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How to Read a Poem

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If you believe a poem can mean anything you want it to mean, let's talk.

Let's start with a poem:

Marks

by [Linda Pastan](#)

My husband gives me an A
for last night's supper,
an incomplete for my ironing,
a B plus in bed.
My son says I am average,
an average mother, but if
I put my mind to it
I could improve.
My daughter believes
in Pass/Fail and tells me
I pass. Wait 'til they learn
I'm dropping out.

Okay, based on the theory that a poem can mean anything you want it to mean, I offer the following claim for the meaning of this poem:

This poem means that death is part of all our lives, and we should learn to accept it. In the poem "Marks" stands for people. Some of us are A's, some of us are B+'s, some of us are average, some pass, and some fail. The speaker of the poem is a gay male, and his husband has just died. He "dropped out" -- because he wasn't happy with the speaker leaving the ironing "incomplete." He probably needed his shirt, and it wasn't ironed, so he had to wear it wrinkled. The speaker of the poem believes that his children are weird for calling him mother, so he

decided to commit suicide too; we know this, because he says in the last line, "I'm dropping out." But all of this could have been avoided if they had realized that death is part of life, and we must learn to accept it.

Now compare this claim about meaning to the following:

In the poem "Marks" the speaker is using a school metaphor to vent her frustration at being constantly evaluated by her family. "Marks" means grades, and each family member has his or her own system of grading the mother: the husband uses letter grades, giving his wife an "A / for last night's supper." She gets an "I"--incomplete--for ironing, because no doubt she didn't finish and probably left some of his clothes unironed. All of the grades are good grades, except for the ironing, but then an incomplete can be converted to an "A" as soon as the work is finished. The son is less discriminating than the husband; he just claims his mom is average, but he also thinks she has potential to become above average "if / [she puts her] mind to it." The daughter uses the pass/fail system, and the good news is the mother passes. The mother, though, is somewhat perturbed by all this grading; after all running a household is not school, so stop all this evaluating, for goodness sakes, and so she says, "Wait 'til they learn / I'm dropping out." Keeping the school metaphor, she employs the verbs "learn" and "dropping out." Now the question is, what does the mother mean by saying she's dropping out? Does she mean she's leaving the household, divorcing the husband, abandoning the children? Does she mean she's going to commit suicide? I suggest that these measures are too drastic. The situation is not that ominous. After all, her "marks" are really good ones: A, B+, I (which can be replaced with an A); average, with the potential to be above average; and pass. The family is not negatively marking her. Why would she be motivated to abandon the family or commit suicide for getting such good marks? I suggest that her "dropping out" is a mild exaggeration and probably indicates that she is no longer going to care if they evaluate her. She's dropping out of the school metaphor; she will no longer consider herself open to evaluation. The poem is too playful to allow for the dire interpretation of family abandonment and suicide. The school metaphor makes it playful. In order to hint at abandonment or suicide I would argue that a speaker might use a legal metaphor, claim that she had been judged wrongly, imply that she was committed to prison unjustly; then the speaker might imply family abandonment or suicide.

Now which claim makes more sense?

It should be obvious that the first claim is preposterous, and I'll concede that in formulating it, I have exaggerated, but only a little. I do get essays that are much too close to a reading like that one. And many students coming into my English Composition II bring the notion that "a poem can mean anything you want it to mean." The notion is widespread. Walking to the library one day, I overheard a heated conversation between a young woman and her companion. I heard her say distinctly: "But I write poetry, and poetry doesn't have to make sense." What is the point of writing anything that doesn't make sense? Words have meanings, and whether or not you choose to acknowledge their meanings, they still have them. When you say the word "sun," those who know that word will think of the big star that warms the Earth. They will not think of chocolate, socks, or death. Their first thought is the object that the word "sun" was designated to "mean." There is no problem with this understanding until we encounter that word (or any word) in a poem. Many students have inferred from their early encounters with poetry that words in poems never retain their real-life, prose meaning. So "sun" in a poem does not ever mean that big star that warms our planet; it will mean something different and only the teacher knows what it is. Even as they believe it, students balk at the notion that only the teacher has the answer and therefore come away with the idea that since words always mean something different in poems, they must mean anything you want them to mean. I have had students tell me that they never got the same thing out of a poem that the teacher did. And the students think they were always wrong, and the teacher was always right. This situation makes no sense to the student, and so in self-defense, they come away with the idea that "a poem can mean anything you want it to mean." At least that gives the students some self-esteem; it's better than believing that only the teacher has an answer, and the student will forever remain clueless about finding the answer.

But what is the answer? Why do poems present such a problem? Do words never retain their denotative meaning in poems? The solution to this problem is really a simple one. But it has become complex through a series of misunderstandings. How can we clear away these misunderstandings?

Let's look at another poem:

Morning Song
by [Sylvia Plath](#)

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

As we study this poem, let's keep in mind the following suggestions:

1. Words in a poem still retain their meaning: love=love, statue=statue, balloons=balloons.

2. Words in a poem may also take on additional meaning:

"Love set you going like a fat, gold watch."

"Love" here implies "conception of the child," as well as the emotional and sexual attraction that drew the parents together in the act that resulted in the "conception" of the child.

**"Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum . . ."**

"Statue" here refers to the baby. According to the mother/speaker the baby is like a new statue in a museum.

**"And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons."**

"Balloons" here refer to the baby's sounds. The sounds seem to move upward, light and airy and colorful.

3. Let's consider the following nutshell definition of a poem: ***A poem is an artistic representation of what it feels like to experience the emotional life of a***

human being. We human beings are not satisfied with prose when it comes to representing our emotions. A prose rendering of the poem "Morning Song" would run something like this: I am supposedly your mother, I conceived you, gave birth to you, but somehow, even as I run to you and care for you, I feel that you are a stranger to me. Notice how bland and unremarkable this rendering is. The artist/poet is moved to explore those basic feelings and share them in a more specific and colorful medium; therefore, instead of the prosaic claim, "I conceived you," the poet dramatizes by saying, "Love set you going like a fat, gold watch." Instead of saying, "I am supposedly your mother," the poet portrays that idea: "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand." Instead of dully remarking, "I feel you are a stranger to me," the poet compares the baby to a new statue in a museum, and later states, "Your mouth opens clean as a cat's." Statues in museums are not intimate objects, and cats are universally noted to be independent creatures. So the point here is that as we are living this life and experiencing it, we react to it in unique ways; we each have our own attitudes toward experiences. One mother might acknowledge only the closeness she feels for her child, while another stresses the distance she feels. That's where interpretation comes in, and that's also the place where students have been led astray. They ask me every semester, "Are we supposed to give you our own interpretation or the right one?" Again that idea that only the teacher knows the right interpretation, and now, if lucky, this teacher will let me state my own idea whether it is right or not.

4. This carries us into the difference between right and wrong interpretation. A poem has two levels of meaning, the surface level which includes the subject and event or simply what's going on in the poem; the deep meaning (sometimes inaccurately called "hidden meaning" by beginners) which includes the interpretation. Interpretation results from the reader's discerning the implications of the surface level meaning. Confusing the two levels of meaning, the student settles for the notion that a poem can mean anything. It's one thing not to realize in the poem "Morning Song" that the speaker is a new mother speaking to her newborn baby, and not realizing that the mother seems to feel two ways about her baby. And some students do not discern this elementary level of meaning; I have actually heard students claim that the speaker is a bird speaking to the sun, or a grandmother speaking to a grandchild. Of course, after a closer look, most students come to understand that truly the speaker is a mother speaking to her newborn. But others remain in a vague haze, continuing to believe that "if I want, I can still think it is a bird talking to the sun."

5. Your own life experience will affect your understanding of a poem. But it will affect the interpretation more than it should affect understanding surface meaning, if you have grasped the suggestions offered in 1-4. Especially that the words still have their same meaning, although they may take on some additional meaning. Obviously, a woman who has given birth and experienced nurturing a newborn will interpret meaning from the Plath poem that an inexperienced woman or man may not. But the inexperienced young woman or man is still able to recognize a mother speaking to an

infant. Take the line, "The midwife slapped your footsoles": why would a bird make such a remark to the sun? Would a bird listen to the sun's "moth-breath" all night? Imagine a bird claiming to be "cow-heavy and floral" in a Victorian night gown. Obviously, the recognition of such common images is not denied the inexperienced in childbirth. Only the inexperienced in poetry reading find these words and images baffling.

6. The purpose of poetry is not primarily to convey information. A poem requires a special reading, different from a newspaper article that you read quickly for the facts. A poem requires repeated readings/listenings. As does your favorite song. You don't listen to your favorite rock group to get the latest news. You listen to be transported by the music, to experience the emotion of the lyric, to be entertained by the drama. It's the same with poems. You read them to get back your emotional experience. You have experienced great pain in your life, and deep in your soul you remember what it was like, but you have not dramatized it. You discover the following poem, and you say to yourself, "Yes, that's the way it was. Yes, Emily Dickinson understood pain the same way I did, and she lived over a century ago, look at this, how universal my pain is." And you are suddenly bound up with art and the rest of humanity in ways you did not know existed. Read this poem:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes —
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs —
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round —
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought —
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone —

This is the Hour of Lead —
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow —
First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go —

If you still believe that a poem can mean anything you want it to, what do you want this one to mean?

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