic tools of the art—the brushstrokes and paints, if you will, of poetry. It is the most physical part of poetry.

### Rhyme and Stanzas

**Rhyme** is the repetition of sound in different words. Usually, the repeated sound is in the end of the word. “Round,” “sound,” “ground,” and “profound” all rhyme. If a rhyme is in the middle of a line, it’s called an **internal rhyme**.

Poets often use end rhymes to group the lines of their poems. We use a simple system of letters to describe the rhymes. The last sound of the first line is assigned the letter *a*, as are all subsequent lines ending with the same sound. Each line that introduces a new end-sound is assigned the next letter of the alphabet. So the rhyme scheme for the opening of Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could Not Stop for Death—” looks like this:

<i>Because I could not stop for Death—</i>	a
<i>He kindly stopped for me—</i>	b
<i>The Carriage held but just Ourselves</i>	c
<i>And Immortality.</i>	b
<i>We slowly drove—He knew no haste</i>	d
<i>And I had put away -</i>	e
<i>My labor and my leisure too,</i>	f
<i>For His Civility—</i>	e

“Away” is not an exact rhyme for “civility,” so it’s called an *off rhyme*. A **feminine rhyme** is a two-syllable rhyme with the stress falling on the next-to-last syllable, as in these lines from Anne Bradstreet’s “A Letter to Her Husband”:

*So many steps, head from the heart to sever,  
If but a neck, soon should we be together.*

The end rhymes give a poem structure by dividing it into groups of lines, which are typically called **stanzas**. Notice in Dickinson’s poem that the rhymes gather the lines into groups of four. Poets usually indicate the divisions between stanzas with a blank line on the page, but even if you don’t see the text of a poem, when you hear it read aloud, the rhymes will tell you where each stanza ends. Like meter, rhymes establish a rhythm in our minds.

Often, the literal meaning of the poem will divide into sections just as the stanzas do. It is not surprising, for example, that each of the stanzas in Dickinson’s poem ends by finishing a sentence. In this way, the rhyme scheme will help you analyze a poem because it divides the poem into smaller coherent parts. Each stanza usually develops a single thought. Likewise, the rhyming end of each line usually mirrors a strong grammatical pause, as the ends do in Bradstreet’s poems.

Just as with meter, you should be especially interested in rhyme irregularities. In Dickinson’s poem, for example, the rhyme suggests that we ought to pause after “away” in the sixth line, but the grammar of the sentence compels us to hurry on to line 7. Poets often use this technique. For example, Shakespeare disrupts our expectations in the opening lines of Sonnet 73:

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,*

The first time you read the poem, you expect the rhyme at the end of the third line to mirror a strong grammatical pause. In that case, “cold” seems to be a noun rounding out the clause concerned with the tree boughs: the boughs seem to shake against the cold of win-

ter. But the next line indicates that "cold" is merely an adjective describing "choirs":

*Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.*

The rhyme misled us: it does not designate a significant grammatical pause. When a line seems to pour over its natural boundary this way and spill into the next line, we call it **enjambment**. The confusion caused by this enjambment draws our attention to the image of the ruined choir, just as the spondee did.

Some subgenres of lyric poetry have fairly strict rules about rhyme schemes. By convention, certain rhyme schemes and certain stanzaic patterns have come to be associated with particular subjects. So stanzaic forms are linked to a poem's meaning by convention. Ballads, sonnets, and odes, each of which has a set of standard subjects, are defined by their stanzaic form.

## Subgenres

Some poems have so many elements in common that they have created their own genres within the larger genre of lyric poems. Each of these **subgenres** calls up in the reader's mind certain expectations, just as the opening credits of a TV show will usually indicate if you're watching a sitcom or a drama. When you recognize the subgenre, you expect certain things. The ballad, for example, has its own grammar, its own conventions. Below are descriptions of the subgenres that appear in this anthology, accompanied by some of the elements you should expect when you encounter each one.

### *Ballads*

**Ballads** are the most popular form of lyric poetry. They were first sung in the city streets, at folk gatherings in the country, and at the fire's side. Now, most popular styles of music use ballads: rock, blues, pop, and particularly country. Ballads tell stories in short, terse narratives. The classic ballad stanza is four lines long with a rhyme scheme of *abab*; the *a* lines are tetrameter, and the *b* lines are

trimeter. But just about any narrative lyric with four-line stanzas would be called a ballad today.

### *Dramatic Monologues*

A **dramatic monologue** is a poem that seems as if it is a speech lifted right out of a play. These generally have one or a few long stanzas, usually unrhymed or in couplets, though the rhyme schemes can vary. Almost always, the poet's beliefs do not exactly correspond to the speaker's beliefs in a dramatic monologue. Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" is a dramatic monologue, as is Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses."

### *Elegies*

**Elegy** used to designate poems written in alternating lines of hexameter and pentameter, usually on the theme of love. But a few hundred years ago the genre began to deal exclusively with death. Sometimes an elegy might be a lament for a particular dead person, sometimes a complaint about mortality in general, often both. Though today elegies have no particular meter or rhyme, typically they are longish, meditative poems. Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" fits this description, as does W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," though that poem's stanzaic form suggests that it is an irregular ode. Ben Jonson's two poems, "On My First Son" and "On My First Daughter," which are short enough to be engraved on tombstones, are epitaphs rather than elegies.

### *Occasional Poems*

An **occasional poem** is any poem written in response to a specific event: a death, an inauguration, a military victory or defeat, a marriage, etc. Lynn Bryer's "The Way," which commemorates Nelson Mandela's release from prison, is an occasional poem.

### *Odes*

John Keats's odes in this volume are modeled on the odes of the Roman poet Horace. These Horatian odes usually meditate on fairly abstract concepts or on objects that symbolize something abstract.

They use colloquial diction, and, typically, they are calm statements of praise or judgment. The stanzas can follow any invention of the poet, but every stanza must have the same meter and rhyme scheme.

Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is an irregular ode: a meditation on some serious subject in stanzas of irregular length and rhyme scheme. This irregularity allows the tone of each stanza to mimic the varying mood and thoughts of the speaker, as if he were spontaneously thinking aloud in the poem.

### Sonnets

Traditionally, the sonnet has been used to express the feelings that a beloved arouses in the speaker. Often, sonnets come in sequences or "cycles" that chronicle the speaker's varying emotions. The sentiment expressed in one poem might be contradicted in the very next poem, just as the moods of love can change quickly. Often the speaker's love is unrequited. William Shakespeare's, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's, and Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnets in this anthology are from cycles of love poems.

In the Romantic era especially, but also in other ages, the sonnet has been used for different purposes, such as political commentary. Sonnets on such themes are usually not part of a sequence but stand alone.

There are two types of sonnets: the Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet, and the English (or Shakespearean) sonnet. They each have fourteen lines, but the rhyme schemes divide the lines differently. An English sonnet has this rhyme scheme: *abab cdcd efef gg*. As a result, the poem is divided into four sections: three quatrains (four lines) and a concluding couplet (two lines). An Italian sonnet has this rhyme scheme: *abba abba cdecde*. As a result, the poem divides into an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). Sometimes the rhyme scheme of the sestet will vary, but an Italian sonnet always divides in two between the eighth and ninth lines. Recognizing these divisions, whether in an English or in an Italian sonnet, will help you interpret the poem: analyze it section by section.

## Conclusion

After this long discussion of the parts of poems, of stanzaic forms and feminine rhymes and iambs, you may find yourself wondering if the pleasure of poetry has been ruined for you. Does analyzing poetry mean you can't enjoy it anymore? In a sense Wordsworth *was* right: we do murder to dissect. The casual fan enjoys a figure skater's grace and agility with a simplicity and awe that the aficionado can only remember. The unlearned ear listens to a jazz ensemble with an innocence that the trained ear can never recapture. It is the same with poetry. As you discover how poems work, as you grow more adept at analysis, as you master the art of interpretation, something is lost.

But the loss is more than recovered by a different pleasure. The aficionado recognizes a thousand subtleties the casual observer can never notice, and each of those subtleties might occasion some analysis. The casual fan views a skater's jump, and her appreciation amounts to the awestruck phrase: *How can they do that?* The aficionado, who *knows* how the skater can do that, who knows the names of particular jumps, who knows the strength each requires and the technique, who can recognize the slight defect in the landing and notice the skater's smooth recovery, can appreciate each subtlety in the performance and the sum of them all. The learned observer's reaction is, perhaps, less pure, certainly less complex, but more profound.

But the most ardent claims on this regard cannot convince you of anything. Study, analyze, reread, recite like an aficionado of poetry and confirm it for yourself.