

An Introduction to Poetry: Five Poems

Introduction to Poetry

Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with a rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Think about who the speaker of this poem probably is, as well as whom the speaker is talking about, and give some thought to the meaning of the figurative descriptions of poetry reading in each stanza. What might it mean, for example, to “hold [a poem] up to the light like a color slide”? (Don’t worry about getting it “right”—the idea here is to simply let your imagination roam freely and try to have fun with it.) Consider the attitude the speaker has to poetry and how that attitude contrasts with the attitude of the people he’s talking about.

The SOAPSTone method, introduced on the next page, may help you with this process.

The Eagle
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

To help you identify the important elements of the poem and better understand its meaning and purpose, remember the “SOAPSTone” method. For any given poem, some of these elements may not be easily identifiable or particularly important in understanding its meaning, but it is often helpful to think about them anyway.

Speaker: the person (perhaps imaginary) from whose point of view the poem is written; the person delivering the poem as distinct from the author

Occasion: the situation (a specific event or a general motivating factor) that prompted the poem and/or for which it was written

Audience: the person or people to whom the poem is addressed

Purpose: the reason why the poet wrote the poem and/or why the speaker is delivering the poem

Subject: the topic of the poem; what the poem is about

Tone: the attitude that the speaker expresses toward the subject

Describe the structure and form of the poem (e.g. meter, rhyme scheme, number and length of stanzas). How do the author’s structural choices contribute to the effect of the poem, especially when it is read aloud?

What sound devices occur in the poem, and what is their effect?

What is the dominant rhetorical device used throughout the poem to describe the eagle? What effect does the use of this device have—how does it help us understand the speaker’s attitude toward and conception of the eagle? Cite specific examples of its usage.

What do you think the “azure world” is? (“Azure” is a fancy word for “blue.”) Why do you think the speaker describes the eagle as being “close to the sun” and “ring’d with the azure world”—what feeling toward the eagle do these descriptions evoke?

What rhetorical device is used in line 4, and what effect does it have?

What rhetorical device is used in line 6, and what effect does it have?

The Great Figure
William Carlos Williams

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

Obviously, this poem is much different from what many people imagine when they think of poetry. Think about the characteristics that distinguish this poem, and consider the effect of those characteristics. The form and style of this poem are closely related to its meaning. Read it aloud to get a sense of how the sound of the poem contributes to its effect. What do you think is the **purpose** of this poem? In this case, perhaps that is a more helpful idea to focus on than **meaning**.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Although this poem seems rather simple and traditional, it has a deeper meaning that is expressed in a subtle and sophisticated way. In interpreting it, pay close attention to imagery—it is a major clue to the poem's meaning.

Give some thought to the significance of devoting an entire stanza to the anonymous owner of the woods.

Think about the horse's reaction to the situation and what this implies.

Consider possible non-literal interpretations of the last two lines, and the significance of this repetition.

Think carefully about the tone of the poem in terms of both the poem's meaning and the narrator's attitude.

Sonnet 29
William Shakespeare

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless¹ cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured² like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope³,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
Haply⁴ I think on thee, and then my state⁵,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Sonnets are an important traditional genre of poem. Their characteristics include the following:

- iambic pentameter (each line has five pairs of unstressed/stressed syllables)
- a length of fourteen lines
- a definite rhyme pattern (for Shakespearean sonnets: abab cdcd efef gg)
- a focus on classic themes such as love and mortality
- strong emotional content
- emphatic imagery and sharp contrasts
- distinct stages and shifts in tone
- a final rhyming couplet that often sums up the theme of the poem

Note how this poem's form and content fit this pattern, and apply some of the elements of the SOAPStone method to the poem: Who is the speaker? Whom is he addressing? What do you think is the purpose of the poem? Think about the speaker's attitude and the change it undergoes toward the end of the poem.

¹ futile

² "having features"

³ breadth of knowledge or ability

⁴ by chance or by luck

⁵ situation; condition