Chapter 4: Experiencing the Power of Poetry

# Analyzing Poetry

Our exploration of literary genres brings us first to poetry, with good reason: Because many people are intimidated by poetry, especially “old” poetry, facing our fears is the first step toward prowess and confidence as scholars and writers. Furthermore, this brave plunge into poetry comes with a bonus: Once we manage to “open up” a poem, we can experience its power and beauty, as well as its insights into human life. We begin with John Keats’s 1819 “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape 5

Of deities or mortals, or of both,

In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

What men or gods are these? what maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? 10

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave 15

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! 20

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed

Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

And, happy melodist, unwearied,

For ever piping songs for ever new;

More happy love! more happy, happy love! 25

For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,

For ever panting, and for ever young;

All breathing human passion far above,

That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,

A burning forehead, and a parching tongue. 30

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

What little town by river or sea shore, 35

Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e’er return. 40

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold pastoral! 45

When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,

‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. 50

(1819)

Upon a first reading of this British Romantic poem, not only does the language elude us, but even much of the imagery may be unfamiliar. If we have ever seen an urn, it probably contained the ashes of a relative and was likely not decorated with scenes like those described in the poem. So how do we conquer our fears and dive in to unravel the poem’s meaning?

Here are some pointers for getting started:

1. Read full sentences (if they exist in the poem) without stopping at the end of the line.
2. Look up words you do not know and write their definitions on the page.
3. Note recurring ideas or images—color code these with highlighters for visual recognition as you look at the poem on the page.
4. Determine formal patterns. Is there a regular rhythm? How would you describe it? Can it be characterized by the number of syllables in each line? If not, do you note a certain number of beats (moments where your voice emphasizes the sound) in the line? Are there rhyming sounds? Where do they occur?
5. What is the overarching effect of all these elements taken together? What do you think is the message conveyed by the poem?

Here is a copy of the poem after first year composition student Judy Smith reviewed it carefully and annotated it with notes and highlights:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Ode: a poem paying tribute to someone or something  Sylvan: associated with the woods  Tempe: a valley in Greece where Apollo and the Muses could often be found  Blue: positive words suggesting youth, spring, happiness  Beauty and truth are the same things; how so? This is the urn’s final message to humanity.  The urn will outlast the poet. | Ode on a Grecian Urn  Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,  Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,  Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape  Of deities or mortals, or of both,  In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?  What men or gods are these? what maidens loth?  What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?  Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,  Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:  Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;  She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!  Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;  And, happy melodist, unwearied,  For ever piping songs for ever new;  More happy love! more happy, happy love!  For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,  For ever panting, and for ever young;  All breathing human passion far above,  That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,  A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.  Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  What little town by river or sea shore,  Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?  And, little town, thy streets for evermore  Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.  O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  With forest branches and the trodden weed;  Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  As doth eternity: Cold pastoral!  When old age shall this generation waste,  Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,  ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’—that is all  Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. | Urn: a decorative vase  Unravish’d: uninitiated, sexually?  Arcadia: Beautiful and wild region of Greece; home of Pan  Yellow: negative words and  phrases—about frustrated desires  Green: consider the urn is like thinking about eternity  Cloyed: sick with excess sweetness  Google search—  refers to Attica,  region where Athens, Greece is located  Brede: embroidery |

Considering the poem’s meaning in light of her annotations, Judy makes a few additional observations in her notes:

1. The rhythm of each line includes ten syllables, with the accent on the second syllable of each pair.
2. The rhymes are almost regular: The first stanza end-sounds follow the pattern of A, B, A, B, C, D, E, C, E, D. The next stanza is close, but varies a bit: A, B, A, B, C, D, E, C, D, E. Stanzas three and four follow the same pattern as two, but the final stanza reflects the switched sounds of the final two lines that we saw in stanza one. So the poem is very formal, generally, but it does feature this one odd shift. Why?
3. The positive and negative words and phrases seem to pull against each other. In some ways it might be terrible to be “stuck” in time—the youth wants to kiss his lover, but he’ll never be able to. The figures on the urn can’t leave to go on with their lives. But the urn’s creator has captured a moment where everything is ripe— the tree is full and green and will never lose its leaves. Maybe the feeling of desire the youth feels for the girl is even better than the actual kiss will be.
4. In the second stanza, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard” seems to mean that we can’t hear the “heard melodies.” I can’t make sense of that. But if I read the whole sentence, including a bit of the stanza’s second line, it starts to make sense: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / are sweeter.” So the melody played by the urn’s pipers is sweeter than if we could actually hear it! Not sure why yet, but it’s an interesting claim.
5. The urn won’t change like the real world will—is this a good thing or not? The speaker says the urn helps us see beyond our ordinary “thought,” maybe to see real beauty, which is rare? And beauty is truth, so the beauty in the urn reveals a kind of truth? What is that truth? It sounds like Keats does have a high regard for art’s place in the world, though I’m not sure being “stuck” in the perfect moment is what we really want.

The process in which Judy has engaged fulfills the process of annotating a text to better understand it, discussed in Chapter 1, refining that process to fit the conventions of poetry. To go a step further, Judy might use these notes to form a *perspective* on the poem and compose an essay arguing for that perspective.

Keats is an example of a poet who employs traditional elements of poetry to great effect. But what about a poem that seems to *resist* some of the conventions traditionally associated with poetry? Consider Langston Hughes’s 1926 poem, “The Weary Blues,” located at [http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176785.](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176785) Try using the process outlined above for unpacking the poem and then spend a few minutes making observations about the poem’s meaning and effects. What do you think the poem might be saying to us?

### Questions for Consideration:

1. You may have noticed that instead of the traditional iambic pentameter used by Keats in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Hughes’s form here sounds more contemporary. Reading it aloud reveals its blues rhythms—its own syncopation, for example, like that the speaker describes in the old blues singer’s song. Why might Hughes have chosen this form instead of the iambic pentameter rhythm in “Ode on a Grecian Urn”?
2. The speaker seems to enjoy the performance of the blues singer, but he notes that the singer finishes, goes to bed, and sleeps “like a rock or a man that’s dead” (line 35). What emotions are usually associated with the blues? Why do people sing the blues? Why do people go to clubs to hear someone else sing the blues and maybe even dance to the songs? With these issues in mind, what do you think the poem’s last line means?
3. How does Hughes convey the dialect of the singer? Are these dialect features important to the overall effect of the poem? How so?

# Considering the Writer’s Life

Readers are often tempted to look for insight into a poem by reading about the *poet*. Many professors will discourage students from integrating the poet’s biographical background into a paper as evidence of the students’ interpretation of the poem. After all, look how much we gained from analyzing the poem *itself*. As mentioned earlier, **formalism**, an approach to literary criticism that came about in the 1920s and remains well-regarded by many today, holds that artwork (including literature) should be considered as an object separate from the author. Formalists feel that a text *means* on its own. The practice of analyzing a poem’s effects apart from the poet’s biography is an important one. If we interpret the poem with preformed ideas about the message a poet *would probably* want to convey, we might miss elements in the poem that are staring us right in the face. We know from our *own* observations of Hughes’s poem that “The Weary Blues” challenges traditional poetic forms, so we are already curious about *why* he might have chosen this form. However, after performing our own analysis, it can be intriguing and sometimes helpful to consider the author’s life. An African American, Hughes wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, the first large-scale African American artistic movement. Although he had read the poetry of many well-regarded British and American poets, he determined to raise the status of African American folk forms, challenging the idea that great art must follow the traditions of European forms. Adding this biographical and historical component to our study increases our understanding of the importance of Hughes’s contribution to the improvement of African American lives and his celebration of African Americans’ part in shaping U.S. culture.

# Literary Terminology

When you enter the dialogue of an unfamiliar discipline, you are often confronted with unfamiliar vocabulary. If you have ever read a legal document, you understand this challenge of venturing into the territory of an unfamiliar professional dialogue. You may hesitate to sign this document until you have had a chance to look up the meanings of key words in order to ensure that you really agree with the terms you’re signing off on. Similarly, in the fields of biology, political science, and education, we may run into specialized vocabulary that we must master in order to enter the dialogue of the field. Your academic essays in various disciplines represent your forays into these dialogues.

Literary studies can be frustrating for students because many already enjoy reading literature and talking about their favorite books with their friends. So, when a professor insists that students use specific literary terms to express their views on a work, students are sometimes forced to review their understanding of the terms themselves before they can write an English paper. “Why can’t I just explain in my own way why the novel is so powerful?” a student might ask.

To find the answer to this seemingly reasonable question, consider a parallel situation. If your car was running badly, you could go to the mechanic and tell her your impression of the problem: “It’s been making a weird sound. Instead of the usual hum of the engine, it sounds more like ‘mm-pachuk, mm-pachuk.’ I’ve also noticed my gas mileage is lower than normal.” The mechanic might be able to look under the hood, drive the car, and figure out the issue, but some car-owners worry that if they present the problem to the mechanic this way, not only will it take longer for the mechanic to diagnose the problem and fix it, but she might even take advantage of their ignorance and complete expensive additional “repairs” that are not immediately necessary.

Your *ethos*, or credibility, is weak in such an exchange, and that weakness may cost you extra time and money. However, if you were to tell the mechanic that you believe the car needs a new spark plug, your ethos would be stronger. The mechanic would recognize your relative expertise and might be more likely to call and ask for your approval before addressing other issues. In this case, simply using common professional terminology would have improved your position. Similarly, scientists using the accepted terms of their disciplines will be listened to with more respect than those using unconventional vocabulary (“the blobby-looking organism”). Your expertise is evidenced, in some part, by your ability to employ accepted terminology.

What terms are important to our study of literature? Some terms overlap among genres, but we will begin with the terms useful to the study of poetry. The term **genre** distinguishes one type of literature from another. The major genres are *poetry*, *fiction*, *drama*, and *creative nonfiction*. However, genre can also be used to refer to subcategories of each; for example, fiction can be broken down into *novel* and *short story*, and the novel can itself be broken into genres such as the *mystery* novel, the *romance* novel and the *science fiction* novel. Sometimes the word **form** is used almost interchangeably with *genre*. This overlap is not entirely surprising since we often consider the *form* of a work as a clue to its *genre*. To illustrate, consider the difference between the visual appearance of a *poem* on the page as compared with that of a short story. In this case, we can *see* the differences in *form*. However, though their meanings overlap, *form* does have a meaning distinct from that of *genre*. The term **form** can be used to indicate very specific features of a work. A **sonnet** is a *poetic form* that traditionally employs fourteen lines in iambic pentameter (see *iambic pentameter* below). A **villanelle**, on the other hand, is a poetic form requiring nineteen lines, distributed into five tercets and a quatrain, and also requiring that the first and third line of the first stanza be repeated alternately in the last lines of the stanzas that follow it. In the final quatrain, the two repeated lines conclude the poem. Thus, we could describe Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 as being a different *form* than Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.”

**Theme** is another term common to discussion of literature. Though *theme* is similar to *message* or *argument*, it is not necessarily an *assertion* like the other two terms are. In connecting to a work’s meaning, a *theme* can refer to *key topics* of a work. Thus, while we might say “Ode on a Grecian Urn” *argues* that the state of desire should be appreciated beyond the moment of satisfaction, we might state that the *themes* of the poem are *becoming versus being*, *the role of timeless art in a time-dependent world*, and *the relationship between beauty and truth*.

The **tone** of a work is crucial to its meaning and effect. The tone of a poem, often generated by *diction*, *rhythm*, and *rhyme*, can be, for example, sad, angry, celebratory, ironic, respectful, and/or yearning. Most effective poems exhibit **tension**. The *tone* can help to generate that tension. Tension itself can be generated in a variety of ways, but one common method is the juxtaposition of two seemingly opposing forces against one another. In “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the two forces that seem to pull against each other are *time* and *timelessness*. To develop that tension, Keats employs carefully crafted **diction**, or word choice. To generate an awareness of time, he uses words like “historian,” “legend,” and “old age.” This awareness, however, is challenged by words associated with the vase’s “frozen” timeless scene: “for ever new,” “for ever young,” and “eternity.” Diction can be used to generate *tension* and to set a poem’s *tone*, as well as to establish significant themes in a work. Consider Hughes’s use in “The Weary Blues” of “drowsy,” “mellow,” “dull pallor,” “lazy,” and “melancholy.” These words not only reflect the “drowsy” sound of blues, but they also suggest the melancholy *mood* of that music.

It is important, in understanding a poem’s meaning, to consider its **point of view**. Remember, we must not assume that the poem’s **speaker** is the *poet*. The speaker is constructed by the poet to provide point of view for the poem. In “The Weary Blues,” the speaker is actually on Lenox Avenue listening to the blues singer and imagining, later, the singer’s life when he leaves the club. We might ask ourselves why the speaker’s thoughts follow the blues singer home in this way. What does the speaker’s point of view tell us about him or her? Why does Hughes describe the event from this perspective? In some poems, the point of view is not first person (in other words, we don’t hear of the main character as *I*). Instead, the **persona** (or main character) is referred to in third person (*he* or *she*).

**Irony** is an idea turned back upon itself; in an ironic passage, the words mean something different than their literal definitions would suggest. Consider Marianne Moore’s “Poetry” located at [http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/poetry.](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/poetry)

Following the title, the first line seems to state *that the speaker does not like poetry* (“it”). In the next line, she even seems to cast aspersion on poetry by calling it “fiddle.” One irony, then, is that the speaker seems to be insulting poetry in a…well, in a *poem*. So, from this moment, the reader understands that Moore is presenting the reader with a puzzle. As the poem develops, however, it becomes clear that it is a certain *kind* of poem that the speaker doesn’t like—a poem that spurs “high-sounding interpretation” but contains no “useful” substance (12), nothing “genuine” (40). After building a gradual argument that “it” is actually not poetry at all, Moore brings us logically to the concluding line, that if what we dislike is “poetry” that we can’t understand—“poetry” that presents complicated emptiness, if we demand the *genuine*—it is likely that we “are interested in poetry” after all (40). Moore’s use of irony here yields a wonderful twist, driving home her point, and giving her own poem great impact.

While we may think of **setting** as an element more relevant to fiction, it is often an important feature of poetry, as well. The setting of Lenox Avenue for “The Weary Blues,” for example, provides historical context and authenticity to the blues song. Lenox Avenue is a famous street in Harlem in which African American culture (particularly jazz, blues, and soul food) thrived during the Harlem Renaissance.

Finally, let’s examine a few literary elements associated more specifically with poetry. **Rhyme** is produced when two words *ending in the same vowel sound* are juxtaposed with one another. In “The Weary Blues,” “tune” and “croon” produce a rhyme, along with “night” and “light,” “sway” and “play,” and “key” and “melody.” These rhymes give the poem a lyrical, or musical, quality. Although the term **lyric poem** refers to classical poetry following specific rhythms and rhyme schemes, these poems were often accompanied by music, and “The Weary Blues” does conjure the sounds of blues music. Hughes’s purposeful use of blues **rhythm** in this poem is a departure from traditional European rhythms, the most common of which are *iambic pentameter* and *ballad meter*. An iamb is a two syllable *foot* (we measure poetic rhythmic units in *feet*), with the accent on the second syllable. “Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,” the first line of “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” is written in iambic pentameter. “Thou still” reflects the two syllable foot with the accent on the second syllable. In this line, there are five feet, a line-length which we describe as *pentameter* (*penta* meaning five). Many poems have been composed in this meter over the centuries, often with each pair of lines rhyming. Pairs like this are called **couplets**. Consider the rhyme and rhythm of Shakespeare’s “My Mistress’ Eyes” (Sonnet 130):

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damasked, red and white, 5

But no such roses see I in her cheeks;

And in some perfumes is there more delight

Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know

That music hath a far more pleasing sound; 10

I grant I never saw a goddess go;

My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

As any she belied with false compare.

(1623)

With its conventional fourteen lines, this sonnet exhibits all the rules of the form we now call the Shakespearean sonnet. Each line is written in iambic pentameter, and the rhyme scheme of the poem follows this pattern: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Concluding with a couplet, the Shakespearean sonnet resolves the conflict or problem in the final two lines, and the GG rhyme enhances this feeling of completion.

The **ballad stanza** (the poetic version of a paragraph) is a *quatrain* (a four-line stanza), and the rhythm alternates iambic *tetrameter* lines (featuring four iambs) with iambic *trimeter* lines (with three iambs each). While there is no rhyme with line one or line three of the stanza, line two rhymes with line four. The “sing-song” quality produced by the ballad’s rhythm and rhyme has generally been more popular among common folks than has iambic pentameter, which is usually associated with “high art.” There are many examples of ballad meter, even in our culture today. Many Christian hymns follow this form, such as “Amazing Grace” and “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” In addition, the oeuvre of Emily Dickinson’s poems is written in ballad form. See if you can trace the ballad rhythm and rhyme scheme in this one:

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died –

The Stillness in the Room

Was like the Stillness in the Air –

Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry - 5

And Breaths were gathering firm

For that last Onset - when the King

Be witnessed - in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away

What portion of me be 10

Assignable - and then it was

There interposed a Fly –

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz –

Between the light - and me -

And then the Windows failed - and then 15

I could not see to see -

(1890)

Can you see Dickinson’s structure at work? Why would she use this “sing- song” form to explore the serious subject of death? Perhaps her focus on the fly offers a clue.

There are many forms that restrict the poet to a particular rhythm and rhyme. One of strictest poetic forms is the traditional villanelle. It might not be so difficult to write a poem that meets the formal requirements of the villanelle, but to write one that makes sense and conveys an important idea is quite a challenge. Read Dylan Thomas’s 1952 “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” one of the most famous villanelles in English literature, at [http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/do-not-go-gentle-good-night.](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/do-not-go-gentle-good-night)

### Questions for Consideration:

1. Why would Thomas choose such a restrictive form in which to express the son’s urgent response to his father’s impending death?
2. What is the effect of the repeated lines?
3. Besides the repeated lines, what other elements help to create the emotional tone?

Many poems reject the strict forms that dictate rhyme and rhythm. **Blank verse**, itself relatively traditional, uses an iambic pentameter line but without rhyme. Much of Shakespeare’s drama is written in such verse. **Slant rhyme** also veers away from our expectations, presenting an “almost rhyme” that causes us to pause, either with words that look like they should rhyme but don’t (like “be” and “Fly” in lines 10 and 12 of Dickinson’s poem above) or with words whose sounds are similar but not exactly the same (such as “Room” and “Storm” in lines 2 and 4 of Dickinson’s poem). Further, many contemporary poets take their freedom a step further to produce **free verse**, which is not governed by any common rules. This is not to say that contemporary poetry does not generate the musical effect we expect of the genre—it simply finds new ways to do so. Consider Galway Kinnell’s 1980 “Blackberry Eating” at [https://www.poetrysociety](http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/poetry_in_motion/atlas/).or[g/psa/poetry/poetry\_in\_motion/atlas/](http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/poetry_in_motion/atlas/) chicago/blackberry\_eating/.

Of course, a central element of poetry is its use of **figurative language**, which, as opposed to *literal language*, suggests meaning beyond a word’s denotation. We expect poetry to compress language in ways that other genres do not. In a fourteen-line sonnet, there is a limited amount of space (even a limited number of syllables) in which to express an idea. Thus, poetry often employs metaphors and similes which pack much meaning into only a word or phrase. A **metaphor** is a comparison of two generally *unlike* things in order to emphasize a particular quality that they do share. Marianne Moore compares powerful poetry to “[h]ands that can grasp” (6), for instance, emphasizing its ability to move beyond the abstract and affect the reader’s real and concrete experience. Shakespeare’s speaker, in describing his mistress, asserts that “black wires grow on her head” (4). Hair and wire are two distinct materials, but in this comparison, he emphasizes the hair’s lack of often-desired softness and suppleness, conveying his point about this woman’s failure to meet conventional standards of beauty. Kinnell’s poem compares words to blackberries in an **extended** or **controlling metaphor**, which carries the central metaphor all the way through the poem. A **simile** is a similar type of comparison, but uses the words *like* or *as* to link the two items. In “I Heard a Fly Buzz - When I Died,” Dickinson writes that “The Stillness in the Room / Was like the Stillness in the Air - / Between the Heaves of Storm” (2-4). What effect does this comparison generate? How is the stillness of a dead body in an (almost) empty room like the still pause between “Heaves of a storm”? If death is a still moment, what are the “heaves” on either side of it?

Students sometimes find it difficult to distinguish between a symbol and a metaphor. While a metaphor is a comparison between two unlike things to emphasize their similarity, such as a blackberry and a word, blackberries don’t *usually* refer to words. That’s what makes Kinnell’s poem so surprising. A **symbol**, on the other hand, is a link—one thing’s representation of another—which many readers recognize. The representational “thing” has become a symbol by long-term association with what it represents. For example, the United States flag is a recognized symbol of American patriotism. For many, the flag represents the freedoms guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution. Similarly, in Western culture, the red rose historically symbolizes love and beauty. Shakespeare’s use of this symbol in “My Mistress’ Eyes” effectively reminds us of traditional notions of female beauty.

Two other poetic elements often used to great effect are alliteration and enjambment. **Alliteration** is the placement of same or similar sounds near each other to draw our attention, sometimes to the sound, sometimes to meanings of the words being linked to each other by the sounds, and sometimes both. In “Blackberry Eating,” Kinnell conveys the message of the near physical quality of words through the “s” alliteration in the words “strengths,” “squinched,” “syllabled,” “squeeze,” “squinch,” and “splurge,” words that capture surprisingly well the experience of the tongue when we bite into a blackberry!

**Enjambment** carries one poetic line into the following one, yielding *two* meanings—one generated by the first line alone, and the other produced by taking the finished phrase or clause as it is completed in the next line. As discussed previously, in the first stanza of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” he creates one impression with line 11 on its own: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard.” But when we read on to finish the clause, we read instead, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter” (11-12). Line 11 might create a sad tone, suggesting that we cannot hear the urn-piper’s melody, but taken together, lines 11 and 12 convey that the urn-piper’s unheard song is *even sweeter* than a heard melody. Our momen- tary misconception boosts the effect of the real message.

As you read poems like those we have discussed in this chapter, as well as those that follow, consider how the above elements function to generate effect and power. You may choose one of these to write about, and as you develop your perspective on the meaning and relevance of the poem, these terms will no doubt help express your point to your audience.

# Additional Poems

Dover Beach

By Matthew Arnold

The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits; on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay. 5

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

Only, from the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land,

Listen! you hear the grating roar

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling, 10

At their return, up the high strand,

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring

The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago 15

Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought

Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow

Of human misery; we

Find also in the sound a thought,

Hearing it by this distant northern sea. 20

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, 25

Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true

To one another! for the world, which seems 30

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain 35

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

(1867)

Annabel Lee

By Edgar Allan Poe

It was many and many a year ago,

   In a kingdom by the sea,

That a maiden there lived whom you may know

   By the name of Annabel Lee;

And this maiden she lived with no other thought 5

   Than to love and be loved by me.

*I* was a child and *she* was a child,

   In this kingdom by the sea,

But we loved with a love that was more than love—

   I and my Annabel Lee— 10

With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven

   Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,

   In this kingdom by the sea,

A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling 15

   My beautiful Annabel Lee;

So that her highborn kinsmen came

   And bore her away from me,

To shut her up in a sepulchre

   In this kingdom by the sea. 20

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,

   Went envying her and me—

Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,

   In this kingdom by the sea)

That the wind came out of the cloud by night, 25

   Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love

   Of those who were older than we—

   Of many far wiser than we—

And neither the angels in Heaven above 30

   Nor the demons down under the sea

Can ever dissever my soul from the soul

   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams

   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; 35

And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes

   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side

   Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,

   In her sepulchre there by the sea— 40

   In her tomb by the sounding sea.

(1849)

Frederick Douglass

By Paul Laurence Dunbar

Ah, Douglass, we have fall’n on evil days,

Such days as thou, not even thou didst know,

When thee, the eyes of that harsh long ago

Saw, salient, at the cross of devious ways,

And all the country heard thee with amaze. 5

Not ended then, the passionate ebb and flow,

The awful tide that battled to and fro;

We ride amid a tempest of dispraise.

Now, when the waves of swift dissension swarm,

And Honour, the strong pilot, lieth stark, 10

Oh, for thy voice high-sounding o’er the storm,

For thy strong arm to guide the shivering bark,

The blast-defying power of thy form,

To give us comfort through the lonely dark.

(1895)

The Hunting of the Hare

By Margaret Cavendish

Betwixt two Ridges of Plowd-land, lay Wat

Pressing his Body close to Earth lay squat.

His Nose upon his two Fore-feet close lies

Glaring obliquely with his great gray Eyes.

His Head he alwaies sets against the Wind; 5

If turne his Taile, his Haires blow up behind:

Which he too cold will grow, but he is wise,

And keeps his Coat still downe, so warm he lies.

Thus resting all the day, till Sun doth set

Then riseth up, his Reliefe for to get. 10

Walking about untill the Sun doth rise

Then back returnes, down in his Forme he lyes.

At last, Poore Wat was found, as he there lay

By Hunts-men, with their Dogs which came that way.

Seeing, gets up, and fast begins to run, 15

Hoping some waies the Cruell Dogs to shun.

But they by Nature have so quick a Sent,

That by their Nose they race, what way he went.

And with their deep, wide Mouths set forth a Cry,

Which answer’d was by Ecchoes in the Skie. 20

Then Wat was struck with Terrour, and with Feare,

Thinkes every Shadow still the Dogs they were.

And running out some distance from the noise,

To hide himselfe, his Thoughts he new employs.

Under a Clod of Earth in Sand-pit wide, 25

Poore Wat sat close, hoping himselfe to hide.

There long he had not sat, but strait his Eares

The Winding Hornes, and crying Dogs he heares:

Starting with Feare, up leapes, then doth he run,

And with such speed, the Ground scarce treades upon. 30

Into a great thick Wood he strait way gets,

Where underneath a broken Bough he sits.

At every Leafe that with the wind did shake,

Did bring such Terrour, made his Heart to ake.

That Place he left, to Champion Plaines he went, 35

Winding about, for to deceive their Sent.

And while they snuffling were, to find his Track,

Poore Wat, being weary, his swift pace did slack.

On his two hinder legs for ease did sit,

His Fore-feet rub’d his Face from Dust, and Sweat. 40

Licking his Feet, he wip’d his Eares so cleane,

That none could tell that Wat had hunted been.

But casting round about his faire great Eyes,

The Hounds in full Careere he neere him ‘pies:

To Wat it was so terrible a Sight, 45

Feare gave him Wings, and made his Body light.

Though weary was before, by running long,

Yet now his Breath he never felt more strong.

Like those that dying are, think Health returnes,

When tis but a faint Blast, which Life out burnes. 50

For Spirits seek to guard the Heart about,

Striving with Death, but Death doth quench them out.

Thus they so fast came on, with such loud Cries,

That he no hopes hath left, no help espies.

With that the Winds did pity poore Wats case, 55

And with their Breath the Sent blew from the Place.

Then every Nose is busily imployed,

And every Nostrill is set open, wide:

And every Head doth seek a severall way,

To find what Grasse, or Track, the Sent on lay. 60

Thus quick Industry, that is not slack,

Is like to Witchery, brings lost things back.

For though the Wind had tied the Sent up close,

A Busie Dog thrust in his Snuffling Nose:

And drew it out, with it did foremost run, 65

Then Hornes blew loud, for the rest to follow on.

The great slow-Hounds, their throats did set a Base,

The Fleet swift Hounds, as Tenours next in place;

The little Beagles they a Trebble sing,

And through the Aire their Voice a round did ring. 70

Which made a Consort, as they ran along;

If they but words could speak, might sing a Song,

The Hornes kept time, the Hunters shout for Joy,

And valiant seeme, poore Wat for to destroy:

Spurring their Horses to a full Careere, 75

Swim Rivers deep, leap Ditches without feare;

Indanger Life, and Limbes, so fast will ride,

Onely to see how patiently Wat died.

For why, the Dogs so neere his Heeles did get,

That they their sharp Teeth in his Breech did set. 80

Then tumbling downe, did fall with weeping Eyes,

Gives up his Ghost, and thus poore Wat he dies.

Men hooping loud, such Acclamations make,

As if the Devill they did Prisoner take.

When they do but a shiftlesse Creature kill; 85

To hunt, there need no Valiant Souldiers skill.

But Man doth think that Exercise, and Toile,

To keep their Health, is best, which makes most spoile.

Thinking that Food, and Nourishment so good,

And Appetite, that feeds on Flesh, and blood. 90

When they do Lions, Wolves, Beares, Tigers see,

To kill poore Sheep, strait say, they cruell be.

But for themselves all Creatures think too few,

For Luxury, with God would make them new.

As if that God made Creatures for Mans meat, 95

To give them Life, and Sense, for Man to eat;

Or else for Sport, or Recreations sake,

Destroy those Lives that God saw good to make:

Making their Stomacks, Graves, which full they fill

With Murther’d Bodies, that in sport they kill. 100

Yet Man doth think himselfe so gentle, mild,

When he of Creatures is most cruell wild.

And is so Proud, thinks onely he shall live,

That God a God-like Nature did him give.

And that all Creatures for his sake alone, 105

Was made for him, to Tyrannize upon.

(1653)

### Also for Consideration:

“Those Winter Sundays,” by Robert Hayden, 1962:   
[http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/those-winter-sundays](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/those-winter-sundays%0A)

“Still I Rise,” by Maya Angelou, 1978:  
[http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/still-i-rise](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/still-i-rise%20)