

How to read a poem

How do you read a poem? It sounds like a silly question, but when you're faced with a poem and asked to write or talk about it, it can be good to have strategies on how to read. We asked a Cambridge student to read a poem as though they were going to write an essay on it, and to write down their thoughts as they went through it. You'll see the strategies they use to read a poem, and how they turn their ideas into an essay plan. First of all, read the poem for yourself, and see what you think of it.

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:
The firefly wakens: waken thou with me.

Now droops the milkwhite peacock like a ghost,
And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.

Now lies the Earth all Danae to the stars,
And all thy heart lies open unto me.

Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves
A shining furrow, as thy thoughts in me.

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,
And slips into the bosom of the lake:
So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip
Into my bosom and be lost in me.

How to read a poem

Hi! I've been asked to read through a poem and write down what I'm thinking as I read it and then write an essay plan. I hope you find this useful!

Whenever I'm trying to study a poem, I start off by reading it over to myself twice (aloud, if possible - obviously not in an exam!)

Reading this poem through, my first reaction is disorientation (a posh way of saying that I'm not quite sure what's going on). What's happening? What's the poem about?

After I've read it through from start to end, I like to start right at the beginning of the poem and work through it, so here goes.

Verse 1

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white

I think that's a beautiful line (I love the way it sounds), but I'm not immediately sure what's happening. We're thrown straight into the middle of things with 'now' (it's a word which implies that something else was happening before, but we don't know what), so perhaps this feeling of disorientation is deliberate. This first line leaves us guessing - the crimson and white petals mean we must be talking about flowers, but what sort of flowers and why? Where are they? Outside in the garden or are they picked and in a vase inside? What does the poet mean by saying that they're sleeping? Why might flowers sleep? I can come up with lots of ideas (maybe the petals fell off the flowers and are 'sleeping' lying on the table around the vase?) but I can't tell anything for sure. This first line is going for deliberate confusion, I think, asking us to read on if we want to know where we are and what's happening.

One thing I have noticed, though, is that the line sounds so peaceful because it's an iambic pentameter - that is, it's got 10 syllables in the line with the stress on alternate syllables. This is a very popular and traditional form to write in for English poets, so this suggests to me that it's quite a traditional poem. But you might not immediately notice that it's an iambic pentameter, because the poet puts a break, not in the middle of the line, but after the 7th syllable.

Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk

OK. The first thing which I react to here is the first word 'nor'. Why 'nor'? 'Nor' usually comes after 'Neither', or 'Not' - I can imagine a line which runs 'the petals do not move, nor waves the cypress' - but after saying what the petals do (i.e. they sleep), how come we're suddenly told what the cypress is *not* doing? But, on the other hand, the cypress gives us a clue to where we are. (A cypress is a tree, normally found in warm southern countries like Italy). We're in the gardens of a palace. Specifically, we're in the 'walk' (a path) of a palace.

The poet tells us that the cypress 'doesn't' wave - that immediately makes me wonder what is it doing? Why does he bother to tell us what something isn't doing? It gives me the impression that it was waving, but right now, at the moment that the poet is writing (like the immediacy of 'now' in the first line), it has stopped. Presumably it was waving in the wind, though. Cypresses are quite big trees, so it must have been a strong wind to make it wave. So now the idea in my head is that earlier it had been windy, with all the trees in the gardens swaying, but that now it's peaceful. Does this give me any idea about the strange description of the sleeping petals in the first line? Well, it suggests that perhaps they've been waving around in the winds too, and that now they're 'sleeping' because the wind has stopped and the flowers are no longer moving around. For some reason, I imagine that these petals are roses, but I'm not really sure why.

Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font

Uh-oh - this is getting hard. What's going on here? First of all, there's a word I need to look up. Having looked up 'porphyry', it turns out to mean a rock or stone with large crystals in it. So we have a 'font' which is made out of a shining stone. But what's the font doing in a garden? They're more usually found in churches. So I'm now imagining some sort of big stone shining font, with water in it. It's worth me noting that 'porphyry' sounds like a pretty fancy word to me. It sounds like we're in a very fancy garden and the poet's using fancy language to describe it. He could have just said 'stone', or 'shining' or some other simple word, but instead he goes for a long unusual word - and that's a deliberate choice. I'll think about the type of language the poet chooses later.

The 'gold fin' - now that I've got the idea of a font, I can imagine that the 'gold fin' is the gold fin of a gold fish - there are gold fish in the font in the garden. Do fins 'wink'? No, so this must be a metaphor - the gold fin is only occasionally visible in the water, like someone suddenly winking. But what does the poet mean by saying it's a font? Is it really a font in the religious sense of the word? I don't think it can be, because you don't find them in gardens, so it must be a metaphor. For some reason, the poet describes the big stone fountain with goldfish in in religious terms. Perhaps we'll find why he wants to get a religious tinge to his poem as we keep reading.

But another thing - this is another line starting 'nor', and again we're told what isn't happening. This is quite a strange thing to do - it's as though he conjures up the image in the reader's mind and then tells us to forget about it - as though he wants us to simultaneously have the idea of the gold fish swimming around and of completely empty water. Why is he doing this? I don't know, but it's something worth thinking about?

The firefly wakens: waken thou with me

At last - something that does happen! I've just looked up fireflies in the dictionary, and I've discovered that they only come out at night. So we now know we're in the garden at night, with the fireflies starting to light up the darkness (maybe as a contrast to the way the goldfish lit up the water before). This helps us get more of an idea of what's happening - the petals are sleeping because it's night.

But - who is the 'thou' that the poet is talking too? We're just going to have to read on and

find out. We do know one thing though, which is that 'thou' is quite a fancy, romantic sort of word when he could have used 'you' just as well. So that gives us some more clues.

Verse 2

Now droops the milkwhite peacock like a ghost

Well, this seems quite an easy line to understand after all the previous complications. That doesn't mean it's not descriptive though! I like the way that the peacock 'droops' - it makes me think of a real 'end-of-day' feeling, as though the peacock had been looking good all day, and now it's tired out and relaxing (like the sleeping petals). Even the idea of it being like a 'ghost' doesn't sound as though it's a scary ghost. There's a real contrast between so many things which seem tired, and the fireflies which are just coming awake and the person who has been asked to wake up.

Maybe 'like a ghost' is a bit like the 'font' in that it's vaguely religious imagery? I'm still not sure about this so I'm going to go on reading.

And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.

Okay. Who is 'she'? Is it the peacock? It could be (though female peacocks are technically called peahens) but somehow I don't think so. I'm wondering whether the 'she' could be a woman - maybe the 'thou' that the poet mentioned before. But if it is a woman, why does he address her directly as 'thou' at one moment and then as 'she' the next? Another thing to think about.

It's very striking the way that the poet repeats 'like a ghost' in the two lines. Why does he do that? Thinking it over, there seem to be a lot of repetition and contrast in this poem. For example, the first line was 'now ... now ...', then the second and third lines were 'nor ...', 'nor ...', then in the fourth line we have 'wakens, waken', and now 'like a ghost, And like a ghost'. That's definitely something worth talking about in an essay. Maybe this is going a bit far, but the descriptions of things as ghosts, the way that the woman 'glimmers', and the gold fin 'winks' suggests a kind of 'here and not here' atmosphere - it's quite magical, as though 'now you see it, now you don't'. It reminds me of the way that I began by saying that we were asked to imagine simultaneously what had been happening earlier and what has been happening now.

Now I've gone back to looking at the whole of the first verse, I notice how much alliteration (repetition of sounds) there is from line to line. I've just read it aloud to myself again. Look at the 's' sounds in 'crimson', 'sleeps', 'waves', 'winks', 'cypress', 'palace' (they're not all the same 's' sound but they're quite similar) - I think they really build up a hushed atmosphere of evening in the garden, as though someone was constantly saying 'ssshhh'. There's also a lot of repetition of 'f' sounds as well - 'font', 'fin', 'porphyry', 'fireflies'. I'm not quite sure what the effect of the repetition of the 'f' sounds is, though.

Reading back over it again, I notice that it's not just the 'f' sound, but the 'i' as well - in 'winks', 'fin', and 'porphyry' - and I think the repetition of these sounds is quite soothing, a bit like a lullaby. So the poet seems to be using the sounds of the words to build up a certain atmosphere - that's something else to go in my essay.

Verse 3

Now lies the Earth all Danae to the stars

What? This is a difficult one. What is 'Danae'? Time for a dictionary - but the dictionary turns out to be no help. It just says that she was a character from Greek mythology who was locked in a bronze chamber. I can't see what that means at all. I'll try to look it up in Google. Well, I've now put 'Danae, Greek Myths' into Google and immediately I've come up with [a picture](#) that tells me exactly what the poet means (though I'm still not sure what's going on in the picture!) According to the picture, Danae is lying naked on a bed outside (looking very voluptuous) and there seems to be a storm going on. Looking it up a bit more, apparently the storm is the Greek God Zeus appearing to Danae as a shower of gold. They then have sex (so I suppose he needs to turn back into human shape for that).

So, the poet seems to be saying that the earth is (like Danae in the picture) lying voluptuously open for the stars to shine down, like Zeus descending towards her. It's a very erotic image, and it gives some idea of what's in the narrator's mind when he's invited this woman to come and wander round the garden at night with him.

And all thy heart lies open unto me.

Hmmm - after that last line, I can't help feeling that it's not her heart that he's interested in, but maybe I'm just cynical. But what he's saying here is making a parallel from the garden to the woman in the garden (by saying 'Now...', And...), saying that just as the Earth is open to the stars, and Danae was open to Zeus, so is her heart open to him.

But is her heart open to him? I don't know why he thinks it is. I would expect someone who's heart was open to be doing a lot more talking. She doesn't seem to have any say at all in this poem - she appears when the narrator asks her to, she doesn't say anything (in fact, she drifts around like a ghost). I see this almost as an instruction to her that she has to be open to him. The more I read it, the more it's almost like a stage hypnotist talking, gradually hypnotizing her by the soft repetitive sounds in the earlier stanzas. Or maybe I'm going over the top here!

Verse 4

Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves A shining furrow, as thy thoughts in me.

I'm going to take these two lines as one, because the lines run over from one to another. I think that's significant, as it doesn't happen elsewhere. It seems that the words are like the meteor, sliding on from one line to another. I think this poem is gradually getting more

erotic after the introduction of the woman into the garden (meteors? Furrows? Sounds to me like the narrator has sex on his mind). We've got very tactile words like 'slides', and the repeated 's' sibilants which continue building up this very quiet, private atmosphere. I think the image of the meteor crossing the night sky and leaving a shining trail behind it is beautiful - it really fits in with this image of the quiet garden and the fireflies. It also picks up on this idea of Danae and Zeus - there's not much difference between a shining meteor and a shower of gold, it seems to me, so it's repeating this sexual image. I've just looked up 'meteor' in google search and there are really dramatic images of how the meteor has a long shining tail left across the sky behind it.

But I'm not quite sure what the narrator means by her thoughts leaving a furrow in him. Maybe it means that they continue to influence him after she's spoken, like the shooting star has a trail of light behind it. Or I suppose that 'furrow' is a farming metaphor, meaning the trails that are made in the soil ready for seeds to be planted. So her thoughts are planted in him, ready to grow. (And, ironically, from the sexual point of view, like Danae, he would be planting seeds in her.)

Verse 5

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,

OK - we're back to an image very like the one in the first line. In fact, the poem seems to be continually moving backwards and forwards between the woman and the garden. But, in a way, the woman becomes the garden - she's compared in turn to the fireflies, like the peacock, like the Earth, like the meteor, and now to the lily. In fact, we've returned not only the images but to the sounds of that opening stanza, with the 's's and the 'f's.

And slips into the bosom of the lake:

I have absolutely no idea what this means! It sounds like the lily closes the flowers and falls into the lake - but why a lily would fall into a lake I can't understand. I'm hoping that if we go to the next line I might get a clue.

***So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip
Into my bosom and be lost in me.***

Ah - another pair of lines where the sense runs on from one line to another. I wonder if it's significant that the only paired lines are the ones which talk about the narrator and the woman - as though to emphasize that they are joined together. So we end up with an image of union - she is 'lost' in him, and they cannot be distinguished. But, the way it ends on 'me' is quite significant, I think. In fact, I've just looked back at the poem as a whole and now I feel really stupid for not having noticed this before - every line ends in 'me'. So I think that although he's putting this emphasis on union, the narrator is unconsciously revealing that it's all about 'me', 'me', 'me'.

In fact, it's a double image of union - the couple are united, but she is also united with the garden through his metaphors. I'm interested in how many commas / pauses there are in this line - three pauses during the first line, and then the run-on (technically known as

enjambment) into the next line. The pauses slow it down - perhaps as though she's 'folding' herself like a lily, . Irrelevant, but I can't help thinking that 'fold thyself' is a pretty silly instruction.

So what does this tell us about the line about the lake? I'm still confused by it. It seems to be as though the narrator is now making a desperate effort to continue making parallels between the way he wants the woman to behave and the way the garden looks, as I really can't imagine any way that the lily can fall in the lake. This seems a bit of a stupid answer, but it really is all I can come up with.

Turning this into an essay

At this point, I've now gone very carefully through the whole poem and have very detailed notes on it, and I'm ready to write my essay plan.

I want to have an argument for my essay, so that it doesn't sound like just one thing after another, but that the whole thing really makes a point about the poem.

Looking back over my notes, I've decided to take the theme of unity and division, which I talked about referring to the very last line.

This would be my essay plan:

Introduction - In this, I'd say what I'm going to argue. My main argument would be that this is a paradoxical - perhaps even ironic - poem, in which an ideal image of union is negated by the constant emphasis on 'me', 'me', 'me'. A poem with a constant focus on duality - both in the language and in the structure of the poem.

Section 1 - Explain my opening paragraph properly by talking about the final two lines.

Section 2 - Talk about how the narrator creates a parallel between the woman and the garden, in order to persuade her to open up to him.

Section 3 - Talk about the parallels of language: all the 'now ... now' and 'nor ... nor' patterns. Explain what effect this has on the poem.

Section 4 - Talk about the structure of the poem: here I'd say how most lines are end-stopped, but the two that describe the couple together are enjambed. Explain what effect this has.

Section 5 - Talk about the sounds of the poem: all the 's's' creating a very peaceful sound, for example.

Section 6 - Talk about the way the poem throws you into the middle of the situation so you have to work out what's going on.

Section 7 - Talk about how the poet asks you to imagine two things at once by saying 'nor' and 'now'.

Conclusion - Sum up what I've said and make some final point.

I hope you've found it useful to see how I read a poem! I found this quite a difficult poem to read, in a lot of ways, but I enjoyed reading it. I'm sure there's a lot of stuff that I could have said about it that I didn't, but I think you can't ever say everything there is to say about a poem.

Tips for Reading Poems

As you've seen, this student has some strategies that she uses to read a new and difficult poem. Here are a few tips on how to read a poem. Try them out for yourself, and see whether they help you in your own reading.

1. Try this trick of reading it line by line for yourself. Ask yourself what the first line means. Then move on to the second line - what does it add to the first line? Move through like this, spending a good amount of time on each line.
2. When you understand what the line means, look at how the poet says it - for example, once we understand that 'porphyry' is a type of stone, think about why the poet says 'porphyry' and not 'stone'.
3. Read the line out loud (or in your head if you're in an exam) to see how it sounds. How do the sounds relate to the meaning of the line?
4. Don't have the TV on in the background - and think twice before having on music with a strong beat, at least until you've read through the poem a few times. The music will drown out the rhythm of the poetry.
5. Look at the way this reader uses what she's just read to go back and think about earlier lines? Lines seem to change their meaning as you read on - and that might be a very deliberate trick on behalf of the poet.
6. If you're confused - does the poet mean you to be confused? Have they deliberately thrown you into the middle of the situation so that you have to work out what's going on? If so, why? For example, in a war poem, the poet might want you to feel as confused and unsure as the soldiers in the poem.
7. Don't understand a word? Try looking it up in a dictionary (warning! Some words have more than one meaning and you'll have to work out which is the right one. Even more confusingly, some poets will deliberately use more than one meaning of a word in their poem, so that it refers to several things at once)
8. Or try looking it up on the Internet - this reader has used Google to find pictures of Danae and a meteor to help her to understand the poem.
9. When you're writing your essay, make sure you plan it first (but, in an exam, don't spend too much time planning). At A-level, don't write the obvious about a poem - spend your time on something more important. For example, in this poem, don't bother telling the examiners that it's set in a garden, or is about a man and a woman. If you write about more important things, it will be clear to the examiners that you understand the poem.

