

Rilke notes

Binary Sets

These are some of the binary oppositions that run through many of Rilke's poems in *The Book of Images*.

Look for these pairs of meaning in his poems and others not listed below. Pay attention to how the "truth" of the poems seems to revolve around these sets of meaning; pay attention to the fact that while you may not immediately see direct evidence of these binary sets in a poem, they are still there, implied by the language of the poem. Notice how powerful these closed sets are in determining the eventual "truth" or thematic thrust of a given poem. Notice how effective they are at eliminating other possible meanings from the poem, especially when one term of a binary set is given more weight or attention or seems somehow preferred over the other within the life of the poem. Notice how they really function to control your essential understanding of the poem. This is what it means to begin "deconstructing" a poem.

Terror / Bliss	Silence / Sound
Self / Other	Love / Loss
Inner / Outer	Having / Losing
Inside / Outside	Beginnings / Endings
Intimate / Elusive	Color / Colorlessness
Remembering / Forgetting	Isolation / Inclusion
Childhood / Adulthood	

Themes & Motifs

Rilke is noted, among other things, for being what's often referred to as a "poet of memory" because the subject of his poems is often, at least on the surface, a recovered memory or a lost memory, or maybe the poem chronicles a narrator's attempt to remember something that can or cannot be remembered fully. His poems are often noted for their melancholy feel, and for their frequent focus on themes or motifs like:

1. the process of taking leave from something or someone, and then looking back on it wistfully or sadly or fondly
2. night and its vastness, or mysteriousness, or ultimate unknowability
3. thresholds and limits and boundaries—both real and metaphorical
4. a constant negotiation between a self and other, between oneself and one's world
5. silence and solitude, and separations of humans from other humans
6. landscapes and figures filled up or imbued with emotion and feeling but also with remoteness and expectancy, often simultaneously
7. spiritual confession or religious questioning and angst (and often lots of biblical or biblical-historical allusions and symbols)
8. invisible connections between the speaker and his/her world or the people surrounding him/her
9. the fragmentary nature of vision or experience and awareness
10. objects, "objectively reality" and the moment when objects stop being objects and take on a more abstract or symbolic role where they come to represent feelings, wishes, beliefs, etc.

The above list is a partial one, but it's a good starting place for what to look for and to be aware of in Rilke's poetry.

Poetry Terminology

Lastly, these poetry terms are important to know when examining Rilke's poems because they give you the language, the tools, we tend to use when discussing the internal workings of poetry.

alliteration	repeated or rhymed consonant sounds in a line of poetry, usually at the beginnings or the first syllable of words
assonance	repeated or rhymed vowel sounds inside words in a line of poetry
allusion	a specific historical or biblical reference a poet adds in order to add authority and legitimacy to a poem, and to supply ready made emotional or intellectual content for the reader
free verse	line of poetry with no set "meter" (stressed or unstressed beat to words and syllables), and no set rhyme pattern in the lines
caesura	a pause within a line of poetry that contributes to the rhythm of the line, sometimes but not always marked with punctuation
enjambment	the continuation of a poetic line past or through line breaks
metaphor	a figure of speech in which comparison or analogy is made between two things; more specifically, where a word or image phrase is used to represent or refer to an abstract object or notion (e.g. "I fell through a trap door of depression")
conceit	an extended metaphor that's used to structure a larger part of the poem or the entire poem; a controlling image
stanza	a unit of poetry, a poetic "paragraph" set off by breaks or spaces before and after it; can be rhymed or unrhymed, short or long, and in any particular poetic style or language
couplet	a two-line stanza, often but not always rhymed, that expresses the final sentiment or lesson in a poem
quatrain	a four-line stanza
meter	recurring rhythmic pattern of accented stress in the words of a line of poetry
syntax	the order words are placed in within a line of poetry or prose
diction	the specific words used in given line of poetry or prose
epigram	a very short poem, often satirical or intentionally ironic, with a witty ending or remark that expresses a specific, singular idea in a clever or amusing way (originally these were carved on tombstones, buildings, gates)
ballad	a narrative poem, usually composed in quatrains with a regular "meter" or beat pattern in the lines; often tells communal stories of love, love lost, or supernatural events; typically uses more "regular" or colloquial speech patterns and language; characterized by frequent repetition or recurrent "refrains" in the stanzas (as this type of poem was originally meant to be sung as a way of transmitting stories orally from person to person, family to family)

- epic** a poem that celebrates, in a continuous long story, the achievements of historical/biblical/mythical figures—heroes and heroines—usually as they complete monumental undertakings (e.g. founding a nation or developing a culture); epics usually use elevated or highly “wrought” language, a grand, highly formal or stylized language
- lyric** a short poem that expresses the personal emotions and thoughts of a single, first-person speaker (this type of poem was also originally meant to be sung, to the accompaniment of a lyre); not usually a narrative or dramatic monologue
- elegy** specific type of poem taking the form of a lament on the death of a particular person