

## **How to Read a Poem: A Pep Talk and Some Questions**

When you approach a poem for the first time, don't be scared. Just try to enjoy it a little bit, even if you've always hated poetry or been intimidated by it. Nobody is watching you, and poems, good ones, can be some of the most pleasurable little bits of language you'll ever come across. Regardless of what anyone (a teacher, a poet, a theory book, etc.) tells you, poems are just about image and impression and suggestion and most of all, play—*with language*.

Poems usually mean more than one thing, in fact they always do. So let your mind go a bit, and don't panic because you don't think you've "gotten it"—nobody ever "gets" it. Poems are especially interesting for that very reason: good poetry, like good art, rewards every reading with something new we didn't quite see or understand or care about before. You need to be patient while you wait for things to rise to the surface, and persistent about making them rise a little faster.

When you read the Rilke poems, take notes on them and record what you see, what you think you understand, what words utterly baffle you, what sensory impression you like, what images makes you cry. The only way to enter into the life of the poem, to begin making it *mean something*, is to acknowledge the things you do and don't see, and this is a skill that, like reading and writing, can be learned.

Grab onto the parts of a poem you understand and use them to help you begin asking questions about the rest of the thing—questions about *how it's built*. Look at how the writer uses punctuation to control your breath and pause. Look at how he or she uses space in and between the lines and stanzas to emphasize words or control the time you spend on a given image. Look for sounds that rhyme or repeat, that force you to give certain words more attention or more weight. Look for images that seem important or at least captivating, and ask what those images could symbolize within the world of the poem, if they symbolize anything. Look at who's talking in the poem, who's telling the story, and the mood that speaker seems to be trying to set (a melancholy one? a mysterious one? a joyful one?). These observations will help you figure out what's going on in the poem, and what the writer may have been trying to do with it.

Remember that the good poet has the utmost respect for readers and will do anything in his or her power to help them understand the poem. Poets do not set out to make an incomprehensible riddle of language that's intentionally designed to confuse you and keep you outside the poem. Quite the opposite: the good poet wants to keep you there and is working very, very hard to strike the right balance between giving you enough clues to make the poem mean something specific he or she has in mind while still leaving the poem open enough for you to complete the work yourself. Because the freedom to create meaning from a poem is most profound when you get to do it yourself, when the poet doesn't do it all for you. The poem you work for is the poem you "get." Then it becomes your poem, not Rilke's.

That being said, below are a few general things you should look for in a poem, some questions to ask, some things to consider as you read. Put the answers to these questions in the margins beside the poem.

- What's the tone of the poem, what mood does it set, what is the "emotional register" of the piece?
- What's the point of view? Who is speaking, and how is the speaker related to the other characters, symbols, and events in the poem?
- What's the setting of the poem, and when does it occur? Or is the poem outside of any specific period of time?
- What's the narrative arc of the story: what happens, is there any conflict that complicates the story, does the story reach a coherent conclusion?
- What kind of imagery exists in the poem—lots of real concrete images, or maybe more abstract metaphors that rely on only a little bit of recognizable image?
- What does the poem seem to be trying to communicate, what might be the wider lament or outrage or memory or lesson proposed by the piece based on what you've decided the individual words and images and phrases mean?

Once you've gleaned some useful things by applying the above question sets to the poem, once it has become meaningful, think about how you might begin reversing that process of coming to an understanding that you just completed. Unravel the poem. This is the *deconstructive step*.

- What sets of "binary meaning" [closed sets of related but opposing terms] seem to run through and "structure" the work? Which terms are privileged over other terms—what feeling or image or sense does the poem seem to favor? Why? Is that favoring an arbitrary favoring? Couldn't we make the poem favor the alternate term?
- How does the poem suggest certain meanings but forget and "elide" [erase and leave out] certain others? Why do you think it does that? What kinds of important, alternate but still related meanings are always getting deferred or postponed by the words in the poem, by the intention of the poet as far as you can discern it, or by *you* when you read the thing? Are you imposing a meaning on the poem that isn't actually there? Why?
- What does the poem really mean? Can you be sure that any of your conclusions about the poem are right? Really? What about all those different translations of Rilke's "The Panther" I gave you? Don't those suggest that "truth" is only a rough translation, an approximation of misheard or inadequately understood speech? Don't they suggest that language, hence "meaning," is maybe more contextual and subjective and temporary and subject to misreading, that "real and true meaning" as it existed inside Rilke's head when he composed the poem disappeared once it hit the page because he, as any of us are, was only ever able to use words to *suggest* what he really knew about his world?

And so there it is, you're back to where you started: not understanding the poem at all. Good work!