

ENG 106

ENG 106

A Complete Online Course

LEIGH HANCOCK

GOOD WORDS UNLIMITED
CONCORD



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Introduction

This book is an edited compilation of several open sourced, online texts. It has been arranged for use in Columbia Gorge Community College's online ENG 106, Introduction to Poetry class. Chapters are aligned with the college's 11-week format for this course.

An Introduction to Poetry starts off where our students start, i.e., from a million different points on a movable spectrum. Some students arrive in this course with a huge excitement for poetry; some have spent years writing poetry themselves. Others haven't looked at a poem since cinquains in third grade; still others remember feeling frustrated because they didn't find "the correct meaning" of a Dickinson poem in high school. Some students cringe at the idea of dissecting something as personal and sacred as a poem. The beauty and power of the community college classroom is that we get to start at a place of diversity and move toward a common—and hopefully deeper—understanding of poetry. That is the intent of this textbook.

Students often fear that they'll never understand poetry. They have been exposed to poetry in middle school and high school—a little Shakespeare, a little Emily Dickinson, a little Robert Frost—and they could never figure out how the teacher got from the words of the poems to the meaning the teacher ascribed to them. Poetry, in short, has made them feel dumb. This textbook aims to give students the tools and confidence they need to access a poem—and the wisdom to recognize that some poems take *years* to fully understand.

The first two chapters of this course explore the attitudes and experiences around poetry that students bring to the class. We look at our beliefs, as well as our misconceptions, about what poetry is and isn't. We model what we call "unpacking a poem"—and then give students time to practice this skill.

Chapters 3-6 explain and illustrate various elements of poems—

elements that once understood help the student access deeper levels of meaning. We focus in these chapters on what is actually on the page within the poem. We try not to apply our own interpretation until we've really examined what the poet has offered. Because we're actually seeing more, things start to get rich; new meanings emerge. Small "aha" moments occur.

Chapters 7-9 look at the various forms (and non-forms) of poetry in the last 700+ years, while Chapter 10 concludes by looking at the rich tradition of protest poetry.

Throughout this course, we strive to put the skills, knowledge and confidence we've been practicing to use. We tackle less accessible poems, and we entertain the notion that very smart, skilled people may see totally different messages within the same poem. We look at poetry in the context of social, political and cultural contexts: is a rose always a rose? And we reflect on our own personal ethos of poetry: what it means to us. How it will (or won't) become a part of our lives. We hope, of course, that it will.

I. Week I - What Poetry is...and isn't

LEIGH HANCOCK, ALAN LINDSAY, AND CANDACE BERGSTROM

What Poetry is....and What it isn't

It's hard to define poetry. When we try, the definitions are often anything but poetic. For example:

- Poetry is “is an art form in which human language is used for its aesthetic qualities in addition to, or instead of, its notional and semantic content.” (Wikipedia)
- A poem is “a thought, caught in the act of dawning.” (NEA.gov)
- Poetry is “writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm.” (Merriam Webster)

Somehow I don't think we're getting very close.

Literary critic Mark Flanagan describes poetry's most definable characteristic as **the economy of language**—which is a fancy way of saying that poets *make every word count*. We'll spend a lot of time this term considering this.

Poetry can provoke in the reader **an intense emotion: joy, sorrow, anger, catharsis, love**. It has the ability to surprise the reader and to give revelation and insight into elemental truth and beauty. As Keats says: “Beauty is truth. Truth, beauty. That is all ye know on Earth and all ye need to know.”

Here are a few commonly held ideas about poetry. See if any capture what you think about poetry.

- Poetry involves using language in a unique, compressed way to articulate non-literal ideas to the reader.
- Poetry comes in a variety of shapes and forms and lack of form.
- Poems are never meaningless.
- Poems make use of everyday words, sentences and grammatical structures, although poets often use these elements in unexpected and unusual ways.
- No language is exclusive to poetry. If you can read this sentence, you can read or learn to read almost any poem.
- Poetry does use language more intensely than normal for producing meaning; it thereby produces more meaning than a typical sentence like the one you are reading now.
- Poems make observation and convey perspectives.

The point here is that NO ONE has the single correct definition and last word about what poetry is and what it isn't. In this class, we'll explore various elements of poetry, with the goal of learning how to access and move deeply into whatever poem we're reading. We'll read a wide variety of poems written for myriad reasons. We'll occasionally read analyses or critiques of poems by "experts," but for the most part, our goal here is to help you become comfortable and skilled with finding and understanding poetry that is meaningful to you.

In that vein, check out the following poems and see if any of them offer an explanation of poetry that rings true to you. We'll discuss a few in our first Discussion Forum.



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Elizabeth Alexander, “Ars Poetica” (Links to an external site.)

Edward Lear, “The Owl and the Pussycat” (Links to an external site.)

Billy Collins, “Workshop” (Links to an external site.)

William Carlos Williams, “Love Song” (Links to an external site.)

Pablo Neruda, “Poetry”

Robert Bly, “Starting a Poem”

2. Week 2 - Unpacking a Poem (How to Read a Poem (and Maybe Fall in Love with Poetry))

MICHELLE BONCZEK EVORY AND LEIGH HANCOCK



*"The reader of poetry is a kind of pilgrim setting out,
setting forth...on an adventure in renewal, a perpetual
beginning, a rebirth of wonder."*

—Edward Hirsch.

Before we talk about how to unpack a poem, I want to address the issue of whether poems are “open to interpretation.” So picture this: A politician says, “I won’t support this bill because it will hurt the middle class.” You hear that and maybe you think, “Yeah, right. You won’t support the bill because if you do, the people who elected you won’t vote for you next time, and you’ll lose your cushy job.”

Or this: You ask a professor a simple question about quadratic equations and she spends half an hour tracing the origin of mathematics through the middle ages. So you think (but are too polite to say), “This is about math, not about you. Stop showing off.”

What do these incidents have in common? In each case, *someone interpreted someone’s words differently than what they seemed to say*. We could offer multiply examples of this because *language can always mean more than what it literally says*. We humans learn from a very early age how to differentiate what is said from what is meant. In fact, all language, even this paragraph, is by its very nature open to different understandings.

It is the job of poets to exploit the inherent ambiguities and multiple meanings of language in order to create their poems. They do this on purpose, with specific intentions, in order to enrich their art AND move closer to the truth (which is often ambiguous). So in this sense, all poetry is open to interpretation.

However.

Not all interpretations are equal. Interpretations that are based on a close reading of the text are more defensible, and likely to be more accurate, than those that are based simply on how the reader feels or what the reader believes. In this course we will emphasize learning to pay close attention to the text as you read so that you can support your interpretations with direct quotes from the text.

(from SUNY: [https://milnepublishing.geneseo.edu/naming-the-unnnameable/chapter two](https://milnepublishing.geneseo.edu/naming-the-unnnameable/chapter-two))

Poet Muriel Rukeyser says in *The Life of Poetry* that in order to successfully read a poem, we must give a poem “a total response” and to come “to the emotional meanings at every moment.” This sounds daunting. Let’s break it down.

First of all, when we read poetry, we need to give it all of our attention, taking it in slowly, reading it several times. This involves listening to the poem openly, without judgment, and without projecting our own assumed meanings onto it. That can be hard to do.

We need to adjust what we think it means whenever a swerve or contradiction occurs, recognizing that each poem creates its own universe from line to line. We breathe in what a poet breathes out; her words and their meanings become part of our body, triggering sensations that lead to thoughts. Through this process, we have experiences that are new, that change us as any other experience can.

By using ancient elements like tone, rhythm, and sound, poetry produces an experience that can shape a reader’s physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience. SUNY poetry teacher Anthony Piccione says, “A poem is what a poem does.” This is why we must read poems with full concentration and focus more than once. It is why we read them out loud. It is why we pay attention to every aspect of the poem on both ends: as a writer, and as a reader.

How to “Unpack” a Poem

Start with the Title

The title sets up an expectation for the poem in us. A title can set a mood or tone, or ground us in a setting, persona, or time. It is the

doorway into the poem. It prepares us for what follows. What is the first word that comes to mind when you read the following title:

- “The Insistence of Beauty”

Maybe the word that comes to mind is Art or Philosophy or Contemplative. Maybe it's fashion or movie star. As you read on, the poem may fulfill your expectation...or it may swerve into unexpected territory. Either way, the poet deliberately uses the title to advance his or her meaning.

Read it First Out Loud

As you read the following poem out loud, be aware of how it affects you emotionally. Listen for the tone, mood, and style. Identify your first impressions.

The Insistence of Beauty

The day before those silver planes
came out of the perfect blue, I was struck
by the beauty of pollution rising
from smokestacks near Newark,
gray and white ribbons of it
on their way to evanescence.

And at impact, no doubt, certain beholders
and believers from another part of the world
must have seen what appeared gorgeous—
the flames of something theirs being born.

I watched for hours—mesmerized—
that willful collision replayed,
the better man in me not yielding,
then yielding to revenge's sweet surge.

The next day there was a photograph
of dust and smoke ghosting a street,
and another of a man you couldn't be sure
was fear-frozen or dead or made of stone,

and for a while I was pleased
to admire the intensity—or was it the coldness?—
of each photographer's good eye.
For years I'd taken pride in resisting

the obvious—sunsets, snowy peaks,
a starlet's face—yet had come to realize
even those, seen just right, can have
their edgy place. And the sentimental,

beauty's sloppy cousin, that enemy,
can't it have a place too?
Doesn't a tear deserve a close-up?
When word came of a fireman

who hid in the rubble
so his dispirited search dog
could have someone to find, I repeated it
to everyone I knew. I did this for myself,
not for community or beauty's sake,
yet soon it had a rhythm and a frame.

*"The Insistence of Beauty", from THE INSISTENCE OF
BEAUTY: POEMS by Stephen Dunn. Copyright © 2004 by
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Company, Inc.*



Write out (very informally) your initial responses to the following questions:

1. What is my first emotional reaction to the poem?
2. Is this poem telling a story or just sharing thoughts? Is it playing with language or exploring deep feelings? Is it praising something or offering instruction? What kind of poem is this?
3. Is the tone serious? Funny? Meditative? Inquisitive? Confessional? How would you describe the tone after just one reading?

Look at the Images

Go back and read the poem a second time, paying attention to the images and specific words. Stop at the end of each stanza to ask yourself what is going on and how you are responding. Notice if lines offer contrasting or contradictory images. For instance, the first two lines describe something beautiful, while the second two evoke pollution, which we usually don't consider beautiful.

The day before those silver planes
came out of the perfect blue, I was struck
by the beauty of pollution rising
from smokestacks near Newark

As we move on to other images in the the poem—"gray and white ribbons," "a man you couldn't be sure was fear-frozen or dead or made of stone"—we begin to look at the issue of beauty from an entirely different place. We sense that something catastrophic has occurred....and yet the speaker seems to say that even in destruction, Beauty can be present.

Identify the Tone

In the second line, the phrase “I was struck” introduces the speaker, who is someone capable of seeing the beauty in pollution—in other words, a person who sees things differently. This image reverses our assumptions and makes us ask how smog rising from smokestacks can be beautiful. Perhaps it even makes us think back to the title, “The Insistence of Beauty.” Maybe we wonder: Can *anything* be beautiful?

Tonally, the words “perfect” and “struck” stand out for different reasons in the first two lines—one for meaning, one for sound. When something is “perfect” we feel admiration, maybe the need to protect it. Since nothing really is perfect, it also sounds a little romantic, subjective, or too good to be true, which may also produce tension as we know perfection isn’t real, or doesn’t last. The word “struck” is a harsh, violent, physical word. And ending the line on it emphasizes it even more. To be struck by something suggests shock, surprise, immediacy, and change.

In addition to these two words, the first phrase sets a **tone**, too, of expectation. We know something significant is being made of the planes because they are marking a day: “The day before those silver planes.” The event is important enough to refer to it in such a way. This is how we speak of big events. The day we were married. The day we went swimming. The day those silver planes came out of the blue.

The tone in the first stanza immediately produces a connection between the speaker and reader. We feel the speaker is disclosing something to us, or divulging something important. As we continue through the poem the speaker’s tone becomes inquisitive as he asks questions:

—or was it the coldness?—
that enemy,
can’t it have a place too?
Doesn’t a tear deserve a close-up?

Is he asking questions of the reader? To himself? A bit of both? We journey with him on his seeking. Read through Dunn’s poem

and identify the rest of the images. Discuss how each image makes you feel. To what words or images is your attention drawn? What associations do you make from them?

Find Connections and Ask Questions

The next helpful question is: What does this word or image remind me of? What associations am I making as I read this poem? Sometimes the connections are within the poem—between lines, images, repeated words or themes—but in some poems like this one, we may be reminded of something outside the poem. In the first stanza, the two planes near Newark and two ribbons evaporating may remind you of the iconic image of the September 11th attacks on The World Trade Center in New York City. Making this connection provides us with a context for the poem, perhaps causing us to ask, “How can the attacks on the World Trade Center and its subsequent collapse be seen as gorgeous?”

What happens if you don’t see that connection? Will you misread Dunn’s poem? Allusions like this usually aren’t necessary if the poem makes good use of all the other elements of poetry. In other words, even if you miss the reference to 9/11, you should be able to understand Dunn’s deeper meaning about the nature of Beauty from the various images he provides. Let’s for a moment pretend that the poem isn’t alluding to specific events. If we begin to make connections within the poem itself, we may see that the ribbons in the first stanza appear beautiful to the speaker even though they are pollution, and the flames in the second stanza appear “gorgeous” even though they are destructive. This suggests that it’s possible to see beauty in something harmful, in something that others see as ugly. This further suggests that beauty is subjective, though the ability to see it is universal.

What other connections and patterns can we see? In the third stanza the speaker watches the collision “replayed”—be it on a television screen or in his mind—and admits to a desire for revenge.

Later, in the last stanza, the speaker repeats the story of the fireman: “I repeated it / to everyone I knew.” What does this suggest? He says “I did this for myself, / not for community or beauty’s sake, / yet soon it had a rhythm and a frame.” How are we to understand the impact of his repeating his story? If it is told “for myself,” then what exactly is the speaker getting from this and how is it connected to the replaying of the collision? What might be meant by rhythm and frame?

In the fourth and fifth stanza the speaker makes a connection between himself admiring “the intensity” of the people in the photographs and between the photographers taking the photographs:

The next day there was a photograph
of dust and smoke ghosting a street,
and another of a man you couldn’t be sure
was fear-frozen or dead or made of stone,
and for a while I was pleased
to admire the intensity—or was it the coldness?—
of each photographer’s good eye.

The speaker asks, “Was it the coldness?,” suggesting a distance or lack of emotion in photographers who cannot act on their emotions in order to capture the moment. The speaker says that he admires this, “the intensity—or was it the coldness?— / of each photographer’s good eye.” Perhaps he sees something admirable in the way a person can detach himself from an event in order to focus only on the image, the visual, the camera’s eye with a “good eye” that can see art and capture it.

In the fifth and sixth stanzas, the speaker muses on how he’s reacted to beautiful things in the past just as coldly as these photographers: “For years I’d taken pride in resisting / the obvious—sunsets, snowy peaks, / a starlet’s face.” The pattern of “coldness” is established by several word choices here: “fear-frozen,” “coldness,” “snowy.” Our speaker then tells us how he discovered that images of “sunsets, snowy peaks, / a starlet’s face,” too, have their “edgy” place. This is a little mysterious. Does “edgy” refer to

the destructive, ugly yet mesmerizing collision and photographs he's been viewing? Is this suggesting that serene beauty and edginess are somehow closely related?

The speaker then introduces the idea of “the sentimental,” which he refers to as “beauty’s sloppy cousin” and asks if it can also be appreciated. The speaker ends the stanza with another question: “Doesn’t a tear deserve a close-up?” As readers, we have to ask ourselves how we fear about sentimentality: does it have a place in Beauty?

In the last part of the poem, the speaker confesses that he retells the story about the fireman hiding in the rubble “so his dispirited search dog / could have someone to find.” The story is moving; our focus shifts from all of the people whom the fireman and his dog cannot help, to the “dispirited” feelings of the dog that the fireman can ease. In this moment, the dog’s feelings become as important and as worthy as our own. If we can feel such strong empathy toward the dog, as the fireman clearly does, can we not also feel it toward our enemies, toward those for whom we normally feel “revenge’s sweet surge?”

The speaker says that he retells this story, not “for community or beauty’s sake,” but for himself. Why would he do that? Why does it matter that he does? Why does he end the poem with these words?

We will practice “unpacking a poem” in class this week!

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3. Week 3 - Poetic Language

CANDACE BERGSTROM, LEIGH HANCOCK, AND ALAN LINDSAY



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Perhaps you've heard the phrase, "he (or she) was just being poetic." It's a phrase you wouldn't be surprised to hear after someone utters some flowery description of a sunrise or a snowstorm. It describes a use of language that is perhaps pretty but also meaninglessly ornate. It's an unfortunate use of the word. Authentic poetic language is very different.

Poets use the same words ("house, bridge, fountain, gate") that everyday people use. There are no words that are reserved solely

for poets. But they use them in ways that often exploit and play at the poem's accepted meanings.

For one thing, poetic language is often figurative rather than literal. But what does that mean? **Literal** language says exactly and directly what it means: "The president is the head of the country"

Figurative language, on the other hand, goes beyond dictionary definitions, perhaps representing one thing by means of another thing, i.e., referring to the President as "The White House." Figurative language capitalizes on the subtle, multiple connotations a word may carry and it works to develop new meanings for words. Figurative language strives to communicate what a literal statement cannot.

Poems are often the most concentrated expressions of language's inherent poetry. Poets are more conscious and deliberate in their use of language. Sometimes they heighten or intensify ordinary ways of using language; sometimes they pack maximum meaning into each word. Sometimes they play with the multiple meanings (connotations and denotations) in every word, a practice that can make poems seem contradictory and hard to understand. But these multiple and subtle meanings are also what give poems their richness and power.

It's important to note that poems do not use only—or at times even very much—figurative language. For example, consider this poem by carpenter-poet Clem Starck:



ME AND MALONEY
Job's nearly over,
me and Maloney all that's left of the crew.
Sunk in the hillside,
hundreds of tons of reinforced concrete
formed in the shape of a drum
ninety-two feet in diameter, eighteen feet
deep—
it could be a kiva, or a hat box, or look from
the air
like a missile silo.
It could be a storage tank for toxic waste.
It could be a vault to house
the national treasure.
In any case, it's finished,
ready for backfill. Now it's the earth's.
And I'm left with Maloney,
who likes to drink beer after work
and tell stories.
Construction stories. Ex-wife
stories. Stories
like how he clubs possums to death with a
two-by-four

when he finds them
 prowling in back of his warehouse at night.
 He laughs, telling the stories.
 Maloney quit drinking once.
 After a year and nine months he decided
 he'd rather
 die of alcohol
 than boredom.
 I know what he means. I work
 for Maloney Construction.
 When it rains we work in the rain. When it
 snows
 we work in the snow.
 I am Maloney's right-hand man:
 when he laughs I laugh too.
 —from *Journeyman's Wages*, Story Line
 Press, 1995.

Pretty straight-forward, right? And yet—even though this poem
 uses everyday language, it seems to be trying to say more than just
 what's on the surface. This poem vibrates with more meaning than
 meets the eye. How, on a language-level, does it do that?

?????????????????????????????????????????



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In some sense, all language is figurative, since the word ocean is
 not the actual ocean. You cannot swim in it. “Ocean” represents or

even symbolizes a cool, briny substance that covers over half the earth. So in some sense, every time we talk, we engage in poetry!

Think about common figurative expressions that, at first glance, sound literal, but in reality do not mean what they literally say:

- “he was on fire,”
- “she bought the farm,”
- “he got burned,”
- “she lost her way.”

In reality, the difference between literal and figurative language has less to do with the words themselves and more to do with how they are used or understood. What is the poem’s intent? What is it trying to do?

Let’s look at these three examples:

- 1) She felt sad.
- 2) She felt as though she’d just lost her best friend.
- 3) She turned away and looked out the window. The world outside became blurry.

The first sentence is basically literal. It communicates the emotional state of a female person. It’s not especially deep or interesting, but it is fairly clear.

The second sentence is more figurative, because it compares how she feels to a state the reader might understand: losing one’s best friend. This sentence is somewhat cliché, however, so it doesn’t carry a lot of emotional charge or interest for the reader.

The third sentence offers us readers the *image* of a female person looking out a window while her vision goes blurry. We don’t know what is happening, but we might assume that tears are blurring her vision....and therefore realize that she is sad. This sentence is a bit more impactful than the first two, because it calls on us to engage, empathize and interpret a statement that is more than its literal meaning.

In poetry, we need both figurative and literal language because they do different jobs.

Types of Figurative Language

There are many different types of figurative language, including but not limited to the following:

- Analogy.
- Metaphor:
- Simile:
- Symbolism:
- Irony:
- Personification

Being able to rattle off the names and pat definitions of these terms is not important or helpful, although the more you understand the language of poetry, the easier it is to communicate your interpretations to someone else. What's more helpful is to learn to identify when a poet is using figurative language, so that you can better access and understand the deeper meanings. Here are a few definitions and examples to get you started.

Metaphor—*a figure of speech in which one thing (which usually is easy to understand) stands for another thing (which is often more abstract).* In Blake's "The Tyger," we know that the tiger is not quite a literal tiger. But it's not entirely figurative either. The figure depends for its meaning on the "tigerness" of real tigers. But what exactly the tiger refers to or stands for is never made crystal clear.



Blake's painting of his tiger.

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or I
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

You might also notice that within the overall metaphor of the tiger, there are other metaphors such as “burning bright.” “Burning bright” compares our metaphorical tiger to a fire.” But why is the tiger burning? When you read the poem, you will see that this tiger was made with a hammer and chain in a furnace. The metaphor makes a tiger the creation of a blacksmith (the blacksmith being a metaphor for God). This is not how “literal” tigers are made. Why has Blake chosen these metaphors? What effect do they have on our reading or understanding of the poem? Such questions can be answered—and they can be answered either well or poorly. But the answers will not be as simple or final in this poem as the answer to the question of the child/book figure in Bradstreet’s poem.

Still other metaphors may be impossible to pin down precisely. Both of the figures mentioned so far evoke emotion or feeling as well as meaning. But it is possible to take a figure so far into the emotional that it loses all sense of the intellectual meaning, as some claim T.S. Eliot does in this image from a poem not on our syllabus,

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

The yellow fog that rubs its back
upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle
on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of
the evening,

Lingered upon the pools that stand in
drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls
from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden
leap,
And seeing that it as a soft October
night,
Curled once around the house, and fell
asleep.

It's clear that the poet is comparing fog to a cat (this is an **implied metaphor** because the cat is invoked without ever being named). The "catness" of fog is however far less obvious than the fearful power of blacksmith/God is to a tiger or the mother to child relationship of an author for her book. Moreover, this fog-cat metaphor is stretched out to such an absurd length that it begins to lose sense. We learn very much less about fog by comparing it to a cat than we learn about books by comparing them to children or about God by comparing him to a blacksmith.

But the difficulties we may have with the cat-fog metaphor doesn't mean that the poet has failed. In the context of the poem it is clear that the metaphor is meant to reveal more about the state of mind of the title character than about the catness of fog.

We've barely begun to discuss the intricacies of metaphor. But that will be enough for now. We could spend the whole book on the subject. Many books have been writing trying to understand all there is to understand about metaphor. We'll go through the rest more quickly.

Simile. Simile is very much like a metaphor but it uses an explicit word, usually "like" or "as," to compare one thing to another. So instead of saying "My book is my child," You say, "My book is *like* a child."

Irony: saying one thing but meaning another, generally the opposite. Saying of a beautiful painting, “Oh, isn’t that ugly.” In irony we perceive that the words deliberately fail to coincide with their usual meaning.

Symbol: The use of a verbal object or quality of an object to stand for an abstract idea. The black hats worn by bad guys in Westerns and the white hats worn by Good Guys are symbolic of evil and good. Notice that they are not metaphors, but they could be metonymy, since we somewhat arbitrarily associate white with good and black with evil.

Ted Talk: James Geary, Metaphorically Speaking

4. Week 4 - The Architecture of a Poem

LEIGH HANCOCK AND MICHELLE BONCZEK EVORY

(Drawn from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Ivory. See licensing at end of lecture)



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In poetry, there are three units of architecture, or structure: **words, lines, and stanzas**. As with all forms of writing, words comprise the most basic level of form. But what makes poetry unique as a genre is **verse**—lines—which work as both a unit of sensibility and music. Lines assemble into stanzas, or “rooms” in Italian. Sometimes poems can have sections, too, where stanzas are confined yet relate to one another, and sometimes poems can break from line and stanza into what we call prose poems, which we will discuss later.

The Line: Rows

Originally, poetry was used as a way to remember stories, which were delivered orally by a speaker or “the poet” to an audience. The units created *verse*, which in Latin translates to “line,” “row,” or “furrow,” musical measures that were easier to remember. Poetry

existed before writing; and even after writing was invented most people could not read. Poetry has been a way throughout human existence for people to pass on history, news, entertainment, and wisdom from one generation to the next. With the spread of literacy, the function of lines began to take on more complexity, increasing auditory and visual impacts. By the twentieth century, typeface allowed poets to place visual form at the center of their art.

It is apt that “verse” translates to “row” or “furrow,” words we also use when speaking of gardens and farms (and also to the lines on our foreheads when we brood!). Think of each line of poetry you write as a row in your garden that is the poem. Every garden is different and the plants in it do not simply lie atop the surface; roots go deep and flourish from the nutrients in the soil. In a poem, those nutrients are the knowledge and emotions of the poet which, like in a garden, we do not see. Instead we see emotions and ideas transformed linguistically into imagery and music. In this analogy, words are the plants and flowers that the poet/gardener has chosen, and they are rooted into the earth, into history, into what came before. Words cannot detach themselves from their meanings and nuances. Each is a seed fallen from a mother plant. Poetry, the garden in which generations of words may flourish, gives opportunities for words to evolve. It is why the poet is known as the “keeper of language,” giving words to the unspeakable, naming the unnamable.

In our gardens, the line is a unit of measurement different from that of sentences. A line can ignore syntax and grammar to create interesting effects. For instance, a line can end on a verb and suspend the object onto the next line. This move can increase speed, or the pace, of the poem, as the reader is propelled forward to complete the thought. The line break can also create an image or idea that can transform when the reader reaches the next line. For example, in Bruce Snider’s poem “Epitaph,” the word “alive” creates one meaning that changes with the turn to the next line:

... I could sense
him down there, satin-lined,
curled like the six-toe cat

we'd found bloated in the creek, alive
with lice and maggots.

As reader we think at first that the cat is alive, only to find that it is alive but with “lice and maggots.” The effect comes from the use of an **enjambéd** line, a line that does not end with punctuation. This enjambment is referred to as *hard* enjambment because it has so much of an effect and impact on the poem’s reading. Enjambed lines can suggest complex meaning, create images or emphasis, and control the music, or **prosody** of the poem. In contrast, when a line ends with a form of punctuation, or with a complete phrase, we refer to those lines as **end-stopped**.

Deciding where to break a line can be determined by a number of things: rhythm, rhyme, emphasis, pace, or the way a poem looks on a page. Classic forms predetermine the form a poem takes, and include rules concerning meter, rhyme, and repetition. Some forms like the Shakespearian sonnet include the element of a turn, or a **volta**, in which there is a marked change in the speaker in thought, emotion, or rhetoric. Forms are fun to experiment with and assert pressure on the writer in interesting ways that result in surprises that wouldn’t occur otherwise.

Today, most poetry is written in free verse, or *vers libre* in Latin, not requiring the poet to follow any prescribed rules of form. Robert Frost famously referred to writing free verse as “playing tennis without a net.” And as you saw in the previous chapter, Billy Collins has noted the way free verse poems have come to rely on tone of voice to hold it together.

End-Stopped Lines and Enjambment

In the following poem, James Wright keeps his lines syntactically intact and uses almost entirely end-stopped lines. Read the poem here via the Poetry Foundation.

The pauses at the ends of Wright’s lines are natural in speech

and adhere to the formation of phrases, the units of sentences. Incorporating enjambment, Wright could've altered the music, meaning, and emphasis of this poem if he had started:

In the Shreve High football stadium, I think
Of Polacks nursing long beers in Titonsville.

You can see in this example how the speaker's thinking is emphasized more than in the original because now the verb, "think," falls at the end of the line. This formation also sets up a delay for the reader to find out what the speaker is thinking about. If this were the first line of the poem, we'd initially have more of a focus on the speaker and his thinking, his brooding. Instead, the first four lines of the original end with a place—stadium, Titonsville, Benwood, and Wheeling Steel. In addition, the punctuation enforces more of a pause at the end of the line than the break already does. We sense the separation of the places, yet their connectedness through the stanza that joins them, as well as the last line of the stanza which unites the Polacks, Negroes, and watchman through an action: "dreaming of heroes." The collective action suggests that the speaker, part of this larger community, is also dreaming of heroes.

The only line not end-stopped with punctuation in the poem happens in the last stanza: "Their sons grow suicidally beautiful," and this difference, as any change does, makes the line stand out. Even though there's no punctuation, this line is not forcefully enjambed, as Wright continues to adhere to syntactical units:

Possessive pronoun (Their)—noun (sons)—verb
(grow)—adverb (suicidally)—adjective (beautiful)

And because he does, there is little if any jarring with the break to "At the beginning of October."

Overall, the end-stopped lines and syntactical intactness of the lines moves the poem slowly, one step it seems at a time until it reaches its sum: "Therefore," at which point the poem loosens its pace and speeds up just for a bit, as if the sons begin to "gallop" or run, as the line itself runs over into the next.

At the end of another one of Wright's poems, "A Blessing,"

enjambment is used to surprise the reader with an image that changes as the **penultimate**, or second to last, line gives way to the final line:

Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

The hard enjambment between “break” and “blossom” creates an initial image of breaking in which the tone is harsh, violent, a loss, a break in need of repair. But the last line changes the tone with the image of a body breaking into blossom rather than simply breaking.

In contrast to Wright’s poem, the following poem by Aimee Nezhukumatathil employs mostly enjambed lines that ignore syntactically complete units in this poem about the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark:

Lewis and Clark Disagree

Because Meriwether ate the last berry
without consulting William. Because
the prairie dog only let *William* feed
it dried corn. Because the Nez Perce
gave one a necklace of purple quartz
and not the other. Because Osage oranges
gave Meriwether hives. Because a grizzly
chased William into an oak tree, left him
high for hours. Because “Someone” tucked
buffalo chips into Merriwether’s knapsack

when he wasn't looking. Because after walking,
rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling,
cutting, all they really wanted was a name
for a fruit one found sour, the other, so sweet.

*"Lewis and Clark Disagree" from Miracle Fruit,
published by Tupelo Press, copyright © 2003 Aimee
Nezhukumatahil. Used with permission.*

The form is almost the exact opposite of Wrights': ten enjambed lines followed by two end-stopped, then an enjambed line, then an end-stopped line. In this poem the lines break sometimes on the first word of the next sentence. If we were to layout the lines in terms of sentences, we would be left with an almost bullet-pointed list of reasons for why "Lewis and Clark Disagree" and they would look like this:

Because Meriwether ate the last berry without consulting William.

Because the prairie dog only let William feed it dried corn.

Because the Nez Perce gave one a necklace of purple quartz and not the other.

Because Osage oranges gave Meriwether hives.

Because a grizzly chased William into an oak tree, left him high for hours.

Because "Someone" tucked buffalo chips into Meriwether's knapsack when he wasn't looking.

Because after walking, rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling, cutting, all they really wanted was a name for a fruit one found sour, the other, so sweet.

Because, because, because, because, because. Instead, verse allows Nezhukumatahil to tone down the repetition of "Because"

while also allowing her to manipulate rhythm and layer meaning. Take, for instance, the following lines:

... Because a grizzly
chased William into an oak tree, left him
high for hours. Because “Someone” tucked
buffalo chips into Merriwether’s knapsack
when he wasn’t looking. Because after walking,

The break after “left him” allows the image and idea of abandonment to linger before its meaning evolves into the complete thought “left him high for hours.” The next two lines use the break to emphasize the alliteration of “tuck” and “-sack,” which even continues beyond that couplet to the next with “walk.” “Walk” and “Tuck” also being verbs, we are propelled forward to the next line by action. As for meaning, we come to “tuck” and think: tucked what?

With lines, generally the first and last words will take on extra emphasis, and in “Lewis and Clark Disagree” they have multiple effects. Some lines begin and end where they do to emphasize meaning: “left him” and “when he wasn’t looking” suggest tension that feeds back to the relationship between Lewis and Clark; abandonment and sneakiness aren’t marks of kindness. We read “left him” and think how terrible! We turn to “when he wasn’t looking” and think, ooooooh sneaky.

Like Wright’s poem, this poem changes its pattern, moving from enjambed lines to end-stopped lines. The last sentence of the poem is strung out over four lines and arranged in a way so that the acoustics develop the feel of a burden or a long list:

... Because after walking,
rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling,
cutting, all they really wanted was a name
for a fruit one found sour, the other, so sweet.

Listen to how the rising pitch in the first line gives way to a list of actions that propels us into the penultimate line:

... walking, [↑]
[→] rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling,
[a big pause]

cutting

There is a long pause between “pulling” and “cutting” produced from the break of momentum in the list of actions. Nezhukumatathil could’ve placed all the verbs on one line to create an entirely different feel:

walking, rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting,
pulling, cutting

But instead, in order to keep the inflection and pitch varied, she rearranges words on a line differently, regardless of their syntactical relationship?

Stanzas: Rooms

Once the lines of our poem begin to find their length of breath, the next structural concern is how to break the lines into stanzas. In classic forms stanza lengths are predetermined. A **ballad** is written in quatrains, or stanzas containing four lines; a **roundel** has three stanzas; and a **villanelle** five **tercets**, or stanzas containing three lines. But in free verse, the poem’s stanzas are determined by the poet. There are no rules when it comes to deciding what kind of stanzas to use in a poem and usually any reason that seems to intuit itself to the poet is justification. The decisions are based on personal taste with consideration to how it looks on the page, how it affects rhythm and pacing, and what it emphasizes in the poem. Like many moves in poetry, stanzas should be organic to the poem and not feel forced or hokey. And like many of the techniques of writing poetry, knowing what to do comes with practice and fine-tuning our attention to language and the effects of poetic elements.

Like rhythm and line length, there is a nomenclature that permits us to talk about stanza length. These terms are used to speak about metrical verse, as well as free verse:

Couplet: a stanza of two lines

Tercet, or Triplet: a stanza of three lines

Quatrain: a stanza of four lines
Cinquain, or quintain, or quintet: a stanza of five lines
Sextain, or sestet: a stanza of six lines
Septet: a stanza of seven lines
Octave: a stanza of eight lines

What Stanzas Do

There is no way around the fact that stanzas, which dictate the way space is used on the page, create unity and separation. Even if the motive is to break a poem into stanzas to make the poem easier to read on the page—a huge chunk of text can be intimidating and heavy—or even if the motive is to control the music of the language by adding longer pauses—breaking a poem into stanzas invites the ideas of division and unification into the poem.

Just like the rooms of houses, walls say “This is the den (let’s relax!),” or “This is the dining room (no clutter allowed!).” Rooms help us create space and define the tone of that space. When I was young, my sister and I shared a doorway with no door. Our bedrooms flowed into and out of each other, but the walls still defined our own individual space. We were connected as siblings, could see into each other’s rooms, but still had control over what we wanted in our private space. Like my childhood bedroom, stanzas in poems can suggest connection, or confine ideas, images, and sounds to their own space while still sharing the same roof. Punctuation and other devices in the last and first lines of a stanza suggest whether the doorway is open like mine and my sister’s bedrooms, or whether it contains a titanium door.

There are endless ways to organize stanzas and infinite decisions that can be made in the process of doing so. Usually stanzas are built on more than one idea, for more than one reason (like all aspects of

a poem). Lines are part of stanzas, and words are part of lines. These three elements—words, lines, and stanzas—work together to cause all sorts of effects from creating music to drawing parallels between ideas and images. There is no way to provide a comprehensive review of what stanzas do, but the following examples will offer a small sampling of what stanzas *can* do.

Stanzas organize space and time

In a room full of books in a world
of stories, he can recall
not one, and soon, he thinks, the boy
will give up on his father.

Already the man lives far ahead, he sees
the day this boy will go. Don't go!
Hear the alligator story! The angel story once more!
You love the spider story. You laugh at the spider.
Let me tell it!

(Li Young Lee, from “A Story”)

In Lee's poem, the first stanza is delivered in the present tense and the second brings us to the future with “lives far ahead.”

To illustrate differences in location:

The Mile

My grandmother crowns the hill,

her headlights lathing the dark,
a farm route

through rye then cotton
then the red and gold of wheat,
the scrub oak crowding

a little nameless river
where fog holds to low places.
Who would have seen the tractor

aimed down the highway by a boy
his first summer behind the wheel
with no lights but the holy

somnolence of a cowboy radio?
The next car over the rise
is my father

blind into the fog.
There is so much to talk about
at this moment,

so many lines of cause and effect
trembling taut into that gully.
How does my father choose,

with his mother's ribs broken,
his new wife moaning from the ditch,
to carry the limp body

of someone else's child
a mile over night fields
toward the insinuation of a roof?

Everyone is bleeding and starlight
drizzles over the summer wheat.
The poem holds them there

long enough to trace the flight
of an owl
from a cedar's black minaret

its wings underlit by brake-lights.
Which of you, dear reader,
is in the next Oldsmobile

to clatter over the bluff
shouting help into your CB radio?
Which of you opens the front door

weeping
to wrap your unconscious boy
in quilts? Do you kill

the man
who carries him?
In most endings I am never

born. In most,
you buy my family's farm cheap
at auction. Who among you

is rushing the ambulance
past the county line at mile 67
when the tire blows? The story

moves through telephone wires
at the pitiless speed of rumor:
when my father reaches the house

with the boy expiring in his arms,
a white rectangle of light
and grief

seers his eyes forever.

In the cave of my mother's
body

I listen to the first fire.

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Here, Sweeney's stanzas bring us on a journey. We move with the grandmother over the hill, then through the grain fields, then beside a river. The lack of punctuation between the stanzas unifies the locations and makes the transitions feel like one journey. Had punctuation such as periods been used at the end of each stanza, there would be a stronger sense of isolation:

My grandmother crowns the hill,
her headlights lathing the dark.

A farm route
through rye then cotton
then the red and gold of wheat.

Then, the scrub oak crowding
a little nameless river
where fog holds to low places.

To Indicate shifts in a poem's mode or voice

Stanzas can mark transitions between narrative and lyrical modes, descriptions and questions, and shifts in tone or perspective.

A shift in voice or address:

Dinner Out

We went to either the Canton Grill
or the Chinese Village, both of them
on 82nd among the car lots
and discount stores and small nests
of people waiting hopelessly
for the bus. I preferred the Canton
for its black and bright red sign
with the dragon leaping out of it
sneezing little pillows of smoke.
And inside, the beautiful green
half-shell booths, glittery brass encrusted
lamps swinging above them.

What would I have?
Sweet and sour?
Chow mein with little wagon wheel shaped
slices of okra and those crinkly noodles
my father called deep fried worms?
Fried rice?

Among such succulence, what did it matter?
We could eat till we were glad and full, the whole
family sighing with the pleasure of it.
And then the tea!
All of this for about six bucks, total,
my father, for that once-in-awhile, feeling

flush in the glow of our happy faces
and asking me, “How you doing, son?”

Fine, Dad. Great, really, in the light
of that place, almost tasting
the salt and bean paste and molasses, nearly
hearing the sound of the car door
opening before we climbed in together
and drove and drove,
though we hadn’t far to go.

*From Gaze by Christopher Howell (Minneapolis:
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Editions. milkweed.org*

In each stanza we hear a shift in voice. The first opens in a narrative mode as we are given a place and time, a description of the street on which the restaurant the speaker and his dad go to eat. In the second stanza, the voice shifts into an interrogative mode, asking questions about what will be ordered. Though the third stanza also begins with a question, this is a different type of question than what is posed in the second stanza. Here, the voice becomes lyrical and introspective: “Among such succulence, what did it matter?” In the last stanza the voice shifts to answer the question posed by the dad in the end of the third stanza and in this way, the first line of the last stanza directly addresses the dad. In Howell’s poem each stanza is used to mark a slight shift in voice.

A shift in thought or a resolution:

You are the bread and the knife,

the crystal goblet and the wine.

You are the dew on the morning grass
and the burning wheel of the sun.

You are the white apron of the baker,
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.

However, you are not the wind in the orchard,
the plums on the counter,
or the house of cards.

And you are certainly not the pine-scented air.
There is just no way that you are the pine-scented air.

It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge,
maybe even the pigeon on the general's head,
but you are not even close
to being the field of cornflowers at dusk.

(Billy Collins, from "Litany")

As in Howell's poem, in Collins' poem there is a shift in the voice's pitch. But in "Litany," the stanzas emphasize moves in the thought process that build upon the ideas established in the preceding stanza. You can follow these turns of thought by the transition words that begin them: "You are"... "However, you are not..." "It is possible that you are..."

Create emphasis

Passover: The Injections

Clouds pass over, endless,
black fruit dripping

sap from the branches
of lightning.

We lie down in the field,
thousands of us,
never mind the rain.

Soldiers come toward us,
groups of three or four.
The wind opens their long coats.
Underneath, their uniforms are black.

They bend over to the babies.
The babies cry,
for a little while.

“We are living in Biblical times,”
a woman says.

“Passover: The Injections”, from *The Candle: Poems of Our Twentieth Century Holocausts* by William Heyen.
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Rarely is there one reason for the way stanzas are arranged. In the above excerpt, the stanzas isolate images, but they also organize space and actions. Each stanza is end-stopped, further emphasizing the divide between the fields, the prisoners, the soldiers.

On Enjambment

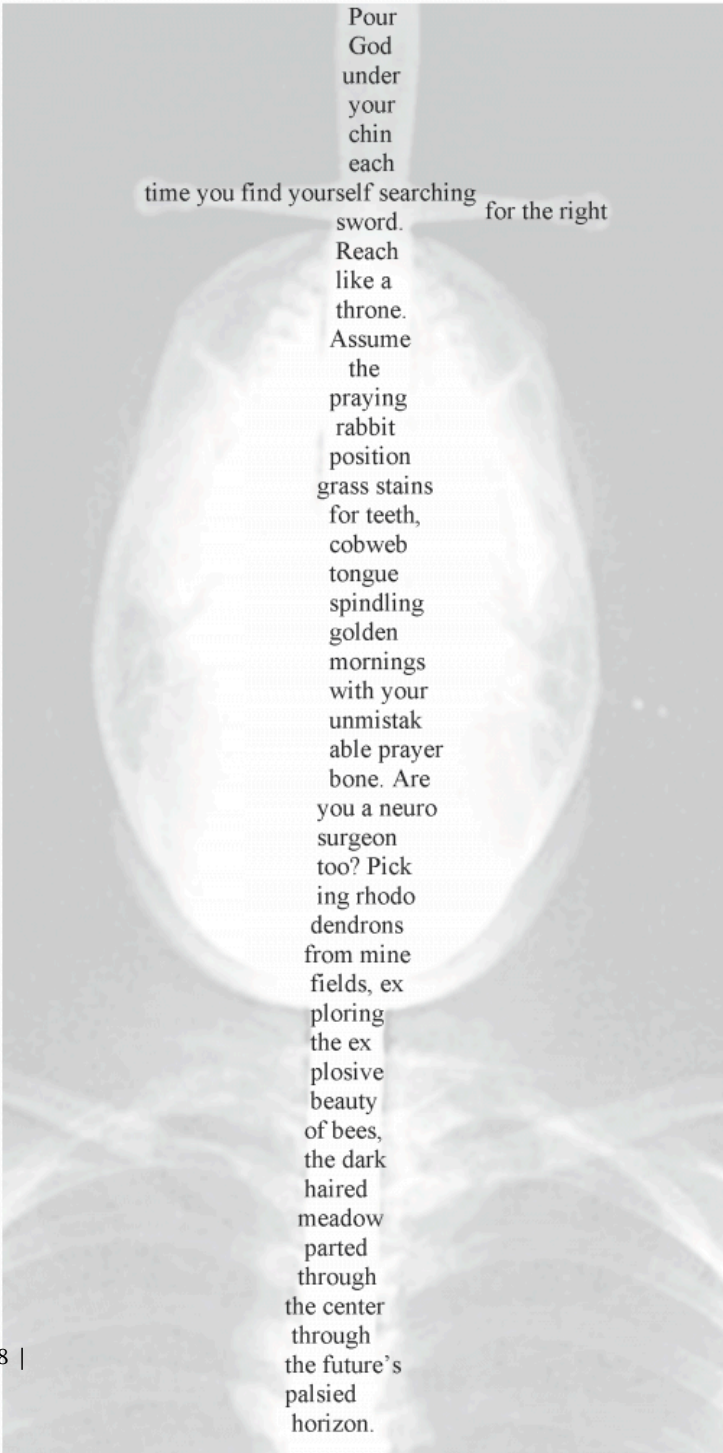
Even the tumbleweed
is a stowaway sneaked in
with the grass seed, given

an easier-to-say name. It became
American. We are lonely
when it stumbles by, but it's just
a weed. We made it
a thing sadder than itself,
like a nursing home lunch.

(Bethany Schultz Hurst, from "Settler")

The stanzas used by Hurst accentuate the way the enjambment affects images and sounds. Each stanza break makes the line break even harder. When we end the first stanza, we are left with the idea of sharing or giving something away. There is connection: "Even the tumbleweed / is a stowaway sneaked in / with the grass seed, given." It sounds thoughtful. It sounds like we are receiving—"given." But moving to the second stanza, the meaning changes: "given // an easier-to-say name." This happens again in the transition from the second to third stanzas with the meaning of "just" changing from the idea of justice or fairness—"but it's just"—to something different: "but it's just // a weed." The beginning of both the second and third stanzas undercut the sentiment we are left with at the end of the preceding stanza and the way the stanzas are formed emphasize this change.

Create an image with the words on the page



Pour
God
under
your
chin
each
time you find yourself searching for the right
sword.
Reach
like a
throne.
Assume
the
praying
rabbit
position
grass stains
for teeth,
cobweb
tongue
spindling
golden
mornings
with your
unmistak
able prayer
bone. Are
you a neuro
surgeon
too? Pick
ing rhodo
dendrons
from mine
fields, ex
ploring
the ex
plosive
beauty
of bees,
the dark
haired
meadow
parted
through
the center
through
the future's
palsied
horizon.

Draw attention to other patterns like repetition

In the following examples, one poem ends each stanza similarly and the other begins each stanza similarly:

Age

They grow ethereally, the wild
Roses on the graden-trellis:
O—silent soul!

The crystal sun grazes through
The cool vine-leaves:
O—holy purity!

With courteous hands an old man offers
Ripened fruit.
O—glimpse of love!

Georg Trakl, trans. Stephen Tapscott, "Age" from Georg Trakl: Poems, Oberlin College. All rights reserved.

If you rub too eagerly
and the head falls to your feet,
you can hollow its skull
and fill it with seeds.

If the eyes are dull
like your clay-covered fingerprints,

it's best to bend it to a turtle's shell
and fill it with water and hot stones.

If the mane starts to curl
like a hawk's talons
before it flies, bite your tongue,
and push the lion to the hearth.

(Tom Holmes, from "The First Potter's Advice")

As we go deeper into the craft of poetry the more we find elements to be connected. Stanzas cannot stand independently from choices made about music, line, and diction. Building on the components learned in this chapter, the next two chapters will introduce you to the particulars of sound and then some forms.

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5. Week 5 - Voice

LEIGH HANCOCK AND MICHELLE BONCZEK EVORY



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When we talk of “voice” in a poem, we are identifying the characteristics that make up the way that we “hear” the speaker of the poem. The voice of a poem is responsible for creating trust between the reader and the speaker, in seducing the reader to lose him or herself in the experience. Voice helps a reader be enraptured by the poem.

Poet Billy Collins explains how the voice of a poem took on a bigger role once Modern poetry began to experiment with free verse:

Once Walt Whitman demonstrated that poetry in English could get along without standard meter and end-rhyme, poetry began to lose that familiar gait and musical jauntiness that listeners and readers had come to identify with it. But poetry also lost something more: a trust system that had bound poet and reader together through the reliable recurrence of similar sounds and a steady dependable beat. Whatever emotional or intellectual demands a poem placed on the reader, at least the reader could put trust in the poet's implicit promise to keep up a tempo and maintain a sound pattern. It is the same promise that is made to the listeners of popular songs. What has come to replace that system of trust, if anything? However vague a substitute, the answer is probably tone of voice. As a reader, I come to trust or distrust the authority of the poem after reading just a few lines. Do I hear a voice that's making reasonable claims for itself—usually a first-person voice speaking fallibly but honestly—or does the poem begin with a grandiose pronouncement, a riddle, or an intimate confession foisted on me by a stranger? Tone may be the most elusive aspect of written language, but our ears instantly recognize words that sound authentic and words that ring false. The character of the speaker's voice played an indescribable but essential role in the making of those two piles I mentioned, one much taller than the other.

It is interesting that Collins refers negatively to the “voice of a stranger” as aren't all speakers of poems strangers to a reader? We do not know the poet, so how can we possibly know the speaker? Yet here, Collins suggests that there is something in us that does know something of the speaker, some credibility that “sounds authentic” rather than “ringing false,” and this has more to do with tone of voice than subject matter. After all, who believes someone who doesn't sound trustworthy? It is like watching a play with bad acting—you can't lose yourself in the story or character, you cannot

transport, you cannot release yourself to get “caught in its spell.” We have trouble trusting our senses and giving our time to the speaker without suspicion, which acts as a barrier between the reader and the experience. It is similar to what poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge called a “suspension of disbelief,” in a sense: We need to be willing to be wrapped up in a poem’s experience and if we’re untrusting than we’re not willing. Tone of voice develops from the many moves a poem makes and can be considered, in another way, the *stance* the speaker takes, the relationship between the subject matter and the speaker.

What Makes Voice

Voice depends on a variety of elements that make up the poems:

Subject Matter: Sharon Olds writes frequently about her father; William Heyen about the Holocaust; Mary Oliver about nature and animals. These subjects are not all that these writers choose to write about, but they do have a heavy, repetitive presence in their collections. To some extent, we associate the “voice” of these authors with their subjects.

Tone and Mood: Some poets (Dylan Thomas, for instance, or Matthew Arnold) are known for the serious voice of their poems. Other poets, like Billy Collins or William Carlos Williams, have a more playful, quirky approach or voice. Ezra Pound’s voice is that of a highly educated, cerebral man, while Lucinda Clifton writes with the rhythm and sass of a strong-minded African American woman. And many poets employ multiple and diverse voices depending on their subject matter and intent.

Diction: Perhaps the most influential element that creates voice and tone is *diction*, a term we use for “word choice” or the vocabulary used in a piece of writing. There is a range of diction—formal, informal, conversational, slang—and the words we choose reveal the emotional coloring of the speaker and the stance of the speaker in relation to the subject. There are no two words

that mean the exact same thing—regardless of what a thesaurus tells you; synonyms are simply related, not exact variants. Diction can also reveal a speaker’s range of knowledge, education, culture, and regional influence. Does the poet say sneakers or tennis shoes? Soda or pop? Car or automobile?

Syntax and Grammar: Working hand in hand with diction is syntax, which refers to the order in which words are arranged. Syntax is *how* the poet delivers his or her thoughts. What the poet chooses to say creates character and voice in more than one way. Some of what’s related to syntax and grammar are sentence length, fragments, and active or passive voice.

Types of Images: Like subject matter, writers tend to favor certain images or image types. Read through Michael Burkard’s collected poems and you’ll find frequent uses of trains, rain, and shadows. Some poets’ bodies of work are filled with birds, or flowers, or astronomical metaphors, or images of the body.

Form: By simply looking at a poem on the page we may be able to identify a poet’s voice. Emily Dickinson’s short poems with stanzas and lines of equal length. Norman Dubie’s willingness to mix different stanzas and line lengths—a couplet followed by a sextet (six-line stanza), followed by a single line that stands on its own. e.e. cummings’s abandonment of punctuation and capitalization. All of these affect the voice of the poem.

Persona

“A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence,” wrote John Keats, “because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body.” In a letter to his brother, Keats famously wrote of the concept of “negative capability,” which he described as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” A type of cognitive dissonance, in which one can peacefully hold two opposing thoughts in the mind at once, Keats’ negative capability is

what allows us as poets to imaginatively and empathetically muse upon the subject of our poems, or to enter the world of another, to speak from an imagined experience as if it were our own. In a persona poem, the poet adopts the perspective of a character or speaker in a specific situation. The poet steps outside his or her own body and into the body of this imagined speaker.

Adopting a persona widens a poet's range of subject matter. It allows us to explore different subjects and points of view. Rather than only writing from our experience, we can invent a new character or speak from a person in history or in literature. In his book-length poem *Shannon*, Campbell McGrath speaks from the perspective of the Lewis and Clark Expedition's youngest member Shannon when he goes missing in the prairie for over two weeks. Based on history, McGrath fills in the events and details no one could ever know. Speaking as Shannon, he writes:

The rest of the day the country shimmers
In a haze, these buffalo
Have no fear of me
Their eyes loll & moon in the grass
& I must shout to start them from my path
& hurl a stick at one brute
Oblivious as if I were invisible
Or he aware of my absolute helplessness.

William Heyen, also inspired by history, in his book *Crazyhorse in Stillness*, speaks from many personas. In the following, he depicts the plight of the buffalo by writing in the voice of an anonymous man hired on the prairie around the time of the Battle of Little Big Horn:

Job

I liked picking up the skulls best.
I could fling a calf's by one horn
maybe twenty feet into the wagon.
It didn't matter if it busted—
in fact, the smaller pieces the better.
But a bull's skull took two of us
to twist it off its stem and lift it.
You each grabbed a horn,
or did it the smart way with a pole
through the jaw and an eyesocket.
All in all, it was good work,
but ran out, but you had the feeling
of clearing something up, a job
no one would need to do again.

Copyright ©William Heyen "Job" is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.

Traci Brimhall's poems in the book *Our Lady of Ruins* speak from the personas of multiple women ravaged by war:

Our Bodies Break Light

We crawl through the tall grass and idle light,

our chests against the earth so we can hear the river
underground. Our backs carry rotting wood and books
that hold no stories of damnation or miracles.
One day as we listen for water, we find a beekeeper—
one eye pearled by a cataract, the other cut out by his
own hand
so he might know both types of blindness. When we
stand
in front of him, he says we are prisms breaking light into
color—
our right shoulders red, our left hips a wavering indigo.
His apiaries are empty except for dead queens, and he
sits
on his quiet boxes humming as he licks honey from the
bodies
of drones. He tells me he smelled my southern skin for
miles,
says the graveyard is full of dead prophets. To you, he
presents
his arms, tattooed with songs slave catchers whistle
as they unleash the dogs. He lets you see the burns on
his chest
from the time he set fire to boats and pushed them out
to sea.
You ask why no one believes in madness anymore,
and he tells you stars need a darkness to see themselves
by.
When you ask about resurrection, he says, How can you
doubt?
and shows you a deer licking salt from a lynched man's
palm.

*“Our Bodies Break Light”, from OUR LADY OF THE
RUINS: POEMS by Traci Brimhall. Copyright © 2012 by
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Company, Inc.*

Point of View

Point of view also affects how we hear and receive the voice of a poem:

First Person • I/We • *I went to the store to buy milk.*

Most poets begin writing in first person, taking their own experiences as subject matter. The first-person point of view is present in memoir, the personal essay, and in autobiography and it allows us to be very close to not only the speaker's observations, but also with his or her thoughts. This is the point of view used in a persona poem or a dramatic monologue.

Second Person • You • *You went to the store to buy milk.*

When poets use this point of view, they may be addressing a particular person in the poem, or they may be addressing the reader. They may even be talking about the speaker, attempting to make the reader imagine being the “I” which is really the “you.” This perspective can make the reader a character and it can also create a deep sense of connection between the reader and the speaker.

Third Person • He/She/It • *Her daughter went to the store to buy milk.*

Omniscient *“Toby fastened his seatbelt and looked*

out the passenger side window. His mother, worrying about being late for the match, blasted the gas. Toby squeezed his hands into fists. He didn't want to go. He thought himself better off at the playground. On the swings where he left her, Susan rebraided her hair. By the next day she'd forget what Toby had told her."

The omniscient speaker is powerful and godlike, not limited by space or time. This speaker can enter the thoughts of all characters, is flexible and can go anywhere, anytime.

Limited Omniscient "Toby fastened his seatbelt and looked out the passenger side window. His mother, worrying about being late for the match, blasted the gas. Toby squeezed his hands into fists. His mother figured that he didn't want to go. But she didn't feel comfortable with him and Susan being unsupervised at the playground—especially with how much "in love" he might be thinking he was."

In this example, we are limited to Toby's mother's thoughts. We can observe Toby but we cannot enter his thoughts. As readers we ride alongside with Toby's mother, struggling as she does, experiencing what she does, discovering things only when she does. We are limited to her interpretations of the world—even if they are incorrect.

Objective "Toby fastened his seatbelt and looked out the passenger side window. His mother blasted the gas. "Now we're going to be late," she said. Toby squeezed his hands into fists and rolled his eyes. Through the rear window, on the swings where he left her, he could see Susan rebraiding her hair."

Here, the most distant of the perspectives, we can observe only what a witness could sense with his nose, ears, mouth, eyes, and skin. Any judgments we

make must arise from the text and where the speaker directs our attention.

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6. Week 6 - Sound

LEIGH HANCOCK AND MICHELLE BONCZEK EVORY

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Even before you were born, in your watery womb home, your body recognized patterns of sound. It began with the beat of your mother's heart, the swishing of her blood. Rhythm is primal. It is comforting, and it can be startling. When rhythms break, they wake us. When rhythms extend, we become entranced. Rhythm is integral to poetry and a mark of what poetry actually is. In learning to interpret poetry's structures and sound patterns, in free verse, our ears attune finely to tone, cadence, pitch, rhythm, and silence. In formal verse, we employ a particular language to help us talk about rhythm.

Meter: Length and Rhythm

In metrical verse, lines can be divided into length and rhythm which we refer to as **feet**, and each foot's syllable into a **stress**. Each foot contains either two or three syllables (see below). You may have seen the symbols used to indicate this: ~ ' :the curve marks an unstressed foot, the slash a stress. In the following words, the first syllable is stressed and the second is not: **Tennis. Fiction. Music.** In the following words, the first syllable is unstressed and the second is: **Unlock. Tonight. Against.** Using this method of dividing a poem's lines into feet and stresses is called **scansion**.

Metrical Lines

- Monometer: A one-foot line: | *Therefore*

- Dimeter: A two-foot line | *Therefore, | dolphins*
- Trimeter: A three-foot line | *Therefore, | dolphins | broke through*
- Tetrameter: A four-foot line | *Therefore, | dolphins | broke through | happily*
- Pentameter: A five-foot line | *Therefore, | dolphins | broke through | happily | and leapt*
- Hexameter: A six-foot line. | *Therefore, | dolphins | broke through | happily | and leapt | into*
- Septameter: A seven-foot line | *Therefore, | dolphins | broke through | happily | and leapt | into | daylight*
- Octameter: An eight-foot line | *Therefore, | dolphins | broke through | happily | and leapt | into | daylight | in a flash*

Metrical Feet

Iamb $\sim \text{'}$ a light stress followed by a heavy stress

- and **leapt**

Trochee $\text{' } \sim$ a heavy stress followed by a light stress

- **dol**-phin

Dactyl $\text{' } \sim \sim$ a heavy stress followed by two light stresses

- **hap**-pi-ly

Anapest $\sim \sim \text{' }$ two light stresses followed by a heavy stress

- in a **flash**

Spondee -- two equal stresses

- **broke through**

If we put these terms together, we can begin to scan lines:

- Iambic tetrameter:

Whose woods | these are | I think | I know
His house | is in | the vil | lage* though
(Robert Frost from “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”)

*Note that feet can break in the middle of words.

- Iambic pentameter:

The world | is too | much with | us late | and soon
(William Wordsworth from “The World Is Too Much with Us”)

- Trochaic Octometer:

Once up | on a | midnight | dreary, | while I
| pondered, | weak and | weary,
Over | many | quaint and | curious | volume | of
for | gotten | lore—
(Edgar Allan Poe from “The Raven”)

The art of scansion is both scientific and subjective. The specialty language allows us to examine poetry in a calculated way, but there are times when the degree of stresses sound different to different ear. Scansion can be useful in discovering where language goes slack by identifying words that produce less energy like prepositions. It can also allow you to identify places in poems that move you, allow you to hear what patterns you are drawn to as a reader and writer.

Music and Rhyme

In addition to line length and rhythm, we also categorize lines by rhyme, especially in formal verse where an extended pattern is maintained. Children's books written by writers like Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss have delighted both children and adults with their rhyming stories. Rhyme makes language memorable and pleasurable.

In both formal verse and free verse, rhyming is elemental. In formal poetry it occurs more frequently as **end-rhyme**, when two or more words that end lines rhyme. In free verse, the rhyme is more likely to be **internal**, not necessarily occurring at the end of lines.

Let's take a look at an excerpt from William Wordsworth's poem "The Daffodils":

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Here we can see the first and third lines rhyme; the second, fourth and sixth; the fifth and sixth. There is definite **rhyme scheme**. When we refer to the rhymes in this stanza, we diagram the rhymes with matching letters like this: ABABCC.

I wandered lonely as a cloud (A)
That floats on high o'er vales and hills, (B)
When all at once I saw a crowd, (A)
A host, of golden daffodils; (B)
Beside the lake, beneath the trees, (C)
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (C)

The letter changes whenever the rhyme changes, and whenever a new rhyme is introduced you add a new letter.

In the poem "They Feed They Lion," rather than end-rhyme, Philip Levine utilizes internal rhyme. Read the first stanza via [this link](#).

In this example, Levine uses rhymes that are both internal and slant or off rather than exact: sacks, black, shafts; butter, tar. Even the numerous occurrences of “out” paired with “creosote” creates a kind of slant rhyme. Here is another example:

Not my hands but green across you now.
Green tons hold you down, and ten bass curve
teasing your hair. Summer slime
will pile deep on your breast. Four months of ice
will keep you firm.

Line Length

If you simply browse the poems included in any anthology, you will see all types of shapes on the page. The length of the line is one of the most important decisions a poet makes about a poem, and the decision usually comes to define a poet’s style. Robert Creeley’s poems use short lines. C. K. Williams, long. Most poets write somewhere in between. The decision of how long to make lines can be driven by a number of factors, but mostly it is chosen by prosody, the musical component of the language that projects the speaker’s voice and breath. As we’ve seen in the last chapter, where we choose to break lines also has a tremendous affect on the poem’s tone and meaning.

One of the elements that determine line length is the character of the language in which you write. English contains many iambic patterns that often sound most right on a line between four and five feet long. Lines one foot long are barely poems at all; it is difficult to create tension or musical phrases with only two beats per line. Lines with four feet are frequently used to tell stories as is the case often with Robert Frost’s poems. Longer lines lend themselves well to conversational tones, like that of Denise Duhamel’s, or in lyric poems like Larry Levis’.

Some poets like Allen Ginsberg and Charles Olson, who wrote

about it in his essay “Projective Verse,” considered a line to be a unit of breath. Olson writes:

And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination.

There can be no denial of the essential relationship between the poetic line and breath. Or between any carefully constructed writing and the pace at which it’s read. Just look at Olson’s passage and his use of commas, which causes us to stagger through the sentence.

Poetry is an oral art which comes fully to life when read aloud. Lines are instructions for how often and how long to pause. Like sheet music, the lines guide our pace, emphasis, and silence. If you were to read short-lined poems, however, taking a new breath at each line’s start, you’d sound like a panting dog. So, there is some room for interpretation on Olson’s assertion. Nonetheless, breath and line are intertwined, as you will see from the following examples.

As we read through these, note the different line lengths and their effects:

Here from this mountain shore, headland beyond stormy
headland plunging
like dolphins through the blue sea-smoke
Into pale sea—look west at the hill of water: it is half the
planet: this dome, this half globe, this bulging
Eyeball of water, arched over to Asia,
Australia and white Antarctica: those are the eyelids that
never close; this is the staring unsleeping
Eye of the earth; and what it watches is not our wars.
(Robinson Jeffers, from “The Eye”)

In this excerpt from Robinson Jeffers’ poem “The Eye” we see the different affects long and short lines have on the breath. The first lengthy line full of images beyond the human—the headlands,

the mountain, the shore, the dolphin, the smoke—in a long line like this we are given a sense of being overwhelmed as the images keep building and drawing out the breath until we are breathless. Compare this line to what follows two lines below: “Eyeball of water, arched over to Asia.” If you read both out loud you can feel how the length changes the way you use your lungs: long breath, short breath. The effect of the shorter line is like a quick glance—the eye open from the Pacific coast to Asia.

Rather than breaking the line after words or phrases to create a pause, many poets incorporate white space into the line itself. Here, the spaces in line four visually mimic the footsteps referred to in line three, as well as create the pacing—as though the steps being taken are slow. Notice that the phrase “Your voice,” which is part of the list in line four is moved to line five. That means there must be some difference between the effect created between the phrases with white space and those created by line breaks. It seems that the pauses between the list in line four are slightly shorter, more staccato, than the pause created between “bone wings” and “Your voice.” The more poetry you read, and the more poetry you write, the more you will begin to identify the subtleties of these techniques.

Lines

On our first date, instead of holding my hand, my
future-husband looked

at my palm. *Here's your fame line* *your heart line*
the lucky M

he said *you were in danger but you are coming out of it now.*

He said it like he meant it, the way the old women in the Philippines

had taught him. *Now make a fist these two little lines under your pinky*

these are the two kids you'll have.

My sister keeps waiting

for her third baby. She has three lines. Three kids, that's what the palm reader

at Rocky Point told her. *You'll get married next year and you'll have three beautiful daughters.* My sister laughed and said

I'll get a second opinion because she was just a junior in high school

and sure she was going to college.

On our first date my future-husband

traced

the lines on my palm with his finger and I closed my hand around his

because it tickled. *If the pad near your thumb is fleshy,* he said,

it means you're very passionate. His own palms were chubby and pink,

his brown fingers tapered and elegant. He wore a silver and turquoise ring.

He said, *You'll get married only once*
but later there'll be an affair.

Now that we're married, he can't find that wrinkle of infidelity.

Our palms change, he tells me, especially our right palms

that mutate through our behavior. He examines the bunch of tiny xs

that look like windshield frost, the wishbones, the spider webs,

the triangle dragon teeth.

My sister will most likely have that third baby.

My husband sees those three lines though my sister groans,

Two are enough. Her oldest is already fourteen, and my sister

is finally able to start taking classes at the community college.

My husband says to make everyone feel better: *I was only kidding*

I don't really know that much about predictions.

That night we all go

to Rocky Point which isn't as fun as it used to be, which is going bankrupt,


my sister says, like everything else in Rhode Island. The rollercoaster

is broken down, the cars off the tracks, lying on their
sides

like cows. And hanging from the booths' roofs, giant
Tweety Birds and Pink Panthers,

the cuddly neon elusive ones that hardly anyone ever
wins.

*"Lines", from The Star-Spangled Banner by Denise
Duhamel. Copyright © 1999 by Denise Duhamel.
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Press.*

One of the most conversational of contemporary poets, Duhamel speaks to us like we are a long-time friend. Her voice is energetic though the lines are long. And in this poem she varies line lengths drastically but keeps to an overall pattern so it still looks uniform on the page. Once again, like other poems we've looked at, the form reflects and enhances the subject: the lines on our hands that palm readers use to predict our future. As we read the poem, we read the lines as though we are scanning a palm. Ironically, poems are made of lines too! In addition to the visual echo, the spaces also create pauses that mimic the way a fortune teller speaks: slowly, interpreting, considering—"He said, *You'll get married once / [space] But later there'll be an affair.*" The space also creates suspense and drama. In this excerpt, there is one line on which only one word sits: "trace." It is the only line in the poem that contains one word. What is the effect? Why this word? 

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7. Week 7 - Poetic Forms/ The Sonnet

LEIGH HANCOCK, CANDACE BERGSTROM, AND ALAN LINDSAY

From the origin of poetry until the middle of the 19th century almost all poems were written in formal verse (sometimes called “closed form”), meaning that they all had a set rhythm, meter and rhyme. These forms might look quite different, ranging from the the 14-line, two-stanza Petrarchan sonnet to the 3-line, 17-syllable haiku to the strangely interlocking villanelle or pantoum. Most of us grew up on formal poetry: ballads, sonnets, haiku, and cinquains, just to name a few. We learned to equate poetry with rhyme, and some of us still feel awkward when we encounter poems lacking this element.

Formal poetry requires that individual words and sentences conform to a set pattern of rhythm, meter and rhyme. This can be quite tricky, as the poet must balance *meaning* (let’s say she’s trying to describe homesickness) with form (she needs a n eight-syllable line that ends with a rhyme for alligator). Formal poetry presents an obstacle course for the poet to run through as gracefully as possible. Done well, formal poetry is magical.

The vast majority of formal poems have a set, steady beat, which we call rhythm. Most of these poems also have a set number of accented beats per line, which is called meter. Finally, most formal poems rhyme in consistent although sometimes complex patterns. They may repeat lines or stanzas in a set pattern. All of these things help determine the type of formal poetry we are reading.

The Varieties of Formal Poetry

There are many, many types of formal poetry; in this chapter, we will look take a deep dive into one of the most celebrated forms in the English language: the sonnet. Consisting of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, the sonnet can employ a variety of rhyme schemes. Although early sonnets almost always take love as their subject, later sonnets examine everything from _____ t
_____.



Sonnets generally have a **volta**, or “turn,” where the sonnet suddenly switches direction and the poet seems to be saying one thing and then suddenly starts saying another. The **volta** may bring about the answer, at the end of a sonnet, to the question being asked. Or it may occur where a false claim is replaced by a true claim, as in Michael Drayton’s Sonnet 61 in which he tells us in the first part of the poem, “I’m so glad we broke up,” and in the

second, “But can we get back together.”

Credit for the invention of the form is given to the Italian poet Giacomo de Lentino in the 14th century, but Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), created one of the two most common sonnet forms, the Petrarchan or Italian Sonnet. This sonnet is broken into two stanzas: an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet. Its rhyme scheme is usually *abbaabba cddcee*, although it also sometimes uses *cdedce* for the final six lines. The **volta** generally appears at the point where the octave—which introduces a problem—divides from the sestet, where the solution to the problem is presented.

Here is an example of a Petrarchan sonnet:

Sonnet 19: When I consider how my light is spent

by John Milton

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more
bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”
I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.”

In this sonnet, you’ll note the iambic rhythm (every other syllable is stressed) and the pentameter meter (8 stressed syllables per line).

You’ll also notice that there is an octet, which presents the problem—Milton is asking, how should I spend my talent?—which is then resolved in the sestet (or volta): God does not need your gifts

The Shakespearean (Elizabethan) Sonnet:

The other main sonnet form is the Elizabethan or Shakespearean. Unlike Italian, English is a rhyme-poor language, which allows for a greater number of rhyming words with its abab cdcd efef gg rhyme scheme.



Shakespeare followed the rhyme scheme in all his sonnets—which are the most famous in English. Although it has fourteen lines of rhymed iambic pentameter., the form is different, and it's less likely to be about the unrequited love of a man for a woman. Here's Shakespeare's Sonnet 73:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

This sonnet is also written in iambic pentameter, with the Shakespearean rhyme scheme of abab cdcd efef gg. The “gg” lines, known as a “Shakespearean couplet,” are where the volta occurs.

So that the meaning doesn't interfere with the understanding of the form, here's a paraphrase:

When you look at me you could think about the very end of autumn, when maybe a few last yellow leaves or maybe none at all hang on the boughs of the trees that are shaken by the cold wind.

Or when you look at me you think of the end of the day, after the sunset fades in the west, just before night comes to seal up life in a death-like sleep.

Or when you look at me you see an almost burnt up fire, a fire that has consumed its fuel, and the very substance that

nourished it, the way that people consume themselves by burning up their youth.

You see these things when you look at me, and they make your love for me stronger, because you know I will not be around much longer.

Many modern poets have embraced the possibilities of the sonnet form, some sticking true to its rigid rhythm and rhyme, while others experiment and stretch what it can do. Here are two examples of modern sonnets that push the boundaries of the form.

Sonnet - Billy Collins

*All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,
and after this one just a dozen
to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas,
then only ten more left like rows of beans.
How easily it goes unless you get Elizabethan
and insist the iambic bongos must be played
and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines,
one for every station of the cross.
But hang on here while we make the turn
into the final six where all will be resolved,
where longing and heartache will find an end,
where Laura will tell Petrarch to put down his pen,
take off those crazy medieval tights,
blow out the lights, and come at last to bed.*

Here is a link to Collins reading that poem: <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/1a/83/1b/1a831b7573432fc3c15f60ea3f2af474.jpg>

CHEAP SEATS, the Cincinnati Gardens, Professional Basketball, 1959

The less we paid, the more we climbed. Tendrils
of smoke lazed just as high and hung there, blue,
particulate, the opposite of dew.
We saw the whole court from up there. Few girls
had come, few wives, numerous boys in molt
like me. Our heroes leapt and surged and looped
and two nights out of three, like us, they'd lose.
But 'like us' is wrong: we had no result
three nights out of three: so we had heroes.
And 'we' is wrong, for I knew none by name
among that hazy company unless
I brought her with me. This was loneliness
with noise, unlike the kind I had at home
with no clocks running down, and mirrors.

—William Matthews

Here are links to more sonnets, some famous and not so famous.

Thomas Wyatt, "The Long Love, That in My Thought Doth Harbor" (Links to an external site.)

Herbert Spenser, "Sonnet 1 [Happy ye leaves...]" (Links to an external site.)

Sir Philip Sidney, "Sonnet 14 [Alas, have I not pain enough...]" (Links to an external site.)

Michael Drayton, "Idea 61" (Links to an external site.)

William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 29 [When in disgrace with fortune...]" (Links to an external site.)

"Sonnet 73 [That time of year...]" (Links to an external site.)

John Donne, "Holy Sonnet 7 [At the round earth's imagined corners]" (Links to an external site.)

John Milton, "When I Consider How My Light Is Spent" (Links to an external site.)

William Wordsworth, "Scorn Not the Sonnet" (Links to an external site.)

Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Ozymandias" (Links to an external site.)


John Keats, “On the Sonnet,” (Links to an external site.)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Sonnet 43 [How do I love thee?]” (Links to an external site.)

Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur” (Links to an external site.)

Robert Frost, “Acquainted with the Night” (Links to an external site.)

“Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same” 

Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Love Is Not All, It Is Not Meat nor Drink” 

Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth” (Links to an external site.)

E. E. Cummings, “next to of course god america i” (Links to an external site.)

Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Rites for Cousin Vit” (Links to an external site.)

8. Week 8 - Formal Poetry: Villanelle, Haiku and Ballad

LEIGH HANCOCK

This week we will look at two very different types of formal poetry: the French villanelle and the Japanese haiku ballad.

The Villanelle (excerpted from the website poets.org)

The villanelle is a highly structured poem made up of five tercets followed by a quatrain, with two repeating rhymes and two refrains.

The first and third lines of the opening tercet are repeated alternately in the last lines of the succeeding stanzas; then in the final stanza, the refrain serves as the poem's two concluding lines. Using capitals for the refrains and lowercase letters for the rhymes, the form could be expressed as: A1 b A2 / a b A1 / a b A2 / a b A1 / a b A2 / a b A1 A2. Here is an example of the very famous villanelle, "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" by Dylan Thomas:

1. Do not go gentle into that good night, a
2. Old age should burn and rave at close of day; b
3. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. a

4. Though wise men at their end know dark is right, a
5. Because their words had forked no lightning they b
6. Do not go gentle into that good night. a

7. Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright a
8. Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay, b
9. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. a

10. Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight, a
11. And learn, too late, they grieve it on its way, b
12. Do not go gentle into that good night. a

13. Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight a
14. Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay, b
15. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. a

16. And you, my father, there on the sad height, a
17. Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray. b
18. Do not go gentle into that good night. a
19. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. a

History of the Villanelle Form

The villanelle did not start off as a fixed form. During the Renaissance, the *villanella* and *villancico* (from the Italian *villano*, or peasant) were Italian and Spanish dance-songs. French poets who called their poems “villanelle” did not follow any specific schemes, rhymes, or refrains. Rather, the title implied that, like the Italian and Spanish dance-songs, their poems spoke of simple, pastoral or rustic themes.

While some scholars believe that the form as we know it today has been in existence since the sixteenth century, others argue that only one Renaissance poem was ever written in that manner—Jean Passerat’s “Villanelle,” or “*Jay perdu ma tourterelle*”—and that it wasn’t until the late nineteenth century that the villanelle was defined as a fixed form by French poet Théodore de Banville.

Regardless of its provenance, the form did not catch on in France, but it has become increasingly popular among poets writing in English. Contemporary poets have not limited themselves to the pastoral themes originally expressed by the free-form villanelles of the Renaissance, and have loosened the fixed form to allow variations on the refrains.

Villanelles often take large complicated topics like death or loss or love as their subject. They use the looping, repetitive structure to provide various aspects or perspectives, in the end letting the reader decide what to make of it. Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" is another well-known example; other poets who have penned villanelles include W. H. Auden, Oscar Wilde, Seamus Heaney, David Shapiro, and Sylvia Plath.

The Haiku

(excerpted from poets.org)



A traditional Japanese haiku is a three-line poem with seventeen syllables, written in a 5/7/5 syllable count. Often focusing on images from nature, haiku emphasizes simplicity, intensity, and directness of expression.

History of the Haiku Form

Haiku began in thirteenth-century Japan as the opening phrase of renga, an oral poem, generally a hundred stanzas long, which was also composed syllabically. The much shorter haiku broke away from renga in the sixteenth century and was mastered a century later by Matsuo Basho, who wrote this classic haiku:

*An old pond!
A frog jumps in—
the sound of water.*

As the form has evolved, many of its regular traits—including its famous syllabic pattern—have been routinely broken. However, the philosophy of haiku has been preserved: the focus on a brief moment in time; a use of provocative, colorful images; an ability to be read in one breath; and a sense of sudden enlightenment.

Here are a few other examples of haiku:

“A World of Dew” by Kobayashi Issa

*A world of dew,
And within every dewdrop
A world of struggle.*

“Lighting One Candle” by Yosa Buson

*The light of a candle
Is transferred to another candle—
Spring twilight*

“The Taste of Rain” by Jack Kerouac

*The taste
Of rain
—Why kneel?*

There are many, many forms of formal poetry. For a very

incomplete list, please go to this link:
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms?letter=V>

9. Week 9 - Free Verse and Modern Poetry

LEIGH HANCOCK AND LUMENS LEARNING

(drawn from Lumens Learnings; permission at end)

Free verse refers to poetry that does not follow regular meter, rhythm or rhyme. Devoid of recurring line lengths, metrical patterns, and rhyme, free verse can seem random, having no obvious pattern or organization at all. Yet since its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, free verse has enabled a different kind of organization, as poets use the elements of poetry, repeated imagery and/or syntactic patterns to create coherence and connection among lines. Even as it eschews regular meter and rhyme schemes, free verse can draw on metrical patterns and occasional rhyme to tie lines together.

What distinguishes free verse from other traditional forms of verse is that it uses these elements only occasionally—for a few lines here and there in a longer poem—and does not use them to structure the poem as a whole. A poem in free verse does not *lack* structure; it simply does not maintain or use regular meter or rhyme to structure the poem as a whole. Instead, free verse relies more on thematic, syntactic, or semantic repetition and development to create coherence.

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is often credited as introducing free verse into English-language poetry. While not quite true (other experiments and uses preceded his—much like the Blackberry preceded Steve Jobs' iPhone), Whitman's poetry helped to



establish free verse's potential for exploring a broad range of topics and embracing new to organize verse lines. Later-nineteenth-century poets, such as Matthew Arnold in England, further explored the use of free verse, but it was the French symbolists (Jules Laforgue, Gustave Kahn, and Arthur Rimbaud) who practiced what they called *vers libre* during this period.

In the twentieth century, free verse came to dominate poetic

production in English, beginning with the modernists (e.g., T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams) who saw the open form as allowing for the more nimble representation of a modern fragmented and accelerated world.

Here's a particularly famous example of free verse by William Carlos Williams:

The Red Wheelbarrow
so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens.³

In what sense is this verse free? It doesn't rhyme. It doesn't have a set meter. But it does have a consistent line and stanza: each stanza consists of one three-word line followed by one one-word line. Williams has even broken up the single word "wheelbarrow" into two words to fit his form. It is as rigorous as haiku in its way. It just doesn't follow rules previously put down by a poetic tradition. Because the history of poem does not consider word count (as distinct from syllable count) an element of closed form, the poem is considered to be free verse.

Free verse is generally easy to recognize. What is harder to recognize is the principle of order that free verse poems employ. There usually is one: it may be the number of words or syllables in a line, it may be the grammatical clause; it may be the line breaks

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- Free Verse. **Provided by:** The Saylor Foundation. **Located at:** <http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ENGL405-2.3-Freeverse-FINAL.pdf>. **License:** CC BY: Attribution
- Image of grass. **Authored by:** Gilberto Taccari. **Located at:** <https://flic.kr/p/4xUbdm>. **License:** CC BY: Attribution

or the repetition of first words. For the sake of analysis we often want to discover what makes a free verse poem a poem, and not just broken up prose. But identifying free verse is easy: if a poem isn't written in a recognizable form or pattern, it's probably free verse.

History

In 1842, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an essay called "The Poet," in which he called upon American writers to refute the elevated language and fussiness of British poetry, and instead craft poems that expressed the diversity, dialect and democratic values of the United States. Walt Whitman, a young journalist and writer, took Emerson's essay to heart, and wrote a rollicking, lusty collection of poems that "combined spontaneous, prosaic rhythms with incantatory repetition" to communicate "the unity and diversity of the limitless American self" (Poetry Foundation). This book, Leaves of Grass, published in 1855, earned Whitman the title of "Father of American Free Verse." Here are the opening lines:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loaf and invite my soul,
I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their
parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to seize not till death.
Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.
-Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass*

Not all American poets immediately jumped on the free verse bandwagon. Robert Frost was disdainful, saying that "writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net"....to which Poet Carl Sandburg replied:

The poet without imagination or folly enough to play tennis by serving and returning the ball over an invisible net may see himself as highly disciplined. But there have been poets who could and did play more than one game of tennis with unseen rackets, volleying airy and fantastic balls over an insubstantial net, on a frail moonlit fabric of a court.

Whatever Frost thought, by the twentieth century, many if not most English language poets felt that the potential of formal (poetry had been exhausted and that nothing new could be done or said with it. Free verse became the language of the modern age.

Modern Poetry

Modernism—the period of poetry of the early twentieth century—was more boldly experimental with regard to form and subject than any period in English-language history. One of the most influential poets of the era, the American Ezra Pound, stated that it was his task to “break the back of the iamb”—in other words, to destroy formal poetry.



Pound and the Modernists had great success in freeing poetry from the straitjacket of meter. Although traditional forms and meters did not disappear, by the early 1900s, they no longer dominated poetry. Poems varied from astonishingly simple verse written by William Carlos Williams, H.D., and Amy Lowell,

to the highly allusive, complex verse of Pound and T.S. Eliot. Consider the following two examples, the first by Amy Lowell:

Autumn

All day I have watched the purple vine leaves
Fall into the water.
And now in the moonlight they still fall,
But each leaf is fringed with silver.

Contrast it with this poem excerpt by T.S. Eliot .

A Cooking Egg

*En l'an trentiesme
de mon aage*

*Que toutes mes hontes
j'ay beues ...*

Pipit sate upright in
her chair

Some distance from
where I was sitting;
Views of the Oxford
Colleges

Lay on the table, with
the knitting.

Daguerreotypes and silhouettes,
Her grandfather and great great aunts,
Supported on the mantelpiece
An Invitation to the Dance.

.....

I shall not want Honour in Heaven
For I shall meet Sir Philip Sidney
And have talk with Coriolanus
And other heroes of that kidney.

I shall not want Capital in Heaven
For I shall meet Sir Alfred Mond:



We two shall lie together, lapt
In a five per cent Exchequer Bond.
I shall not want Society in Heaven,
Lucretia Borgia shall be my Bride;
Her anecdotes will be more amusing
Than Pipit's experience could provide.
I shall not want Pipit in Heaven:
Madame Blavatsky will instruct me
In the Seven Sacred Trances;
Piccarda de Donati will conduct me.

.....

"Autumn" is about as simple as a poem can get, while "A Cooking Egg" leaves you adrift. "Autumn" provides a single image, but says nothing about that image. It leaves you to see in that image what you find appropriate (knowing that you will associate "autumn" with the approaching end of things). "A Cooking Egg," tells you to work hard and to recognize and translate medieval French (without the help of the internet), and to figure out how the old French poem applies to his. Eliot's poem leaves readers thinking they've missed something. It may be that a lot of poems have left you feeling that way, but for the first time that idea seems to be built into the poem itself.

Critic C. S. Lewis laments that modern poems no longer convey a single, agreed-upon meaning to all readers. If twentieth- and twenty-first-century students are quick to state that a poem means whatever the reader thinks it means, we probably have the Modernists to thank (or blame). Much of this poetry assumes a reader who is as adept in poetry and, in fact, in all of literature as the authors were themselves—and sometimes adept in other things as well (Ezra Pound now and then included Chinese characters in his poems even though he did not read or speak Chinese). Modernists often expected their readers to do the necessary research, to struggle through and find out what their writing was all about. (James Joyce, a writer of modern fiction, once suggested that to understand his work, a reader would have to devote his entire life to studying it.) These works do not imply the knowledge base or

reading sophistication of the average 18-year old. And much of this poetry is too open or too associative in its logic to be easily restricted to any single, monolithic understanding.

If you try to read Eliot's poetry in the same way that you read *Beowulf* or *Paradise Lost*, you will be frustrated. The hierarchy of value has been broken. In that hierarchy allusions support—are subject to—a singular, central meaning. In Modernist poetry, the element of meaning, while still absolutely present, is no longer king; it is limited, but no longer necessarily singular.

In fact, Modernist poetry takes advantage of an aspect of language which poetry would seem to have a natural affinity for: even the simplest, easiest-to-understand utterance is potentially infinite in its meaning—or in its ability to create and become involved with meaning. There's nothing radical about that claim. For a word to be transferable from any one context to any other context it must be infinitely transferable. Most often actual uses of language—me talking to you, me writing this lecture to you, you talking on the phone to your mother, Shakespeare performing the ghost of Hamlet's father—work very hard to limit the ways that the words can be taken. Language is like liquid which must be precisely held in a solid container or it goes everywhere. The container will give it measurable shape. Modernist poetry gives language a looser shape that lets more of its inherently shapelessness appear.

That's not to say that all twentieth-century poetry or even all Modernist poetry is this way. In addition to Williams and Eliot and Pound, there are poets like Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, and William Butler Yeats—and of course many many others—who work in traditional forms. Eliot himself often rhymes, often writes in iambic pentameter. So does Williams and sometimes even Pound. But early twentieth-century poetry is characterized more by this experimentation than by its frequent lack of meter or rhyme.

The period of Modernism, with its convolutions and confusions, gave way, inevitably, to a period of reaction. Beginning in the mid-century, a great number of poets came to believe that the work of T. S. Eliot and company was taking poetry away from its ancient base

and denying it the ability to reach ordinary people. There was fear that this elitism would be the death of poetry. In the 1950s, Beat Generation poets, such as Allen Ginsberg, worked to create a poetry more steeped in immediate experience and emotional intensity than the cerebral poems of the Modernists. Here, for example, are the



first lines of Ginsberg's famous poem, "Howl," a poem that hops over the advances of Modernism and returns us to (and updates) the poetics of Walt Whitman:

Howl

For Carl Solomon

*I saw the best minds of my
generation destroyed by
madness, starving hysterical
naked,
dragging themselves through the
negro streets at dawn looking for
an angry fix,*

*angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to
the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in
the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops
of cities contemplating jazz,
who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw
Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,
who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating
Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,
who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene
odes on the windows of the skull,
who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money
in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall,
who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with a*

*belt of marijuana for New York,
who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley,
death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night
with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock
and endless balls,
incomparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the
mind leaping toward poles of Canada & Paterson, illuminating all the
motionless world of Time between.....*

While not every poet of the mid- to late-twentieth century took Whitman as the model, the poetry of this Postmodern era generally became simpler and easier to read, even as it stayed away from traditional forms dominated by rhyme and meter. Indeed, during the sixties and seventies it would have been difficult to find a newly published poem that rhymed.

At present poetry is doing nothing more profoundly than trying to figure out why it exists in a world in which more and more poetry is published by smaller and smaller presses for fewer and fewer readers, most of them academics, poets, or students. Poetry still has occasional high-profile moments, such as when Maya Angelou read a poem at Bill Clinton's second inaugural, or when a celebration of poetry was abruptly cancelled at the White House for fear the invited poets would use the platform to protest America's invasion of Iraq. But at present, poetry in the English-speaking world leads a mostly underground life. It is still everywhere, but most people, most of the time, manage to ignore it.

Some Poems:

Thomas Hardy, "The Darkling Thrush" ([Links to an external site.](#))

A. E. Housman, "To an Athlete Dying Young" ([Links to an external site.](#))

William Butler Yeats, "Easter 1916" ([Links to an external site.](#))

Robert Frost, "Birches" ([Links to an external site.](#))

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (Links to an external site.)

“Design”

Carl Sandburg, “Chicago” (Links to an external site.)

Wallace Stevens, “Anecdote of the Jar” (Links to an external site.)

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (Links to an external site.)

D. H. Lawrence, “Piano” (Links to an external site.)

Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, “I” (Links to an external site.)

H. D. “Garden” (Links to an external site.)

T. S. Eliot, “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” (Links to an external site.)

John Crow Ransom, “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter” (Links to an external site.)

Edna St. Vincent Millay, “First Fig” (Links to an external site.)

Wilfred Owen, “Dulce Et Decorum Est” (Links to an external site.)

Langston Hughes, “The Weary Blues (Links to an external site.)”

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “Dog” (Links to an external site.)

Denise Levertov, “Pleasures” (Links to an external site.)

Allen Ginsberg, “Howl, Part I” (Links to an external site.)

Adrienne Rich, “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” (Links to an external site.)

Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus” (Links to an external site.)

Rita Dove, “Dusting”

10. Week 10 - Poems of Protest, Resistance and Empowerment

LEIGH HANCOCK

We live in a turbulent time. America has been at war for most of the past two decades. Income and wealth inequality are at an all-time high in our country, with subsequent surges in homelessness, opioid addiction and percentage of incarcerated citizens (the highest in the developed world). Climate change and covid-19 have each caused huge disruptions for the most vulnerable populations worldwide. Racial inequality and oppression, most profoundly expressed in the Black Lives Matter movement, has finally become visible to almost every American. The chasm between our two main political parties verges on civil war.

So it seems fitting to end this text with a look at poems of protest, resistance and empowerment—then and now. From Walt Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!” to Woodie Guthrie’s “Roll on Columbia” to the gospel songs sung by slaves to the fiery poetry of Allen Ginsberg and Audre Lorde, poems and songs have been integral to the fight for justice and liberty...a fight that is far from over.

As the *Poetry Foundation* states,

Pithy and powerful, poetry is a popular art form at protests and rallies. From the civil rights and women’s liberation movements to Black Lives Matter, poetry is commanding enough to gather crowds in a city square and compact enough to demand attention on social media. Speaking truth to power remains a crucial role of the poet in the face of political and media rhetoric designed to obscure, manipulate, or worse. Such poems call out and talk back to the inhumane forces that threaten from above. They expose

grim truths, raise consciousness, and build united fronts. Some insist, as Langston Hughes writes, “That all these walls oppression builds / Will have to go!” Others seek ways to actively “make peace,” as Denise Levertov implores, suggesting that “each act of living” might cultivate collective resistance. All rail against complacency and demonstrate why poetry is necessary and sought after in moments of political crisis. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/101581/poems-of-protest-resistance-and-empowerment>)

(Sadly, despite these inspiring words, the Poetry Foundation itself has come under recent fire for its lack of response to the Black Lives Matter movement, criticism that has resulted in the resignation of its Board President.)

Please choose one or more of the links below to explore and discuss in our discussion forums and journals this week.

- A long list of links to protest poetry: <https://poets.org/protest-poetry>
- “Poetry in a Time of Protest” by Edwidge Danticat, *The New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/poetry-in-a-time-of-protest>
- “POems of Resistance: A PRimer” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/21/books/review/political-poetry-sampler.html>
- “The Poems that Poets Turn to in a Time of Strife,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/11/books/poetry-poets-recommendations.html>
- “Poetry Foundation Leadership Resigns after Black Lives Matters Comment,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/books/poetry-foundation-black-lives-matter.html>
- Statement from the Academy of American poets on BLM: <https://poets.org/black-lives-matter>

A Complete Online Course

This is where you can add appendices or other back matter.