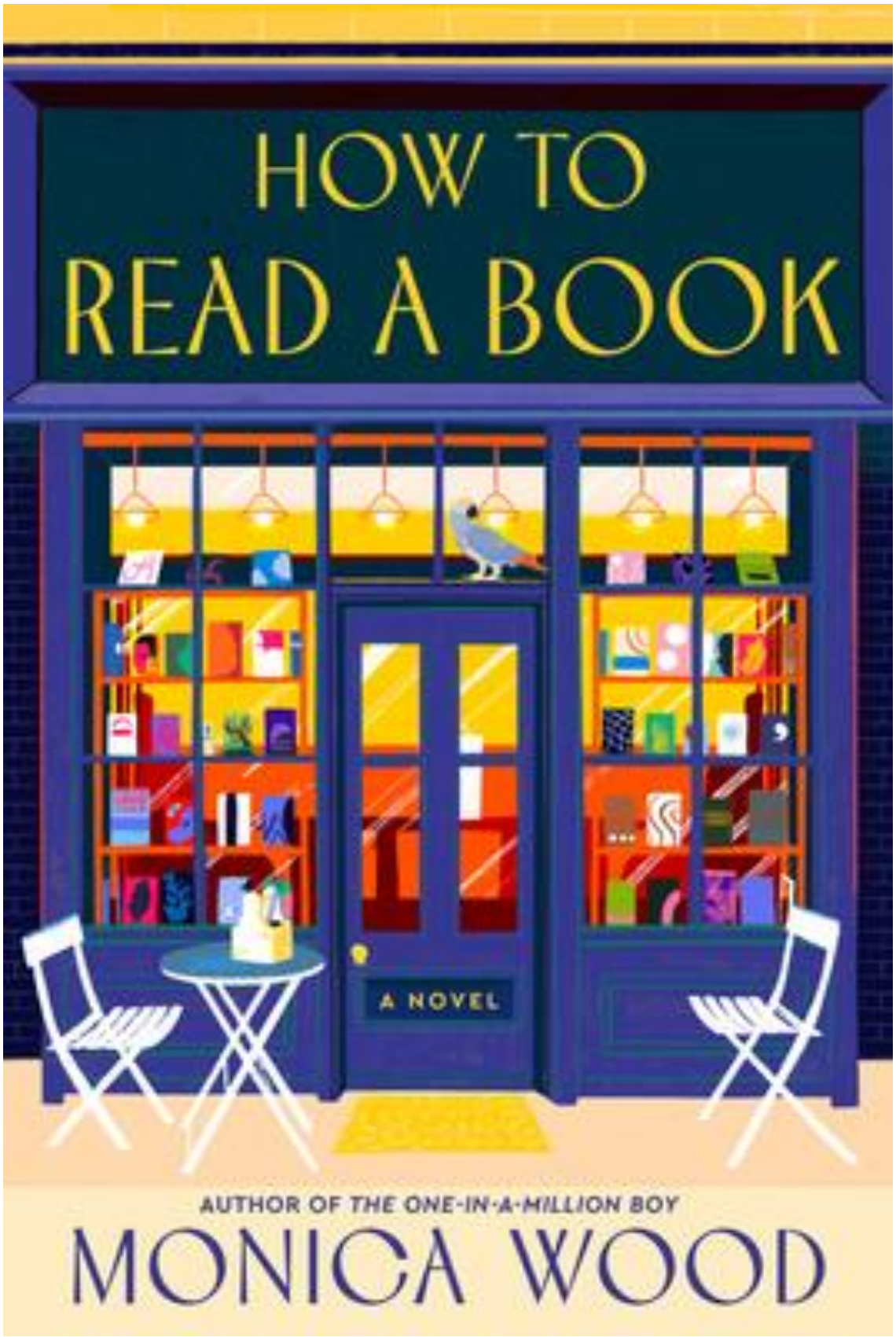
HOW TO
READ A BOOK
A NOVEL
AUTHOR OF THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY
MONICA WOOD

Chapter 15

Suggestions for Reading Stories, Plays, and Poems

The parallel rules for reading imaginative literature that were discussed in the last chapter were general ones, applying across the board to all kinds of imaginative literature—novels and stories, whether in prose or verse (including epics); plays, whether tragedies or comedies or something in between; and lyric poems, of whatever length or complexity. These rules, being general, must be adapted somewhat when they are applied to the different kinds of imaginative literature. In this chapter we want to suggest the adaptations that are required. We will have something particular to say about the reading of stories, plays, and lyric poems, and we will also include notes on the special problems presented by the reading of epic poems and the great Greek tragedies. Before proceeding to those matters, however, it is desirable to make some remarks about the last of the four questions that the active and demanding reader must ask of any book, when that question is asked of a work of imaginative literature. You will recall that the first three questions are: first, What is the book about as a whole?; second, What is being said in detail, and how?; and third, Is the book true, in whole or part? The application of these three questions to imaginative literature was covered in

the last chapter. The first question is answered when you are able to describe the unity of the plot of a story, play, or poem—"plot" being construed broadly to include the action or movement of a lyric poem as well as of a story. The second question is answered when you are able to discern the role that the various characters play, and recount, in your own words, the key incidents and events in which they are involved. And the third question is answered when you are able to give a reasoned judgment about the poetical truth of the work. Is it a likely story? Does the work satisfy your heart and your mind? Do you appreciate the beauty of the work? In each case, can you say why? 144 CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS145 The fourth question is, What of it? In the case of expository books, an answer to this question implies some kind of action on your part. "Action," here, does not always mean going out and doing something. We have suggested that that kind of action is an obligation for the reader when he agrees with a practical work—that is, agrees with the ends proposed—and accepts as appropriate the means by which the author says they can be attained. Action in this sense is not obligatory when the expository work is theoretical. There, mental action alone is required. But if you are convjnced that such a book is true, in whole or part, then you must agree with its conclusions, and if they imply some adjustment of your views of the mbject, then you are more or less required to make those adjustments. Now it is important to recognize that, in the case of a work of imaginative literature,

this fourth and final question must be interpreted quite differently. In a sense, the question is irrelevant to the reading of stories and poems. Strictly speaking, no action whatever is called for on your part when you have read a novel, play, or poem well—that is, analytically. You have discharged all of your responsibilities as a reader when you have applied the parallel rules of analytical reading to such works, and answered the first three questions. We say "strictly speaking," because it is obvious that imaginative works have often led readers to act in various ways. Sometimes a story is a better way of getting a point across—be it a political, economic, or moral point—than an expository work making the same point. George Orwell's Animal Farm and his 1984 are both powerful attacks on totalitarianism. Aldous Huxley's Brave New World is an eloquent diatribe against the tyranny of technological progress. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's The First Circle tells us more about the petty cruelty and inhumanity of the Soviet bureaucracy than a hundred factual studies and reports. Such works have been banned and censored many times in the history of mankind, and the reason for that is clear. As E. B. White once remarked, "A despot doesn't fear eloquent writers preaching freedom—he fears a drunken poet who may crack a joke that will take hold." Nevertheless, such practical consequences of the reading of stories and poems are not of the essence of the matter. Imaginative writings can lead to action, but they do not have to. They belong in the realm of fine art. A work of fine art is "fine" not because it is "refined" or "finished," but because it is an

end (finis, Latin, means end) in itself. It does not move toward some result beyond itself. It is, as Emerson said of beauty, its own excuse for being. Therefore, when it comes to applying this last question to works of imaginative literature, you should do so with caution. If you feel impelled because of a book you have read to go out and do something, ask yourself whether the work contains some implied statement that has produced this feeling. Poetry, properly speaking, is not the realm of statement, although many stories and poems have statements in them, more or less deeply buried. And it is quite right to take heed of them, and to react to them. But you should remember that you are then taking heed of and reacting to something other than the story or poem itself. That subsists in its own right. To read it well, all you have to CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS146 do is experience it. How to Read Stories The first piece of advice we would like to give you for reading a story is this: Read it quickly and with total immersion. Ideally, a story should be read at one sitting, although this is rarely possible for busy people with long novels. Nevertheless, the ideal should be approximated by compressing the reading of a good story into as short a time as feasible. Otherwise you will forget what happened, the unity of the plot will escape you, and you will be lost. Some readers, when they really like a novel, want to savor it, to pause over it, to draw out the reading of it for as long as they can. But in this case they are probably not so much reading the book as satisfying their more or less unconscious

feelings about the events and the characters. We will return to that in a moment. Read quickly, we suggest, and with total immersion. We have indicated the importance of letting an imaginative book work on you. That is what we mean by the latter phrase. Let the characters into your mind and heart; suspend your disbelief, if such it is, about the events. Do not disapprove of something a character does before you understand why he does it—if then. Try as hard as you can to live in his world, not in yours; there, the things he does may be quite understandable. And do not judge the world as a whole until you are sure that you have "lived" in it to the extent of your ability. Following this rule will allow you to answer the first question you should ask about any book—What is it about, as a whole? Unless you read it quickly you will fail to see the unity of the story. Unless you read intensely you will fail to see the details. The terms of a story, as we have observed, are its characters and incidents. You must become acquainted with them, and be able to sort them out. But here a word of warning. To take War and Peace as an example, many readers start this great novel and are overwhelmed by the vast number of characters to whom they are introduced, especially since they all have strange-sounding names. They soon give up on the book in the belief that they will never be able to sort out all the complicated relationships, to know who is who. This is true of any big novel—and if a novel is really good, we want it to be as big as possible. It does not always occur to such fainthearted readers that exactly the same thing happens to them when

they move to a new town or part of a town, when they go to a new school or job, or even when they arrive at a party. They do not give up in those circumstances; they know that after a short while individuals will begin to be visible in the mass, friends will emerge from the faceless crowd of fellow-workers, fellowstudents, or fellow-guests. We may not remember the names of everyone we met at a party, but we will recall the name of the man we talked to for an hour, or the girl with whom we made a date for the next evening, or the mother whose child goes to the same school as ours. The same CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS147 thing happens in a novel. We should not expect to remember every character; many of them are merely background persons, who are there only to set off the actions of the main characters. However, by the time we have finished War and Peace or any big novel, we know who is important, and we do not forget. Pierre, Andrew, Natasha, Princess Mary, Nicholas—the names are likely to come immediately to memory, although it may have been years since we read Tolstoy's book. We also, despite the plethora of incidents, soon learn what is important. Authors generally give a good deal of help in this respect; they do not want the reader to miss what is essential to the unfolding of the plot, so they flag it in various ways. But our point is that you should not be anxious if all is not clear from the beginning. Actually, it should not be clear then. A story is like life itself; in life, we do not expect to understand events as they occur, at least with total clarity, but looking back

on them, we do understand. So the reader of a story, looking back on it after he has finished it, understands the relation of events and the order of actions. All of this comes down to the same point: you must finish a story in order to be able to say that you have read it well. Paradoxically, however, a story ceases to be like life on its last page. Life goes on, but the story does not. Its characters have no vitality outside the book, and your imagination of what happens to them before the first page and after the last is only as good as the next reader's. Actually, all such speculations are meaningless. Preludes to Hamlet have been written, but they are ridiculous. We should not ask what happens to Pierre and Natasha after War and Peace ends. We are satisfied with Shakespeare's and Tolstoy's creations partly because they are limited in time. We need no more. The great majority of books that are read are stories of one kind or another. People who cannot read listen to stories. We even make them up for ourselves. Fiction seems to be a necessity for human beings. Why is this? One reason why fiction is a human necessity is that it satisfies many unconscious as well as conscious needs. It would be important if it only touched the conscious mind, as expository writing does. But fiction is important, too, because it also touches the unconscious. On the simplest level—and a discussion of this subject could be very complex—we like or dislike certain kinds of people more than others, without always being sure why. If, in a novel, such people are rewarded or punished, we may have stronger feelings, either pro or con, about the book than it merits

artistically. For example, we are often pleased when a character in a novel inherits money, or otherwise comes into good fortune. However, this tends to be true only if the character is "sympathetic"—meaning that we can identify with him or her. We do not admit to ourselves that we would like to inherit the money, we merely say that we like the book. Perhaps we would all like to love more richly than we do. Many novels are about love—most are, perhaps—and it gives us pleasure to identify with the loving characters. They are free, and we are not. But we may not want to CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS148 admit this; for to do so might make us feel, consciously, that our own loves are inadequate. Again, almost everyone has some unconscious sadism and masochism in his makeup. These are often satisfied in novels, where we can identify with either the conqueror or victim, or even with both. In each case, we are prone to say simply that we like "that kind of book"—without specifying or really knowing why. Finally, we suspect that life as we know it is unjust. Why do good people suffer, and bad ones prosper? We do not know, we cannot know, but the fact causes great anxiety in everyone. In stories, this chaotic and unpleasant situation is adjusted, and that is extremely satisfying to us. In stories—in novels and narrative poems and plays—justice usually does exist. People get what they deserve; the author, who is like a god to his characters, sees to it that they arc rewarded or punished according to their true merit. In a good story, in a satisfying one, this is usually so, at least. One of the most

irritating things about a bad story is that the people in it seem to be punished or rewarded with no rhyme or reason. The great storyteller makes no mistakes. He is able to convince us that justice—poetic justice, we call it—has been done. This is true even of high tragedy. There, terrible things happen to good men, but we see that the hero, even if he does not wholly deserve his fate, at least comes to understand it. And we have a profound desire to share his understanding. If we only knew—then we could withstand whatever the world has in store for us. “I Want to Know Why” is the title of a story by Sherwood Anderson. It could be the title of many stories. The tragic hero does learn why, though often, of course, only after the ruin of his life. We can share his insight without sharing his suffering. Thus, in criticizing fiction we must be careful to distinguish those books that satisfy our own particular unconscious needs—the ones that make us say, “I like this book, although I don’t really know why”—from those that satisfy the deep unconscious needs of almost everybody. The latter are undoubtedly the great stories, the ones that live on and on for generations and centuries. As long as man is man, they will go on satisfying him, giving him something that he needs to have—a belief in justice and understanding and the allaying of anxiety. We do not know, we cannot be sure, that the real world is good. But the world of a great story is somehow good. We want to live there as often and as long as we can. A Note About Epics Perhaps the most honored but probably the least read books in the great tradition of the Western World are the

major epic poems, particularly the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer, Virgil's Aeneid, Dante's Divine Comedy, and Milton's Paradise Lost. This paradox requires some comment. Judging by the very small number that have been completed successfully in the past 2,500 years, a long epic poem is apparently the most difficult thing a CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS149 man can write. This is not for want of trying; hundreds of epics have been begun, and some—for example, Wordsworth's Prelude and Byron's Don Juan—have grown to extensive proportions without ever really being finished. So honor is due the poet who sticks to the task and completes it. Greater honor is due him if he produces a work that has the qualities of the five just mentioned. But they are certainly not easy to read. This is not only because they are written in verse—for in every case except that of Paradise Lost, prose translations are available to us. The difficulty seems rather to lie in their elevation, in their approach to their subject matter. Any of these major epics exerts enormous demands on the reader—demands of attention, of involvement, and of imagination. The effort required to read them is very great indeed. Most of us are not aware of the loss we suffer by not making that effort. For the rewards to be gained from a good reading—an analytical reading, as we should say—of these epics are at least as great as those to be gained from the reading of any other books, certainly any other works of fiction. Unfortunately, however, these rewards are not gained by readers who do less than a good job on these books. We hope

that you will take a stab at reading these five great epic poems, and that you will manage to get through all of them. We are certain you will not be disappointed if you do. And you will be able to enjoy a further satisfaction. Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton—they are the authors that every good poet, to say nothing of other writers, has read. Along with the Bible, they constitute the backbone of any serious reading program. How to Read Plays A play is fiction, a story, and insofar as that is true, it should be read like a story. Perhaps the reader has to be more active in creating the background, the world in which the characters live and move, for there is no description in plays such as abounds in novels. But the problems are essentially similar. However, there is one important difference. When you read a play, you are not reading a complete work. The complete play (the work that the author intended you to apprehend) is only apprehended when it is acted on a stage. Like music, which must be heard, a play lacks a physical dimension when we read it in a book. The reader must supply that dimension. The only way to do that is to make a pretense of seeing it acted. Therefore, once you have discovered what the play is about, as a whole and in detail, and once you have answered the other questions you must ask about any story, then try directing the play. Imagine that you have half a dozen good actors before you, awaiting your commands. Tell them how to say this line, how to play that scene. Explain the importance of these few words, and how that action is the climax of the work. You will have a lot of fun, and you will learn

a lot about the play. An example will show what we mean. In Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii, Polonius announces to the king and queen that Hamlet is insane because of his love CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS150 for Ophelia, who has spumed the prince's advances. The king and queen are doubtful, whereupon Polonius proposes that the king and he hide behind an arras, in order to overhear a conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia. This proposal occurs in Act II, Scene ii, at lines 160–170; immediately thereafter Hamlet enters, reading. His speeches to Polonius are enigmatic; as Polonius says, "though this be madness, yet there is method in'tl" Later on, early in Act III, Hamlet enters and delivers the famous soliloquy, beginning "To be or not to be," and then is interrupted by catching sight of Ophelia. He speaks to her quite reasonably for a time, but suddenly he cries: "Ha, hal are you honest?" (III, i, line 103). Now the question is, has Hamlet overheard Polonius say earlier that he and the king planned to spy on him? And did he perhaps also hear Polonius say that he would "loose my daughter to him"? If so Hamlet's conversations with both Polonius and Ophelia would mean one thing; if he did not overhear the plotting, they would mean another. Shakespeare left no stage directions; the reader (or director) must decide for himself. Your own decision will be central to your understanding of the play. Many of Shakespeare's plays require this kind of activity on the part of the reader. Our point is that it is always desirable, no matter how explicit the playwright was in telling us exactly what we

should expect to see. (We cannot question what we are to hear, since the play's words are before us.) Probably you have not read a play really well until you have pretended to put it on the stage in this way. At best, you have given it only a partial reading. Earlier, we suggested that there were interesting exceptions to the rule that the playwright cannot speak directly to the reader as the author of a novel can and often does. (Fielding, in Tom Jones, is an example of this direct addressing of the reader in one great novel.) Two of these exceptions are separated by nearly twenty-five centuries of time. Aristophanes, the ancient Greek comic playwright, wrote the only examples of what is called Old Comedy that survive. From time to time in an Aristophanic play, and always at least once, the leading actor would step out of character, perhaps move forward toward the audience, and deliver a political speech that had nothing whatever to do with the action of the drama. It is felt that these speeches were expressions of the author's personal feelings. This is occasionally done nowadays—no useful artistic device is ever really lost—but perhaps not as effectively as Aristophanes did it. The other example is that of Shaw, who not only expected his plays to be acted but also hoped that they would be read. He published them all, at least one (Heartbreak House) before it was ever acted, and accompanied the publication with long prefaces in which he explained the meaning of the plays and told his readers how to understand them. (He also included very extensive stage directions in the published versions.) To read a Shavian play

without reading the preface Shaw wrote for it is to tum one's back intentionally on an important aid to understanding. Again, other modern playwrights have imitated Shaw in this device, but never as effectively as he did. One other bit of advice may be helpful, particularly in reading Shakespeare. We have already suggested the importance of reading the plays through, as nearly as possible at one sitting, in order to get a feel for the whole. But, CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS151 since the plays are mostly in verse, and since the verse is more or less opaque in places because of changes in the language that have occurred since 160, it is often desirable to read a puzzling passage out loud. Read slowly, as if an audience were listening, and with "expression"—that is, try to make the words meaningful to you as you read them. This simple device will clear up many difficulties. Only after it has failed should you tum to the glossary or notes. A Note About Tragedy Most plays are not worth reading. This, we think, is because they are incomplete. They were not meant to be read—they were meant to be acted. There are many great expository works, and many great novels, stories, and lyric poems, but there are only a few great plays. However, those few—the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripedes, the plays of Shakespeare, Molière's comedies, the works of a very few moderns—are very great indeed, for they contain within them some of the deepest and richest insights men have ever expressed in words. Among these, Greek tragedy is probably the toughest nut to crack for

beginning readers. For one thing, in the ancient world three tragedies were presented at one time, the three often dealing with a common theme, but except in one case (the Oresteia of Aeschylus) only single plays (or acts) survive. For another, it is almost impossible to stage the plays mentally, since we know almost nothing about how the Greek directors did it. For still another, the plays often are based on stories that were well known to their audiences but are known to us only through the plays. It is one thing to know the story of Oedipus, for example, as well as we know the story of George Washington and the Cherry Tree, and thus to view Sophocles' masterpiece as a commentary on a familiar tale; and it is quite another to see Oedipus Rex as the primary story and try to imagine the familiar tale that provided the background. Nevertheless, the plays are so powerful that they triumph over even these obstacles, as well as others. It is important to read them well, for they not only can tell us much about life as we still live it, but they also form a kind of literary framework for many other plays written much later—for example, Racine's and O'Neill's. We have two bits of advice that may help. The first is to remember that the essence of tragedy is time, or rather the lack of it. There is no problem in any Greek tragedy that could not have been solved if there had been enough time, but there is never enough. Decisions, choices have to be made in a moment, there is no time to think and weigh the consequences; and, since even tragic heroes are fallible—especially fallible, perhaps—the decisions are wrong. It is easy for us to see what should have

been done, but would we have been able to see in time? That is the question that you should always ask in reading any Greek tragedy. The second bit of advice is this. One thing we do know about the staging of Greek plays is that the tragic actors wore buskins on their feet that elevated them several inches above the ground. (They also wore masks.) But the mem- CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS152 bers of the chorus did not wear buskins, though they sometimes wore masks. The comparison between the size of the tragic protagonists, on the one hand, and the members of the chorus, on the other hand, was thus highly significant. Therefore you should always imagine, when you read the words of the chorus, that the words are spoken by persons of your own stature; while the words spoken by the protagonists proceed from the mouths of giants, from personages who did not only seem, but actually were, larger than life. How to Read Lyric Poetry The simplest definition of poetry (in the somewhat limited sense implied by the title of this section) is that it is what poets write. That seems obvious enough, and yet there are those who would dispute the definition. Poetry, they hold, is a kind of spontaneous overflowing of the personality, which may be expressed in written words but may also take the form of physical action, or more or less musical sound, or even just feeling. There is something to this, of course, and poets have always recognized it. It is a very old notion that the poet reaches down deep into himself to produce his poems, that their place of origin is a mysterious “well of creation” within the

mind or soul. In this sense of the term, poetry can be made by anyone at any time, in a kind of solitary sensitivity session. But although we admit that there is a kernel of truth in this definition, the meaning of the term that we will be employing in what follows is much narrower. Whatever may be the origin of the poetic impulse, poetry, for us, consists of words, and what is more, of words that are arranged in a more or less orderly and disciplined way. Other definitions of the term that similarly contain a kernel of truth are that poetry (again, primarily lyric poetry) is not truly poetry unless it praises, or unless it rouses to action (usually revolutionary), or unless it is written in rhyme, or unless it employs a specialized language that is called "poetic diction." In that sentence we have intentionally mixed together some very modern and some very antiquated notions. Our point is that all of these definitions, and a dozen more that we might mention, are too narrow, just as the definition discussed in the last paragraph was too broad (for us). Between such very broad and such very narrow definitions lies a central core that most people, if they were feeling reasonable about the matter, would admit was poetry. If we tried to state precisely what the central core consisted in, we would probably get into trouble, and so we will not try. Nevertheless, we are certain that you know what we mean. We are certain that nine times out of ten, or perhaps even ninety-nine times out of a hundred, you would agree with us that X was a poem and Y was not. And that is fully sufficient for our purposes in the following pages. Many people believe that they

cannot read lyric poetry—especially modern poetry. They think that it is often difficult, obscure, complex, and that it demands so much attention, so much work on their part, that it is not worthwhile. We would say two things. First, lyric poetry, even modern poetry, does not CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS153 always demand as much work as you may think if you go about reading it in the right way. Second, it is often worth whatever effort you are willing to spend. We do not mean that you should not work on a poem. A good poem can be worked at, re-read, and thought about over and over for the rest of your life. You will never stop finding new things in it, new pleasures and delights, and also new ideas about yourself and the world. We mean that the initial task of bringing a poem close enough to you to work on it is not as hard as you may have believed. The first rule to follow in reading a lyric is to read it through without stopping, whether you think you understand it or not. This is the same rule that we have suggested for many different kinds of books, but it is more important for a poem than it is for a philosophical or scientific treatise, and even for a novel or play. In fact, the trouble so many people seem to have in reading poems, especially the difficult modern ones, stems from their unawareness of this first rule of reading them. When faced by a poem of T. S. Eliot or Dylan Thomas or some other “obscure” modern, they plunge in with a will, but are brought up short by the first line or stanza. They do not understand it immediately and in its entirety, and they think they should. They puzzle over

the words, try to unwind the complicated skein of the syntax, and soon give up, concluding that, as they suspected, modern poetry is just too difficult for them. It is not only modern lyrics that are difficult. Many of the best poems in the language are complicated and involved in their language and thought. Besides, many apparently simple poems have immense complexity under the surface. But any good lyric poem has a unity. Unless we read all of it, and all at once, we cannot comprehend its unity. We cannot discover, except possibly by accident, the basic feeling or experience that underlies it. In particular, the essence of a poem is almost never to be found in its first line, or even in its first stanza. It is to be found only in the whole, and not conclusively in any part. The second rule for reading lyrics is this: Read the poem through again—but read it out loud. We have suggested this before, in the case of poetic dramas like Shakespeare's. There it was helpful; here it is essential. You will find, as you read the poem out loud, that the very act of speaking the words forces you to understand them better. You cannot glide over a misunderstood phrase or line quite so easily if you are speaking it. Your ear is offended by a misplaced emphasis that your eyes might miss. And the rhythm of the poem, and its rhymes, if it has them, will help you to understand by making you place the emphasis where it belongs. Finally, you will be able to open yourself to the poem, and let it work on you, as it should. In the reading of lyrics, these first two suggestions are more important than anything else. We think that if readers who believe they cannot read

poems would obey these rules first, they would have little difficulty afterwards. For once you have apprehended a poem in its unity, even if this apprehension is vague, you can begin to ask it questions. And as with expository works, that is the secret of understanding. The questions you ask of an expository work are grammatical and logical. CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS154 The questions you ask of a lyric are usually rhetorical, though they may also be syntactical. You do not come to terms with a poem; but you must discover the key words. You discover them not primarily by an act of grammatical discernment, however, but by an act of rhetorical discernment. Why do certain words pop out of the poem and stare you in the face? Is it because the rhythm marks them? Or the rhyme? Or are the words repeated? Do several stanzas seem to be about the same ideas; if so, do these ideas form any kind of sequence? Anything of this sort that you can discover will help your understanding. In most good lyrics there is some kind of conflict. Sometimes two antagonists—either individual people, or images, or ideas—are named, and then the conflict between them is described. If so, this is easy to discover. But often the conflict is only implied and not stated. For example, a large number of great lyric poems—perhaps even the majority of them—are about the conflict between love and time, between life and death, between the beauty of transient things and the triumph of eternity. But these words may not be mentioned in the poem itself. It has been said that almost all of Shakespeare's sonnets are about the ravages of

what he calls “Devouring time.” It is clear that some of them are, for he explicitly says so again and again. When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced The rich-proud cost of outworn buried age he writes in the 64th sonnet and lists other victories that time gains over all that man wishes were proof against it. Then he says: Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate, That Time will come and take my love away. There is no question what that sonnet is about. Similarly with the famous 116th sonnet, which contains these lines: Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks Within his bending sickle’s compass come; Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, But bears it out even to the edge of doom. But the almost equally famous 138th sonnet, which begins with the lines: When my love swears that she is made of truth I do believe her, though I know she lies, is also about the conflict between love and time, although the word “time” appears nowhere in the poem. That you will see without much difficulty. Nor is there any difficulty in seeing that Marvell’s celebrated lyric “To His Coy Mistress” is about the same subject, for he makes this clear right at the beginning: Had we but world enough, and time, This coyness, lady, were no crime. CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS155 We do not have all the time in the world, Marvell says—for . . . at my back I always hear Time’s winged chariot hurrying near; And yonder all before us lie Deserts of vast eternity. Therefore, he adjures his mistress, Let us roll all our strength and all Our sweetness up into one ball, And tear our pleasures with rough strife Thorough the iron

gates of life. Thus, though we cannot make our sun Stand still, yet we will make him run. It is perhaps a bit harder to see that the subject of “You, Andrew Marvell,” by Archibald MacLeish, is exactly the same. The poem begins: And here face down beneath the sun And here upon earth’s noon ward height To feel the always coming on The always rising of the night Thus MacLeish asks us to imagine someone (the poet? the speaker? the reader?) as lying in the noonday sun—but all the same, in the midst of that brightness and warmth, aware of “the earthly chill of dusk.” He imagines the line of the shadow of the setting sun—of all the cumulative successive setting suns of history—moving across the world, across Persia, and Baghdad . . . he feels “Lebanon fade out and Crete,” “And Spain go under and the shore / Of Africa the gilded sand,” and . . . “now the long light on the sea” vanishes, too. And he concludes: And here face downward in the sun To feel how swift, how secretly, The shadow of the night comes on . . . . The word “time” is not used in the poem, nor is there any mention of a lover. Nevertheless, the title reminds us of Marvell’s lyric with its theme of “Had we but world enough and time,” and thus the combination of the poem itself and its title invokes the same conflict, between love (or life) and time, that was the subject of the other poems we have considered here. One final piece of advice about reading lyric poems. In general, readers of such works feel that they must know more about the authors and their times than they really have to. We put much faith in commentaries, criticism, biographies—but this may be only because we doubt our own

ability to read. Almost everyone can read any poem, if he will go to work on it. Anything you discover about an author's life or times is valid and may be helpful. But a vast knowledge of the context of a poem is no guarantee that the poem itself will be understood. To be understood it must CHAPTER 15. SUGGESTIONS FOR READING STORIES, PLAYS, AND POEMS156 be read—over and over. Reading any great lyric poem is a lifetime job—not, of course, in the sense that it should go on and on throughout a lifetime, but rather that as a great poem, it deserves many return visits. And during vacations from a given poem, we may learn more about it than we realize.