

The Poet's Tools

“My poetry, I think, has become the way of my giving out what music is within me.”

--Countee Cullen, poet

“If you read quickly to get through a poem to what it means, you have missed the body of the poem.”

--M. H. Abrams, literary critic

The poet Robert Frost claimed “poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.” Frost, perhaps the country’s best-known poet, should know. Yet poems don’t announce their emotional state. They build it, line by line, image by image, syllable by syllable, until the reader begins to see, hear, and even feel what the poet wants to express.

Because poets don’t directly state their meanings—at least the good ones don’t—readers have to look closely at the different elements in a poem that create the larger experience or feeling being communicated. Readers need to know, in other words, something about the **poet’s tools**. So here forthwith, is a brief introduction to *some* of the devices poets use to translate emotion into thought and thought into words.

To be sure, poets have many more verbal tools at their disposal than the ones shown here. I’ve picked the ones I thought could be explained, albeit barely, in a few paragraphs, which is, by the way, why I do not discuss rhythm in poetry, a topic that would probably require a small book.

1. Imagery

“I no sooner have an idea than it turns into an image.”

-- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, poet and playwright

Images in poetry are the physical objects or experiences pictured, or described, what John Frederick Nims and David Mason, authors of a truly wonderful book on poetry, *Western Wind*,¹ call the “sense data.” The images in the poem are the smells, sounds, colors, tastes, and physical feelings that the poet uses to create the mood², experience, or thought the poet wants to communicate. Follow the images and you are bound to see the meaning.

Questions to Ask About Imagery

What visible objects and experiences are pictured in the poem? How are they described? Are they described in ways that make them seem positive or negative, attractive or ugly? Taken together, what do they suggest about the poem’s outlook the world?

-
1. Bless my friend, poet and textbook author Carol Kanar for introducing me to it.
 2. Mood: I’m using this term throughout to mean atmosphere, while I use “tone” to describe the speaker’s attitude toward the subject and the audience.

2. Metaphor and Simile

“You can't think without metaphors.”

--Mary Catherine Bateson, scientist

In *Western Wind*, Nims and Mason say “the mind ... operates by finding likenesses.” Nowhere is this statement more true than in poetry. In the most astonishing ways, poets are forever telling us that two things, for instance “eyes “ and “bullets,” are surprisingly alike. In making their unusual comparisons, poets tell us not just that A (eyes) is like B (bullets), but that A has qualities or powers we may never have thought about before.

Poets sometimes make their comparisons with *similes*, where the similarity is spelled out with the help of the words *like* or *as*. To illustrate, here's a haunting simile from poet Walter De La Mare, “her eyes were like a stormy sea/Forlorn³ and vast and grey.” But poets are even more likely to use *metaphors* in which the comparison is suggested but not stated. Thus the poet Francis Osgood can describe winter in Vermont as a time “when lanes are fairy lands in white.” Osgood's metaphor relies on the reader to know that “fairy lands” are usually portrayed as mysterious and yet lovely. Therefore comparing Vermont's snow-covered lanes (the A part of the metaphor) to “fairy lands” (the B part) suggests that the lanes, dressed in winter white, have the magical and mysterious look associated with fairy tales.

Questions to Ask about Metaphors and Similes

To see the effect of similes and metaphors in a poem, ask yourself: What implicit and explicit comparisons does the author make? When the author suggests that A is like B, what is the effect of that comparison on A? What new associations does A take on or assume by being compared to B? What do these associations contribute to the mood or tone of the poem? What emotions are they meant to call up in the reader?

3. Symbol

“A poem begins with a lump in the throat.”

-- Robert Frost, poet

The anthropologist Eli Sagan claimed that humans were “symbol-making” creatures. Sagan has a point since we surround ourselves with *symbols*—letters, objects and images that stand for something else. We use letters to represent sounds, words to stand for things, and all kinds of objects to call up ideas, attitudes and beliefs that can be imagined or thought about yet call up no concrete, or physical, image of their own. Thus we use flags to show patriotism, doves to represent peace, and yellow ribbons to say we want our loved ones to come home from war.

But if humans generally seem to surround themselves with symbols, poets are even more obsessed by symbols. Unlike the rest of us, though, they don't rely so heavily on the standard symbols of the culture, like the rose as a symbol for beauty, the lion as a symbol of courage, or white as a symbol of purity.

3. forlorn: lonely and lost.

Instead, poets make up their own symbols. Therefore, part of the reader's job is to figure out what the symbols represent by looking closely at how they are used. William Blake, for instance, in his poem "The Tyger" consistently associates the tiger with images of fire, strength, and danger, making the tiger seem a symbol of uncontrolled, even deadly, natural instinct.

Keep in mind, however, that poetic symbols aren't easy to nail down. Your friend may decide that the tiger in Blake is a symbol of evil, rather than uncontrolled instinct. That's fine as long as you and your friend can both make your case by citing words and phrases from the poem that most people would see as associated with evil or nature gone out of control.

Symbols are slippery, so one symbol can represent two or even three different things to different readers. However, all three readers have to make sense of the symbol in terms of what's said about it. The reader can't decide, for instance, that Blake's tiger represents peace, given that Blake asks of the tiger "In what distant deeps or skies†/ Burnt the fire of thine eyes?" Peace and fiery eyes just don't go together, at least not in our culture.

Questions to Ask About Symbols

Are there consistent references to one event, object, or being in the poem? What other words and images are attached to the thing that is repeatedly referred to? What do the related words and images suggest about the symbol's meaning? What does the symbol suggest about the world created in the poem?

4. Rhyme

"I rhyme for fun."

--Robert Burns, poet

The term *rhyme* refers to the use of words with similar or the same sounds. Rhyme is *often* a key component of a poem, although not all poets make use of it. Those who do use it in a variety of ways, sometimes making the last word in each line of a poem rhyme, sometimes rhyming every other line. See here how the poet John Donne, who wrote some of the world's most beautiful love poems, does both in "The Canonization," where the speaker tells his audience to leave him alone and let him be in love:

¹For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
²Or chide my palsy⁴, or my gout⁵,
³My five gray hairs or ruined fortune flout,⁶
⁴With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
⁵Take you a course, get you a place,
⁶Observe His Honor, or his Grace.

-
4. palsy: an illness that brings on trembling of the limbs.
 5. gout: an illness that causes pain and swelling of the limbs.
 6. flout: in this case, make fun of or point out in an obvious way.

But rhymes don't appear just at the ends of lines. They can also appear within lines, even within words. That's called *internal rhyme*. Note the internal rhyme in one of American poetry's most famous lines by Edgar Allan Poe: "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary..."

With *half* or *near rhyme*, the poet comes close to rhyming but doesn't quite make it. Instead the poet creates what some call an *imperfect rhyme*. The imperfection, however, is intentional. You can hear near or imperfect rhyme in these lines from Emily Dickinson:

¹Hope is the thing with feathers
²That perches in the **soul**,
³And sings the tune without the words,
⁴And never stops at **all**.

Poets use rhyme to make readers attend to words central to the poem. They also use it to reinforce the speaker's tone, or attitude, in the poem. Lots of rhyming short words, for instance, can speed up the poem's pace and help create a light-hearted tone.

Rhyme also helps readers follow the poet's *transitions*, or shifts in thought. When lines rhyme, the ideas expressed in them are likely to be not just crucial to the poem but also related to one another. In turn, a new set of rhyming words often signifies a change in or modification of the poet's thinking.

Rhyme also gives *unity*, or a connected sense of wholeness, to a poem by making the sounds link the words together through similarity. Listen here for the ways in which the half rhymes tie together the words in Wilfred Owen's "Arms and the Boy":

¹Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
²How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
³Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash:
⁴And thinly drawn with famishing⁷ for flesh.

Questions to Ask About Rhyme

Are there rhyming words or lines in the poem? What images or thoughts do they connect? When the rhyming words change, do they support a change in the poet's train of thought? What do the sounds of rhymes contribute to the poem? What words do the rhymes draw attention to? What do those rhymed words tell you about the feeling, idea or attitude presented in the poem?

7. famishing: hungering.

5. Personification

“A poet's work is to name the unnameable....”

--Salman Rushdie, novelist

In the passage above on metaphors, you saw the phrase “dressed in winter white.” That’s a good example of *personification* because, obviously, Vermont’s lanes don’t “get dressed.” People do that. It’s ascribing the behavior of people to something not human that makes the phrase an example of personification.

Personification has long been a common poetic device. The ancient Greeks already had a word for it. Personification appears in the Bible. Shakespeare made heavy use of personification, as he does here in a line from *Romeo and Juliet*: “When well-appareled April on the heel of limping Winter treads.”

Questions to Ask about Personification

Are there places in the poem where the poet makes non-human objects, plants, or creatures behave or speak as if they were human? What feelings or attitudes do these objects, plants, or creatures express? What do those feelings or attitudes contribute to the overall meaning or feeling of the poem?

6. Allusions

“Poetry makes nothing happen. It survives in the valley of its saying.”

-- Poet Maxine Kumin, in a quotation that alludes to W.H. Auden’s poem “In Memory of William Butler Yeats”

Allusions can be references to other well-know poems or plays. For instance, Robert Frost titled one of his poems “Out, Out,” which is an allusion to Shakespeare’s lines from *Macbeth*:

¹Out, out, brief candle!

²Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,

³That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

⁴And then is heard no more.

In Frost’s case, the allusion sets the mood of the poem and suggests to readers who recognize the phrase that the subject of the poem will be death.

However, allusions are just as likely to be references to people, places, and events that underscore some idea or feeling in the poem. Margaret Atwood’s sad and funny poem “Helen of Troy Does Countertop Dancing” uses an allusion to Helen of Troy, the heroine of the Greek epic, *The Iliad*, in a double sense. The allusion suggests that the stripper in the poem maintains her self-respect by likening herself to the gorgeous Helen. At the same time, it also suggests how far away a stripper doing a pole dance really is from a woman whom men supposedly lived and died for.

You may not always recognize allusions to other literary works. But that's not a big problem. You can get a sense of the poet's meaning without them. The same is not always true for references to people and places.

If you see allusions to names and locations in a poem and don't know who the person was or what happened in that particular place, make sure you look the allusions up (That's the beauty of the Web; looking things up takes no time at all). Sometimes, as with Atwood's poem, the full meaning hinges on the allusion. While you can still understand the poem without knowing who Helen of Troy was, you won't get its total emotional impact if you have no knowledge of Helen's story.

Questions to Ask About Allusions

Who are the people and places mentioned? What associations do they call up? How do these associations fit with the other images, symbols and comparisons used in the poem?

7. Time

"Poetry is as precise as geometry."

--Gustave Flaubert, novelist

Poems often play with time, describing how the subject of the poem was in the past, is in the present, or will be in the future. Always note references to time in a poem. They are there for a reason. It is often in the difference between present and past, today and tomorrow, that the poet makes his or her point about the world.

Questions to Ask about Time

Does the poem refer to any changes over time? What descriptive words does the poet use to talk about different periods in time? Do you associate those words with feelings that are positive or negative? Are the associations different depending on which time period is described?

8. Pronoun Reference

Poets often move from line to line with references to *you*, *we*, or *it*. Just as in prose, perhaps even more so, poetry readers need to make sure they understand what the pronouns refer to. Otherwise particularly with complex poems, it's easy to get lost and lose track of how the poet's thought develops as the lines progress.

Questions to Ask About Pronouns

To whom or what does each pronoun refer? If the speaker of the poem addresses someone as *you*, what does the speaker want the other person to know or feel? What is the relationship between the two? How are they different or similar?

And now for some poems

“Poetry doesn’t need skilled practitioners, she needs lovers,”

-- *Federico García Lorca, poet and political activist*

1. **Hard Evidence**

for Wolf

¹I’m stumbling on signs of life

²throughout the empty house,

³bones buried under rugs,

⁴a leash snared by a table leg.

⁵These and other of your effects—

⁶cans and bags of uneaten food,

⁷assorted toys and grooming aids—

⁸a legacy now for homeless dogs.

⁹Habits die, but need remains:

¹⁰the walk I will not take today.

¹¹Silence whimpers at my door.

¹²I still can smell you in the rain.

This poem is used by permission of the poet, Carol Kanar.

Questions:

a. What tone or mood does the poet set when she opens by saying she was “stumbling on” rather than “walking into” signs of life?

b. What is the “hard evidence” of the poem?

c. Evidence is usually used to prove something. What does the evidence in the poem prove for the speaker?

d. What two different meanings can be applied to the word *hard* in the title?

e. Why does the poet use the word *whimpers* in relation to silence?

f. The phrase “silence whimpers” is an example of _____.

g. What experience, emotion, or attitude does the poet want to convey with this poem?

i. How would you paraphrase, or put into your own words, the line “Habits die, but need remains”?

j. Is there an image in the poem that provokes an emotional reaction in you? If so, what is that reaction?

Can you explain why you have that reaction?

2. Elegy⁸ On The Death Of A Mad Dog

¹Good people all, of every sort,
²Give ear unto my song;
³And if you find it wond'rous short,
⁴It cannot hold you long.

⁵In Islington there was a man,
⁶Of whom the world might say,
⁷That still a godly race he ran,
⁸Whene'er he went to pray.

⁹A kind and gentle heart he had,
¹⁰To comfort friends and foes;
¹¹The naked every day he clad,
¹²When he put on his clothes.

¹³And in that town a dog was found,
¹⁴As many dogs there be,
¹⁵Both mongrel, puppy, whelp, and hound,
¹⁶And curs of low degree.

¹⁷This dog and man at first were friends;
¹⁸But when a pique⁹ began,
¹⁹The dog, to gain some private ends,
²⁰Went mad and bit the man.

²¹Around from all the neighbouring streets
²²The wond'ring neighbours ran,
²³And swore the dog had lost his wits,
²⁴To bite so good a man.

²⁵The wound it seem'd both sore and sad
²⁶To every Christian eye;
²⁷And while they swore the dog was mad,
²⁸They swore the man would die.

²⁹But soon a wonder came to light,
³⁰That show'd the rogues they lied:

8. elegy: a mournful poem usually recited after someone has died.

9. pique: period of irritation or annoyance.

³¹The man recover'd of the bite,

³²The dog it was that died.

--*Oliver Goldsmith*

Questions:

a. How would you compare the speaker's tone or attitude toward the audience in this poem with the tone used in the first poem?

b. In "Hard Evidence," how does the poet make use of rhyme? How does the rhyme in that poem compare with the use of rhyme in "Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog"?

c. How does the use of rhyme affect or influence the different tone of the two poems?

d. When Goldsmith's poem has the dog die rather than the man, what point does the poem make about the neighbor's expectations?

e. What does the poem suggest about the godly man's character?

3. The Apple

¹This apple I toss in your lap,

²If you share the ardor¹⁰ I'm feeling,

³Take it; it's yours. In return,

⁴Render your virginal self.

⁵If you think what I'm hoping you won't,

⁶Take it anyway, ponder¹¹ its prime, how

⁷Ripe now its redolent¹² flesh.

⁸Not so tomorrow, my dear.

-- *Ascribed to Plato (c.429-347 B.C. but no one knows for sure)*

Questions:

a. The key symbol of the poem is the _____.

b. What two different periods of time are contrasted in the poem?

c. What does *its* refer to in the phrase "ponder its prime"?

d. What does the speaker want the other person to ponder, or think about?

e. Why does the speaker want the woman to think about an apple?

10. ardor: passion.

11. ponder: think hard.

12. redolent: in this case, sweet-smelling or fragrant.

f. What experience, emotion, or attitude does the poet want to convey with this poem?

4. When you are old

¹When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
²And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
³And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
⁴Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

⁵How many loved your moments of glad grace,
⁶And loved your beauty with love false or true,
⁷But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
⁸And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

⁹And bending down beside the glowing bars,
¹⁰Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
¹¹And paced upon the mountains overhead
¹²And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

W.B. Yeats

Questions:

a. The speaker of the poem wants the woman addressed to think of herself at what period in her life?

What line or lines from the poem support your answer?

b. What is she supposed to remember?

c. A “pilgrim” is someone who takes long journeys often to sacred places. What then does the poet mean when he says, “But one man loved the *pilgrim soul* in you.” What did the man love about the woman?

d. Is that a simile or a metaphor?

e. What do the last three lines of the poem suggest about the woman’s reaction to the man who loved her pilgrim soul?

f. When the poet describes love as fleeing and hiding, he is using

g. Is rhyme used in this poem in the same way it was used in the Goldsmith poem?

h. What experience, emotion, or attitude does the poet want to convey with this poem?

5. Grass

¹Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.¹³

²Shovel them under and let me work—

³I am the grass; I cover all.

⁴And pile them high at Gettysburg¹⁴

⁵And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.

⁶Shovel them under and let me work.

⁷Two years, ten years, and the passengers ask the conductor:

⁸What place is this?

⁹Where are we now?

¹⁰I am the grass.

¹¹Let me work.

Carl Sandburg

Questions:

a. Who is the *I* in the poem? _____.

b. The author's description of the grass illustrates _____.

c. What are the time references meant to show? What happens in two years, ten years?

d. Austerlitz, Waterloo, Gettysburg, Ypres, and Verdun all are all examples of what?

e. Why are these place names in the poem? What do they contribute to the overall meaning?

13. Austerlitz and Waterloo: The former was the scene of Napoleon's greatest triumph, the latter the site of his greatest defeat. Both battles resulted in much bloodshed.

14. Gettysburg: a famous and extremely blood battlefield in the American Civil War. Ypres and Verdun were scenes of equally brutal and bloody battles during World War I.