POETRY
Reading, Responding, Writing

Ways of reading poetry and reasons for doing so differ almost as widely as poems themselves, and in ways we can perhaps best appreciate by considering poetry's functions in other times and places. Though you might be aware, for example, that medieval noblemen paid courtly "bards" to commemorate their achievements and thereby help them to maintain their own prestige and power, you might be surprised to learn that since 2007 millions of people across the Middle East have tuned in to watch *Prince of Poets*, a reality show in which poets rather than pop singers compete for audience votes.

Such phenomena might come as a surprise to us simply because today, at least in the West, we don't tend to think of poetry as having great popular appeal or political potency. Millions of us may be moved by the way hip-hop artists use rhyme and rhythm to boast about, or "celebrate and sing," themselves; to show us the danger and excitement of life on the streets; or even to get out the vote. Yet "poetry" seems to many of us a thing apart, something either to suffer, to cherish, or to simply be baffled and intimidated by precisely because it seems so arcane, so different and difficult, so essentially irrelevant to the rest of our lives. Though one rarely hears anyone say of all fiction either "I hate it" or "I love it" or "I just don't get it," if you're like most people, you've probably said, thought, or heard someone else say at least one of these things about poetry.

This chapter and the ones that follow welcome poetry-lovers. But they neither require you to be one nor aim to convert you. They do, we hope, demonstrate a few key points:

- Poetry itself isn't all one thing: *Poems differ as much as the people who write and read them, or as much as music and movies do.* They can be by turns goofy, sad, or angry; they can tell a story, comment on current events, or simply describe the look of a certain time of day. Deciding that you "love," "hate," "get," or "don't get" all poetry based on your experience of one poem or of one kind of poetry is a little like either deciding you love all music because Mozart moves you or giving up on music entirely because Lady Gaga leaves you cold.
- *A good poem is not a secret message one needs a special decoder ring or an advanced degree to decipher.* Any thoughtful person who's willing to try can make sense of it, though some poems certainly do invite us to rethink our idea of what "making sense" might mean. Poetry has spoken to millions of ordinary people across the centuries and around the world, so at least some poems can speak to us, too, if we give both them and ourselves a chance. By the same token, even the most devoted, experienced poetry lovers among us can become better, more responsive, more thoughtful readers by simply reading more and different kinds of poetry and by exploring, as the following chapters do, the various elements and techniques with which poetry is made.

- People around the world have often turned to poetry to express their feelings and longings precisely because *poetry is, in certain vital ways, distinct from other forms of writing.* Each genre plays by its own rules and has its own history and traditions, so reading poetry effectively, like succeeding in a video game, does involve learning and playing by certain rules. Any one poem may open itself to multiple responses and interpretations, just as a game may allow you many ways of advancing to the next level. But in both cases there are limits. Neither is a free-for-all in which "anything goes." (In both cases, too, some difficulty can be essential to the fun.) *A poem wouldn't mean anything if it could mean everything.*
- *Yet the questions we ask of a poem and the techniques we use to understand it are simply variations of the same ones we use in reading fiction or drama.* Indeed, some poems narrate action just as a short story does; others work much like plays.
- Finally, *poems aren't nearly as fragile as we take them to be when we worry about "over-reading" or "analyzing them to death."* You can't kill a poem. But a poem does experience a sort of living death if it's not read, re-read, and pondered over. Poems need you. Not only can they bear the weight of your careful attention, but they also deserve it: the best of them are, after all, the result of someone else's. William Wordsworth may have done much to shape our contemporary ideas about poetry when he famously described it as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," but his own poems were, like most great poems, the result of weeks, even years, of writing and revision.

DEFINING POETRY

But what, after all, is poetry? Trying to define poetry is a bit like trying to catch a snowflake; you can do it, but at the very same moment, the snowflake begins to melt and disappear. With poems, as with fiction, one can always come up with particular examples that don't do what the definition insists they must, as well as numerous writers and readers who will disagree. Yet to claim that poetry eludes all definition is merely to reinforce the idea that it is simply too mysterious for ordinary mortals. Without being all-sufficient or entirely satisfying, a dictionary definition can at least give us a starting point. Here are two such definitions of poetry:

1. 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*)
2. Composition in verse or some comparable *patterned arrangement* of language in which the expression of *feelings* and ideas is given *intensity* by the use of distinctive style and *rhythm*[. . .] . Traditionally associated with explicit formal departure from the *patterns* of ordinary speech or prose, e.g., in the use of elevated diction, figurative language, and syntactical reordering. (*The Oxford English Dictionary*)

Different as they are, both of these definitions stress four elements: 1) the "patterned arrangement of language" to 2) generate "rhythm" and thereby both 3) express and evoke specific "emotion[s]" or "feelings" in 4) a "concentrated" way, or with "intensity."

But what does all that really mean? To test drive this definition, let's look at an example. And let's pick a tough one: Head, Heart, taken from *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*, is usually classified as a work of fiction, and it certainly does have the elements of one, including **characters** and some **action** arranged into a **plot** brought to us by a **narrator**. Yet one reviewer of Davis's *Collected Stories* tellingly describes this one as "a poem of a story." What specific features of the following story might make it work like a poem? Which, if any, of the features essential to poetry might it lack?

LYDIA DAVIS

Head, Heart

Heart weeps.
Head tries to help heart.
Head tells heart how it is, again:
You will lose the ones you love. They will all go. But even the earth will go, someday.
5 Heart feels better, then.
But the words of head do not remain long in the ears of heart.
Heart is so new to this.
I want them back, says heart.
Head is all heart has.
10 Help, head. Help heart.

2007

If difficulty were essential to poetry, "Head, Heart" would not seem to qualify. It's hard to imagine less formal, even less elementary, **diction** or **syntax**. And the whole seems relatively easy to paraphrase (often a helpful thing to do when first encountering a poem): When we're sad about losing someone we love, we reason with ourselves that loss is inevitable because everything earthly, even the earth itself, can't last forever. Such rational explanations give us comfort, but that comfort is itself temporary; we still miss those we've lost and have to keep calling on our heads to help our hearts cope.

We do have emotion here, then, as well as a **conflict** between emotion and reason—and even when they lack plots, most poems do explore conflicts, just as stories and plays do. But do we have a poem? Does it matter that "Head, Heart" depends entirely on two **figures of speech—metonymy**, the use of the name of one thing for another closely associated thing (here, "head" for "reason," and "heart" for "emotion"), as well as **personification**, the representation of an object or an abstraction (here, "head" and "heart") as a person (capable of weeping and talking, for example)? Though fiction and drama both use figurative language, we often describe such language as "poetic," even when it occurs in a story or play, because poems do tend to depend much more on it (as we discuss further in ch. 14).

Does it matter that "Head, Heart" is short—just seventy-one words? Though poems come in every size, many poems are short or at least shorter than the typical work of fiction. Brevity is one way that *some* poems achieve the "concentration" and "intensity" the dictionaries take to be essential. Such concentration invites, even requires, ours. As poet Billy Collins puts it, "Poetry offers us the possibility of modulating our pace." The very brevity of a poem can teach us simply to slow

down for a moment and pay attention—not only to the details within the poem, but also, through them, to whatever in the world or in ourselves the poem attends to. Sometimes that's all a poem does—simply invites us to pay attention to something we wouldn't notice otherwise.

Regardless of their overall length, moreover, almost all poems concentrate our attention and modulate our pace by doling out words a few at a time, arranging them not just into sentences (as in prose), but into discreet **lines**. One result is much more blank space and thus more silences and pauses than in prose. For this reason alone, "Head, Heart" looks and works like a poem. And the deliberateness with which it does so is signaled by the fact that one of its sentences is divided so as to span multiple lines. (Line 3 ends with a colon, not a period.) By arranging words into lines and, often, into **stanzas**, the poet, not a typesetter or printer, determines where words fall on the page. And that perhaps is the most important aspect of that arrangement of language that has differentiated poetry from prose since poetry became a written, as well as spoken, art (an issue discussed further in ch. 18). All printings of a poem, if accurate, reproduce exactly the same breaks and space the words precisely the same way on the page.

AUTHORS ON THEIR CRAFT

BILLY COLLINS ON THE POET AS "LINE-MAKER"

From "A Brisk Walk: An Interview with Billy Collins" (2006)*

I'm a line-maker. I think that's what makes poets different from prose-writers. [. . .] We think not just in sentences the way prose writers do but also in lines. [. . .] When I'm constructing a poem, I'm trying to write one good line after another. [. . .] I'm not thinking of just writing a paragraph and then chopping it up. I'm very conscious of the fact that every line should have a cadence to it. It should contribute to the progress of the poem. And that the ending of the line is a way of turning the reader's attention back into the interior of the poem.

*"A Brisk Walk: An Interview with Billy Collins." Interview by Joel Whitney. *Guernica*, 14 June 2006, www.guernicamag.com/interviews/a_brisk_walk/.

One result is that line endings and beginnings inevitably get more of our attention, bear more oomph and meaning. Notice how many of the lines of "Head, Heart" begin with *head* and *heart* and how these words repeat in a pattern (*Heart, Head, Head, Heart, Heart, Head*—and then *Help*), as if the line-beginnings themselves enact the same interplay between "head" and "heart" that the sentences describe. Conversely, certain end-words reverberate: *again*, for example, suggests the repetitive familiarity of this conflict, one that paradoxically seems all the more difficult or poignant because it's both repetitive (each person goes through this again and again) and familiar (all of us go through this); *then* alerts us to the temporariness of the comfort head offers heart, preparing us for the *But* in the next line.

Again and *then* also reverberate in us and with each other because they **rhyme**, just as *head*, *heart*, and *help* **alliterate**. These words share a special aural, as well

as spatial and visual, relationship to each other. Though prose writers certainly make their appeal to us in part through sound, poetry remains, as it has been for thousands of years, a more insistently aural form—one that appeals through aural patterning to what Davis here humorously, but not wrongly, calls "the ears of heart" (line 6). As poet Mary Oliver puts it, "To make a poem, we must make sounds. Not random sounds, but chosen sounds."

But are there qualities essential to poetry that "Head, Heart" lacks? Is it, for example, sufficiently aural in its appeal? Does it have genuine rhythm? Perhaps so, perhaps not. As you work your way through the rest of the chapters in this section and read more poems, we encourage you to keep thinking critically about our definitions in order to hone your own sense of just what poetry is, how it works, and what it does.

POETIC SUBGENRES AND KINDS

All poems share some common elements, use some of the same techniques, and thus require us to ask some of the same questions. Later in this chapter, we'll outline some of the steps you can follow and some of the questions you can pose as you read, respond to, and write about any poem. But different sorts of poems also work by slightly different rules and thus invite somewhat different responses and questions.

Poems may be classified into subgenres based on various characteristics, including their length, appearance, and formal features (patterns of rhyme and rhythm, for example); their subject; or even the type of **situation** and **setting** (time and place) they depict. (A **sonnet**, for example, has fourteen lines. Defined broadly, an **elegy** is simply any poem about death.) A single poem might well represent multiple subgenres or at least might contain elements of more than one. (One could write an elegy that is also a sonnet, for instance.)

Since Aristotle's time, however, readers and writers have also often divided poems into three broad categories or subgenres—**narrative**, **dramatic**, or **lyric**—based upon their mode of presentation. Put simply, poems that have a plot are either narrative poems (if they feature a narrator) or dramatic poems (if they don't), and many poems that lack a plot are lyrics. The rest of this section describes each of these subgenres in more detail, starting with the one that most resembles fiction and ending with the dramatic monologue, a sort of hybrid that combines features of both dramatic and lyric poetry.

As the dramatic monologue demonstrates, the borders between narrative, dramatic, and lyric poetry are fuzzy, contestable, and shifting. Some poems will cross those borders; others will resist these categories altogether. And the very definition of lyric poetry has not only changed over time, but also remains contested today. The ultimate goal isn't to definitively pigeonhole every poem but rather to develop a language through which to recognize, describe, and explore different poetic modes. Knowing which mode dominates in a particular poem can help ensure that we privilege the right questions as we read and write about it. Learning the conventions of particular subgenres and kinds allows us to better adjust to individual poems, to compare them to each other, and to appreciate how each creatively uses and reworks generic conventions.

Narrative Poetry

Like a work of prose fiction, a narrative poem tells a story; in other words, it has a plot related by a narrator, though its plot might be based on actual rather than made-up events. Comprising the same elements discussed in the Fiction section of this book, a narrative poem encourages us to ask the same questions—about character, plot, narration, and so on—that we do when reading a short story or novel. (See "Questions about the Elements of Fiction" in "Fiction: Reading, Responding, Writing.")

In centuries past, narrative poetry was a—even *the*—dominant subgenre of poetry. As a result, there are many different kinds of narrative poems, including book-length **epics** like Homer's *Iliad;* chivalric **romances** like Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur;* grisly murder **ballads**, often rooted in actual events; and a range of harder-to-classify works of varying lengths such as the relatively short example below.

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON
Richard Cory

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

5 And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
10 And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine,[1] we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
15 And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

1897

- How does the poem characterize Richard Cory? What is the effect of the first-personal plural narration?
- What details in the poem's first three stanzas might make its final stanza simultaneously surprising, ironic, and predictable?

1. In conclusion, in sum.

Dramatic Poetry

For centuries, plays were written exclusively or mainly in verse; as a result, drama itself was understood not as a genre in its own right (as we think of it today) but rather as a subgenre of poetry. "Dramatic poetry" thus meant and still can mean actual plays in verse (or *verse drama*). But any poem that consists wholly of dialogue among characters, unmediated by a narrator, counts as a dramatic poem. And we might even apply that label to poems like the following in which narration is kept to the barest minimum. Indeed, this narrator's only words are "said she," and since every other word in the poem is spoken by one female character to another, the poem essentially reads like a scene from a play. Notice, though, that the poem also depends on techniques of formal organization and patterning unique to poetry: In each of the poem's six stanzas, for example, one woman speaks the first lines, while her companion gets the last line (or two).

THOMAS HARDY
The Ruined Maid

"O 'Melia,[2] my dear, this does everything crown!
Who could have supposed I should meet you in Town?
And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?"—
"O didn't you know I'd been ruined?" said she.

5 —"You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks;[3]
And now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!"—
"Yes: that's how we dress when we're ruined," said she.

—"At home in the barton[4] you said 'thee' and 'thou,'
10 And 'thik oon,' and 'theäs oon,' and 't'other'; but now
Your talking quite fits 'ee for high compa-ny!"—
"Some polish is gained with one's ruin," said she.

—"Your hands were like paws then, your face blue and bleak
But now I'm bewitched by your delicate cheek,
15 And your little gloves fit as on any la-dy!"—
"We never do work when we're ruined," said she.

—"You used to call home-life a hag-ridden dream,
And you'd sigh, and you'd sock;[5] but at present you seem
To know not of megrims[6] or melancho-ly!"—
20 "True. One's pretty lively when ruined," said she.

—"I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,
And a delicate face, and could strut about Town!"—

2. Short for Amelia. 3. Spading up weeds. 4. Farmyard. 5. Sigh (English dialect).
6. Migraine headaches.

"My dear—a raw country girl, such as you be,
Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined," said she.

1866

When we read and write about dramatic poems, we can usefully bring to bear the same questions we do in reading drama. (See "Questions to Ask When Reading a Play" in "Drama: Reading, Responding, Writing.") But when it comes to short poems like THE RUINED MAID, questions about sets, staging, and even plot will usually be much less relevant than those related to character and conflict, as well as setting, tone, language, symbol, and theme. In Hardy's poem, for example, how are each of the two speakers characterized by *how* they speak, as well as *what* they say? How is our view of them, and especially of 'Melia, "the ruined maid," affected by the formal pattern mentioned earlier, which ensures (among other things) that she gets the last line? How might this pattern, along with rhythm and rhyme, also add **irony** to the poem?

Lyric Poetry

For good historical reasons, lyric poems probably best fulfill your expectations of what poetry should be like. Yet lyric poetry has been and still is defined in myriad ways. The word *lyric* derives from the ancient Greeks, for whom it designated a short poem chanted or sung by a single singer to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument called a lyre (hence, the word *lyric* and the fact that we today also use the word *lyrics* to denote the words of any song). Scholars believe that the earliest "lyrics" in the Greek sense were likely associated with religious occasions and feelings, especially those related to celebration, praise, and mourning. Ever since, the lyric has been associated with brevity, musicality, a single speaker, and the expression of intense feeling. Not surprisingly, at least a few specific kinds of lyric, including the **ode** and the elegy, originated in the ancient world.

Over the centuries, the lyric's boundaries have expanded and become less clear. Few lyrics are intended to be sung at all, much less to a lyre. But everyone agrees that relatively short poems that focus primarily on the feelings, impressions, and thoughts—that is, on the subjective, inward experience—of a single first-person speaker are lyrics.

Below are two examples very different from each other in subject matter and tone. Yet with these, as with all lyrics, our initial questions in both reading and writing will likely focus on each speaker's situation and inward experience of it. What is each speaker experiencing, feeling, and thinking, and how exactly does the poem make that state of mood and mind at once vivid and relevant to us?

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH
[I wandered lonely as a cloud]

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;

5 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
10 Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
15 A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
20 In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

1807

- **According to the speaker, what is "the bliss of solitude" (line 22)? Why and how does "solitude" become less "lonely" for him (line 1)?**
- **What about the relationship between human beings and nature might be implied by the speaker's description of his particular experience?**

FRANK O'HARA

Poem

Lana Turner[7] has collapsed!
I was trotting along and suddenly
it started raining and snowing
and you said it was hailing
5 but hailing hits you on the head
hard so it was really snowing and
raining and I was in such a hurry
to meet you but the traffic
was acting exactly like the sky
10 and suddenly I see a headline
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties
15 and acted perfectly disgraceful

7. American actress (1921–95); in 1958, Turner's lover was stabbed to death by her daughter, who was determined to have acted in self-defense.

but I never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up

1962

- What or whom exactly does this poem seem to make fun of? Does the poem also convey more serious sentiments?
- What current celebrity seems to you like the best potential substitute for Lana Turner? What about both this celebrity's public persona and the poem itself make your choice seem especially appropriate?

What makes these lyrics different from narrative and dramatic poems? Though both include action ("wander[ing]," "trotting," and so on), that action doesn't quite add up to a plot; what we have might be better described as a situation, scene, or incident. Similarly, though the poems vividly describe external things, from "golden daffodils" to "traffic," greater emphasis ultimately falls on how the "I" experiences and feels about them—the internal, subjective experience or state of mind and mood that those outward things inspire or reflect. Both poems thus encourage us to focus almost exclusively on the complex emotional experience and thoughts of a particular speaker in a specific situation, but ones that we can, if the poem is effective, ultimately understand as having a much wider, sometimes even universal, resonance and relevance.

Most lyrics require us to infer a general theme from a specific experience, but some offer more explicit reflection, commentary, even argument. As you read the following example, notice what happens in line 5 (exactly halfway through the poem), as the speaker turns from personal statements to more impersonal, argumentative ones. How does personal reflection relate to, even enable, argument here?

PHILLIS WHEATLEY
On Being Brought from Africa to America

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
5 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,[8]
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

1773

- What do the poem's first four lines imply about how the speaker feels about "being brought from Africa to America" and about what motivates these feelings?
- What two "view[s]" of Africans are contrasted in the last four lines (line 5)? According to the entire poem, which is the right view, and why and how so?

8. One of Adam's sons, who killed his brother Abel. (See Gen. 4.)

Descriptive or Observational Lyrics

As Wheatley's poem demonstrates, lyrics come in many varieties. Quite a few are more exclusively descriptive or observational than the examples above, insofar as they describe something or someone to us without bringing much attention to the speaker's personal state of mind or feelings. As we've noted, after all, some poems simply give us the opportunity to look more closely and carefully at something in the world around us. Nineteenth-century poet Percy Bysshe Shelley suggested, in fact, that all poetry's major purpose is just that—helping us see in a new way. Poetry, he said, "strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare [its] naked and sleeping beauty" and "wonder." Over a century later, American poet James Dickey expressed a similar idea somewhat differently when he defined a poet as "someone who notices and is enormously taken by things that somebody else would walk by."

Obviously, any descriptive poem inevitably reflects its speaker's point of view. Yet lyrics of this type invite us to focus more on what they describe than on the subjective, internal experience or feelings of the speaker doing the describing. As a result, our focus in reading and writing will probably be how the poem characterizes, and encourages us to see, think, and feel about, whatever it describes—whether a moment, a person, an object, or a phenomenon. What is described in each of the poems that follow? What figures of speech are used, and with what implications and effects?

EMILY DICKINSON
[The Sky is low—the Clouds are mean]

The Sky is low—the Clouds are mean.
A Travelling Flake of Snow
Across a Barn or through a Rut
Debates if it will go—
5 A Narrow Wind complains all Day
How some one treated him
Nature, like Us, is sometimes caught
Without her Diadem—

1866

- Whom does the speaker seem to mean by "Us," and what might this poem imply about the similarity between "Nature" and "Us" (line 7)?

BILLY COLLINS
Divorce

Once, two spoons in bed,
now tined forks

across a granite table
and the knives they have hired.

2008

- This poem consists almost entirely of **metaphor** (implied comparison). What is compared to what here? How would you describe the poem's **tone**? (Is it funny, sad, bitter, or some combination of these?) Why and how so?

The Dramatic Monologue

Finally, we come to the **dramatic monologue**, a subgenre of poem that—by residing somewhere in between lyric and dramatic poetry—can teach us more about both. Robert Browning, the nineteenth-century British poet often credited with inventing this kind of poem, tellingly labeled his own works "dramatic lyrics," describing them as "dramatic in principle," "lyric in expression." On the one hand, the dramatic monologue is "lyric in expression" or like a lyric poem because it features a single speaker who discusses him- or herself. On the other hand, it is "dramatic in principle" or resembles a scene from a play for at least two reasons. First, the poem's primary focus is characterization, an obviously fictional or historical speaker's often unintentional revelation of his or her personality, outlook, and values. Such poems tend to offer us a window into an entire, complex psychology and even life history rather than simply one experience or feeling of a speaker we otherwise discover little about (as in lyrics). Often, too, dramatic monologues invite us to see their speakers and situations somewhat differently than the speakers themselves do, much as does fiction narrated by *unreliable narrators.* Second, the speaker of a dramatic monologue often addresses one or more silent **auditors** whose identity we can only infer from the speaker's words *to* them. The questions we pose in reading and writing about such poems thus often center on character and characterization and on the gap between our perception of the speaker and his or her situation, on the one hand, and the speaker's own self-representation, on the other.

Invented in the nineteenth century, this subgenre remains as popular with contemporary songwriters as with contemporary poets. Bruce Springsteen's albums *Nebraska* (1982) and *The Rising* (2002), for instance, consist mainly of dramatic monologues. Below, you will find the lyrics to one of these, followed by a poem that takes the form of an imaginary letter, thus putting an interesting twist on the conventions regarding "speakers" and "auditors."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN
Nebraska

I saw her standin' on her front lawn
   just twirlin' her baton
Me and her went for a ride, sir, and ten
   innocent people died

5 From the town of Lincoln, Nebraska,
   with a sawed-off .410 on my lap
Through the badlands of Wyoming I
   killed everything in my path

I can't say that I'm sorry for the things
10 that we done

At least for a little while, sir, me and
her we had us some fun

The jury brought in a guilty verdict and
the judge he sentenced me to death
15 Midnight in a prison storeroom with
leather straps across my chest

Sheriff, when the man pulls that
switch, sir, and snaps my poor head back
You make sure my pretty baby is sittin'
20 right there on my lap

They declared me unfit to live, said into
that great void my soul'd be hurled
They wanted to know why I did what I did
Well, sir, I guess there's just a meanness in this world[9]
1982

- **What different motives and explanations for the speaker's actions might NEBRASKA provide by means of what he says, how he speaks, and how his speech is rendered on the page? Might the song as a whole offer explanations that the speaker doesn't offer, at least consciously or directly?**

ROBERT HAYDEN
A Letter from Phillis Wheatley

(London, 1773)

Dear Obour[1]
Our crossing was without
event. I could not help, at times,
reflecting on that first—my Destined—
5 voyage long ago (I yet
have some remembrance of its Horrors)[2]
and marvelling at God's Ways.
Last evening, her Ladyship[3] presented me
to her illustrious Friends.
10 I scarce could tell them anything
of Africa, though much of Boston
and my hope of Heaven. I read
my latest Elegies to them.
"O Sable Muse!" the Countess cried,

9. Allusion to words spoken by a murderer in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (par. 134).
1. Obour Tanner, a Rhode Island slave and Wheatley's intimate friend and frequent correspondent.
2. Born in Africa c. 1753–54, Wheatley was taken at around age eight on the slave ship *Phillis* to America, where she was purchased by Boston merchant John Wheatley. In 1773, John Wheatley sent her to London with his son, Nathaniel, a visit at least partly motivated by concerns about her health.
3. Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon (1707–91), helped arrange publication of Wheatley's first book of poems, which appeared in London just months after the poet's return to the United States.

15 embracing me, when I had done.
I held back tears, as is my wont,
and there were tears in Dear
Nathaniel's eyes.
    At supper—I dined apart
20 like captive Royalty—
the Countess and her Guests promised
signatures affirming me
True Poetess, albeit once a slave.[4]
Indeed, they were most kind, and spoke,
25 moreover, of presenting me
at Court (I thought of Pocahontas)[5]—
an Honor, to be sure, but one,
I should, no doubt, as Patriot decline.
    My health is much improved;
30 I feel I may, if God so Wills,
entirely recover here.
Idyllic England! Alas, there is
no Eden without its Serpent. Beneath
chiming Complaisance I hear him hiss;
35 I see his flickering tongue
when foppish would-be Wits
murmur of the Yankee Pedlar
and his Cannibal Mockingbird.
    Sister, forgive th'intrusion of
40 my Sombreness—Nocturnal Mood
I would not share with any save
your trusted Self. Let me disperse,
in closing, such unseemly Gloom
by mention of an Incident
45 you may, as I, consider Droll:
Today, a little Chimney Sweep,
his face and hands with soot quite Black,
staring hard at me, politely asked:
"Does you, M'lady, sweep chimneys too?"
50 I was amused, but Dear Nathaniel
(ever Solicitous) was not.
    I pray the Blessings of Our Lord
    and Saviour Jesus Christ
    will Abundantly be yours.
55   Phillis

1977

4. Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) was prefaced by a letter, signed by seventeen eminent Bostonians, attesting to the poems' authenticity.
5. Daughter of an Algonquian Indian chief (c. 1595–1617), Pocahontas famously befriended Virginia's first English colonists, led by Captain John Smith; she died while visiting England, where she had been presented at the court of King James I.

- What internal and external conflicts seem to be revealed here? What conflict does Wheatley herself seem aware of? Why might Hayden have chosen both this particular moment in Wheatley's life and this particular addressee (Obour Tanner)?
- How does Hayden's portrayal of both Wheatley's feelings and others' views of her compare to Wheatley's own characterization of these in ON BEING BROUGHT FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA?

RESPONDING TO POETRY

Not all poems are as readily accessible as those in this chapter, and even those that are take on additional meanings if we approach them systematically, bringing to bear specific reading habits and skills and some knowledge of poetic genres and traditions. Experience will give you a sense of what to expect, but knowing what to expect isn't everything. As a reader of poetry, you should always be open—to new experiences, new feelings, new ideas, new forms of expression. Every poem is a potential new experience, and you will often discover something new with every re-reading.

Steps to Follow, Questions to Ask, and Sample Reading Notes

No one can give you a method that will offer you total experience of all poems. But because individual poems share characteristics with other poems, taking certain steps can prompt you both to ask the right questions and to devise compelling answers. If you are relatively new to poetry, encounter a poem that seems especially difficult, or plan to write about a poem, you may need to tackle these steps one at a time, pausing to write even as you read and respond. With further experience, you will often find that you can skip steps or run through them quickly and almost automatically, though your experience and understanding of any poem will be enriched if you slow down and take your time.

Try the first step on your own, then we will both detail and demonstrate the others.

1. **Listen to a poem first.** When you encounter a new poem, try reading it through once without thinking too much about what it means. Try to simply listen to the poem, even if you read silently, and much as you might a song on the radio. Or better yet, read it aloud. Doing so will help you hear the poem's sound qualities, get a clearer impression of its **tone**, and start making sense of its **syntax**, the way words combine into sentences.

APHRA BEHN
On Her Loving Two Equally

I

How strongly does my passion flow,
Divided equally twixt[6] two?
Damon had ne'er subdued my heart

6. Between.

Had not Alexis took his part;
5 Nor could Alexis powerful prove,
Without my Damon's aid, to gain my love.

II

When my Alexis present is,
Then I for Damon sigh and mourn;
But when Alexis I do miss,
10 Damon gains nothing but my scorn.
But if it chance they both are by,
For both alike I languish, sigh, and die.

III

Cure then, thou mighty wingèd god,[7]
This restless fever in my blood:
15 One golden-pointed dart take back:
But which, O Cupid, wilt thou take?
If Damon's, all my hopes are crossed;
Or that of my Alexis, I am lost.

1684

Now that you've read Behn's poem, read through the remaining steps and see how one reader used them as a guide for responding. Later, return to these steps as you read and respond to other poems.

2. **Articulate your expectations, starting with the title.** Poets often try to surprise readers, but you can appreciate such surprises only if you first define your expectations. As you read a poem, take note of what you expect and where, when, and how the poem fulfills, or perhaps frustrates, your expectations.

   The title of Aphra Behn's "On Her Loving Two Equally" makes me think the poem will be about a woman. But can someone really "love two equally"? Maybe this is the question the poem will ask. If so, I expect its answer to be "no" because I don't think this is possible. If so, maybe the title is a sort of pun—"On Her Loving *Too* Equally."

3. **Read the syntax literally.** What the sentences literally say is only a starting point, but it is vital. You cannot begin to explore what a poem means unless you first know what it says. Though poets arrange words into lines and stanzas, they usually write in complete sentences, just as writers in other genres do. At the same time and partly in order to create the sort of aural and visual patterns discussed earlier in this chapter, poets make much more frequent use of **inversion** (a change in normal word order or syntax). To ensure you don't misread, first "translate" the poem rather than fixing on certain words and free-associating or leaping to conclusions. To translate accurately, especially with poems written before the twentieth

7. Cupid, who, according to myth, shot darts of lead and of gold at the hearts of lovers, corresponding to false love and true love, respectively.

century, you may need to break this step down into the following smaller steps:

a. *Identify sentences.* For now, ignore the line breaks and look for sentences or independent clauses (word groups that can function as complete sentences). These will typically be preceded and followed by a period (.), a semicolon (;), a colon (:), or a dash (—).

The eighteen lines of Behn's poem can be broken down into nine sentences.

1. How strongly does my passion flow, Divided equally twixt two?
2. Damon had ne'er subdued my heart, Had not Alexis took his part;
3. Nor could Alexis powerful prove, Without my Damon's aid, to gain my love.
4. When my Alexis present is, Then I for Damon sigh and mourn;
5. But when Alexis I do miss, Damon gains nothing but my scorn.
6. But if it chance they both are by, For both alike I languish, sigh, and die.
7. Cure then, thou mighty wingèd god, This restless fever in my blood;
8. One golden-pointed dart take back: But which, O Cupid, wilt thou take?
9. If Damon's, all my hopes are crossed; Or that of my Alexis, I am lost.

b. *Reorder sentences.* Identify the main elements—subject(s), verb(s), object(s)—of each sentence or independent clause, and if necessary rearrange them in normative word order. (In English, this order tends to be subject-verb-object except in the case of a question; in either case, dependent clauses come at the beginning or end of the main clause and next to whatever element they modify.)

c. *Replace each pronoun with the antecedent noun it replaces;* if the antecedent is ambiguous, indicate all the possibilities.

In the following sentences, the reordered words appear in italics, nouns substituted for pronouns appear in parentheses:

1. How strong does my passion flow, Divided equally twixt two?
2. Damon had ne'er subdued my heart Had not Alexis took (Alexis's or Damon's) part;
3. Nor could Alexis prove powerful *to gain my love Without my Damon's aid.*
4. When my Alexis *is* present, Then I *sigh and mourn* for Damon;
5. But when I do *miss* Alexis, Damon gains nothing but my scorn.
6. But if it chance both (Damon and Alexis) are by, *I languish, sigh, and die* For both (Damon and Alexis) alike.
7. *thou mighty wingèd god*, Cure then This restless fever in my blood;
8. *take back* One golden-pointed dart: But which wilt thou take, *O Cupid?*
9. *If Damon's*, all my hopes are crossed; Or that (dart) of my Alexis, I am lost.

d. *Translate sentences into modern prose.* Use a dictionary to define unfamiliar or ambiguous words or words that seem to be used in an unfamiliar or unexpected way. Add any implied words necessary to link the parts of a sentence to each other and one sentence logically to the next. At

this stage, don't move to outright paraphrase; instead, stick closely to the original.

Below, added words appear in brackets, substituted definitions in parentheses:

1. How strongly does my passion flow [when it is] divided equally between two [people]?
2. Damon would never have (*conquered* or *tamed*) my heart if Alexis had not taken (Damon or Alexis's) (*portion*) [of my heart].
3. Nor could Alexis [have] prove[n] powerful [enough] to gain my love without my Damon's aid.
4. When my Alexis is present, then I sigh and mourn for Damon;
5. But when I miss Alexis, Damon doesn't gain anything (except) my scorn.
6. But if it (*so happens*) that both (Damon and Alexis) are [near]by [me], I languish, sigh, and die for both (Damon and Alexis) alike.
7. [Cupid], (you) mighty god (*with wings*), cure then this restless fever in my blood;
8. Take back one [of your two] darts [with] pointed gold [tips]: But which [of these darts] will you take, O Cupid?
9. If [on the one hand, you take away] Damon's [dart], all my hopes are (*opposed, invalidated, spoiled*); Or [if, on the other hand, you take away] Alexis's [arrow], I am (*desperate, ruined, destroyed; no longer claimed or possessed by anyone; helpless or unable to find my way*).

e. ***Note any ambiguities in the original language that you might have ignored in your translation.*** **For example, look for modifiers that might modify more than one thing; verbs that might have multiple subjects or objects; words that have multiple relevant meanings.**

In the second sentence, "his" could refer either to Damon or Alexis since both names appear in the first part of this sentence; in other words, this could say either "Alexis took Damon's part" or "Alexis took his own part." But what about the word *part*? I translated this as *portion*, and I assumed it referred back to "heart," partly because the two words come at the ends of lines 3 ("heart") and 4 ("part") and also rhyme. But two other definitions of *part* might make sense here: "the role of a character in a play" or "one's . . . allotted task (as in an action)," and "one of the opposing sides in a conflict or dispute," which in this case could be the "conflict" over the speaker's love. On the one hand, then, I could translate this either "Alexis took his own portion of my heart"; "Alexis played his own role in my life or in this three-way courtship drama"; or "Alexis defended his own side in the battle for my love." On the other hand, I could translate it as "Alexis took Damon's part of my heart"; "Alexis played Damon's role"; or even "Alexis defended Damon's side in the battle for my love."

4. **Consult reference works.** **In addition to using a dictionary to define unfamiliar or ambiguous words, look up anything else to which the poem refers that you either don't understand or that you suspect might be ambiguous: a place, a person, a myth, a quotation, an idea, etc.**

According to *Britannica.com*, Cupid was the "ancient Roman god of love" and "often appeared as a winged infant carrying a bow and a quiver of arrows whose wounds inspired love or passion in his every victim." It makes sense, then, that the speaker of this poem would think that she might stop loving one of these men if Cupid took back the arrow that made her love him. But the poem wasn't written in ancient Rome (it's dated 1684), so is the speaker just kidding or being deliberately "poetic" when she calls on Cupid? And what about the names "Damon" and "Alexis"? Were those common in the seventeenth century? Maybe so, if a poet could be named "Aphra Behn."

5. **Figure out who, where, when, and what happens.** Once you have gotten a sense of the literal meaning of each sentence, ask the following very general factual questions about the whole poem. Remember that not all of the questions will suit every poem. (Which questions apply will depend in part on whether the poem is narrative, dramatic, or lyric.) At this point, stick to the facts. What do you know for sure?

Who?
- Who is, or who are, the poem's **speaker(s)**?
- Who is, or who are, the **auditor(s)**, if any?
- Who are the other **characters**, if any, that appear in the poem?

The title suggests that the speaker is a woman who loves two people. In the poem, she identifies these as two men—Damon and Alexis. The speaker doesn't seem to address anyone in particular (certainly not the two men she talks about) except in the third stanza, when she addresses Cupid—first through the **epithet** "mighty wingèd god" (line 13) and then by name (line 16). (Because Cupid isn't present, this is an **apostrophe**.)

Where? When?
- Where is the speaker?
- Where and when do any actions described in the poem take place? That is, what is the poem's **setting**?

No place or time is specified in Behn's poem. The poem is dated 1684, and the antiquated diction ("twixt," line 2; "wilt," line 16) seems appropriate to that time. But nothing in the poem makes the situation or feelings it describes specific to a time or place. The speaker doesn't say things like "Last Thursday, when Damon and I were hanging out in the garden . . . ," for example. She seems to describe situations that keep happening repeatedly rather than specific incidents.

What?
- What is the **situation** described in the poem?
- What, if anything, literally happens over the course of it, or what **action**, if any, does it describe?
- Or, if the poem doesn't have a **plot**, then how would you describe its internal structure? Even when a poem seems less interested in telling a story than in simply capturing a feeling or describing something or someone, you can still usually read in it some kind of progression or development or

even an argument. When and how does the subject matter or focus or address shift over the course of the poem?

The basic situation is that the speaker loves two men equally. In the second stanza she describes recurring situations—being with one of the men and not the other or being with both of them at once—and the feelings that result. Then, in the third stanza, she imagines what would happen if she stopped loving one of them. The topic or subject essentially remains the same throughout, but there are two subtle shifts. First is the shift from addressing anyone in stanzas one and two to addressing Cupid in stanza three. Second, there are shifts in verb tense and time: The first stanza floats among various tenses ("does," line 1; "took," line 4), the second sticks to the present tense ("is," "sigh," "mourn," etc.), and the third shifts to future ("wilt," line 16). As a result, I would say that the poem has two parts: in one, the speaker characterizes her situation in the present and recent past; in the other she explores a possible alternative future (that she ends up not liking any better).

6. **Formulate tentative answers to the questions, *Why does it matter*? *What does it all mean*?**

- **Why should the poem matter to anyone other than the poet, or what might the poem show and say to readers?**
- **What problems, issues, questions, or conflicts does the poem explore that might be relevant to people other than the speaker(s) or the poet—to humanity in general, to the poet's contemporaries, to people of a certain type or in a certain situation, and so forth?**
- **How is each problem or conflict developed and resolved over the course of the poem, or how is each question answered? What conclusions does the poem seem to reach about these, or what are its themes?**

The title and first two lines pose a question: How strong is our love if we love two people instead of one? We tend to assume that anything that is "divided" is less strong than something unified. The use of the word *flow* in the first line reinforces that assumption because it implicitly compares love to something that flows: A river, for example, "flows," and when a river divides into two streams, each is smaller and its flow less strong than the river's. So the way the speaker articulates the question implies an answer: Love, like a river, isn't strong and sure when divided.

But the rest of the poem undermines that answer. In the first stanza, the speaker points out that each lover and his love has "aided" and added to the "power" of the other: Neither man would have "gain[ed her] love" if the other hadn't. The second stanza gives a more concrete sense of why: Since we tend to yearn for what we don't have at the moment, being with one of these men makes her miss the other one. But if both men are present, she feels the same about both and perhaps even feels *more* complete and satisfied.

As if realizing she can't solve the problem herself, she turns in the third stanza to Cupid and asks him to help by taking away her love for either Damon or Alexis. As soon as she asks for this, though, she indicates that the result would be unhappiness. In the end, the poem seems to say (or its theme is) that love *doesn't* flow or work like a river because love can actually be stronger

when we love more than one person, as if it's multiplied instead of lessened by division.

Clearly, this is the opposite of what I expected, which was that the poem would ask whether it was possible to love two people and conclude it wasn't. The conflict is also different than I expected—though there's an external conflict between the two men (maybe), the focus is on the speaker's internal conflict, but that conflict isn't over which guy to choose but about how this is actually working (*I love both of them equally; each love reinforces the other*) versus how she thinks things *should* work (*I'm not supposed to love two equally*).

7. **Consider how the poem's form contributes to its effect and meaning.**

- How is the poem organized on the page, into lines and/or stanzas, for example? (What are the lines and stanzas like in terms of length, shape, and so on? Are they all alike, or do they vary? Are lines **enjambed** or **end-stopped**?)
- What are the poem's other formal features? (Is there **rhyme** or another form of aural patterning such as **alliteration**? What is the poem's base **meter**, and are there interesting variations? If not, how else might you describe the poem's rhythm?)
- How do the poem's overall form and its various formal features contribute to its meaning and effect? In other words, what gets lost when you translate the poem into modern prose?

The stanza organization underscores shifts in the speaker's approach to her situation. But organization reinforces meaning in other ways as well. On the one hand, the division into three stanzas and the choice to number them, plus the fact that each stanza has three sentences, mirror the three-way struggle or "love triangle" described in the poem. On the other hand because the poem has 18 *lines* and 9 *sentences*, every sentence is "divided equally twixt two" *lines*. Sound and especially rhyme reinforce this pattern since the two lines that make up one sentence usually rhyme with each other (to form a **couplet**). The only lines that aren't couplets are those that begin the second stanza, where we instead have alternating rhyme—*is* (line 7) rhymes with *miss* (line 9), *mourn* (line 8) rhymes with *scorn* (line 10). But these lines describe how the speaker "miss[es]" one man when the other is "by," a sensation she arguably reproduces in readers by ensuring that we twice "miss" the rhyme that the rest of the poem leads us to expect.

8. **Investigate and consider the ways the poem both uses and departs from poetic conventions, especially those related to form and subgenre.** Does the poem use a traditional verse form (such as **blank verse**) or a traditional stanza form (such as **ballad stanza**)? Is it a specific subgenre or kind of poem—a **sonnet**, an **ode**, a **ballad**, for example? If so, how does that affect its meaning? Over time, stanza and verse forms have been used in certain ways and to certain ends, and particular subgenres have observed certain conventions. As a result, they generate particular expectations for readers familiar with such traditions, and poems gain additional meaning by both fulfilling and defying those expectations. For example, **anapestic**

meter (two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one, as in *Tennessee*) is usually used for comic poems, so when poets use it in a serious poem they are probably making a point.

9. **Argue.** Discussion with others—both out loud and in writing—usually results in clarification and keeps you from being too dependent on personal biases and preoccupations that sometimes mislead even the best readers. Discussing a poem with someone else (especially someone who thinks very differently) or sharing what you've written about the poem can expand your perspective and enrich your experience.

WRITING ABOUT POETRY

If you follow the steps outlined above and keep notes on your personal responses to the poems you read, you will have already begun writing informally. You have also generated ideas and material you can use in more formal writing. To demonstrate how, we conclude this chapter with two examples of such writing. Both grow out of the notes earlier in this chapter. Yet each is quite different in form and content. The first example is a relatively informal response paper that investigates the allusions in Aphra Behn's ON HER LOVING TWO EQUALLY, following up on the discoveries and questions generated by consulting reference works (as in step 4 above). The second example is an essay on the poem that defends and develops as a thesis one answer to the questions, Why does it matter? What does it all mean? (as in step 6 above) by drawing on discoveries made in earlier and later steps.

As these examples illustrate, there are many different ways to write about poems, just as there are many different things to say about any one. But all such writing begins with a clear sense of the poem itself and your responses to it. Effective writing also depends on a willingness to listen carefully to the poem and to ask genuine questions about how it works, what it says and means, and how it both fulfills and challenges your expectations about life, as well as poetry.

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From bardic chronicles to imaginary letters, brief introspective lyrics to action-packed epics, "poetry" comes in many sizes, shapes, and varieties; serves myriad purposes for many diverse audiences; and offers pleasures and rewards both like and unlike those we get from fiction, drama, music, or any other art form. In part, though, that's because poetry is something of a trickster and a trespasser, crossing in and out of those other generic domains and trying on their clothes, even as it inhabits and wears very special ones all its own. Poetry speaks to head, as well as heart; ears, as well as eyes. If you keep yours open, it just might speak to you in ways you never expected.