



UNDERSTANDING POETRY



The Granger Collection, NYC

MARIANNE MOORE (1887–1972)**Poetry** (1921)

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are
important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt
for it, one
discovers in it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise 5
if it must, these things are important not
because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because
they are useful. When they become so derivative as to become
unintelligible, the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
do not admire what 10
we cannot understand: the bat

holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that
feels a flea, the base-

ball fan, the statistician— 6

nor is it valid 9

to discriminate against “business documents and 3

school-books”;¹ all these phenomena are important. One must
make a distinction 7

¹ “business documents and school-books”: Moore quotes the *Diaries of Tolstoy* (New York, 1917): “Where the boundary between prose and poetry lies, I shall never be able to understand.... Poetry is verse; prose is not verse. Or else poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books.”

however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the
 result is not poetry,
 nor till the poets among us can be
 “literalists of
 the imagination”²—above
 insolence and triviality and can present

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for inspection, “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,”³
 shall we have
 it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
 the raw material of poetry in
 all its rawness and
 that which is on the other hand
 genuine, you are interested in poetry.

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PAMELA SPIRO WAGNER (1952–)

How to Read a Poem: Beginner's Manual*

First, forget everything you have learned,
 that poetry is difficult,
 that it cannot be appreciated by the likes of you,
 with your high school equivalency diploma,
 your steel-tipped boots,
 or your white-collar misunderstandings.

5

Do not assume meanings hidden from you:
 the best poems mean what they say and say it.

To read poetry requires only courage
 enough to leap from the edge
 and trust.

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²“literalists of the imagination”: A reference (given by Moore) to W. B. Yeats’s “William Blake and His Illustrations” (in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 1903): “The limitation of his view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of the imagination as others are of nature; and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind’s eye, when exalted by inspiration, were ‘external existences,’ symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments.”

³“imaginary gardens with real toads in them”: Moore places these words in quotations, but the source is unknown.

*Publication date is unavailable.

Treat a poem like dirt,
 humus rich and heavy from the garden.
 Later it will become the fat tomatoes
 and golden squash piled high upon your kitchen table. 15

Poetry demands surrender,
 language saying what is true,
 doing holy things to the ordinary.

Read just one poem a day. L
 Someday a book of poems may open in your hands 20
 like a daffodil offering its cup
 to the sun. D

When you can name five poets D
 without including Bob Dylan, E
 when you exceed your quota 25
 and don't even notice, L
 close this manual. L

Congratulations.
 You can now read poetry.



Origins of Modern Poetry

The history of poetry begins where the history of all literature begins—with the **oral tradition**, information passed down from one generation to another by word of mouth. In a time before literacy and the printing press, the oral tradition was relied on as a way of preserving stories, histories, values, and beliefs. These stories were usually put into the form of rhyming poems, with repeated words and sounds used to make the poems easier to memorize and remember.

These extended narratives were eventually transcribed as **epics**—long poems depicting the actions of heroic figures who determine the fate of a nation or of an entire race. Early epics include Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Early poetry can also be found in various religious texts, including ancient Hindu holy books like the Upanishads; sections of the Bible, including the Song of Solomon; and the Koran.

During the **Anglo-Saxon era** (late sixth to mid-eleventh centuries), poetry flourished as a literary form. Unfortunately, only about 30,000 lines of poetry survive from this period. Those poems that did survive are marked by violence, carnage, and heroic deeds as well as Pagan and Christian themes. The major texts of this time include *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and *The Dream of the Rood*, which is one of the earliest Christian poems. The theme of Christian morality in poetry continued into the Middle Ages with poems

such as William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, which consists of three religious dream visions, and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a collection of narrative poems told by pilgrims as they travel to Canterbury, England. Using a slightly different approach to similar subject matter, Dante Alighieri wrote the Italian epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, which depicts an imaginary journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven. In France, the **troubadours**, poets of the Provençal region, wrote complex lyric poems about courtly love.

The next major literary period, the **Renaissance** (late fourteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries), witnessed the rebirth of science, philosophy, and the classical arts. Perhaps the most important writer of this period was William Shakespeare. A prolific poet, Shakespeare also wrote plays in verse, continuing in the tradition of the ancient Greek tragedian Sophocles and the ancient Roman playwright Seneca. Other notable writers of the Renaissance included Sir Philip Sidney, Christopher Marlowe, and Edmund Spenser.

During the seventeenth century, several literary movements emerged that contributed to poetry's growing prevalence and influence. John Milton continued the tradition of Christian poetry with his epic *Paradise Lost*, which told the tale of Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden. The **metaphysical**



Illustration of Trojan horse from Virgil's *Aenied*

Source: © Bettman/Corbis



Image depicting the pilgrims from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

Source: Roy 18 D II f.148 Lydgate and the Canterbury Pilgrims Leaving Canterbury from the 'Troy Book and the Siege of Thebes' by John Lydgate (c.1370–c.1451) 1412–22 (vellum) (detail of 8063), English School, (15th century) / British Library, London, UK / © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved / Bridgeman Images

poets (John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and George Herbert) used elaborate figures of speech and favored intellect over emotions in their writing. Their poems were characterized by reason, complex comparisons and allusions, and paradoxes, and they introduced the **meditative poem** (a poem that abstractly ponders a concept or idea) into the literary world.

In the early eighteenth century, British poets (such as Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson) wrote poems, biographies, and literary criticism. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the movement known as **Romanticism** began. Romantic poetry was marked by heightened emotion and sentiment; a strong sense of individualism; a fascination with nature, the Middle Ages, and mysticism; a rebellion against social and political norms;



Illuminated manuscript (fifteenth century) from Dante's *Divine Comedy* depicting Dante and Virgil in Hell

Alfredo Dagli Orti/The Art Archive/Corbis



John Martin's painting *The Bard* (1817) illustrating the mystical view of nature characteristic of Romanticism

The Bard, c.1817 (oil on canvas), Martin, John (1789–1854) / Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, USA / Paul Mellon Collection / Bridgeman Images



Illuminated manuscript from William Blake's "The Tyger"

Source: ©Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, UK/ Bridgeman Art Library

and a return to first-person lyric poems. The early British Romantics included Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and William Blake. This generation was followed by the later Romantics, including Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and George Gordon, Lord Byron. American Romantics (called **transcendentalists**) included Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman.

The nineteenth century was marked by yet another shift in poetic consciousness. This time, poets moved away from the contemplation of the self within nature that characterized Romanticism and returned to a more elevated sense of rhetoric and subject matter. Notable

British poets included Matthew Arnold, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. American poets of the this period included Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emily Dickinson, and Phillis Wheatley, a slave who became the first African American poet.

The twentieth century had perhaps the largest number of literary movements to date, with each one reflecting its predecessors and influencing future generations of poets. In the early twentieth century, a literary movement that became known as **modernism** developed. As writers responded to the increasing complexity of a changing world, the overarching sentiment of modernism was that the “old ways” would no longer suffice in a world that had changed almost overnight as a result of the rise of industrialization and urbanization, as well as the devastation of World War I. Key modernist poets included W. H. Auden, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, whose epic poem *The Waste Land* expressed the fragmentation of consciousness in the modern world.

After World War I, poets began to challenge the prevailing ideas of subject matter and form. Ezra Pound, along with Amy Lowell and other poets, founded **imagism**, a poetic movement that emphasized free verse and the writer’s response to a visual scene or an object. William Carlos Williams wrote poems that were often deceptively simple, while the poetry of Wallace Stevens was often opaque and difficult to grasp. Dylan Thomas and E. E. Cummings also experimented with form, with Cummings intentionally manipulating the accepted constructs of grammar, syntax, and punctuation.

In the 1920s, the United States experienced the **Harlem Renaissance**. This rebirth of arts and culture was centered in Harlem, an area in New



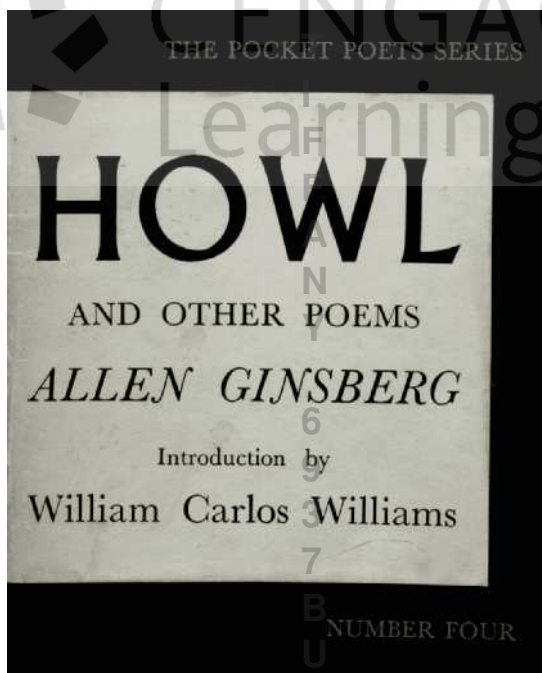
Undated engraving illustrating Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”

Source: ©Bettmann/CORBIS

York City where, by the mid-1920s, the African American population had reached 150,000. Harlem was teeming with creativity, especially in music (jazz and blues), literature, art, and drama. The poets who were part of the Harlem Renaissance—including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, and Jean Toomer—chose diverse subject matter and styles, but they were united in their celebration of African American culture.

In the early 1930s, a group of poets gathered at a college in Black Mountain, North Carolina, with the aim of teaching and writing about poetry in a new way. The **Black Mountain poets**, as they were called, stressed the process of writing poetry rather than the finished poem. Notable poets in this group included Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and Charles Olson. Meanwhile, in Latin America, poetry was growing in importance, with poets such as Pablo Neruda experimenting with subject matter, language, form, and imagery.

In the late 1940s, in the aftermath of World War II, a group of disillusioned American poets turned to eastern mysticism and newly available hallucinogenic drugs to achieve higher consciousness. They became known as the **Beat poets**, and their work was known for social and political criti-



Cover of the first edition of *Howl*, published by City Lights Books in 1956

1956 by City Light Books

cism that challenged the established norms of the time. These poets included Allen Ginsberg, whose long poem *Howl* became an unofficial anthem of the revolutionary 1960s, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Up until the late 1950s, subject matter in American poetry was largely impersonal, concentrating chiefly on symbols, ideas, and politics. This changed when a group of poets—including Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, W. D. Snodgrass, and Sylvia Plath—began to write **confessional poems** about their own personal experiences, emotions, triumphs, and tragedies (including mental illness and attempted suicide). Although there was considerable backlash against these poets from writers who thought that such highly personal subjects were not suitable for poetry, contemporary poets such as Sharon Olds continue to write confessional poetry.

The early 1960s witnessed the rise of the **Black Arts Movement**, which had its roots in the ideas of the civil rights struggle, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, and the Black Power Movement. The Black Arts poets wrote political works that addressed the sociopolitical and cultural context of African American life. Notable authors in this group included Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jayne Cortez, and Etheridge Knight.

The next major literary movement in poetry had its beginnings in the mid to late 1980s with slam poetry. **Slam poetry**, with origins in the oral tradition, was influenced by the Beat poets, who stressed the live performance of poems. In a **slam**, poets compete either individually or in teams before an audience, which serves as the judge. (The structure of a traditional poetry slam was created by Marc Smith, a poet and construction worker, in 1986.) Slam poetry is concerned with current events and social and political themes, and often the winning poet is the one who best combines enthusiasm,



Staceyann Chin, acclaimed slam poet and the star of *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway*

Richard Termine/The New York Times/Redux

presentation, and attitude with contemporary subject matter. A home base for slam poetry is the Nuorican Poets Café in New York City, which has become a forum for poetry, music, video, and theater. Notable slam poets past and present include Miguel Piñero, Maggie Estep, Jeffrey McDaniel, and Bob Holman.

A spinoff of slam poetry is the **spoken word** movement, which, unlike slam poetry, is a rehearsed performance. Spoken word performances have captivated a broad audience due in part to television shows such as HBO's *Def Poetry Jam* (2002–2007). **Hip-hop** and **rap**, musical forms whose lyrics rely heavily on rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and other poetic devices, also owe a debt to slam poetry and the spoken word movement.

Contemporary poetry is an extremely diverse genre whose practitioners have been influenced by many of the literary movements discussed above. Some contemporary poets embrace narrative poetry; others favor the lyric. Some write free verse; others experiment with traditional forms like the **sonnet** or the **villanelle**. Still others write **concrete poetry**, which uses words as well as varying type sizes and type fonts to form pictures on a page, or other forms of **visual poetry**.

With the advent of digital media, new forms of poetry have emerged that use multimedia elements to create texts. Not just words, but also sound, images, and video combine to create new poetic forms and new levels of aesthetic experience. For example, **hypertext poetry** has links to other texts (or visuals) that are available electronically. These links can appear all at once on the screen, or they can be revealed gradually, creating multiple levels of meaning. **Kinetic poetry** is a form in which letters (or words) drift around the screen, gradually coalescing to form phrases, lines, and possibly entire poems. **Interactive poetry** depends on readers contributing content that enhances and possibly determines the meaning of the poem. **Code poetry** is programming code expressed as poetry. The most famous code poem is “Black Perl,” which is written in Perl programming language. These and other forms of digital poetry use digital technology to challenge and expand the notion of what poetry is and should be.



Defining Poetry

Throughout history and across national and cultural boundaries, poetry has occupied an important place. In ancient China and Japan, for example, poetry was prized above all else. One story tells of a samurai warrior who, when defeated, asked for a pen and paper. Thinking that he wanted to write a will before being executed, his captor granted his wish. Instead of writing a will, however, the warrior wrote a farewell poem that so moved his captor that he immediately released him.

To the ancient Greeks and Romans, poetry was the medium of spiritual and philosophical expression. Today, throughout the world, poetry continues to delight and to inspire. For many people in countless places, poetry is the language of the emotions, the medium of expression they use when they speak from the heart.

But what exactly is poetry? Is it, as Pamela Spiro Wagner says, “language saying what is true / doing holy things to the ordinary” (p. 488)? Or is a poem simply what Marianne Moore (p. 486) calls “all this fiddle”?

One way of defining poetry is to examine how it is different from other forms of literature, such as fiction or drama. The first and most important element of poetry that distinguishes it from other genres is its **form**. Unlike prose, which is written from margin to margin, poetry is made up of individual **lines**. A poetic line begins and ends where the poet chooses: it can start at the left margin or halfway across the page, and it can end at the right margin or after only a word or two. A poet chooses when to stop, or break, the line according to his or her sense of rhythm and meter.

Poets also use the **sound** of the words themselves, alone and in conjunction with the other words of the poem, to create a sense of rhythm and melody. **Alliteration** (the repetition of initial consonant sounds in consecutive or neighboring words), **assonance** (the repetition of vowel sounds), and **consonance** (the repetition of consonant sounds within words) are three devices commonly used by poets to help create the music of a poem. Poets can also use **rhyme** (either at the ends of lines or within the lines themselves), which contributes to the pattern of sounds in a poem.

In addition, poets are more likely than writers of other kinds of literature to rely on **imagery**, words or phrases that describe the senses. These vivid descriptions or details help the reader to connect with the poet’s ideas in a tangible way. Poets also make extensive use of **figurative language**, including metaphors and similes, to convey their ideas and to help their readers access these ideas.

Another way of defining poetry is to examine our assumptions about it. Different readers, different poets, different generations of readers and poets, and different cultures often have different expectations about poetry. As a result, they have varying assumptions about what poetry should be, and these assumptions raise questions. Must poetry be written to delight or inspire, or can a poem have a political or social message? Must a poem’s theme be conveyed subtly, embellished with imaginatively chosen sounds and words, or can it be explicit and straightforward? Such questions, which have been debated by literary critics as well as by poets for many years, have no easy answers—and perhaps no answers at all. A **haiku**—a short poem, rich in imagery, adhering to a rigid formal structure—is certainly poetry. To some Western readers, however, a haiku might seem too plain or understated to be “poetic.” Still, most of these readers would agree that the following lines qualify as poetry.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616)

That time of year thou mayst in me behold (1609)

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,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day 5
As after sunset fadeth in the West,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie, 10
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

This poem includes many of the characteristics that Western readers commonly associate with poetry. For instance, its lines have a regular pattern of rhyme and meter that identifies it as a **sonnet**. The poem also develops a complex network of related images and figures of speech that compare the lost youth of the aging speaker to the sunset and to autumn. Finally, the pair of rhyming lines at the end of the poem expresses a familiar poetic theme: the lovers' realization that they must eventually die makes their love stronger.

Although most readers would classify Shakespeare's sonnet as a poem, they might be less certain about the following lines.

E. E. CUMMINGS (1894–1962)

l(a (1923)

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Unlike Shakespeare's poem, "l(a" does not seem to have any of the characteristics normally associated with poetry. It has no meter, rhyme, or imagery. It has no repeated sounds and no figures of speech. It cannot even be read aloud because its "lines" are fragments of words. In spite of its odd appearance, however, "l(a" does communicate a conventional poetic theme.

When reconstructed, the words Cummings broke apart have the following appearance: "l (a leaf falls) one l iness." In a sense, this poem is a complex visual and verbal pun. If the parenthetical insertion "(a leaf falls)" is removed, the remaining letters spell "loneliness." Moreover, the form of the letter *l* in loneliness suggests the number 1—which, in turn, suggests the loneliness and isolation of the individual, as reflected in nature (the single leaf). Like Shakespeare, Cummings uses an image of a leaf to express his ideas about life and human experience. At the same time, by breaking words into bits and pieces, Cummings suggests the flexibility of language and conveys the need to break out of customary ways of using words to define experience.

As these two poems illustrate, defining what a poem is (and what it is not) can be difficult. Poems can rhyme or not rhyme. They can be divided into stanzas and have a distinct form, or they can flow freely and have no discernable form. These and other choices are what many poets find alluring about the process of writing poetry. As a form, poetry is compact and concise, and choosing the right words to convey ideas is a challenge. As a literary genre, it offers room for experimentation while at the same time remaining firmly grounded in a literary tradition that stretches back through time to antiquity.



Recognizing Kinds of Poetry

Most poems are either **narrative** poems, which recount a story, or **lyric** poems, which communicate a speaker's mood, feelings, or state of mind.

Narrative Poetry

Although any brief poem that tells a story, such as Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory" (p. 783), may be considered a narrative poem, the two most familiar forms of narrative poetry are the *epic* and the *ballad*.

Epics are narrative poems that recount the accomplishments of heroic figures, typically including expansive settings, superhuman feats, and gods and supernatural beings. The language of epic poems tends to be formal, even elevated, and often quite elaborate. In ancient times, epics were handed down orally; more recently, poets have written literary epics, such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Nobel Prize-winning poet Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990), that follow many of the same conventions.

The **ballad** is another type of narrative poetry with roots in an oral tradition. Originally intended to be sung, a ballad uses repeated words and phrases, including a refrain, to advance its story. Some—but not all—ballads use the **ballad stanza**. For an example of a traditional ballad in this book, see “Bonny Barbara Allan” (p. 734). Dudley Randall’s “Ballad of Birmingham” (p. 529) is an example of a contemporary ballad.

Lyric Poetry

Like narrative poems, lyric poems take various forms.

An **elegy** is a poem in which a poet mourns the death of a specific person (or persons), as in “To an Athlete Dying Young” (p. 557).

An **ode** is a long lyric poem, formal and serious in style, tone, and subject matter. An ode typically has a fairly complex stanzaic pattern, such as the **terza rima** used by Percy Bysshe Shelley in “Ode to the West Wind” (p. 786). Another ode in this text is John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (p. 773).

An **aubade** is a poem about morning, usually celebrating the coming of dawn. For example, see Bill Coyle’s “Aubade” (p. 750).

An **occasional poem** is written to celebrate a particular event or occasion. An example is Billy Collins’s 2002 poem “The Names,” read before a joint session of Congress to commemorate the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

A **meditation** is a lyric poem that focuses on a physical object, using this object as a vehicle for considering larger issues. Edmund Waller’s seventeenth-century poem “Go, lovely rose” is a meditation.

A **pastoral**—for example, Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” (p. 777)—is a lyric poem that celebrates the simple, idyllic pleasures of country life.

A **dramatic monologue** is a poem whose speaker addresses one or more silent listeners, often revealing much more than he or she intends. Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” (p. 503) and “Porphyria’s Lover” (p. 520) and Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (p. 790) are dramatic monologues.

As you read the poems in this text, you will encounter works with a wide variety of forms, styles, and themes. Some you will find appealing, amusing, uplifting, or moving; others may strike you as puzzling, intimidating, or depressing. But regardless of your critical reaction to the poems, one thing is certain: if you take the time to connect with the lines you are reading, you will come away from them thinking not just about the images and ideas they express but also about yourself and your world.



CHAPTER 16

VOICE

Langston Hughes

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs
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Robert Browning

AP Images



Louise Glück

Robin Marchant/Getty Images



Janice Mirikitani

David Paul Morris/ Getty Images
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Source: © Bettmann/Corbis

EMILY DICKINSON (1830–1886)

I'm nobody! Who are you? (1891)

I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there's a pair of us?
Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one's name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

5



The Speaker in the Poem

When they read a work of fiction, readers must decide whether the narrator is sophisticated or unsophisticated, trustworthy or untrustworthy, innocent or experienced. Just as fiction depends on a narrator, poetry depends on a **speaker** who describes events, feelings, and ideas to readers. Finding out as much as possible about this speaker can help readers to interpret a poem. For example, the speaker in Emily Dickinson's "I'm nobody! Who are you?" seems at first to be not just self-effacing but also playful, even flirtatious. As the poem continues, however, the speaker becomes more complex. In the first stanza, she reveals her private self—internal, isolated, with little desire to be well known; in the second stanza, she expresses disdain for those who seek to become "somebody," whom she sees as self-centered, self-promoting, and inevitably superficial. Far from being defeated by her isolation, the speaker rejects fame and celebrates her status as a "nobody."

One question readers might ask about "I'm nobody! Who are you?" is how close the speaker's voice is to the poet's. Readers who conclude that the poem is about the conflict between a poet's public and private selves may be tempted to see the speaker and the poet as one. But this is not necessarily the case. Like the narrator of a short story, the speaker of a poem is a **persona**, or mask, that the poet puts on. Granted, in some poems little distance exists between the poet and the speaker. Without hard evidence to support a link between speaker and poet, however, readers should not simply assume they are one and the same.

In many cases, the speaker is quite different from the poet—even when the speaker's voice conveys the attitude of the poet, either directly or indirectly. In the 1789 poem "The Chimney Sweeper" (p. 738), for example, William Blake assumes the voice of a child to criticize the system of child labor that existed in eighteenth-century England. Even though the child speaker does not understand the economic and social forces that cause his misery, readers sense the poet's anger as the trusting speaker describes the appalling conditions under which he works. The poet's indignation is especially apparent in the biting irony of the last line, in which the victimized speaker echoes the moral precepts of the time by innocently assuring readers that if all people do their duty, "they need not fear harm."

Sometimes the poem's speaker is anonymous. In such cases—as in William Carlos Williams's "Red Wheelbarrow" (p. 563), for instance—the first-person

voice is absent, and the speaker remains outside the poem. At other times, the speaker has a set identity—a king, a beggar, a highwayman, a sheriff, a husband, a wife, a rich man, a murderer, a child, a mythical figure, an explorer, a teacher, a faithless lover, a saint—or even a flower, an animal, or a clod of earth. Whatever the case, the speaker is not the poet but rather a creation that the poet uses to convey his or her ideas. (For this reason, poems by a single poet may have very different voices. Compare Sylvia Plath’s bitter and sardonic poem “Daddy” [p. 589] with her nurturing and celebratory work “Morning Song” [p. 517], for example.)

Sometimes a poem’s title tells readers that the poet is assuming a particular persona. In the following poem, for example, the title identifies the speaker as a fictional character, Gretel from the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel.”



Robin Marchant/Getty Images

LOUISE GLÜCK (1943–)

Gretel in Darkness (1971)

This is the world we wanted.
 All who would have seen us dead
 are dead. I hear the witch’s cry
 break in the moonlight through a sheet
 of sugar: God rewards, 5
 Her tongue shrivels into gas. . . .
 Now, far from women’s arms
 And memory of women, in our father’s hut
 we sleep, are never hungry.
 Why do I not forget? 10
 My father bars the door, bars harm
 from this house, and it is years.
 No one remembers. Even you, my brother,
 summer afternoons you look at me as though
 you meant to leave, 15
 as though it never happened.
 But I killed for you. I see armed firs,
 the spires of that gleaming kiln—
 Nights I turn to you to hold me
 but you are not there. 20
 Am I alone? Spies
 hiss in the stillness, Hansel
 we are there still, and it is real, real,
 that black forest, and the fire in earnest.



Illustration of “Hansel and Gretel” (1930)

AP Images

The speaker in this poem comments on her life after her encounter with the witch in the forest. Speaking to her brother, Gretel observes that they now live in the world they wanted: they live with their father in his hut, and the witch and the wicked stepmother are dead. Even so, the memory of the events in the forest haunts Gretel and makes it impossible for her to live “happily ever after.”

By assuming the persona of Gretel, the poet is able to convey some interesting and complex ideas. On one level, Gretel represents any person who has lived through a traumatic experience. Memories of the event keep breaking through into the present, frustrating her attempts to reestablish her belief in the goodness of the world. The voice we hear

is sad, alone, and frightened: “Nights I turn to you to hold me,” she says, “but you are not there.” Although the murder Gretel committed for her brother was justified, it seems to haunt her. “No one remembers,” laments Gretel, not even her brother. At some level, she realizes that by killing the witch she has killed a part of herself, perhaps the part of women that men fear and consequently transform into witches and wicked stepmothers. The world that is left after the killing is her father’s and her brother’s, not her own, and she is now alone haunted by the memories of the black forest. In this sense, Gretel—“Now, far from women’s arms/And memory of women”—may be the voice of all victimized women who, because of men, act against their own best interests—and regret it.

As “Gretel in Darkness” illustrates, a title can identify a poem’s speaker, but the speaker’s words can provide even more information. In the next poem, the first line of each stanza establishes the identity of the speaker—and defines his perspective.



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LANGSTON HUGHES (1902–1967)

Negro (1926)

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of my Africa.

I’ve been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean. 5

I brushed the boots of Washington.

- I've been a worker:
 Under my hand the pyramids arose.
 I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.
- I've been a singer: 10
 All the way from Africa to Georgia
 I carried my sorrow songs.
 I made ragtime.
- I've been a victim:
 The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo. 15
 They lynch me still in Mississippi.
- I am a Negro:
 Black as the night is black,
 Black like the depths of my Africa.

Here the speaker, identifying himself as “a Negro,” assumes each of the roles African Americans have historically played in Western society—slave, worker, singer, and victim. By so doing, he gives voice to his ancestors who, by being forced to serve others, were deprived of their identities. By presenting not only their suffering but also their accomplishments, the speaker asserts his pride in being black. The speaker also implies that the suffering of black people has been caused by economic exploitation: Romans, Egyptians, Belgians, and Americans all used black labor to help build their societies. In this context, the speaker's implied warning is clear: except for the United States, all the societies that have exploited blacks have declined, and long after the fall of those empires, black people still endure.

In each of the preceding poems, the speaker is alone. The following poem, a **dramatic monologue**, presents a more complex situation in which the poet creates a complete dramatic scene. The speaker is developed as a character whose distinctive personality is revealed through his words as he addresses a silent listener.



AP Images

ROBERT BROWNING (1812–1889)

My Last Duchess (1842)

Ferrara

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
 Looking as if she were alive. I call
 That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's¹ hands
 Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said 5

¹Frà Pandolf: “Brother” Pandolf, a fictive painter.

“Frà Pandolf” by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I) 10
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ’twas not
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek: perhaps 15
Frà Pandolf chanced to say “Her mantle laps
Over my lady’s wrist too much,” or “Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat”: such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough 20
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, ’twas all one! My favor at her breast, 25
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech, 30
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill 35
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set 40
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse
—E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands; 45
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,

The Count your master's known munificence
 Is ample warrant that no just pretense
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune,² though,
 Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,
 Which Claus of Innsbruck³ cast in bronze for me!



Art gallery similar to setting of "My Last Duchess"

The King's Closet, Windsor Castle, from 'Royal Residences', engraved by William James Bennett (1769–1844), published by William Henry Pyne (1769–1843), 1816, Wild, Charles (1781–1835) (after) / Private Collection / The Stapleton Collection / Bridgeman Images

The speaker in "My Last Duchess" is most likely Alfonso II, duke of Ferrara, Italy, whose young wife, Lucrezia, died in 1561 after only three years of marriage. Shortly after her death, the duke began negotiations to marry again. When the poem opens, the duke is showing a portrait of his late wife to an emissary of an unnamed count who is there to arrange a marriage between the duke and the count's daughter. The duke remarks that the artist, Frà Pandolf, has caught a certain look on the duchess's face. This look aroused the jealousy of the duke, who thought that it should have been for him alone. Eventually, the duke could tolerate the situation no longer; he "gave commands," and "all smiles stopped together."

²*Neptune*: In Roman mythology, the god of the sea.

³*Claus of Innsbruck*: A fictive—or unidentified—sculptor. The count of Tyrol's capital was at Innsbruck, Austria.

Though silent, the listener plays a subtle but important role in the poem: his presence establishes the dramatic situation that allows the character of the duke to be revealed. The duke tells his story to communicate to the emissary exactly what he expects from his prospective bride and from her father. As he speaks, the duke provides only the information that he wants the emissary to take back to his master, the count. Although the duke appears vain and superficial, he is actually extraordinarily shrewd. Throughout the poem, he turns the conversation to his own ends and gains the advantage through flattery and false modesty. The success of the poem lies in the poet's ability to develop the voice of this complex character, who embodies both superficial elegance and shocking cruelty.

FURTHER READING: The Speaker in the Poem

LESLIE MARMON SILKO (1948–)

Where Mountain Lion Lay Down with Deer (1973)

I climb the black rock mountain
stepping from day to day
silently.

I smell the wind for my ancestors
pale blue leaves
crushed wild mountain smell. 5

Returning
up the gray stone cliff
where I descended
a thousand years ago. 10

Returning to faded black stone.
where mountain lion lay down with deer.

It is better to stay up here
watching wind's reflection
in tall yellow flowers. 15

The old ones who remember me are gone
the old songs are all forgotten
and the story of my birth.

How I danced in snow-frost moonlight
distant stars to the end of the Earth, 20

How I swam away
in freezing mountain water
narrow mossy canyon tumbling down
out of the mountain

out of the deep canyon stone
down
the memory
spilling out
into the world.

Reading and Reacting

1. Who is speaking in line 4? in line 9? Can you explain this shift?
2. From where is the speaker returning? What is she trying to recover?
3. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Is it important to know that the poet is Native American? How does this information affect your interpretation of the poem?
4. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In her 1983 essay “Answering the Deer,” poet and critic Paula Gunn Allen observes that the possibility of cultural extinction is a reality Native Americans must face. Native American women writers, says Allen, face this fact directly but with a kind of hope:

The sense of hope . . . comes about when one has faced ultimate disaster time and time again over the ages and has emerged . . . stronger and more certain of the endurance of the people, the spirits, and the land from which they both arise and which informs both with life. Transformation, or more directly, metamorphosis, is the oldest tribal ceremonial theme. . . . And it comes once again into use within American Indian poetry of extinction and regeneration that is ultimately the only poetry any contemporary Indian woman can write.

Does Silko’s poem address the issue of cultural extinction and the possibility of regeneration or metamorphosis? How?

Related Works: “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” (p. 205), “Two Kinds” (p. 471), “We Wear the Mask” (p. 550)



David Paul Morris/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images

JANICE MIRIKITANI (1942–)

Suicide Note (1987)

...An Asian American college student was reported to have jumped to her death from her dormitory window. Her body was found two days later under a deep cover of snow. Her suicide note contained an apology to her parents for having received less than a perfect four point grade average. . . .

How many notes written . . .
ink smeared like birdprints in snow.

not good enough	not pretty enough	not smart enough	
dear mother and father.			
I apologize			5
for disappointing you.			
I've worked very hard,			
not good enough			
harder, perhaps to please you.			
If only I were a son, shoulders broad			10
as the sunset threading through pine,			
I would see the light in my mother's			
eyes, or the golden pride reflected			
in my father's dream			
of my wide, male hands worthy of work			15
and comfort.			
I would swagger through life			
muscled and bold and assured,			
drawing praises to me			
like currents in the bed of wind, virile			20
with confidence.			
not good enough	not strong enough	not good enough	
I apologize.			
Tasks do not come easily.			
Each failure, a glacier.			25
Each disapproval, a bootprint.			
Each disappointment,			
ice above my river.			
So I have worked hard.			
not good enough			30
My sacrifice I will drop			
bone by bone, perched			
on the ledge of my womanhood,			
fragile as wings.			
not strong enough			35
It is snowing steadily			
surely not good weather			
for flying—this sparrow			
sillied and dizzied by the wind			
on the edge.			40
not smart enough			
I make this ledge my altar			
to offer penance.			
This air will not hold me,			
the snow burdens my crippled wings,			45

my tears drop like bitter cloth
 softly into the gutter below.
 not good enough not strong enough not smart enough
 Choices thin as shaved
 ice. Notes shredded
 drift like snow
 on my broken body,
 cover me like whispers
 of sorries
 sorries.

Perhaps when they find me
 they will bury
 my bird bones beneath
 a sturdy pine
 and scatter my feathers like
 unspoken song
 over this white and cold and silent
 breast of earth.

Reading and Reacting

1. This poem is a suicide note that contains an apology. Why does the speaker feel she must apologize? Do you agree that she needs to apologize?
2. What attitude does the speaker convey toward her parents?
3. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Is the college student who speaks in this poem a stranger to you, or is her voice in any way like that of students you know?
4. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In her essay “Reading Asian American Poetry,” Juliana Chang discusses the reasons why Asian American prose, both fiction and nonfiction, has received more critical attention than Asian American poetry. In particular, she points to “the critical perception that poetry is to prose precisely as the private and individual are to the public and the social, and that the poetic therefore has less social relevance.” Chang continues, “Anecdotally, I have heard consistently that poetry is considered ‘difficult,’ that readers often experience an anxiety over being equipped with the right ‘key’ to decipher a complex of images and patterns in order to gain access to a ‘hidden,’ and therefore private, meaning.”

Do you feel that “Suicide Note” has social relevance? Does the poem seem accessible or difficult? Does its meaning seem “hidden” in any way?

Related Works: “The Rocking-Horse Winner” (p. 409), “The Value of Education” (p. 549), “Dreams of Suicide” (p. 684), “Death Be Not Proud” (p. 757), *The Cuban Swimmer* (p. 1166)



The Tone of the Poem

The **tone** of a poem conveys the speaker's attitude toward his or her subject or audience. In speech, this attitude can be conveyed easily: stressing a word in a sentence can modify or color a statement. For example, the statement "Of course, you would want to go to that restaurant" is quite straightforward, but changing the emphasis to "Of course *you* would want to go to *that* restaurant" transforms a neutral statement into a sarcastic one. For poets, however, conveying a particular tone to readers poses a challenge because readers rarely hear poets' spoken voices. Instead, poets indicate tone by using rhyme, meter, word choice, sentence structure, figures of speech, and imagery.

The range of possible tones is wide. For example, a poem's speaker may be joyful, sad, playful, serious, comic, intimate, formal, relaxed, condescending, or ironic. In the following poem, notice the speaker's detached, almost irreverent attitude toward his subject.

ROBERT FROST (1874–1963)

Fire and Ice (1923)

Some say the world will end in fire,
 Some say in ice.
 From what I've tasted of desire
 I hold with those who favor fire.
 But if it had to perish twice,
 I think I know enough of hate
 To say that for destruction ice
 Is also great
 And would suffice.

5

Here the speaker uses word choice, rhyme, and especially **understatement** to comment on the human condition. The conciseness as well as the simple, regular meter and rhyme suggest an **epigram**—a short poem that makes a pointed comment in an unusually clear, and often witty, manner. This pointedness is consistent with the speaker's glib, unemotional tone, as is the last line's wry understatement that ice "would suffice." The contrast between the poem's serious message—that hatred and indifference are equally destructive—and its informal style and offhand tone complement the speaker's detached, almost smug, posture.

Sometimes shifts in tone reveal changes in the speaker's attitude. In the next poem, subtle shifts in tone reveal a change in the speaker's attitude toward war.



Underwood And Underwood/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images

THOMAS HARDY (1840–1928)

The Man He Killed (1902)

“Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!¹

“But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

“I shot him dead because—
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That’s clear enough; although
“He thought he’d ’list,² perhaps,
Off-hand-like—just as I—

Was out of work—had sold his traps—
No other reason why.

“Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You’d treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a crown.”³



Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division[LC-USZ62-42613]

British infantry fighting in South Africa during the Boer War

¹*nipperkin*: A small container of liquor.

²*’list*: Enlist.

³*crown*: A unit of British currency.

The speaker in this poem is a soldier relating a wartime experience. Quotation marks indicate that he is engaged in conversation—perhaps in a pub—and his dialect indicates that he is a member of the English working class. For him, at least at first, the object of war is simple: kill or be killed. To Hardy, this speaker represents all men who are thrust into a war without understanding its underlying social, economic, or ideological causes. In this sense, the speaker and his enemy are both victims of forces beyond their comprehension or control.

The tone of “The Man He Killed” changes as the speaker tells his story. In the first two stanzas, sentences are smooth and unbroken, establishing the speaker’s matter-of-fact tone and reflecting his confidence that he has done what he had to do. In the third and fourth stanzas, broken syntax reflects the narrator’s increasingly disturbed state of mind as he tells about the man he killed. The poem’s singsong meter and regular rhyme scheme (*met/wet, inn/nipperkin*) suggest that the speaker is struggling to maintain his composure; the smooth sentence structure of the last stanza and the use of a cliché (“Yes; quaint and curious war is!”) indicate that the speaker is trying to trivialize an incident that has seriously traumatized him.

Sometimes a poem’s tone can establish an ironic contrast between the speaker and his or her subject. The speaker’s abrupt change of tone at the end of the next poem establishes such a contrast.

AMY LOWELL (1874–1925)

Patterns (1915)

I walk down the garden-paths,	
And all the daffodils	
Are blowing, and the bright blue squills.	
I walk down the patterned garden-paths	
In my stiff, brocaded gown.	5
With my powdered hair and jewelled fan,	
I too am a rare	6
Pattern. As I wander down	9
The garden-paths.	3
My dress is richly figured,	
And the train	7
Makes a pink and silver stain	B
On the gravel, and the thrift	U
Of the borders.	
Just a plate of current fashion	15
Tripping by in high-heeled, ribboned shoes.	

Not a softness anywhere about me,
 Only whalebone¹ and brocade.
 And I sink on a seat in the shade
 Of a lime tree. For my passion
 Wars against the stiff brocade. 20
 The daffodils and squills
 Flutter in the breeze
 As they please.
 And I weep; 25
 For the lime-tree is in blossom
 And one small flower has dropped upon my bosom.
 And the plashing of waterdrops
 In the marble fountain
 Comes down the garden-paths. 30
 The dripping never stops.
 Underneath my stiffened gown
 Is the softness of a woman bathing in a marble basin,
 A basin in the midst of hedges grown
 So thick, she cannot see her lover hiding, 35
 But she guesses he is near,
 And the sliding of the water
 Seems the stroking of a dear
 Hand upon her.
 What is Summer in a fine brocaded gown! 40
 I should like to see it lying in a heap upon the ground.
 All the pink and silver crumpled up on the ground.
 I would be the pink and silver as I ran along the paths,
 And he would stumble after,
 Bewildered by my laughter. 45
 I should see the sun flashing from his sword-hilt and buckles
 on his shoes.
 I would choose
 To lead him in a maze along the patterned paths,
 A bright and laughing maze for my heavy-booted lover.
 Till he caught me in the shade, 50
 And the buttons of his waistcoat bruised my body as
 he clasped me,
 Aching, melting, unafraid.
 With the shadows of the leaves and the sundrops,

¹ *whalebone*: The type of bone used to stiffen corsets.

And the plopping of the waterdrops,
 All about us in the open afternoon— 55
 I am very like to swoon
 With the weight of this brocade,
 For the sun sifts through the shade.

 Underneath the fallen blossom
 In my bosom, 60
 Is a letter I have hid.
 It was brought to me this morning by a rider from the Duke.
 Madam, we regret to inform you that Lord Hartwell
 Died in action Thursday se'nnight.²
 As I read it in the white, morning sunlight, 65
 The letters squirmed like snakes.
 "Any answer, Madam," said my footman.
 "No," I told him.
 "See that the messenger takes some refreshment.
 No, no answer." 70
 And I walked into the garden,
 Up and down the patterned paths,
 In my stiff, correct brocade.
 The blue and yellow flowers stood up proudly in the sun,
 Each one. 75
 I stood upright too,
 Held rigid to the pattern
 By the stiffness of my gown.
 Up and down I walked.
 Up and down. 80
 In a month he would have been my husband.
 In a month, here, underneath this lime,
 We would have broken the pattern;
 He for me, and I for him,
 He as Colonel, I as Lady, 85
 On this shady seat.
 He had a whim
 That sunlight carried blessing.
 And I answered, "It shall be as you have said."
 Now he is dead. 90

²*se'nnight*: "Seven night," or a week ago Thursday.

In Summer and in Winter I shall walk
 Up and down
 The patterned garden-paths
 In my stiff, brocaded gown.
 The squills and daffodils 95
 Will give place to pillared roses, and to asters, and to snow.
 I shall go
 Up and down,
 In my gown.
 Gorgeously arrayed, 100
 Boned and stayed.
 And the softness of my body will be guarded from embrace
 By each button, hook, and lace.
 For the man who should loose me is dead,
 Fighting with the Duke in Flanders,³ 105
 In a pattern called a war.
 Christ! What are patterns for?

The speaker begins by describing herself walking down garden paths. She wears a stiff brocaded gown, has powdered hair, and carries a jeweled fan. By her own admission, she is “a plate of current fashion.” Although her tone is controlled, she is preoccupied by sensual thoughts. Beneath her “stiffened gown / Is the softness of a woman bathing in a marble basin,” and the “sliding of the water” in a fountain reminds the speaker of the stroking of her lover’s hand. She imagines herself shedding her brocaded gown and running with her lover along the maze of “patterned paths.” The sensuality of the speaker’s thoughts stands in ironic contrast to the images of stiffness and control that dominate the poem: her passion “Wars against the stiff brocade.” She is also full of repressed rage. She knows that her lover has been killed, and she realizes the meaninglessness of the patterns of her life, patterns to which she has conformed, just as her lover conformed by going to war. Throughout the poem, the speaker’s tone reflects her barely contained anger and frustration. In the last line, when she finally lets out her rage, the poem’s point about the senselessness of conformity and war becomes apparent.

³*Flanders*: A region in northwestern Europe, including part of northern France and western Belgium. Flanders was a site of prolonged fighting during World War I.

FURTHER READING: The Tone of the Poem



Triton blowing his horn (detail from Trevi fountain, Rome)
sootra/Shutterstock.com

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770–1850)

The World Is Too Much with Us (1807)

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon; 5
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn; 10
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus¹ rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton² blow his wreathed horn.

Reading and Reacting

1. What is the speaker's attitude toward the contemporary world? How is this attitude revealed through the poem's tone?
2. This poem is a **sonnet**, a highly structured traditional form. How do the regular meter and rhyme scheme help to establish the poem's tone?
3. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Imagine that you are a modern-day environmentalist, labor organizer, or corporate executive. Write a response to the sentiments expressed in this poem.
4. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In his 1972 essay "Two Roads to Wordsworth," M. H. Abrams notes that critics have tended to view Wordsworth in one of two ways:

One Wordsworth is simple, elemental, forthright, the other is complex, paradoxical, problematic; one is an affirmative poet of life, love, and joy, the other is an equivocal or self-divided poet whose affirmations are implicitly

¹*Proteus*: Sometimes said to be Poseidon's son, this Greek sea-god had the ability to change shape at will and to tell the future.

²*Triton*: The trumpeter of the sea, this sea-god is usually pictured blowing on a conch shell. Triton was the son of Poseidon, ruler of the sea.

qualified... by a pervasive sense of morality and an ever-incipient despair of life;... one is the Wordsworth of light, the other the Wordsworth of [shadow], or even darkness.

Does your reading of “The World Is Too Much with Us” support one of these versions of Wordsworth over the other? Which one? Why?

Related Works: “The Rocking-Horse Winner” (p. 409), “The Road Not Taken” (p. 624), “The Peace of Wild Things” (p. 717), “Dover Beach” (p. 737), “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (p. 798)

SYLVIA PLATH (1932–1963)

Morning Song (1962)

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

5

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

10

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

15

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

Reading and Reacting

1. Who is the speaker? To whom is she speaking? What does the poem reveal about her?
2. What is the poem's subject? What attitudes about this subject do you suppose the poet expects her readers to have?
3. How is the tone of the first stanza different from that of the third? How does the tone of each stanza reflect its content?

4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** In what sense does this poem reinforce traditional ideas about motherhood? How does it challenge them?
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Sylvia Plath's life, which ended in suicide, was marked by emotional turbulence and instability. As Anne Stevenson observes in *Bitter Fame*, her 1988 biography of Plath, in the weeks immediately preceding the composition of "Morning Song" a fit of rage over her husband's supposed infidelity caused Plath to destroy many of his books and poetic works in progress. Then, only a few days later, she suffered a miscarriage. According to Stevenson, "Morning Song" is about sleepless nights and surely reflects Plath's depression. However, in a 1991 biography, *Rough Magic*, Paul Alexander says, "Beautiful, simple, touching, 'Morning Song' was Plath's—then—definitive statement of motherhood."

Which biographer's assessment of the poem do you think makes more sense? Why?

Related Works: "The Yellow Wallpaper" (p. 434), "Metaphors" (p. 582), "Daddy" (p. 589), "Those Winter Sundays" (p. 705)



Gather Ye Rosebuds While Ye May (1909 oil painting)
 "Gather Ye Rosebuds While Ye May", 1909 (oil on canvas), Waterhouse, John William (1849–1917) / Private Collection / Photo © Odon Wagner Gallery, Toronto, Canada / Bridgeman Images

ROBERT HERRICK (1591–1634)

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time (1634)

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
 Old Time is still a-flying;
 And this same flower that smiles
 today,
 Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, 5
 the sun,
 The higher he's a-getting,
 The sooner will his race be run,
 And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first, 10
 When youth and blood are warmer;
 But being spent, the worse, and worst
 Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,
 And while ye may, go marry;
 For having lost but once your prime, 15
 You may forever tarry.

Reading and Reacting

1. How would you characterize the speaker? Do you think he expects his listeners to share his views? How might his expectations affect his tone?
2. This poem is developed like an argument. What is the speaker's main point? How does he support it?
3. What effect does the poem's use of rhyme have on its tone?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Whose side are you on—the speaker's or those he addresses?
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Critic Roger Rollin offers the following reading of the final stanza of “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”:

This last stanza makes it clear enough that to the speaker young women are coy by [custom or choice] rather than by nature. Their receptivity to love is under their control. The delaying tactics that social custom prescribes for them are self-defeating, threatening to waste life's most precious commodities—time, youth, and love.

Does Rollin's interpretation seem plausible to you? What evidence do you find in the final stanza, or elsewhere in the poem, that the virgins addressed are not naturally “coy” but rather are constrained by social convention?

Related Works: “Love and Other Catastrophes: A Mix Tape” (p. 84), “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” (p. 777), *The Brute* (p. 814), *The Date* (p. 1160)



Irony

Just as in fiction and drama, **irony** occurs in poetry when a discrepancy exists between two levels of meaning or experience. Consider the tone of the following lines by Stephen Crane:

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind.
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky
And the afrightened steed ran on alone,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Surely the speaker in this poem does not intend his words to be taken literally. How can war be “kind”? Isn't war exactly the opposite of “kind”? By making this ironic statement, the speaker actually conveys the opposite idea: war is a cruel, mindless exercise of violence.

Skillfully used, irony enables a poet to make a pointed comment about a situation or to manipulate a reader's emotions. Implicit in irony is the writer's assumption that readers will not be misled by the literal meaning of a

statement. In order for irony to work, readers must recognize the disparity between what is said and what is meant, or between what a speaker thinks is occurring and what readers know to be occurring.

One kind of irony that appears in poetry is **dramatic irony**, which occurs when a speaker believes one thing and readers realize something else. In the following poem, the poet uses a deranged speaker to tell a story that is filled with irony.

ROBERT BROWNING (1812–1889)

Porphyria's Lover (1836)

The rain set early in to-night,
 The sullen wind was soon awake,
 It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
 And did its worst to vex the lake:
 I listened with heart fit to break. 5

When glided in Porphyria; straight
 She shut the cold out and the storm,
 And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
 Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;
 Which done, she rose, and from her form 10

Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
 And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
 Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
 And, last, she sat down by my side
 And called me. When no voice replied, 15

She put my arm about her waist,
 And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
 And all her yellow hair displaced,
 And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
 And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair, 20

Murmuring how she loved me—she
 Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
 To set its struggling passion free
 From pride, and vainer ties dis sever,
 And give herself to me for ever. 25

But passion sometimes would prevail,
 Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain
 A sudden thought of one so pale
 For love of her, and all in vain:
 So, she was come through wind and rain. 30

Be sure I looked up at her eyes
 Happy and proud; at last I knew
 Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
 Made my heart swell, and still it grew
 While I debated what to do. 35
 That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
 Perfectly pure and good: I found
 A thing to do, and all her hair
 In one long yellow string I wound
 Three times her little throat around, 40
 And strangled her. No pain felt she;
 I am quite sure she felt no pain.
 As a shut bud that holds a bee,
 I warily oped her lids: again
 Laughed the blue eyes without a stain. 45
 And I untightened next the tress
 About her neck; her cheek once more
 Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:
 I propped her head up as before,
 Only, this time my shoulder bore 50
 Her head, which droops upon it still:
 The smiling rosy little head,
 So glad it has its utmost will,
 That all it scorned at once is fled,
 And I, its love, am gained instead! 55
 Porphyria's love: she guessed not how
 Her darling one wish would be heard.
 And thus we sit together now,
 And all night long we have not stirred,
 And yet God has not said a word! 60

Like Browning's "My Last Duchess" (p. 503), this poem is a **dramatic monologue**, a poem that assumes an implied listener as well as a speaker. The speaker recounts his story in a straightforward manner, seemingly unaware of the horror of his tale. In fact, much of the effect of this poem comes from the speaker's telling his tale of murder in a flat, unemotional tone—and from readers' gradual realization that the speaker is mad.

The irony of the poem, as well as its title, becomes apparent as the monologue progresses. At first, the speaker fears that Porphyria is too weak to free herself from pride and vanity to love him. As he looks into her eyes, however, he comes to believe that she worships him. The moment the speaker realizes that Porphyria loves him, he feels compelled to kill her and keep her his forever. According to him, she is at this point "mine, mine, fair, / Perfectly

pure and good,” and he believes that by murdering her, he actually fulfills “Her darling one wish”—to stay with him forever. As he attempts to justify his actions, the speaker reveals himself to be a deluded psychopathic killer.

Another kind of irony is **situational irony**, which occurs when the situation itself contradicts readers’ expectations. For example, in “Porphyria’s Lover” the meeting of two lovers ironically results not in joy and passion but in murder.

In the next poem, the situation also creates irony.



The Granger Collection, NYC

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY (1792–1822)

Ozymandias¹ (1818)

I met a traveler from an antique land
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, 5
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless
 things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart
 that fed;
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: 10
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

The speaker in “Ozymandias” recounts a tale about a colossal statue that lies shattered in the desert. Its head lies separated from the trunk, and the face has a wrinkled lip and a “sneer of cold command.” On the pedestal of the monument are words exhorting all those who pass: “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!” The situational irony of the poem has its source in the contrast between the “colossal wreck” and the boastful inscription on its base: Ozymandias is a monument to the vanity of those who mistakenly think they can withstand the ravages of time.

Perhaps the most common kind of irony found in poetry is **verbal irony**, which is created when words say one thing but mean another, often exactly

¹*Ozymandias*: The Greek name for Ramses II, ruler of Egypt in the thirteenth century B.C.



Head of Ramses II, possible inspiration for “Ozymandias”

© Roger Wood/CORBIS

the opposite. When verbal irony is particularly biting, it is called **sarcasm**—for example, Stephen Crane’s use of the word *kind* in his antiwar poem “War Is Kind.” In speech, verbal irony is easy to detect through the speaker’s change in tone or emphasis. In writing, when these signals are absent, verbal irony becomes more difficult to convey. Poets must depend on the context of a remark or on the contrast between a word and other images in the poem to create irony.

FURTHER READING: Irony

SHERMAN ALEXIE (1966–)

Evolution (1992)

Buffalo Bill¹ opens a pawn shop on the reservation
right across the border from the liquor store
and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

¹*Buffalo Bill*: Nickname of William Frederick Cody (1846–1917), soldier, showman, and hunter.

and the Indians come running in with jewelry
 television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded buckskin outfit 5
 it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. Buffalo Bill
 takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it
 all catalogued and filed in a storage room. The Indians
 pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last, they pawn
 their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin 10
 and when the last Indian has pawned everything
 but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks
 closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old
 calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN
 CULTURES
 charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter. 15

Reading and Reacting

1. In this poem, what is Buffalo Bill's relationship with the Indians? Why do you think Alexie introduces this historical figure?
2. What is the significance of the poem's title? Is it ironic in any way?
3. Identify several examples of irony in this poem. What different kinds of irony are present?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** What point do you think the speaker is making about American culture? about Native American culture?
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In an essay on Sherman Alexie's poetry, critic Jennifer Gillan notes that Alexie is "a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian from Washington State" and goes on to discuss the ways in which this fact informs his work:

From a tribe neither Plains nor Pueblo, which few would associate with the Hollywood version of American Indians, Alexie wonders whether his people ever had access to the authenticity all America seems to associate with Indians. Alienated from their American Indian culture as well as from America, the characters in Alexie's poetry and prose collections want to believe in the wisdom of old Indian prophets, want to return to the "old ways," but know that doing so will just trap them inside another clichéd Hollywood narrative.

In what sense, if any, are the Indians portrayed in "Evolution" "trapped"? Are they "alienated" from both their own culture and the broader American culture?

Related Works: "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" (p. 205), "Where Mountain Lion Lay Down with Deer" (p. 506), "The English Canon" (p. 548), "Buffalo Bill's" (p. 750), "Indian Boarding School: The Runaways" (p. 763), *The Cuban Swimmer* (p. 1166)

SANDRA M. CASTILLO (1962–)

Castro¹ Moves into the Havana Hilton*

"History always dresses us for the wrong occasions."

—Ricardo Pau-Llosa

*Camera Obscura*²

The afternoon lightening his shadow,
Fidel descends from the mountains,
the clean-shaven lawyer turned guerilla,
his eyes focused on infinity,
El Jefe Máximo con sus Barbudos,³ 5
rebels with rosary beads
on their 600-mile procession across the island
with campesinos⁴ on horseback, flatbed trucks, tanks,
a new year's journey down the oldest roads
towards betrayal. 10

*Ambient light.*⁵ *Available light*⁶

Light inside of them,
nameless isleños⁷ line El Malecón⁸ to touch Fidel,
already defining himself in black and white.
The dramatic sky moving in for the close-up
that will frame his all-night oratory, 15
he turns to the crowd,
variations on an enigma,
waving from his pulpit with rehearsed eloquence,
a dove on his shoulder.

This is a photograph. This is not a sign. 20

*Publication date unavailable.

¹Castro: Fidel Castro (1962–), head of the Cuban government from 1959 to 2008.

²Camera Obscura: A simple device for projecting images.

³El Jefe Máximo con sus Barbudos: Spanish for "the big boss with his bearded companions."

⁴campesinos: Spanish for "farmers."

⁵Ambient light: A photographic term meaning either the natural light available in a given setting, or the minimal light from a single source provided by a photographer.

⁶Available light: A photographic term meaning the natural light available in a given setting.

⁷isleños: Spanish for "islanders."

⁸El Malecón: A long, wide street in Havana, Cuba.

Flash-on camera. Celebrity portraits.

1. Fidel on a balcony across the street
from Grand Central Station,
an American flag above his head,
New York, 1959.
2. Fidel made small by the Lincoln Memorial,
Washington D.C., 1959. 25
3. Fidel learning to ski,
a minor black ball against a white landscape,
Russia, 1962.
4. Fidel and shotgun,
hunting with Nikita,⁹
Russia, 1962. 30

Circles of Confusion

Beyond photographs,
Havana is looted and burned.
Women weep at out wailing wall,
El Paredón,¹⁰ where traitors are taken,
and television cameras shoot
the executions, this blood soup,
the paradoxes of our lives,
three years before I am born. 35 40

*Photoflood*¹¹

But it is late afternoon,
and a shower of confetti and serpentine¹²
falls from every floor of the Havana Hilton,
where history is a giant piñata,
where at midnight, Fidel will be photographed
eating a ham sandwich. 45

⁹*Nikita*: Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971), leader of the Soviet Union from 1953 to 1964.

¹⁰*El Paredón*: A wall in Havana where executions were carried out.

¹¹*Photoflood*: An extremely bright floodlight used in photography and cinematography.

¹²*serpentine*: A coiled type of party streamer.



New York Daily News Archive/Getty Images

Fidel Castro in New York, April 1959.

Reading and Reacting

1. The Havana Hilton was built in 1957. The majority of the hotel was owned by Meyer Lansky, a major organized crime figure, who paid the Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista, a share of the profits. When Fidel Castro overthrew Batista in 1959, Castro made the hotel his headquarters. Why do you think Castillo chooses to focus on this hotel? What point do you think that she is trying to make?
2. In the section of the poem entitled "Flash-on camera. Celebrity portraits," Castillo describes four pictures of Castro along with the dates they were taken. What do these pictures show about Castro?
3. What does Castillo mean when she says that at the Havana Hilton "history is a giant piñata"?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** What is Castillo's attitude toward Castro? How can you tell?

Related Works: from *Persepolis* (p. 111), "Hitler's First Photograph" (p. 530), *The Cuban Swimmer* (p. 1166)

AGHA SHAHID ALI (1949–2001)

The Wolf's Postscript to "Little Red Riding Hood"*

First, grant me my sense of history:
I did it for posterity,
for kindergarten teachers
and a clear moral:
Little girls shouldn't wander off

5

*Publication date unavailable.

in search of strange flowers,
and they mustn't speak to strangers.

And then grant me my generous sense of plot:
Couldn't I have gobbled her up
right there in the jungle? 10

Why did I ask her where her grandma lived?
As if I, a forest-dweller,
didn't know of the cottage
under the three oak trees
and the old woman lived there
all alone? 15

As if I couldn't have swallowed her years before?

And you may call me the Big Bad Wolf,
now my only reputation.
But I was no child-molester 20
though you'll agree she was pretty.

And the huntsman:
Was I sleeping while he snipped
my thick black fur
and filled me with garbage and stones? 25
I ran with that weight and fell down,
simply so children could laugh
at the noise of the stones
cutting through my belly,
at the garbage spilling out
with a perfect sense of timing,
just when the tale
should have come to an end. 30

Reading and Reacting

1. How does Ali portray the Big Bad Wolf? How is this characterization different from the one in the classic fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood"?
2. How would you describe the tone of this poem? How does Ali create this tone?
3. The wolf says that he "did it for posterity" and "for kindergarten teachers." What does he mean?
4. Why does the wolf think that he needs to add a postscript to "Little Red Riding Hood"?
5. **JOURNAL ENTRY** What "clear moral" does the poem have? In what sense is this moral ironic?

Related Works: “Gretel in Darkness” (p. 501), “Porphyria’s Lover” (p. 520), “The Chimney Sweeper” (p. 738), *Beauty* (p. 831)

DUDLEY RANDALL (1914–2000)

Ballad of Birmingham (1969)

(On the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963)

“Mother dear, may I go downtown
 Instead of out to play,
 And march the streets of Birmingham
 In a Freedom March today?”
 “No, baby, no, you may not go, 5
 For the dogs are fierce and wild,
 And clubs and hoses, guns and jails
 Aren’t good for a little child.”
 “But, mother, I won’t be alone.
 Other children will go with me, 10
 And march the streets of Birmingham
 To make our country free.”
 “No, baby, no, you may not go,
 For I fear those guns will fire.
 But you may go to church instead 15
 And sing in the children’s choir.”
 She has combed and brushed her night-dark hair,
 And bathed rose petal sweet,
 And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,
 And white shoes on her feet. 20
 The mother smiled to know her child
 Was in the sacred place,
 But that smile was the last smile
 To come upon her face. 25
 For when she heard the explosion,
 Her eyes grew wet and wild.
 She raced through the streets of Birmingham
 Calling for her child.
 She clawed through bits of glass and brick,
 Then lifted out a shoe. 30
 “O, here’s the shoe my baby wore,
 But, baby, where are you?”

Reading and Reacting

1. Who are the speakers in the poem? How do their tones differ?
2. What kinds of irony are present in the poem? Give examples of each kind you identify.
3. What point do you think the poem makes about violence? about racial hatred? about the civil rights struggle?
4. This poem is a **ballad**, a form of poetry traditionally written to be sung or recited. Ballads typically repeat words and phrases and have regular meter and rhyme. How do the regular rhyme, repeated words, and singsong meter affect the poem's tone?
5. **JOURNAL ENTRY** This poem was written in response to the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, a bomb that killed four African American children. How does this historical background help you to understand the irony of the poem?
6. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Speaking of “Ballad of Birmingham,” critic James Sullivan says, “This poem uses the ballad convention of the innocent questioner and the wiser respondent (the pattern of, for example, ‘Lord Randall’ and ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ [p. 771]), but it changes the object of knowledge from fate to racial politics. The child is the conventional innocent, while the mother understands the violence of this political moment.”

How does Randall's use of these ballad conventions help him create irony?

Related Works: “Bonny Barbara Allan” (p. 734), “If We Must Die” (p. 778), *Fences* (p. 1270)



Adolph Hitler as a baby
The Granger Collection, NYC

WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA (1923–)

Hitler's First Photograph (1986)

And who's this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?
That's tiny baby Adolf, the Hitler's little boy!
Will he grow up to be an LL.D.¹
Or a tenor in Vienna's Opera House?
Whose teensy hand is this, whose little ear and
eye and nose?
Whose tummy full of milk, we just don't know:
printer's, doctor's, merchant's, priest's?
Where will those tootsy-wootsies finally wander?

¹LL.D.: *Legum Doctor*, or Doctor of Law.

To garden, to school, to an office, to a bride,
maybe to the Burgermeister's² daughter? 10

Precious little angel, mommy's sunshine, honeybun,
while he was being born a year ago,
there was no dearth of signs on the earth and in the sky:
spring sun, geraniums in windows,
the organ-grinder's music in the yard, 15
a lucky fortune wrapped in rosy paper,
then just before the labor his mother's fateful dream:
a dove seen in dream means joyful news,
if it is caught, a long-awaited guest will come.
Knock knock, who's there, it's Adolf's heartchen³ knocking. 20

A little pacifier, diaper, rattle, bib,
our bouncing boy, thank God and knock on wood, is well,
looks just like his folks, like a kitten in a basket,
like the tots in every other family album.
Shush, let's not start crying, sugar, 25
the camera will click from under that black hood.

The Klinger Atelier,⁴ Grabenstrasse,⁵ Braunau,⁶
and Braunau is small but worthy town,
honest businesses, obliging neighbors,
smell of yeast dough, of gray soap. 30
No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps.
A history teacher loosens his collar
and yawns over homework.

Reading and Reacting

1. What attitude toward her subject does the speaker expect readers to have? How do you know? How much information about Hitler does she expect readers to know?
2. Throughout the poem, the speaker speaks to baby Hitler as she would to any other baby. How do words like “angel,” sunshine,” “honeybun,” and “sugar” create irony in the poem?
3. What does the speaker mean in line 31 of the poem when she says, “No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps”?

²*Burgermeister*: An executive of a town in Germany.

³*heartchen*: A partial translation of a German word meaning “little heart.”

⁴*Klinger Atelier*: Painting of Max Klinger's artist's studio.

⁵*Grabenstrasse*: Street in Austria.

⁶*Braunau*: Birthplace of Hitler in Austria-Hungary.

4. Why does the poem end with the image of a history teacher loosening his tie and yawning? What effect does this image have on you?
5. **JOURNAL ENTRY** What point do you think Szyborska is making in this poem? How does irony help her make this point?
6. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Speaking of “Hitler’s First Photograph,” critic Alan Reid makes this observation:

“Hitler’s First Photograph” is one of the most chilling poetic inspections of the psychopathological phenomena associated with its namesake and Nazism ever written. By describing Hitler in his first year of life from the perspective of his parents (any parents), [Szyborska] jolts us out of our complacency around the question of how this could have happened. . . . She prods us to question whether the signs were there and, if they were not, to ask what gives rise to such abominations and to recognize the need to be vigilant.

Do you agree with Reid’s assessment of the poem? Why or why not?

Related Works: “I Stand Here Ironing” (p. 217), “Young Goodman Brown” (p. 367), “What Shall I Give My Children?” (p. 553), “The Lamb” (p. 739), “Daddy” (p. 589), “Those Winter Sundays” (p. 705)

✓ CHECKLIST Writing about Voice

The Speaker in the Poem

- What do we know about the speaker?
- Is the speaker anonymous, or does he or she have a particular identity?
- How does assuming a particular persona help the poet to convey his or her ideas?
- Does the title give readers any information about the speaker’s identity?
- How does word choice provide information about the speaker?
- Does the speaker make any direct statements to readers that help establish his or her identity or character?
- Does the speaker address anyone? How can you tell? How does the presence of a listener affect the speaker?

The Tone of the Poem

- What is the speaker’s attitude toward his or her subject?

- How do word choice, rhyme, meter, sentence structure, figures of speech, and imagery help to convey the attitude of the speaker?
- Is the poem's tone consistent? How do shifts in tone reveal the changing mood or attitude of the speaker?

Irony

- Does the poem include dramatic irony? situational irony? verbal irony?

WRITING SUGGESTIONS: Voice

1. The poet Robert Frost once said that he wanted to write “poetry that talked.” According to Frost, “whenever I write a line it is because that line has already been spoken clearly by a voice within my mind, an audible voice.” Choose some poems in this chapter (or from elsewhere in the book) that you consider “poetry that talks.” Then, write an essay about how successful they are in communicating “an audible voice.”
2. Compare the speakers' voices in “Patterns” (p. 512), and “Gretel in Darkness” (p. 501). How are their attitudes toward men similar? How are they different?
3. The theme of Herrick's poem “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” (p. 518) is known as **carpe diem**, or “seize the day.” Read Andrew Marvell's “To His Coy Mistress” (p. 594), which has the same theme, and compare its tone with that of “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.”
4. Because the speaker and the poet are not the same, poems by the same author can have different voices. Compare the voices of several poems by one poet—for example, Sylvia Plath, W. H. Auden, Robert Frost, or William Blake—whose works are included in this anthology.



WORD CHOICE, WORD ORDER

Adrienne Rich

AP Images/Chuck Knoblock



Margaret Atwood

AP Images/Dave Thomson



E. E. Cummings

Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy



Gwendolyn Brooks

Bill Tague



Duffy-Marie Amout/WinelImage/Getty Images

BOB HOLMAN (1948–)

Beautiful (2002)

January 3, 2002

Dear Bob,
You are not allowed to use
the word “beautiful” in a poem
this year.

Signed,
The Rest of the World
Except for You

Words identify and name, characterize and distinguish, compare and contrast. Words describe, limit, and embellish; words locate and measure. Even though words may be elusive and uncertain and changeable, a single word—such as Holman’s “beautiful” in the poem on the preceding page—can also be meaningful. In poetry, as in love and in politics, words matter.

Beyond the quantitative—how many words, how many letters and syllables—is a much more important consideration: the *quality* of words. Which words are chosen, and why? Why are certain words placed next to others? What does a word suggest in a particular context? How are the words arranged? What exactly constitutes the “right word”?

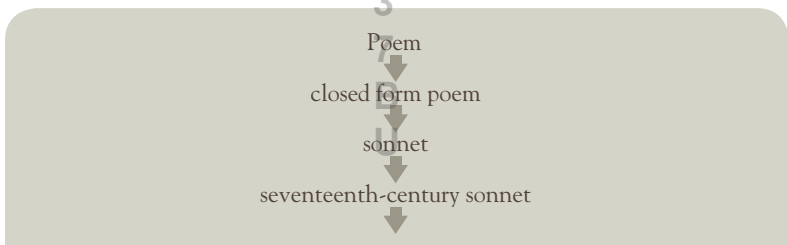


Word Choice

In poetry, even more than in fiction or drama, words are the focus—sometimes even the true subject—of a work. For this reason, the choice of one word over another can be crucial. Because poems are brief, they must compress many ideas into just a few lines; poets know how much weight each individual word carries, so they choose with great care, trying to select words that imply more than they state.

In general, poets (like prose writers) select words because they communicate particular ideas. However, poets may also choose words for their sound. For instance, a word may echo another word’s sound, and such repetition may place emphasis on both words; a word may rhyme with another word and therefore be needed to preserve the poem’s rhyme scheme; or a word may have a certain combination of stressed and unstressed syllables needed to maintain the poem’s metrical pattern. Occasionally, a poet may even choose a word because of how it looks on the page.

At the same time, poets may choose words for their degree of concreteness or abstraction, specificity or generality. A **concrete word** refers to an item that is a perceivable, tangible entity—for example, a kiss or a flag. An **abstract word** refers to an intangible idea, condition, or quality, something that cannot be perceived by the senses—love or patriotism, for instance. **Specific words** refer to particular items; **general words** refer to entire classes or groups of items. The following sequence illustrates the movement from general to specific.



Elizabethan sonnet
 ↓
 sonnet by Shakespeare
 ↓
 “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”

Sometimes a poet wants a precise word, one that is both specific and concrete. At other times, a poet might prefer general or abstract language, which may allow for more subtlety—or even for intentional ambiguity.

Finally, a word may be chosen for its **connotation**—what it suggests. Every word has one or more **denotations**—what it signifies without emotional associations, judgments, or opinions. The word *family*, for example, denotes “a group of related things or people.” Connotation is a more complex matter; after all, a single word may have many different associations. In general terms, a word may have a connotation that is positive, neutral, or negative. Thus, *family* may have a positive connotation when it describes a group of loving relatives, a neutral connotation when it describes a biological category, and an ironically negative connotation when it describes an organized crime family. Beyond this distinction, *family*, like any other word, may have a variety of emotional and social associations, suggesting loyalty, warmth, home, security, or duty. In fact, many words have somewhat different meanings in different contexts. When poets choose words, then, they must consider what a particular word may suggest to readers as well as what it denotes.

In the poem that follows, the poet chooses words for their sounds and for their relationships to other words as well as for their connotations.

WALT WHITMAN (1819–1892)

When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer (1865)

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
 When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
 measure them,
 When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much
 applause in the lecture-room,
 How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
 Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
 Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

5

This poem might be paraphrased as follows: “When I grew restless listening to an astronomy lecture, I went outside, where I found I learned more just by looking at the stars than I had learned inside.” However, the paraphrase is

obviously neither as rich nor as complex as the poem. Through careful use of diction, Whitman establishes a dichotomy that supports the poem's central theme about the relative merits of two ways of learning.

The poem can be divided into two groups of four lines each. The first four lines, unified by the repetition of "When," introduce the astronomer and his tools: "proofs," "figures," and "charts and diagrams" to be added, divided, or measured. In this section of the poem, the speaker is passive: he sits and listens ("I heard"; "I was shown"; "I sitting heard"). The repetition of "When" reinforces the dry monotony of the lecture. In the next four lines, the choice of words signals the change in the speaker's actions and reactions. The confined lecture hall is replaced by "the mystical moist night-air," and the dry lecture and the applause give way to "perfect silence"; instead of sitting passively, the speaker becomes active (he rises, glides, wanders); instead of listening, he looks. The mood of the first half of the poem is restrained: the language is concrete and physical, and the speaker is passively receiving information from a "learn'd" authority. The rest of the poem, celebrating intuitive knowledge and feelings, is more abstract, freer. Throughout the poem, the lecture hall is set in sharp contrast to the natural world outside its walls.

After considering the poem as a whole, readers should not find it hard to understand why the poet selected certain words. Whitman's use of "lectured" in line 4 rather than a more neutral word like "spoke" is appropriate both because it suggests formality and distance and because it echoes "lecture-room" in the same line. The word "sick" in line 5 is striking because it connotes physical as well as emotional distress, more effectively conveying the extent of the speaker's discomfort than "bored" or "restless" would. "Rising" and "gliding" (line 6) are used rather than "standing" and "walking out" both because of the way their stressed vowel sounds echo each other (and echo "time to time" in the next line) and because of their connotation of dreaminess, which is consistent with "wander'd" (line 6) and "mystical" (line 7). The word "moist" (line 7) is chosen not only because its consonant sounds echo the *m* and *st* sounds in "mystical," but also because it establishes a contrast with the dry, airless lecture hall. Finally, line 8's "perfect silence" is a better choice than a reasonable substitute like "complete silence" or "total silence," either of which would suggest the degree of the silence but not its quality.

FURTHER READING: Word Choice

RHINA ESPAILLAT (1932–)

Bilingual/Bilingüe (1998)

My father liked them separate, one there,
one here (allá y aquí), as if aware
that words might cut in two his daughter's heart
(el corazón) and lock the alien part

to what he was—his memory, his name 5
 (su nombre)—with a key he could not claim.
 “English outside this door, Spanish inside,”
 he said, “y basta.”¹ But who can divide
 the world, the word (mundo y palabra) from
 any child? I knew how to be dumb 10
 and stubborn (testaruda); late, in bed,
 I hoarded secret syllables I read
 until my tongue (mi lengua) learned to run
 where his stumbled. And still the heart was one.
 I like to think he knew that, even when, 15
 proud (orgullosa) of his daughter’s pen,
 he stood outside mis versos,² half in fear
 of words he loved but wanted not to hear.

Reading and Reacting

1. Why do you think the poet includes parenthetical Spanish translations in this poem? Are they necessary? Why do you think the Spanish words “y basta” (line 8) and “mis versos” (line 17) are not translated as the others are?
2. Some of the words in this poem might be seen as having more than one connotation. Consider, for example, “alien” (line 4), “word” (line 9), “dumb” (line 10), and “syllables” (line 12). What meanings could each of these words have? Which meaning do you think the poet intended them to have?
3. What is the relationship between “the word” and “the world” in this poem?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** What is the father’s fear? Do you think this fear is justified? Why do you think he doesn’t want to hear his daughter’s words?

Related Works: “The Secret Lion” (p. 466), “Two Kinds” (p. 471), “Baca Grande” (p. 545), “Find Work” (p. 645)



AP Images/Chuck Knoblock

ADRIENNE RICH (1929–)

Living in Sin (1955)

She had thought the studio would keep itself,
 no dust upon the furniture of love.
 Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,
 the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,
 a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat

5

¹ “y basta.”: and enough.

² *mis versos*: my poems.

stalking the picturesque amusing mouse
had risen at his urging.

Not that at five each separate stair would writhe
under the milkman's tramp; that morning light
so coldly would delineate the scraps
of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;
that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers
a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own—
envoy from some black village in the mouldings . . .

Meanwhile, he, with a yawn,
sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,
declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,
rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;
while she, jeered by the minor demons,
pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found
a towel to dust the table-top,
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.

By evening she was back in love again,
though not so wholly but throughout the night
she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming
like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

10

15

20

25



1950s milkman making delivery

Philip Gendreau/© Bettmann/Corbis

Reading and Reacting

1. How might the poem's impact change if each of these words were deleted: "Persian" (line 5), "picturesque" (line 6), "sepulchral" (line 11), "minor" (line 19), "sometimes" (line 25)?
2. What words in the poem have strongly negative connotations? What do these words suggest about the relationship the poem describes? How does the image of the "relentless milkman" (line 26) sum up this relationship?
3. This poem, about a woman in love, uses very few words conventionally associated with love poems. Instead, many of its words denote the everyday routine of housekeeping. Give examples of such words. Why do you think they are used?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** What connotations does the title have? What other phrases have similar denotative meanings? How do their connotations differ? Why do you think Rich chose the title "Living in Sin"?
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In "Her Cargo: Adrienne Rich and the Common Language," a 1979 essay examining the poet's work over almost thirty years, Alicia Ostriker offers the following analysis of Rich's early poems, including "Living in Sin":

They seem about to state explicitly... a connection between feminine subordination in male-dominated middle-class relationships, and emotionally lethal inarticulateness for both sexes. But the poetry... is minor because it is polite. It illustrates symptoms but does not probe sources. There is no disputing the ideas of the predecessors, and Adrienne Rich at this point is a cautious good poet in the sense of being a good girl, a quality noted with approval by her reviewers.

Does your reading of "Living in Sin" support Ostriker's characterization of the poem as "polite" and "cautious"? Do you think Rich is "being a good girl"?

Related Works: "Hills Like White Elephants" (p. 74), "Love and Other Catastrophies: A Mix Tape" (p. 84), "The Storm" (p. 199), "What lips my lips have kissed" (p. 720)



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E. E. CUMMINGS (1894–1962)

in Just-¹ (1923)

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman
whistles far and wee

5

¹*in Just-*: This poem is also known as "Chansons Innocentes I."

and eddieandbill come
 running from marbles and
 piracies and it's
 spring
 when the world is puddle-wonderful 10
 the queer
 old balloonman whistles
 far and wee
 and bettyandisbel come dancing
 from hop-sotch and jump-rope and 15
 it's
 spring
 and
 the
 goat-footed 20
 balloonMan whistles
 far
 and
 wee

Reading and Reacting

1. In this poem, Cummings coins a number of words that he uses to modify other words. Identify these coinages. What other, more conventional, words could be used in their place? What does Cummings accomplish by using the coined words instead?
2. What do you think Cummings means by “far and wee” in lines 5, 13, and 22–24? Why do you think he arranges these three words in a different way on the page each time he uses them?
3. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Evaluate this poem. Do you like it? Is it memorable? moving? Or is it just clever?
4. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In “Latter-Day Notes on E. E. Cummings' Language” (1955), Robert E. Maurer suggests that Cummings often coined new words in the same way that children do: for example, “by adding the normal *-er* or *-est* (*beautifuler*, *chiefest*), or stepping up the power of a word such as *last*, which is already superlative, and saying *lastest*,” creating words such as *givingest* and *whirlingest*. In addition to “combining two or more words to form a single new one . . . to give an effect of wholeness, of one quality” (for example, *yellowgreen*), “in the simplest of his word coinages, he merely creates a new word by analogy as a child would without adding any shade of meaning other than that inherent in the prefix or suffix he utilizes, as in the words

unstrength and *untimid*....” Many early reviewers, Maurer notes, criticized such coinages because they “convey a thrill but not a precise impression,” a criticism also leveled at Cummings’s poetry more broadly.

Consider the coinages in “in Just-.” Do you agree that many do not add “shades of meaning” or provide a “precise impression”? Or, do you find that the coinages contribute to the poem in a meaningful way?

Related Works: “The Secret Lion” (p. 466), “anyone lived in a pretty how town” (p. 555), “Constantly Risking Absurdity” (p. 578), “Jabberwocky” (p. 629), “the sky was can dy” (p. 662)

FRANCISCO X. ALARCÓN (1954–)

“Mexican” Is Not a Noun (2002)

*to forty-six UC Santa Cruz students and
seven faculty arrested in Watsonville for
showing solidarity with two thousand
striking cannery workers who were mostly
Mexican women, October 27, 1985*

“Mexican”
is not
a noun
or an
adjective 5

“Mexican”
is a life
long
low-paying
job 10

a check
mark on
a welfare
police
form 15

more than
a word
a nail in
the soul
but 20

D
D
E
L
I
F
F
A
N
Y

6
9
3
7
B
U

Learning®

it hurts
 it points
 it dreams
 it offends
 it cries 25

it moves
 it strikes
 it burns
 just like
 a verb 30

Reading and Reacting

1. According to the speaker, the word *Mexican* is “not / a noun / or an / adjective” (lines 3–5). What part of speech does he see it as? Why?
2. What is gained by isolating the word *Mexican* on its own line in lines 1 and 6? by repeating the word?
3. In what sense is the word *Mexican* “a nail in / the soul” (18–19)? Why is it “more than / a word” (16–17)?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Write a paragraph in which you define the word *Mexican* by elaborating on the speaker’s characterizations.

Related Works: “The Secret Lion” (p. 466), “Reapers” (p. 571), “The Carpet Factory” (p. 643), “La Migra” (p. 778)



Levels of Diction

The diction of a poem may be formal or informal or fall anywhere in between, depending on the identity of the speaker and on the speaker’s attitude toward the reader and toward his or her subject. At one extreme, very formal poems can seem lofty and dignified, far removed in style and vocabulary from everyday speech. At the other extreme, highly informal poems can be full of jargon, regionalisms, and slang. Many poems, of course, use language that falls somewhere between formal and informal diction.

Formal diction is characterized by a learned vocabulary and grammatically correct forms. In general, formal diction does not include colloquialisms, such as contractions and shortened word forms (*phone* for *telephone*). As the following poem illustrates, a speaker who uses formal diction can sound aloof and impersonal.



AP Images/Dave Thomson

MARGARET ATWOOD (1939–)**The City Planners** (1966)

Cruising these residential Sunday
 streets in dry August sunlight:
 what offends us is
 the sanities:
 the houses in pedantic rows, the planted 5
 sanitary trees, assert
 levelness of surface like a rebuke
 to the dent in our car door.
 No shouting here, or
 shatter of glass; nothing more abrupt 10
 than the rational whine of a power mower
 cutting a straight swath in the discouraged grass.
 But though the driveways neatly
 sidestep hysteria
 by being even, the roofs all display 15
 the same slant of avoidance to the hot sky,
 certain things:
 the smell of spilled oil a faint
 sickness lingering in the garages,
 a splash of paint on brick surprising as a bruise, 20
 a plastic hose poised in a vicious
 coil; even the too-fixed stare of the wide windows
 give momentary access to
 the landscape behind or under
 the future cracks in the plaster 25
 when the houses, capsized, will slide
 obliquely into the clay seas, gradual as glaciers
 that right now nobody notices.
 That is where the City Planners
 with the insane faces of political conspirators 30
 are scattered over unsurveyed
 territories, concealed from each other,
 each in his own private blizzard;
 guessing directions, they sketch
 transitory lines rigid as wooden borders 35
 on a wall in the white vanishing air
 tracing the panic of suburb
 order in a bland madness of snows.



1950s suburban housing development

Masterfile

Atwood's speaker is clearly concerned about the poem's central issue, but rather than use *I*, the poem uses the first-person plural (*us*) to convey some degree of emotional detachment. Although phrases such as "sickness lingering in the garages" and "insane faces of political conspirators" clearly communicate the speaker's disapproval, formal words—"pedantic," "rebuke," "display," "poised," "obliquely," "conspirators," "transitory"—help her to maintain her distance. Both the speaker herself and her attack on the misguided city planners gain credibility through her balanced, measured tone and through her use of language that is as formal and "professional" as theirs.

Informal diction is the language closest to everyday conversation. It includes **colloquialisms**—contractions, shortened word forms, and the like—and may also include slang, regional expressions, and even nonstandard words.

In the poem that follows, the speaker uses informal diction to highlight the contrast between James Baca, a law student speaking to the graduating class of his old high school, and the graduating seniors.

JIM SAGEL (1947–1998)

Baca Grande¹

Una vaca se topó con un ratón y le dice:

"Tú—¿tan chiquito y con bigote?" Y le responde el ratón:

"Y tú tan grandota—¿y sin brassiere?"²

¹*Baca Grande*: *Baca* is both a phonetic spelling of the Spanish word *vaca* (cow) and the last name of one of the poem's characters. *Grande* means "large."

²*Una ... brassiere?*: A cow ran into a rat and said: "You—so small and with a moustache?" The rat responded: "And you—so big and without a bra?"

It was nearly a miracle
 James Baca remembered anyone at all
 from the old hometown gang
 having been two years at Yale
 no less 5
 and halfway through law school
 at the University of California at Irvine
 They hardly recognized him either
 in his three-piece grey business suit
 and surfer-swirl haircut 10
 with just the menacing hint
 of a tightly trimmed Zapata moustache
 for cultural balance
 and relevance
 He had come to deliver the keynote address 15
 to the graduating class of 80
 at his old alma mater
 and show off his well-trained lips
 which laboriously parted
 each Kennedyish “R” 20
 and drilled the first person pronoun
 through the microphone
 like an oil bit
 with the slick, elegantly honed phrases
 that slid so smoothly 25
 off his meticulously bleached
 tongue
 He talked Big Bucks
 with astronautish fervor and if he
 the former bootstrapless James A. Baca 30
 could dazzle the ass
 off the universe
 then even you
 yes you
 Joey Martinez toying with your yellow 35
 tassle
 and staring dumbly into space
 could emulate Mr. Baca someday
 possibly
 well 40
 there was of course

such a thing
 as being an outrageously successful
 gas station attendant too
 let us never forget 45
 it doesn't really matter what you do
 so long as you excel
 James said
 never believing a word
 of it 50
 for he had already risen
 as high as they go
 Wasn't nobody else
 from this deprived environment
 who'd ever jumped 55
 straight out of college
 into the Governor's office
 and maybe one day
 he'd sit in that big chair
 himself 60
 and when he did
 he'd forget this damned town
 and all the petty little people
 in it
 once and for all 65
 That much he promised himself

“Baca Grande” uses numerous colloquialisms, including contractions; conversational placeholders, such as “no less” and “well”; shortened word forms, such as “gas”; slang terms, such as “Big Bucks”; whimsical coinages (“Kennedyish,” “astronautish,” “bootstrapless”); nonstandard grammatical constructions, such as “Wasn’t nobody else”; and even profanity. The level of language is perfectly appropriate for the poem’s speaker, one of the students Baca addresses—suspicious, streetwise, and unimpressed by Baca’s “three-piece grey business suit” and “surfer-swirl haircut.” In fact, the informal diction is a key element in the poem, expressing the gap between the slick James Baca, with “his well-trained lips / which laboriously parted / each Kennedyish ‘R’” and members of his audience, with their unpretentious, forthright speech—and also the gap between Baca as he is today and the student he once was. In this sense, “Baca Grande” is as much a linguistic commentary as a social one.

FURTHER READING: Levels of Diction**ADRIENNE SU** (1967–)**The English Canon**¹ (2000)

It's not that the first speakers left out women
Unless they were goddesses, harlots, or impossible loves
Seen from afar, often while bathing,

And it's not that the only parts my grandfathers
could have played
Were as extras in Xanadu²
Nor that it gives no instructions for shopping or cooking.

The trouble is, I've spent my life
Getting over the lyrics
That taught me to brush my hair till it's gleaming,

Stay slim, dress tastefully, and not speak of sex,
Death, violence, or the desire for any of them,
And to let men do the talking and warring

And bringing of the news. I know a girl's got to protest
These days, but she also has to make money
And do her share of journalism and combat,

And she has to know from the gut whom to trust,
Because what do her teachers know, living in books,
And what does she know, starting from scratch?

Reading and Reacting

1. What criticisms does the speaker have of the traditional English literary canon?
2. List the words and expressions that identify this poem's diction as informal. Given the poem's subject and theme, do you think this informal language (and the speaker's use of contractions) is a strength or a weakness?

¹*English Canon*: Those works in English traditionally thought worthy of study.

²*Xanadu*: The summer capital of the emperor Kublai Khan; also the setting for the poem "Kubla Khan" (p. 747) by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

3. What does the speaker mean when she says, “The trouble is, I’ve spent my life / Getting over the lyrics” (7–8)?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Reread the poem’s last two lines. What does the speaker know that her teachers do not know? What do her teachers know that she does not know?
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In her essay “Teaching Literature: Canon, Controversy, and the Literary Anthology,” Barbara Mujica discusses the way in which literary anthologies (like this one) naturally tend to create lists of works, known as **canons**, that are considered to be of especially high quality:

“Anthology”. . . is from the Greek word for “collection of flowers,” a term implying selection. The very format of an anthology prompts canon formation . . . Anthologies convey the notion of evolution (the succession of literary movements) and hierarchy (the recognition of masterpieces). They create and reform canons, establish literary reputations, and help institutionalize the national culture, which they reflect.

How would you characterize the attitude of the speaker in “The English Canon” toward the process that Mujica describes? What is your own attitude toward the idea of canons in literature? Do you think some works can be said to be indisputably better than others?

Related Works: “Gryphon” (p. 172), “The Secretary Chant” (p. 584), “Aristotle” (p. 685), “Theme for English B” (p. 770)

MARK HALLIDAY (1949–)

The Value of Education (2000)

I go now to the library. When I sit in the library
I am not illegally dumping bags of kitchen garbage
in the dumpster behind Clippinger Laboratory,
and a very pissed-off worker at Facilities Management
is not picking through my garbage and finding
several yogurt-stained and tomato-sauce-stained envelopes
with my name and address on them.

5

When I sit in the library,
I might doze off a little,
and what I read might not penetrate my head
which is mostly porridge in a bowl of bone.
However, when I sit there trying to read

10

I am not, you see, somewhere else being a hapless ass.
 I am not leaning on the refrigerator
 in the apartment of a young female colleague 15
 chatting with oily pep
 because I imagine she may suddenly decide to
 do sex with me while her boyfriend is on a trip.
 Instead I am in the library! Sitting still!
 No one in town is approaching my chair 20
 with a summons, or a bill, or a huge fist.
 This is good. You may say,
 “But this is merely a negative definition of
 the value of education.” Maybe so,
 but would you be able to say that 25
 if you hadn’t been to the library?

Reading and Reacting

1. Who is the speaker? What does he reveal about himself? Whom might he be addressing?
2. How is the speaker’s life outside the library different from the life he leads inside the library?
3. In lines 23–24, the speaker imagines a challenge to his comments. Do you think this challenge is valid? What do you think of the speaker’s reply?
4. What phrases are repeated in this poem? Why?
5. **JOURNAL ENTRY** What argument is the speaker making for the benefits of the library (and for the value of education)? Is he joking, or is he serious?

Related Works: “Gryphon” (p. 172), “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” (p. 536), “Why I Went to College” (p. 655)

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR (1872–1906)

We Wear the Mask (1896)

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
 It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—
 This debt we pay to human guile;
 With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
 And mouth with myriad subtleties. 5

Why should the world be over-wise,
 In counting all our tears and sighs?
 Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries 10

To thee from tortured souls arise.
 We sing, but oh the clay is vile
 Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
 But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

15

Reading and Reacting

- Which of the following words and phrases do you see as formal? Why?
 - “human guile” (line 3)
 - “torn and bleeding hearts” (4)
 - “myriad subtleties” (5)
 - “over-wise” (6)
 - “tortured souls” (11)
 - “vile” (12)
- Some choices of words and phrases listed in question 1 are determined at least in part by the poem’s rhyme scheme and metrical pattern. If rhyme and meter were not an issue, what other words and phrases could you substitute for those listed? How would your substitutions change the poem’s level of diction?
- Do you think the poem’s meter and rhyme make it seem more or less formal? Explain.
- Given the poem’s subject matter, is its relatively formal level of diction appropriate? Why or why not?
- JOURNAL ENTRY** What exactly is the mask to which the speaker refers? Who is the “we” who wears this mask? (Note that Dunbar is an African American poet writing in the late nineteenth century.)
- CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In his book *Paul Laurence Dunbar*, Peter Revell explains that “‘We Wear the Mask’ itself is ‘masked’” in its hidden references to race. How does the poem’s diction help to mask its message?

Related Works: from *The Harlem Hellfighters* (p. 104), “Big Black Good Man” (p. 236), “Negro” (p. 502), “Yet Do I Marvel” (p. 690)



Source: ©Bill Tague

GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1917–2000)

We Real Cool (1959)

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
 Left School. We
 Lurk late. We
 Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We 5
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Reading and Reacting

1. What elements of nonstandard English grammar appear in this poem?
How does the use of such language affect your attitude toward the speaker?
2. Every word in this poem is a single syllable. Why?
3. Why do you think the poet begins with “We” only in the first line instead of isolating each complete sentence on its own line? How does this strategy change the poem’s impact?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Write a prose version of this poem, adding words, phrases, and sentences to expand the poem into a paragraph.
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, critic D. H. Malhem writes of “We Real Cool,” “Despite presentation in the voice of the gang, this is a maternal poem, gently scolding yet deeply sorrowing for the hopelessness of the boys.”

Do you agree with Malhem that the speaker’s attitude is “maternal”?

Related Works: “Greasy Lake” (p. 425), “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (p. 453), “Why I Went to College” (p. 655)®



Players in a pool hall (1950s)

Mac Gramlich/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1917–2000)

What Shall I Give My Children? (1949)

What shall I give my children? who are poor,
 Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land,
 Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand
 No velvet and no velvety velour;
 But who have begged me for a brisk contour, 5
 Crying that they are quasi, contraband
 Because unfinished, graven by a hand
 Less than angelic, admirable or sure.
 My hand is stuffed with mode, design, device.
 But I lack access to my proper stone. 10
 And plenitude of plan shall not suffice
 Nor grief nor love shall be enough alone
 To ratify my little halves who bear
 Across an autumn freezing everywhere.

Reading and Reacting

1. Unlike “We Real Cool” (p. 551), also by Gwendolyn Brooks, this sonnet’s diction is quite formal. Given the subject of each poem, do the poet’s decisions about level of diction make sense to you?
2. Which words in this poem do you see as elevated—that is, not likely to be used in conversation?
3. Apart from individual words, what else strikes you as formal about this poem?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Consulting a dictionary if necessary, write down a synonym for each of the formal words you identified in question 2. Then, write out three or four lines of this poem in more conversational language.

Related Work: “We Real Cool” (p. 551)

**Word Order**

The order in which words are arranged in a poem is as important as the choice of words. Because English sentences nearly always have a subject-verb-object sequence, with adjectives preceding the nouns they modify, a departure from this order calls attention to itself. Thus, poets can use readers’ expectations about word order to their advantage.

For example, poets often manipulate word order to place emphasis on a word. Sometimes they achieve this emphasis by using a very unconventional sequence; sometimes they simply place the word first or last in a line or place it in a stressed position in the line. Poets may also choose a particular word order to make two related—or startlingly unrelated—words fall in adjacent or parallel positions, calling attention to the similarity (or the difference) between them. In other cases, poets may manipulate syntax to preserve a poem’s rhyme or meter or to highlight sound correspondences that might otherwise not be noticeable. Finally, irregular syntax may be used throughout a poem to reveal a speaker’s mood—for example, to give a playful quality to a poem or to suggest a speaker’s disoriented state.

In the poem that follows, word order frequently departs from conventional English syntax.

EDMUND SPENSER (1552–1599)

One day I wrote her name upon the strand (1595)

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,¹
 But came the waves and washed it away:
 Again I wrote it with a second hand,
 But came the tide and made my pains his prey.
 “Vain man,” said she, “that doest in vain assay,
 A mortal thing so to immortalize,
 For I myself shall like to this decay,
 And eek ² my name be wiped out likewise.”
 “Not so,” quod³ I, “let baser things devise,
 To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
 My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
 And in the heavens write your glorious name.
 Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
 Our love shall live, and later life renew.”

“One day I wrote her name upon the strand,” a sonnet, has a fixed metrical pattern and rhyme scheme. To accommodate the sonnet’s rhyme and meter, Spenser makes a number of adjustments in syntax. For example, to make sure certain rhyming words fall at the ends of lines, the poet sometimes moves words out of their conventional order, as the following three comparisons illustrate.

¹*strand*: Beach.

²*eek*: Also, indeed.

³*quod*: Said.

Conventional Word Order

“Vain man,’ she said, ‘that doest
assay in vain.”

“My verse shall *eternize your rare
virtues.*”

“Where whenas death shall *subdue all
the world, / Our love shall live, and
later renew life.*”

Inverted Sequence

“Vain man,’ said she, ‘that doest
in vain assay.” (“Assay” appears
at end of line 5, to rhyme with
line 7’s “decay.”)

“My verse *your virtues rare shall
eternize.*” (“Eternize” appears at
end of line 11 to rhyme with line
9’s “devise.”)

“Where whenas death shall *all
the world subdue, / Our love shall
live, and later life renew.*” (Rhym-
ing words “subdue” and “renew”
are placed at ends of lines.)

To make sure the metrical pattern stresses certain words, the poet occasionally moves a word out of conventional order and places it in a stressed position. The following comparison illustrates this technique.

Conventional Word Order

“But *the waves came* and washed it
away.”

Inverted Sequence

“But *came the waves* and washed
it away.” (Stress in line 2 falls
on “waves” rather than on
“the.”)

As the above comparisons show, Spenser’s adjustments in syntax are motivated at least in part by a desire to preserve his sonnet’s rhyme and meter.

The next poem does more than simply invert word order; it presents an intentionally disordered syntax.

E. E. CUMMINGS (1894–1962)

anyone lived in a pretty how town (1940)

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn’t he danced his did.

Women and men (both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn’t they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

5

children guessed (but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more 10

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still 15
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then) they
said their nevers they slept their dream 20

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess 25
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep 30
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men (both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came 35
sun moon stars rain

Cummings, like Spenser, sometimes manipulates syntax in response to the demands of rhyme and meter—for example, in line 10. But Cummings goes much further, using unconventional syntax as part of a scheme that includes other unusual elements of the poem, such as its unexpected departures from the musical metrical pattern (for example, in lines 3 and 8) and from the rhyme scheme (for example, in lines 3 and 4) and its use of various parts of speech in unfamiliar contexts. Together, these techniques give the poem a playful quality. The refreshing disorder of the syntax (for instance, in lines 1–2, 10, and 24) adds to the poem's whimsical effect.

FURTHER READING: Word Order**A. E. HOUSMAN** (1859–1936)**To an Athlete Dying Young** (1896)

The time you won your town the race
 We chaired you through the market-place;
 Man and boy stood cheering by,
 And home we brought you shoulder-high.

Today, the road all runners come, 5
 Shoulder-high we bring you home,
 And set you at your threshold down,
 Townsman of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away 10
 From fields where glory does not stay,
 And early though the laurel grows
 It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut
 Cannot see the record cut,
 And silence sounds no worse than cheers 15
 After earth has stopped the ears.

Now you will not swell the rout
 Of lads that wore their honors out,
 Runners whom renown outran
 And the name died before the man. 20

So set, before its echoes fade,
 The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
 And hold to the low lintel up
 The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laureled head 20
 Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
 And find unwithered on its curls
 The garland briefer than a girl's.

Reading and Reacting

1. Where does the poem's meter or rhyme scheme require the poet to depart from conventional syntax?
2. Edit the poem so its word order is more conventional. Do your changes improve the poem?

- 3. JOURNAL ENTRY** Who do you think the speaker might be? What might his relationship to the athlete be?

Related Works: “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” (p. 518), “Nothing Gold Can Stay” (p. 569)

✓ CHECKLIST Writing about Word Choice and Word Order

Word Choice

- Which words are of key importance in the poem? What is the denotative meaning of each of these key words?
- Which key words have neutral connotations? Which have negative connotations? Which have positive connotations? Beyond its literal meaning, what does each word suggest?
- Why is each word chosen instead of a synonym? (For example, is the word chosen for its sound? its connotation? its relationship to other words in the poem? its contribution to the poem’s metrical pattern?)
- What other words could be effectively used in place of words now in the poem? How would substitutions change the poem’s meaning?
- Are any words repeated? Why?

Levels of Diction

- How would you characterize the poem’s level of diction? Why is this level of diction used? Is it appropriate?
- Does the poem mix different levels of diction? If so, why?

Word Order

- Is the poem’s word order conventional, or are words arranged in unexpected order?
- What is the purpose of the unusual word order? (For example, does it preserve the poem’s meter or rhyme scheme? Does it highlight particular sound correspondences? Does it place emphasis on a particular word or phrase? Does it reflect the speaker’s mood?)
- How would the poem’s impact change if conventional syntax were used?

particular rock in one of his paintings. By conveying what the poet imagines, images open readers' minds to perceptions and associations different from—and possibly more original and complex than—their own.

One advantage of imagery is its extreme economy. A few carefully chosen words enable poets to evoke a range of emotions and reactions. In the following poem, William Carlos Williams uses simple visual images to create a rich and compelling picture.



John D. Schiff/© Bettmann/Corbis

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS (1883–1963)

Red Wheelbarrow (1923)

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

5

beside the white
chickens

What is immediately apparent in this poem is its verbal economy. The poet does not tell readers what the barnyard smells like or what sounds the animals make. In fact, he does not even present a detailed picture of the scene. How large is the wheelbarrow? What is its condition? How many chickens are in the barnyard? In this poem, the answers to these questions are not important.

Even without answering these questions, the poet is able to use simple imagery to create a scene on which, he says, “so much depends.” The wheelbarrow establishes a momentary connection between the poet and his world. Like a still-life painting, the red wheelbarrow beside the white chickens gives order to a world that is full of seemingly unrelated objects. In this poem, the poet suggests that our ability to perceive the objects of this world gives our lives meaning and that our ability to convey our perceptions to others is central to our lives as well as to poetry.

Images enable poets to present ideas that would be difficult to convey in any other way. One look at a dictionary will illustrate that concepts such as *beauty* and *mystery* are so abstract that they are difficult to define, let alone to discuss in specific terms. However, by choosing an image or a series of images to embody these ideas, poets can effectively make their feelings known, as Ezra Pound does in the two-line poem that follows.

NOTE A special use of imagery, called **synesthesia**, occurs when one sense is described in terms of another sense—for instance, when a sound is described with color. When people say they are feeling *blue* or describe music as *hot* or *smooth*, they are using synesthesia.

FURTHER READING: Imagery

F. J. BERGMANN (1954–)

An Apology (2003)

Forgive me
for backing over
and smashing
your red wheelbarrow.

It was raining
and the rear wiper
does not work on
my new plum-colored SUV.

I am also sorry
about the white
chickens.

Reading and Reacting

1. A **parody** is a literary work that imitates the style of another work for comic effect or ridicule. Bergmann's "An Apology" is a parody of William Carlos Williams's "Red Wheelbarrow" (p. 563). Why do you think Bergmann chose this poem to parody?
2. What aspects of "Red Wheelbarrow" does Bergmann parody? Do you think these elements deserve to be parodied, or do you think Bergmann's parody is unjustified or unfair?
3. Do you think Bergmann's purpose is to ridicule "Red Wheelbarrow" or just to amuse his readers? Explain.
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Write a parody of another poem in this book. Make sure you decide in advance what elements of the poem you want to parody.
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Blogger and critic Kerry Michael Wood observes that some readers think that critics have read too much into "The Red Wheelbarrow." According to him, however, "The Red Wheelbarrow"



FIGURES OF SPEECH

Nancy Mercado
Ricardo Muniz



Sylvia Plath
Cleveland State University Library / Everett Collection



Marge Piercy
AP Photo/Ben Barnhart



Source: ©Bettmann/Corbis

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616)

**Shall I compare thee to a
summer's day?** (1609)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, 5
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
 And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
 By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed.
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;¹ 10
 Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Although writers experiment with language in all kinds of literary works, poets in particular recognize the power of a figure of speech to take readers beyond the literal meaning of a word. For this reason, **figures of speech**—expressions that use words to achieve effects beyond the power of ordinary language—are more prominent in poetry than in other kinds of writing. For example, the sonnet above compares a loved one to a summer's day in order to make the point that, unlike the fleeting summer, the loved one will—within the poem—remain forever young. But this sonnet goes beyond the obvious equation (loved one = summer's day): the speaker's assertion that his loved one will live forever in his poem actually says more about his confidence in his own talent and reputation (and about the power of language) than about the loved one's beauty.



Simile, Metaphor, and Personification

When William Wordsworth opens a poem with “I wandered lonely as a cloud” (p. 712), he conveys a good deal more than he would if he simply began, “I wandered, lonely.” By comparing himself in his loneliness to a cloud, the speaker suggests that like the cloud he is a part of nature and that he too is drifting, passive, blown by winds, and lacking will or substance. Thus, by using a figure of speech, the poet can suggest a wide variety of feelings and associations in very few words. 6

The phrase “I wandered lonely as a cloud” is a **simile**, a comparison between two unlike items that uses *like* or *as*. When an imaginative comparison between two unlike items does not use *like* or *as*—that is, when it says “a is b” rather than “a is *like* b”—it is a **metaphor**. 9

Accordingly, when the speaker in Adrienne Rich’s “Living in Sin” (p. 538) speaks of “daylight coming / like a relentless milkman up the stairs,” she is using a strikingly original simile to suggest that daylight brings not the conventional associations of promise and awakening but rather a stale, never-ending 12

¹that fair thou ow'st: That beauty you possess.

routine that is greeted without enthusiasm. This idea is consistent with the rest of the poem, an account of an unfulfilling relationship. However, when the speaker in the Audre Lorde poem on page 579 says, “Rooming houses are old women,” she uses a metaphor, equating two elements to stress their common associations with emptiness, transience, and hopelessness. At the same time, by identifying rooming houses as old women, Lorde is using **personification**, a special kind of comparison, closely related to metaphor, that gives life or human characteristics to inanimate objects or abstract ideas.

Sometimes, as in Wordsworth’s “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” a single brief simile or metaphor can be appreciated for what it communicates on its own. At other times, however, a simile or metaphor may be one of several related figures of speech that work together to convey a poem’s meaning. The following poem, for example, presents a series of related similes. Together, they suggest the depth of the problem the poem explores in a manner that each individual simile could not do on its own.



Harlem street scene, 1957

AP Images/Robert Kradin

LANGSTON HUGHES (1902–1967)

‘Harlem’ (1951)

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—
And then run?

5

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

10

Or does it explode?

The dream to which Hughes alludes in this poem is the dream of racial equality. It is also the American Dream—and, by extension, any important unrealized dream. His speaker offers six tentative answers to the question asked in the poem’s first line, and five of the six are presented as similes. As the poem unfolds, the speaker considers different alternatives: the dream can shrivel up and die, fester, decay, crust over—or sag under the weight of the burden those who hold the dream must carry. In each case, the speaker transforms an abstract entity—a dream—into a concrete item—a raisin in the sun, a sore, rotten meat, syrupy candy, a heavy load. The final line, italicized for emphasis, gains power less from what it says than from what it leaves unsaid. Unlike the other alternatives explored in the poem, “*Or does it explode?*” is

not presented as a simile. Nevertheless, because of the pattern of figurative language the poem has established, readers can supply the other, unspoken half of the comparison: "... like a bomb."

Sometimes a single extended simile or extended metaphor is developed throughout a poem. The following poem develops an **extended simile**, comparing a poet to an acrobat.

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI (1919–)

Constantly Risking Absurdity (1958)

Constantly risking absurdity
and death
whenever he performs
above the heads
of his audience 5

the poet like an acrobat
climbs on rime
to a high wire of his own making
and balancing on eyeballs
above a sea of faces 10

paces his way
to the other side of day
performing entrechats
and sleight-of-foot tricks
and other high theatrics 15

and all without mistaking
any thing
for what it may not be

For he's the super realist
who must perforce perceive 20

taut truth
before the taking of each stance or step
in his supposed advance 6

toward that still higher perch
where Beauty stands and waits 25

with gravity
to start her death-defying leap

And he
a little charleychaplin man
who may or may not catch 30

her fair eternal form
spreadeagled in the empty air
of existence

In his extended comparison of a poet and an acrobat, Ferlinghetti characterizes the poet as a circus performer, at once swinging recklessly on a trapeze and balancing carefully on a tightrope.

What the poem suggests is that the poet, like an acrobat, works hard at his craft but manages to make it all look easy. Something of an exhibitionist, the poet is innovative and creative, taking impossible chances yet also building on traditional skills in his quest for truth and beauty. Moreover, like an acrobat, the poet is balanced “on eyebeams / above a sea of faces,” for he too depends on audience reaction to help him keep his performance focused. The poet may be “the super realist,” but he also has plenty of playful tricks up his sleeve: “entrechats / and sleight-of-foot tricks / and other high theatrics,” including puns (“above the heads / of his audience”), unexpected rhyme (“climbs on rime”), alliteration (“taut truth”), coinages (“a little charleychaplin man”), and all the other linguistic acrobatics available to poets. (Even the arrangement of the poem’s lines on the page suggests the acrobatics it describes.) Like these tricks, the poem’s central simile is a whimsical one, perhaps suggesting that Ferlinghetti is poking fun at poets who take their craft too seriously. In any case, the simile helps him to illustrate the acrobatic possibilities of language in a fresh and original manner.

The following poem develops an **extended metaphor**, personifying rooming houses as old women.

AUDRE LORDE (1934–1992)

Rooming houses are old women (1968)

Rooming houses are old women	
rocking dark windows into their whens	
waiting incomplete circles	
rocking	
rent office to stoop to	5
community bathrooms to gas rings and	
under-bed boxes of once useful garbage	
city issued with a twice monthly check	
and the young men next door	
with their loud midnight parties	10
and fishy rings left in the bathtub	
no longer arouse them	
from midnight to mealtime no stops inbetween	
light breaking to pass through jumbled up windows	
and who was it who married the widow that Buzzie’s	15
son messed with?	

To Welfare and insult form the slow shuffle
 from daywork to shopping bags
 heavy with leftovers
 Rooming houses
 are old women waiting 20
 searching
 through darkening windows
 the end or beginning of agony
 old women seen through half-ajar doors
 hoping 25
 they are not waiting
 but being
 the entrance to somewhere
 unknown and desired
 but not new. 30

So closely does Lorde equate rooming houses and old women in this poem that at times it is difficult to tell which of the two is actually the poem's subject. Despite the poem's assertion, rooming houses are *not* old women; however, they are *comparable* to the old women who live there because their walls enclose a lifetime of disappointments as well as the physical detritus of life. Like the old women, rooming houses are in decline, rocking away their remaining years. And, like the houses they inhabit, these women's boundaries are fixed—"rent office to stoop to / community bathrooms to gas rings"—and their hopes and expectations are few. They are surrounded by other people's loud parties, but their own lives have been reduced to a "slow shuffle" to nowhere, a hopeless, frightened—and perhaps pointless—"waiting / searching." Over time, the women and the places in which they live have become one. By using an unexpected comparison between two seemingly unrelated entities, the poem illuminates both the essence of the rooming houses and the essence of their elderly occupants.

FURTHER READING: Simile, Metaphor, and Personification

ROBERT BURNS (1759–1796)

Oh, my love is like a red, red rose (1796)

Oh, my love is like a red, red rose
 That's newly sprung in June;
 My love is like the melody
 That's sweetly played in tune.

So fair art thou, my bonny lass, 5
 So deep in love am I;
 And I will love thee still, my dear,
 Till a' the seas gang¹ dry.

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
 And the rocks melt wi' the sun; 10
 And I will love thee still, my dear,
 While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee weel, my only love!
 And fare thee weel awhile!
 And I will come again, my love 15
 Though it were ten thousand mile.

Reading and Reacting

1. Why does the speaker compare his love to a rose? What other simile is used in the poem? For what purpose is it used?
2. Why do you suppose Burns begins his poem with similes? Would moving them to the end change the poem's impact?
3. Where does the speaker seem to exaggerate the extent of his love? Why does he exaggerate? Do you think this exaggeration weakens the poem? Explain.
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Create ten original similes that begin with, "My love is like _____."

Related Works: "Araby" (p. 288), "Baca Grande" (p. 545), "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (p. 572), "To His Coy Mistress" (p. 594), "How Do I Love Thee?" (p. 719), *The Brute* (p. 814)



AP Images/Jacques Brinon

N. SCOTT MOMADAY (1934–)

Simile (1974)

What did we say to each other
 that now we are as the deer
 who walk in single file
 with heads high
 with ears forward

5

¹gang: Go.

with eyes watchful
 with hooves always placed on firm ground
 in whose limbs there is latent flight

Reading and Reacting

1. In what sense are the speaker and the person he is speaking to like the deer he describes in this extended simile? In what sense are their limbs in “latent flight” (line 8)?
2. Without using similes or metaphors, paraphrase this poem.
3. This entire poem consists of a single sentence, but it has no punctuation. Do you see this as a problem? What punctuation marks, if any, would you add? Why?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** What do you suppose the speaker and the person he addresses might have said to each other to inspire the feelings described in this poem?

Related Work: “Let me not to the marriage of true minds” (p. 785)

SYLVIA PLATH (1932–1963)

Metaphors (1960)

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
 An elephant, a ponderous house,
 A melon strolling on two tendrils.
 O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
 This loaf's big with its yeasty rising. 5
 Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
 I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
 I've eaten a bag of green apples,
 Boarded the train there's no getting off.

Reading and Reacting

1. The speaker in this poem is a pregnant woman. Do all the metaphors she uses to characterize herself seem appropriate? For instance, in what sense is the speaker “a means, a stage” (line 7)?
2. If you were going to expand this poem, what other metaphors (or similes) would you add?
3. What are the “nine syllables” to which the speaker refers in the poem’s first line? What significance does the number *nine* have in terms of the poem’s subject? in terms of its form?

4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Would you say the speaker has a positive, negative, or neutral attitude toward her pregnancy? Which metaphors give you this impression?

Related Work: “I Stand Here Ironing” (p. 217)

RANDALL JARRELL (1914–1965)

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner¹ (1945)

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

5



Gunner in ball turret

Source: ©Cape Canaveral Hangar, United States Air Force

Reading and Reacting

1. Who is the speaker? To what does he compare himself in the poem's first two lines? What words establish this comparison?
2. Contrast the speaker's actual identity with the one he creates for himself in lines 1–2. What elements of his actual situation do you think lead him to characterize himself as he does in these lines?

¹*Ball turret gunner:* World War II machine gunner positioned upside-down in a plexiglass sphere in the belly of a bomber.

- 3. JOURNAL ENTRY** Both this poem and “Dulce et Decorum Est” (p. 723) use figures of speech to describe the horrors of war. Which poem has a greater impact on you? How does the poem’s figurative language contribute to this impact?
- 4. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In a 1974 article, Frances Ferguson criticizes “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” arguing that the poem “thoroughly manifests the lack of a middle between the gunner’s birth and his death.... Because the poem presents a man who seems to have lived in order to die, we forget the fiction that he must have lived.” However, in a 1978 explication, Patrick J. Horner writes that the “manipulation of time reveals the stunning brevity of the gunner’s waking life and the State’s total disregard for that phenomenon.... Because of the telescoping of time, [the poem] resonates with powerful feeling.”
- With which critic do you agree? Do you see the “lack of a middle” as a positive or negative quality of this poem?

Related Works: “The Things They Carried” (p. 310), “The Soldier” (p. 725), from *In Time of War* (p. 727), “Terza Rima” (p. 729)



AP Photo/Ben Barnhart

MARGE PIERCY (1936–)

The Secretary Chant (1973)®

My hips are a desk.
 From my ears hang
 chains of paper clips.
 Rubber bands form my hair.
 My breasts are wells of mimeograph ink. 5
 My feet bear casters.
 Buzz. Click.
 My head is a badly organized file.
 My head is a switchboard
 where crossed lines crackle. 10
 Press my fingers
 and in my eyes appear
 credit and debit.
 Zing. Tinkle.
 My navel is a reject button. 15
 From my mouth issue canceled reams.
 Swollen, heavy, rectangular
 I am about to be delivered
 of a baby

Xerox machine.
 File me under W
 because I wonce
 was
 a woman.



Secretaries in typing pool, 1956

© TopFoto / The Image Works

Reading and Reacting

1. Examine each of the poem's figures of speech. Do they all make reasonable comparisons, or are some far-fetched or hard to visualize? Explain the relationship between the secretary and each item with which she is compared.
2. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Using as many metaphors and similes as you can, write a "chant" about a job you have held.
3. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In a review of a recent collection of Piercy's poetry, critic Sandra Gilbert notes instances of "a kind of bombast" (pompous language) and remarks, "As most poets realize, political verse is almost the hardest kind to write."

In what sense can "The Secretary Chant" be seen as "political verse"? Do you think Piercy successfully achieves her political purpose, or does she undercut it with "bombast"?

Related Works: "A&P" (p. 160), "The Carpet Factory" (p. 643), *Applicant* (p. 840)

JOHN DONNE (1572–1631)

A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning (1611)

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
 And whisper to their souls to go,
 Whilst some of their sad friends do say
 The breath goes now, and some say no:
 So let us melt, and make no noise, 5
 No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
 'Twere profanation of our joys
 To tell the laity¹ our love.
 Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears;
 Men reckon what it did and meant; 10
 But trepidation of the spheres,
 Though greater far, is innocent.
 Dull sublunary lovers' love
 (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
 Absence, because it doth remove 15
 Those things which elemented it.
 But we, by a love so much refined
 That ourselves know not what it is,
 Inter-assured of the mind,
 Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss. 20
 Our two souls, therefore, which are one,
 Though I must go, endure not yet
 A breach, but an expansion,
 Like gold to airy thinness beat.
 If they be two, they are two so 25
 As stiff twin compasses² are two:
 Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
 To move, but doth, if th' other do.
 And though it in the center sit,
 Yet when the other far doth roam, 30
 It leans and harkens after it,
 And grows erect as that comes home.

¹*laity*: Here, "common people."

²*compasses*: V-shaped instruments used for drawing circles.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
 Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
 Thy firmness makes my circle just,³
 And makes me end where I begun.

35



Engraving of compass

The Granger Collection, NYC—All rights reserved.

Reading and Reacting

1. Beginning with line 25, the poem develops an extended metaphor that compares the speaker and his loved one to “twin compasses” (line 26), attached yet separate. Why is the compass (pictured above) an especially apt metaphor? What physical characteristics of the compass does the poet emphasize?
2. The poem uses other figures of speech to characterize both the lovers’ union and their separation. To what other events does the speaker compare his separation from his loved one? To what other elements does he compare their attachment? Do you think these comparisons make sense?

³just: Perfect.

- 3. JOURNAL ENTRY** To what other object could Donne have compared his loved one and himself? Explain the logic of the extended metaphor you suggest.
- 4. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In *John Donne and the Metaphysical Poets* (1970), Judah Stampfer writes of this poem's "thin, dry texture, its stanzas of pinched music," noting that its form "has too clipped a brevity to qualify as a song" and that its "music wobbles on a dry, measured beat." Yet, he argues, "the poem comes choked with emotional power" because "the speaker reads as a naturally reticent man, leaving his beloved in uncertainty and deep trouble." Stampfer concludes, "Easy self-expression here would be self-indulgent, if not reprehensible. . . . For all his careful dignity, we feel a heart is breaking here."

Do you find such emotional power in this highly intellectual poem?

Related Works: "To My Dear and Loving Husband" (p. 593), "How Do I Love Thee?" (p. 719), *A Doll House* (p. 881) *Post-its* (p. 955)



Hyperbole and Understatement

Two additional kinds of figurative language, *hyperbole* and *understatement*, also give poets opportunities to suggest meaning beyond the literal level of language.

Hyperbole is intentional exaggeration—saying more than is actually meant. In the poem "Oh, my love is like a red, red rose" (p. 580), when the speaker says that he will love his lady until all the seas go dry, he is using hyperbole.

Understatement is the opposite—saying less than is meant. When the speaker in the poem "Fire and Ice" (p. 510), weighing two equally grim alternatives for the end of the world, says that "for destruction ice / Is also great / And would suffice," he is using understatement. In both cases, the poets expect their readers to understand that their words are not to be taken literally.

By using hyperbole and understatement, poets enhance the impact of their poems. For example, poets can use hyperbole to convey exaggerated anger or graphic images of horror—and to ridicule and satirize as well as to inflame and shock. With understatement, poets can convey the same kind of powerful emotions subtly, without artifice or embellishment, thereby leading readers to read more closely than they might otherwise.

The emotionally charged poem that follows uses hyperbole to convey anger and bitterness that seem almost beyond the power of words.



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SYLVIA PLATH (1932–1963)

Daddy (1965)

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

5

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe
Big as a Frisco seal

10

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.¹

15

In the German tongue, in the Polish town²
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

20

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

25

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,³
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

30

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.

¹*Ach, du*: "Ah, you" (German).

²*Polish town*: Grabów, where Plath's father was born.

³*ich*: "I" (German).

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.⁴

I began to talk like a Jew.

I think I may well be a Jew.

35

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna

Are not very pure or true.

With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck

And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack

I may be a bit of a Jew.

40

I have always been scared of you,

With your Luftwaffe,⁵ your gobbledygoo.

And your neat moustache

And your Aryan eye, bright blue.

Panzer⁶-man, panzer-man, O You—

45

Not God but a swastika

So black no sky could squeak through.

Every woman adores a Fascist,

The boot in the face, the brute

Brute heart of a brute like you.

50

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,

In the picture I have of you,

A cleft in your chin instead of your foot

But no less a devil for that, no not

Any less the black man who

55

Bit my pretty red heart in two.

I was ten when they buried you.

At twenty I tried to die

And get back, back, back to you.

I thought even the bones would do.

60

But they pulled me out of the sack,

And they stuck me together with glue.

And then I knew what to do.

I made a model of you,

A man in black with a Meinkampf⁷ look

65

And a love of the rack and the screw.

And I said I do, I do.

⁴*Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen*: Nazi concentration camps.

⁵*Luftwaffe*: The German air force.

⁶*Panzer*: Protected by armor. The Panzer division was the German armored division.

⁷*Meinkampf*: *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) is Adolf Hitler's autobiography.

So daddy, I'm finally through.
 The black telephone's off at the root,
 The voices just can't worm through. 70

If I've killed one man, I've killed two—
 The vampire who said he was you
 And drank my blood for a year,
 Seven years, if you want to know.
 Daddy, you can lie back now. 75

There's a stake in your fat black heart
 And the villagers never liked you.
 They are dancing and stamping on you.
 They always *knew* it was you.
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through. 80



Nazi poster, 1941

Hulton Archive/Archive Photos/Getty Images

In her anger and frustration, the speaker sees herself as a helpless victim—a foot entrapped in a shoe, a Jew in a concentration camp—of her father's (and, later, her husband's) absolute tyranny. Thus, her hated father is characterized as a "black shoe," "a bag full of God," a "Ghastly statue," and, eventually, a Nazi, a torturer, the devil, a vampire. The poem "Daddy" is

widely accepted by scholars as autobiographical, and the fact that Plath's own father was actually neither a Nazi nor a sadist (nor, obviously, the devil or a vampire) makes it clear that the figures of speech in the poem are wildly exaggerated. Even so, they may convey the poet's true feelings toward her father—and, perhaps, toward the patriarchal society in which she lived.

Plath uses hyperbole to communicate these emotions to readers who she knows cannot possibly feel the way she does. Her purpose, therefore, is not only to shock but also to enlighten, to persuade, and perhaps even to empower her readers. Throughout the poem, the inflammatory language is set in ironic opposition to the childish, affectionate term “Daddy”—most strikingly in the last line's choked out “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.” The result of the exaggerated rhetoric is a poem that is vivid and shocking. And, although some might believe that Plath's almost wild exaggeration undermines the poem's impact, others would argue that the powerful language is necessary to convey the extent of the speaker's rage.

Like “Daddy,” the following poem describes a situation whose emotional impact is devastating. In this case, however, the poet does not use highly charged language; instead, she uses understatement, presenting her imagined scenario without embellishment.

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY (1892–1950)

If I should learn, in some quite casual way (1931)

If I should learn, in some quite casual way,
That you were gone, not to return again—
Read from the back-page of a paper, say,
Held by a neighbor in a subway train,
How at a corner of this avenue 5
And such a street (so are the papers filled)
A hurrying man—who happened to be you—
At noon today had happened to be killed,
I should not cry aloud—could not cry
Aloud, or wring my hands in such a place— 10
I should but watch the station lights rush by
With a more careful interest on my face,
Or raise my eyes and read with greater care
Where to store furs and how to treat the hair.

Although this poem's speaker imagines a tragic scenario—receiving the news of her lover's death—her language is restrained. In the poem's first eight lines, words and expressions like “quite casual” (1), “say” (3), “this avenue / And

such a street” (5–6), and “happened to be” (7, 8) convey a sense of randomness. The speaker’s voice is detached and passive. In the remaining six lines, which describe her reaction to the news, she calmly explains her unwillingness to make a scene, telling what she will not do—“cry / Aloud, or wring my hands...” (9–10)—and expressing her determination to adopt an air of studied interest in the subway car’s trivial advertisements. The poem’s language and tone are consistently flat and unemotional, conveying a sense of detachment and resignation.



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FURTHER READING: Hyperbole and Understatement

ANNE BRADSTREET (1612–1672)

To My Dear and Loving Husband (1678)

If ever two were one, then surely we.
 If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee;
 If ever wife was happy in a man,
 Compare with me ye women if you can.
 I prize thy love more than whole Mines of gold, 5
 Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
 My love is such that Rivers cannot quench,
 Nor ought but love from thee, give recompense.
 Thy love is such I can no way repay,
 The heavens reward thee manifold I pray. 10
 Then while we live, in love let's so persevere,
 That when we live no more, we may live ever.

Reading and Reacting

1. Review the claims the poem’s speaker makes about her love in lines 5–8. Are such exaggerated declarations of love necessary, or would the rest of the poem be sufficient to convey the extent of her devotion to her husband?
2. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Compare this poem’s declarations of love to those of John Donne’s speaker in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” (p. 586). Which speaker do you find more convincing? Why?

Related Works: “A Rose for Emily” (p. 143), “How Do I Love Thee?” (p. 719), “Let me not to the marriage of true minds” (p. 785)

ANDREW MARVELL (1621–1678)**To His Coy Mistress** (1681)

Had we but world enough and time,
 This coyness, lady, were no crime.
 We would sit down and think which way
 To walk, and pass our long love's day.
 Thou by the Indian Ganges' side 5
 Should'st rubies find; I by the tide
 Of Humber¹ would complain. I would
 Love you ten years before the Flood,
 And you should, if you please, refuse 10
 Till the conversion of the Jews.
 My vegetable love should grow
 Vaster than empires, and more slow.
 An hundred years should go to praise
 Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze,
 Two hundred to adore each breast, 15
 But thirty thousand to the rest.
 An age at least to every part,
 And the last age should show your heart.
 For, lady, you deserve this state,
 Nor would I love at lower rate. 20

But at my back I always hear
 Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near,
 And yonder all before us lie
 Deserts of vast eternity.
 Thy beauty shall no more be found,
 Nor in thy marble vault shall sound 25
 My echoing song; then worms shall try
 That long preserved virginity,
 And your quaint honor turn to dust,
 And into ashes all my lust. 30
 The grave's a fine and private place,
 But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
 Sits on thy skin like morning glew² 35
 And while thy willing soul transpires
 At every pore with instant fires,



Winged horses pulling chariot
 Helene Rogers / Art Directors & TRIP / Alamy

¹*Humber*: An estuary on the east coast of England.

²*glew*: Dew.

Now let us sport us while we may;
 And now, like amorous birds of prey,
 Rather at once our time devour
 Than languish in his slow-chapped³ power. 40
 Let us roll all our strength and all
 Our sweetness up into one ball
 And tear our pleasures with rough strife
 Thorough the iron gates of life.
 Thus, though we cannot make our sun 45
 Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Reading and Reacting

1. In this poem, Marvell's speaker sets out to convince a reluctant woman to become his lover. In order to make his case more persuasive, he uses hyperbole, exaggerating time periods, sizes, spaces, and the possible fate of the woman if she refuses him. Identify as many examples of hyperbole as you can.
2. The tone of "To His Coy Mistress" is more whimsical than serious. Given this tone, what do you see as the purpose of Marvell's use of hyperbole?
3. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Using contemporary prose, paraphrase the first four lines of the poem. Then, beginning with the word *However*, compose a few new sentences of prose, continuing the argument Marvell's speaker makes.
4. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In her essay "Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress': A Feminist Reading," critic Margaret Wald presents the following analysis of the poem:

Andrew Marvell's speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" invokes Petrarchan convention, a poetic mode originating in the fourteenth century in which a male lover uses exaggerated metaphors to appeal to his female beloved. Yet Marvell alludes to such excessive—and disempowering—pining only to defy this tradition of unrequited love. Instead of respectful adulation, he offers lustful invitation; rather than anticipating rejection, he assumes sexual dominion over the eponymous "mistress." The poem is as much a celebration of his rhetorical mastery as it is of his physical conquest.

In what sense is the speaker in this poem celebrating his beloved? In what sense is he celebrating himself? Is his portrayal of his loved one entirely positive? Which elements, if any, are negative?

Related Works: "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (p. 453), "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" (p. 518), "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" (p. 777), *The Brute* (p. 814)

³*slow-chapped*: Slowly crushing.

ROBERT FROST (1874–1963)**“Out, Out—”** (1916)

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
 And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
 Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
 And from there those that lifted eyes could count
 Five mountain ranges one behind the other 5
 Under the sunset far into Vermont.
 And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
 As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
 And nothing happened: day was all but done.
 Call it a day, I wish they might have said 10
 To please the boy by giving him the half hour
 That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
 His sister stood beside them in her apron
 To tell them “Supper.” At the word, the saw,
 As if to prove saws knew what supper meant, 15
 Leaped out at the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap—
 He must have given the hand. However it was,
 Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
 The boy’s first outcry was a rueful laugh,
 As he swung toward them holding up the hand 20
 Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
 The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
 Since he was old enough to know, big boy
 Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart—
 He saw all spoiled. “Don’t let him cut my hand off— 25
 The doctor, when he comes. Don’t let him, sister!”
 So. But the hand was gone already.
 The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
 He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
 And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright. 30
 No one believed. They listened at his heart.
 Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
 No more to build on there. And they, since they
 Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

Reading and Reacting

1. The poem’s title is an **allusion** to a passage in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (5.5.23–28) that addresses the brevity and meaninglessness of life in very emotional terms:

Out, out brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

What idea do you think Frost wants to convey through the title “Out, Out—”?

2. Explain why each of the following qualifies as understatement:

- “Neither refused the meeting!” (line 18)
- “He saw all spoiled.” (line 25)
- “—and that ended it.” (line 32)
- “No more to build on there.” (line 33)

Can you identify any other examples of understatement in the poem?

3. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Do you think the poem’s impact is strengthened or weakened by its understated tone?

4. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In an essay on Frost in his book *Affirming Limits*, poet and critic Robert Pack focuses on the single word “So” in line 27 of “Out, Out—”:

For a moment, his narration is reduced to the impotent word “So,” and in that minimal word all his restrained grief is held.... That “So” is the narrator’s cry of bearing witness to a story that must be what it is in a scene he cannot enter. He cannot rescue or protect the boy.... In the poem’s sense of human helplessness in an indifferent universe, we are all “watchers,” and what we see is death without redemption, “signifying nothing.” So. So? So! How shall we read that enigmatic word?

How do you read this “enigmatic word”? Why?

Related Works: “The Lottery” (p. 335), “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (p. 583), “Terza Rima” (p. 729)

COUNTEE CULLEN (1903–1946)

Incident (1925)

Once riding in old Baltimore,
 Heart-filled, head-filled with glee;
 I saw a Baltimorean
 Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
 And he was no whit bigger,

5

And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, “Nigger.”

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That’s all that I remember.

10

Reading and Reacting

1. This poem’s last two lines are extremely understated. What words or lines in the poem are *not* understated? Does this use of both direct and understated language make sense? Explain.
2. What do you think the speaker might be referring to by “all the things that happened” in Baltimore (11)? Why?
3. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Retell the events of this poem in a paragraph, paraphrasing lines 1–10 but quoting the last two lines exactly. Include a few sentences that reveal the speaker’s emotions.
4. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** According to critic Jervis Anderson, Countee Cullen, although one of the most prominent African American poets of his time, placed relatively little emphasis in his work on race and racial politics:

Cullen did not, could not, avoid entirely the question of race. But his view of himself as a poet did not permit him to make that question his main subject. . . . Usually, Cullen engaged the race problem obliquely—at times with deft jabs and glancing blows. . . . at times with understated amusement, as in “Incident.”

Do you agree with Anderson that in “Incident,” Cullen deals with race with “understated amusement.” What evidence for or against this interpretation do you see in the poem?

Related Works: “Big Black Good Man” (p. 236), “Negro” (p. 502), “Ethel’s Sestina” (p. 649), “Yet Do I Marvel” (p. 690), “If We Must Die” (p. 778)

MARGARET ATWOOD (1939–)

You fit into me (1971)

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye

Reading and Reacting

1. What positive connotations does Atwood expect readers to associate with the phrase “you fit into me”? What does the speaker seem at first to mean by “like a hook into an eye” in line 2?
2. The speaker’s shift to the brutal suggestions of lines 3 and 4 is calculated to shock readers. Does the use of hyperbole here have another purpose in the context of the poem? Explain.
3. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Do you find this poem unsettling? Do you think it is serious or just a joke?

Related Works: “Hills Like White Elephants” (p. 74), “Love and Other Catastrophes: A Mix Tape” (p. 84), “Daddy” (p. 589), *A Doll House* (p. 881)



Metonymy and Synecdoche

Metonymy and synecdoche are two related figures of speech. **Metonymy** is the substitution of the name of one thing for the name of another thing that most readers associate with the first—for example, using *hired gun* to mean “paid assassin” or *suits* to mean “business executives.” A specific kind of metonymy, called **synecdoche**, is the substitution of a part for the whole (for example, using *wheels* to refer to an automobile or *bread*—as in “Give us this day our daily bread”—to mean “food”) or the whole for a part (for example, using *the law* to refer to a police officer).

With metonymy and synecdoche, instead of describing something by saying it is like something else (as in simile) or by equating it with something else (as in metaphor), writers can characterize an object or concept by using a term that evokes it. The following poem illustrates the use of synecdoche.

RICHARD LOVELACE (1618–1658)

To Lucasta Going to the Wars (1649)

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.

5

NANCY MERCADO (1959–)

Going to Work (2001)

On their daily trips
Commuters shed tears now
Use American flags
Like veiled women
To hide their sorrows 5
Rush to buy throwaway cameras
To capture your twin ghosts

Frantically I too
Purchase your memory
On postcards & coffee mugs 10
In New York City souvenir shops
Afraid I'll forget your facade
Forget my hallowed Sunday
Morning PATH Train rides
My subway travels through 15
The center of your belly
Day after day

Afraid I'll forget your powers
To transform helicopters
Into ladybugs gliding in the air 20
To turn New York City
Into a breathing map
To display the curvature
Of our world

In “Going to Work,” the poem’s speaker describes her reactions in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks and remembers how, before the towers were destroyed, she traveled to work on the PATH (Port Authority Trans-Hudson) train that ran beneath them. Now, she says, commuters “Rush to buy throwaway cameras / To capture your twin ghosts.” She continues, “Frantically I too / Purchase your memory” in the form of souvenirs. In the speaker’s mind, the towers loom large; despite her fears, there is little danger of her forgetting them. In their remembered size and power, they still “display the curvature / Of our world.”

FURTHER READING: Apostrophe

JOHN KEATS (1795–1821)

Ode to a Nightingale (1819)

I

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock¹ I had drunk,
 Or emptied some dull opiate² to the drains
 One minute past, and Lethe³-wards had sunk:
 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot. 5
 But being too happy in thine happiness,—
 That thou, light-wingèd Dryad⁴ of the trees,
 In some melodious plot
 Of beechen⁵ green, and shadows numberless,
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease. 10

II

O for a draught⁶ of vintage! that hath been
 Cool'd a long age in the deep-delvèd⁷ earth,
 Tasting of Flora⁸ and the country-green,
 Dance, and Provençal⁹ song, and sunburnt mirth!
 O for a beaker full of the warm South! 15
 Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,¹⁰
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
 And purple-stainèd mouth;
 That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim: 20

III

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
 What thou among the leaves hast never known,
 The weariness, the fever, and the fret
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

¹*hemlock*: A medicinal plant used as a sedative or, in higher doses, a deadly poison.

²*opiate*: A medicine containing opium, a substance derived from poppies, which aids sleep and relieves pain.

³*Lethe*: In Greek mythology, a river in Hades, the land of the dead. Those who drank its water lost all memory of the past.

⁴*Dryad*: A spirit believed to inhabit trees.

⁵*beechen*: Of or relating to a beech tree.

⁶*draught*: A large sip of liquid.

⁷*deep-delvèd*: Excavated.

⁸*Flora*: In Roman mythology, the goddess of flowers.

⁹*Provençal*: From Provence, a region of southern France.

¹⁰*Hippocrene*: A fountain on Mt. Helicon, in Greece, considered sacred to the Muses.

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs, 25
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs,
 Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
 Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. 30

IV

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
 Not charioted by Bacchus¹¹ and his pards,¹²
 But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
 Though the dull brain perplexes and retards: 35
 Already with thee! tender is the night,
 And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
 Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;¹³
 But here there is no light,
 Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
 Through verdurous¹⁴ glooms and winding mossy ways. 40

V

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
 But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows 45
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;¹⁵
 Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
 And mid-May's eldest child,
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves. 50

VI

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
 I have been half in love with easeful Death,
 Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
 To take into the air my quiet breath; 55
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
 While thou art pouring forth the soul abroad
 In such an ecstasy!
 Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
 To thy high requiem become a sod. 60

¹¹*Bacchus*: The god of wine.

¹²*pards*: Leopards or panthers.

¹³*Fays*: Fairies.

¹⁴*verdurous*: Green with vegetation.

¹⁵*eglantine*: A plant also known as the sweet-briar.

VII

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
 No hungry generations tread thee down;
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path 65
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn;¹⁶
 The same that ofttimes hath
 Charm'd magic casements,¹⁷ opening on the foam
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.¹⁸ 70

VIII

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
 Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
 As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.
 Adieu!¹⁹ adieu! the plaintive anthem fades 75
 Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
 Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
 In the next valley-glades:
 Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
 Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?



Lithograph of nightingale, c. 1830

The Nightingale of France, c.1830 (colour litho), Oudart, Paul Louis (b.1796) (after) / Bibliotheque des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, France / Archives Charmet / Bridgeman Images

¹⁶ *corn*: Grain.

¹⁷ *casements*: Windows.

¹⁸ *forlorn*: Lost.

¹⁹ *Adieu*: Farewell.

Reading and Reacting

1. Where does the speaker first address the nightingale? Where else does he speak directly to the nightingale?
2. In lines 19–20, the speaker expresses his desire to “leave the world unseen, / And with thee fade away into the forest dim. . . .” Why does he want to “fade away”? What is it about the “forest dim” that attracts him? Give some examples from the poem to contrast the speaker’s world with the world of the nightingale.
3. What is it that the speaker admires about the nightingale? In what sense does he see the nightingale as superior to human beings?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** If you were to write an **ode**—a long, serious, and formal poem—to a creature or an object, what would you choose as your subject? Why? How do you see your own world as different from (and inferior to) the world of your subject?

Related Works: “Young Goodman Brown” (p. 367), “The World Is Too Much with Us” (p. 516), “Death Be Not Proud” (p. 757)

ALLEN GINSBERG (1926–1997)

A Supermarket in California (1956)

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman,¹ for I
walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache
self-conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into
the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping
at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in
the tomatoes!—and you, Garcia Lorca,² what were you doing down
by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking
among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.³

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? 5
What price bananas? Are you my Angel?

¹*Walt Whitman:* An American poet (1819–1892) whose poems frequently praise the commonplace and often contain lengthy “enumerations.”

²*Federico Garcia Lorca:* Spanish poet and dramatist (1899–1936).

³*eyeing the grocery boys:* Whitman’s sexual orientation is the subject of much debate. Ginsberg is suggesting here that Whitman was homosexual.

I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective.

We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?

(I touch your book⁴ and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely. 10

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon⁵ quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?⁶

Reading and Reacting

1. In this poem, Ginsberg's speaker wanders through the aisles of a supermarket, speaking to the nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman and asking Whitman a series of questions. Why do you think the speaker addresses Whitman? What kind of answers do you think he is looking for?
2. In paragraph 2, the speaker says he is "shopping for images." What does he mean? Why does he look for these images in a supermarket? Does he find them?
3. Is this poem about supermarkets? about Walt Whitman? about poetry? about love? about America? What do you see as its primary theme? Why?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Does the incongruous image of the respected poet "poking / among the meats" (paragraph 4) in the supermarket strengthen the poem's impact, or does it undercut any serious "message" the poem might have? Explain.
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** The critic Leslie Fiedler discusses some of the ways in which Ginsberg's style resembles that of Walt Whitman:

⁴*your book*: *Leaves of Grass*.

⁵*Charon*: In Greek mythology, the ferryman who transported the dead over the river Styx to Hades.

⁶*Lethe*: In Greek mythology, the river of forgetfulness (one of five rivers in Hades).

Everything about Ginsberg is . . . blatantly Whitmanian: his meter is resolutely anti-iambic, his line groupings stubbornly anti-stanzaic, his diction aggressively colloquial and American, his voice public.

Does this characterization apply to “A Supermarket in California”? If so, how?

Related Works: “A&P” (p. 160), “Chicago” (p. 660), from “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (p. 663), “Defending Walt Whitman” (p. 732), “I Hear America Singing” (p. 795), from “Song of Myself” (p. 796), *The Cuban Swimmer* (p. 1166)

✓ CHECKLIST Writing about Figures of Speech

- What figures of speech are used in the poem? Identify any examples of simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, understatement, metonymy, synecdoche, and apostrophe.
- What two elements are being compared in each use of simile, metaphor, and personification? What characteristics are shared by the two items being compared?
- Does the poet use hyperbole? Why? For example, is it used to move or to shock readers, or is its use intended to produce a humorous or satirical effect? Would more understated language be more effective?
- Does the poet use understatement? For what purpose? Would more emotionally charged language be more effective?
- If the poem includes metonymy or synecdoche, what term is being substituted for another? To what object or concept does the term refer?
- If the poem includes apostrophe, whom or what does the speaker address? What does the use of apostrophe accomplish?
- How do figures of speech contribute to the impact of the poem as a whole?