

Introduction to Poetry

Billy Collins

The title of this poem gives some insight into its meaning. The title has another meaning as well: the poem itself serves as an effective introduction to poetry. Consider these meanings as you read the poem aloud.

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

5 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
10 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.

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

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. Who is the **speaker** ("I") in the poem? Who do the pronouns "them" (lines 1 and 9) and "they" (lines 12 and 15) probably refer to?
2. Give some thought to the meanings of the descriptions of poetry reading in each stanza. Don't worry about getting them "right"—let your imagination roam freely and try to have fun with the process.
 - What might it mean, for example, to "hold [a poem] up to the light like a color slide" (lines 2-3)?
 - What do a hive (line 4) and a mouse (line 5) have to do with a poem?
 - Discuss other significant ideas and images in the poem.
3. What is the **tone** of the poem? Consider the attitude the speaker has toward poetry and how it contrasts with the attitude of the people he's talking about (who want to "torture a confession out of it"). What opinion do you think the speaker has about "find[ing] out what it really means" (line 16)?
4. Based on these factors, how would you describe the **purpose** of the poem? Explain.
5. Discuss the use of **rhetorical devices** (especially various kinds of **figurative language**) in the poem. What specific examples can you find, and what effect do they have in relation to the poem's **purpose**?