

How To Read A Poem: A Discussion Guide for Book Clubs/Groups

"Many people who feel a tentative affinity to poetry—even love it, and sometimes even write it—don't really feel they understand it. Slowly I discovered that the apprehension of a poem is a sensuous mental activity. And understanding is gained just the way a love relationship is deepened—through the blind delight of examining it with the sense and intellect all at once. Emotive brainwork creates luxurious understanding."

—Molly Peacock, from *How to Read a Poem & Start a Poetry Circle*

There are as many ways to read a poem as there are definitions of poetry. As Molly Peacock described, even those of us who love poetry can feel intimidated by it, perhaps more so if it's a poem by a poet whom we've never read.

Reading is active, not passive, and with poetry, this is especially true. Ed Hirsch observes, "You are reading poetry—and I mean really reading it—when you feel encountered and changed by a poem, when you feel its seismic vibrations, the sounding of your depths."

Before the meeting

Read the poem quietly the first time, to yourself. Have a dictionary handy in case there are any unfamiliar words.

True Ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense.

—Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism"

Read the poem aloud to yourself. Read slowly, letting your voice wrap itself around the words. Ed Hirsch observes: "When I recite a poem I reinhabit it, I bring the words off the page into my own mouth, my own body. I become its speaker and let its verbal music move through me as if the poem is a score and I am its instrumentalist, its performer."

During the meeting

Have two people read the poem aloud to the group. Allow the sounds to wash over you as if you were listening to music.

Focus on the sound of the language. Are there any sounds that are repeated, any images or phrases that are repeated? Is there any rhyme in the poem? Do you sense a rhythm to the words?

Can you identify a speaker of the poem? Who is this person? The speaker is not necessarily the poet, as Emily Dickinson once suggested:

When I state myself-
As representative of the Verse-
It does not mean-me-
But a Supposed person.

Does anything happen in the poem? Does the speaker take any action? Or does the speaker tell a story or reveal a secret? As Robert Lowell wrote, in his poem, "Epilogue," "Yet why not say what happened?"

If something does happen, where does "it" happen? Is there a landscape?

Do you have an emotional response to the poem? As Thomas Hardy said: "The poet should touch our hearts by showing his own."

How does the poem end? Does the poem contain a resolution at the end of the poem, or does it with a question? Stanley Kunitz advised: "End on an image & don't explain it."

After reading the poem and considering these questions, read it one final time aloud, without any further discussion. Let the poet have the last word.

Epilogue
by Robert Lowell

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme--
why are they no help to me now
I want to make
something imagined, not recalled?
I hear the noise of my own voice:
The painter's vision is not a lens,
it trembles to caress the light.
But sometimes everything I write
with the threadbare art of my eye
seems a snapshot,
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
heightened from life,

yet paralyzed by fact.
All's misalliance.
Yet why not say what happened?
Pray for the grace of accuracy
Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination
stealing like the tide across a map
to his girl solid with yearning.
We are poor passing facts,
warned by that to give
each figure in the photograph
his living name.

(This content is taken from "How to Read a Poem" found on www.poets.org from the Academy of American Poets)