

Sample Workshop:
Literary text as Score: Poetry
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Each poem is a world of its own, with its own language and rules.

Can we understand poetry?

Can we understand poetry? If by 'understanding' we mean, explaining something in different words, then – no, we cannot understand poetry, just as we can't understand a human being.

So, How does "understanding" apply in poetry? We can definitely 'get it' - we can 'get' a poem, even with no previous learning or even having been exposed to it. Like beauty – we may not be able to explain it, but we can sense when it's there – even in music completely foreign to us, we can sometimes tell when it is great music. Right?

So what kind of 'knowing' can there be where poetry is concerned? Perhaps the kind of knowing we have in loving? It occurs simultaneously in the head, heart, loins – the mental, emotional and physical. It's a knowing of the kind we can't explain, the kind that changes us, that makes us see and hear and feel and think thoughts we'd never had before, and notice things we'd paid no attention to. Right?

But we don't often have 'love at first sight' with a poem. Sometimes love comes after spending some time together, getting acquainted with the poem, understanding and hearing better how it speaks and what it is trying to say.

I often compare poetry to other people's love in the sense that both are easy to ridicule. And rightly so. Neither can be grasped or appreciated, unless we are willing to invest, unless we are deeply involved in it. Because lets face it, if it's our own love, it is very important and not ridiculous at all, it is a life force, isn't it?

Imagine the poem as a garden: the title is the gate – how should I walk on the path of this garden (= how should I say/talk this poem) – is it like running barefoot on very hot sand? Or muddy and cold? Pebbles? Thistles? Should I run? Or does it call for very slow walking on soft warm smooth sand? Should I be skipping?

The title is a zone where the author/poet is speaking to the reader, inviting, luring or daring them into the poem itself. The poem is always spoken by a poetic speaker [more or less consciously identified] to his/her addressee. The title is where the poet speaks directly to the reader 'over the shoulder' of the poetic speaker, before he addresses the poetic addressee.

We cannot know everything about a poem, what we can do is raise questions that a particular poem seems to invite or to inspire, or notice questions the poem raises, that will help to know it better. We won't give answers. Relevant questions will tell us more about a poem (or person) than final answers [that are rarely convincing], and good poetry often means more than one thing and often, both something and its opposite at the same time.

Reading takes place physically, in the body. We want to translate the response we have to the body of the text, the body of the words, and to create a similar response in our audience. In order to translate we must understand as much as possible, resonate the essence, yet make choices without giving up important things in the poem.

What kind of breathing does a poem suggest, demand? What kind of pulse does it have? What on the page tells us that? A reading that is alive and responds to the text can sound different each time, yet be deep and meaningful and resonate the poem.

Don't open your mouth if you have nothing to say, if you don't mean anything. In order to mean something you need to "grasp" or "get" the text, to understand how it works – this we can do. We try to figure out, what the writer gains by saying it in this particular way – what does the way of saying imply regarding what is said – we can't separate content from form.

Anything that has to do with language and especially with literary, poetic language – is not an exact science, so what we need is a combination of common sense and intuition for this method to serve us well. Like any method, some exercised will be effective on certain poems more than on others, just as some people will prefer certain exercises offered over others.

I may say things which are obvious, please forgive me – I'd rather do that than not say something which may be relevant to reading poetry with a new ear. Because taking nothing for granted is basic to this approach to reading poetry – everything in a poem is new (even when referring to older texts), a poem not only says something new with words, but does that of which it is talking - to the reader, through the reading.

At the basis of the method offered is dialogue – a dialogue existent in every literary text between a poetic speaker and his poetic addressee, a dialogue between writer and reader, also between legitimate, high language [‘langue’ according to linguist Ferdinand de Saussure] and spoken language [‘parole’].

Poetic Speaker (or narrator) and Addressee:

The addressee is the inspirer, the instigator, the source and the cause of speech, of talking, of that speaking that is the poem. A poem is a written speech inspired in a poetic speaker by an addressee. The addressee creates a need in the speaker to do something to her/him – that is the speech-action.

An addressee not only changes the way we express things, it makes us think thoughts that would not have been created were it not for the addressee.

In the oral rendition of the text we want to bring the literary dialogue to life without distorting it or over-dramatizing it out of tune with the tone the text itself seems to imply. We try to orally realize the active components, ingredients, materials, matters in a poem.

At no stage during the preparation of a poem for reading aloud, do we ever do anything ‘technically’, without working with, listening for, always seeking the deepest, most interesting **meaning** – in the sounds, structures, shapes, speech-actions, poetic speaker’s attitude towards his/her own words [the tone of a poem] – all refer to meaning. Always.

Speech against the background of silence (like words on a blank page) is a kind of dialogue as well. Poetry - like music - makes use of this particular dialogue.

When words move from the ‘natural’ to the literary sphere, they change from being noise – to being music. Even if it’s slang and street music.

Language is no longer basically practical noise for useful purposes, but has an additional dimension, as music, where the actual words and syntactic structure and flow not only bring across meaning but keep pointing at themselves as if saying 'aren't we beautiful'? Calling attention to themselves not only as carriers of communicative or practical missions but as sound-and-sense entities. Language moves from noise to music when it moves from daily life to poetry [Just as sound does when moving from 'noise' to music.]

Developing listening skills and attentiveness:

Example:

1. Ask someone to read one of the short poems – everyone else: listen and write down what you hear. Everything you say is legitimate, nothing will be considered silly. Hear each person's comments. Relate them to the reader's intentions, his speech-actions, to the specificity of his imagination, to how much thought he himself has given to whatever he is talking about. Write down what you hear. Anything that has to do with the reading and with the text. What came across and how? What – if anything, didn't? In other words, how much does he mean what he says when he says (reads) those written words? If they don't matter to the reader, why should the words matter to the listener?

Notice the connection between the speaker's intention and the audience's ability to perceive.

Natural speech as a flowing river:
poetic speech sets up dams and dykes in the flow.

Two assumptions about a literary text:

1. In every text someone is talking to someone.
2. Everything that is laid down on the page is put there for a reason.

This means that whatever is on the page – in its' precise place and shape – is there at basic level in order to allow the poetic speaker to do something (through words) to the poetic addressee.

Everything on the page in a poem is there for a reason – in other words, to do something, to act, to perform a particular action [through saying words]. That action is what I am looking for, in order to activate the specific kind of life, the tone of speaking, the particular “sound”, “voice”, that is a poem. At the most basic level, prior to ambiguities or irony, what is the text's most basic action? - that which the poetic speaker is doing toward his addressee.

Don't confuse the poetic speaker (who is written on the page) – with the writer (in real life); or the addressee (on the page) with the reader (in real life).

The aim, the objective, of the poetic speaker's speech towards the poetic addressee, gives the narrative/narration its energy: The flow of the sentence, the train of thought underlying the lines and stanzas, carries, creates and expresses the passion, the need – the speech-action of the poetic speaker to his addressee. The poetic ‘prosodics’ (rhymes, etc.) give this passion the rhythm and music and shape – the dance and music.

The poetic speaker's intent, vitality, towards the addressee, via the words he says – his speech-actions [not to be confused with sub-text] – are, at the most basic, beginning level, what focuses and characterizes the discourse, the tone of speech, the feel, the “voice”, the tone of a poem.

It may undergo many changes as we proceed stage by stage in preparing the text to be said aloud – by re-reading it layer-by-layer, focusing on a different aspect of it at each stage. At the end of the process we will choose the particular “tone” of the poem we want to convey through the reading, and seek ways of doing so.

Yet this very first stage of preparation is most crucial to the understanding of how a poem works, what makes it 'tick', what makes it alive.

We will not imitate the tone of our voice in each reading, rather – we will start with the intention [speech-action] that leads us to a particular “poetic sound” or “voice”, and let it sound however it may in each performance.

Please note: preparing a poem for reading is a process, building towards a reading stage by stage, much like preparing a musical concert. In a sample workshop we will only touch beginning stages – none of which should even attempt to be a good reading.

A possible definition of a poem: words that say: we're important.

If they aren't important to the reader they can't be, to his audience.

They can't be important to you if you don't know what they're saying.

Being fascinated by them is not enough, you may be hypnotized by their music or by a metaphor, but that won't let a listener into the poem, unless you follow its' train of thought as well, the particular way in which a poet chose to say something, using a metaphor or touching a certain subject.

The way of saying it is essential to the poetics and that is what we seek to find. Know what you are talking about when you read a poem aloud – even if some parts (as in life) are never absolutely clear. A good poem is like a person, you can never know it completely, but you can always find out new interesting things that are potentially active in it.