

Poems are like songs, meant to be sung more than once. Meaning is in the images, shape, the rhythms and sounds, even in the confusion and mysteries. Even poetry experts do not expect to appreciate a poem by reading it once. Some poems you can enjoy for a whole lifetime.

Choose a challenging poem and live with it a while. It will open up to higher levels of meaning.

- 1st. **Read the poem aloud**, uncritically, just to hear it and see what is there.
- 2nd. **Vocabulary.** Read it again, marking unfamiliar words, or words used in an unfamiliar way. Find the meanings that best fit the context. (If the poem is 150 years old, try the *Oxford English Dictionary*.)
- 3rd. **Sentences.** Read it again and write a sentence-by-sentence paraphrase of the entire literal sense.
- 4th. **Diction.** Read it again, noticing interesting word choices. What alternatives did the author have? Does the chosen word have connotations — moods or ideas you associate with it?
- 5th. **Tone.** What is the poet's bias or attitude? How does it show? Do you hear anything ironic?
- 6th. **Form.** Read it aloud again. Does it have a constant rhythm or meter? Does the meter vary? Are the line lengths all the same or different? Short or long? Is there rhyme? A regular rhyme *scheme*? Or is it free verse? Do the lines break at interesting places, emphasizing certain words or pauses?
- 7th. **Sounds of the language.** Read it aloud again, marking the words and phrases you hear and feel— speech rhythms, assonance, consonance, alliteration, bright vowels, warm vowels, harsh consonants, smooth or flowing consonants.
- 8th. **Imagery.** Read it again, looking for references to sight, hearing, heat and cold, smell and taste, pain and comfort. Try to imagine those sensory experiences. How do they guide your responses? Do you go forward, backward, fall, rise, move closer, or wander? Is there a past, present, and future to the poem?
- 9th. **Figurative language.** Read it again, looking for similes, metaphors, personification, puns, and any other ways of using words so they mean something *more*, or *less*, or *other* than they normally would.
- 10th. **Symbols.** Read it again, looking for things or events that suggest higher meanings.
- 11th. **Context.** Read it again, looking for allusions, anything that seems to refer to something outside the poem. Look for information about these in the footnotes, the dictionary, and critical essays.
- 12th. **Gestalt.** Keep reading it aloud thoughtfully until your mind can finally bring together at once all the layers of music and meaning you have discovered. Make it “explode” (Hopkins).

### Notes:

- A poem should be read aloud because it is a participatory medium, a collaboration between the poet and the reader, just as a song should be sung, a dance should be danced, and a game played, not just watched.
- Rhyme, meter, repetition, and other sound effects, as well as metaphor and other distortions of meaning, serve to “release words... from their bondages to meaning, their purely referential role, and to give or restore to them the corporeality which a true medium needs” (Burckhardt).
- A writer's most powerful tool is not the writer's imagination, but the reader's imagination.
- Gestalt: a “pattern of elements so unified as a whole that its properties cannot be derived from a simple summation of its parts” (*American Heritage*). —In other words, a whole that is greater than its parts.

### Works Cited

- Burckhardt, Sigurd. *Shakespearean Meanings*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968. 24. Quoted in Russ McDonald, “‘Pretty Rooms’: Shakespeare's Sonnets, Elizabethan Architecture, and Early Modern Visual Design.” *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare's Poetry*. Ed. Jonathan F. S. Post. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 502. Print.
- “Gestalt.” *American Heritage Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. Print.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley, quoted in Michael D. Hurlley, “Rhythm.” *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*. Ed. Matthew Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 29. Print.