

READING LYRIC POETRY: TEN SUGGESTIONS

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

In the readings for this week, we'll be looking at some lyric poems. Reading lyric poetry is distinct from the types of reading we've done this semester (epic poems, philosophy dialogues, religious scriptures, plays, and so on). In particular, in these other sorts of texts, it is often somewhat straightforward to say what they are "about," at least in some basic sense. Not so for lyric poetry! So, rather than try to tell you what the poems we'll be reading are about, I'm going to give you some suggestions on how to read them for *yourself*.

1. **Lyric poems are like songs.** Many of the suggestions below are intended to reflect the fact that lyric poems aren't meant to be read like textbooks, novels, or even religious texts. To get yourself in the right frame of mind to read them, I'd encourage you to think of them as "songs." No one expects to fully understand a song the first time they hear it, and everyone knows that the "sound" of a song is *at least* as important as what the words of the song mean. Many songs get better the more you listen to them, and there are some song lyrics you'll *never* understand 😊. Many ancient lyric poems were *meant* to be sung, or accompanied by music ("lyric" comes from "lyre," which was the instrument used to accompany them). In fact, ancient "lyric poems" are the ancestors of both modern poetry AND modern song lyrics, and many modern readers' main exposure to lyric poetry is through song lyrics. (Bob Dylan even won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his song lyrics!).
2. **Lyric poems are supposed to be enjoyable!** When compared to forms like epic poetry, novels, philosophy/religious texts, textbooks, etc. lyric poems are *less* about conveying information and *more* about the experience of reading or listening. So, when you're reading, try to let go (at least for a little bit) of the idea that you're reading to *get some new information* out of the poem. Again, lyric poems are like songs. You don't listen to your favorite songs to *learn new information* (even though this happens sometimes). Instead, you listen to them because you enjoy them, or because they speak to you in a certain sort of way.
3. **The first time you read, don't worry about what it means.** In keeping with the idea that "lyric poems are like songs," you should just let them poem "flow over you" the first time through. Don't worry about looking up words, or Googling references to mythological figures, or stressing out about what a certain line "means." Just read the poem (out loud, if possible), and pay attention to feel/sound of the poem. You'll have time to focus on the details later.
4. **Lyric poems should be read more than once.** Lyric poems are usually pretty short, and the vast majority can be read in less than 5 minutes (again, just like most songs!). To really "get" a lyric poem, though, you'll need to spend more time with it. Second, third, and fourth readings are the time to look up unfamiliar words, to research references you don't understand, and to spend time puzzling over lines you find especially confusing (or exciting!). A good lyric poem, like a good song, will almost always *improve* as you spend more time with it.
5. **Line-by-line paraphrasing can be helpful.** As you really start getting into a poem, it's often helpful to try to *paraphrase* the poem (and to put each line from the poem "in your own words"). This is importantly different from *summarizing* the poem, where you are just trying to identify the "main idea" (and in fact, summaries of lyric poems are often pretty useless!). Your goal here is NOT to tell us what the poem as a whole is "about", but rather to investigate how each and every line (and word) "works" in the context of the whole poem.
6. **The "speaker" is not the same as the "author."** For whatever reason, critics of lyric poetry in all of its forms (including both traditional poems and song lyrics) have often assumed the "speaker" of a poem (the person whose "voice" the listener/reader hears) is the author, and that they are telling us the "truth" about what happened, and how they feel about it. However, this is often not the case, as many, many poets and songwriters have made perfectly clear over the last several thousand years. Lyric poets are NOT simply "writing down what happened"—they are instead using the events of their own lives (and often, the lives of others) to make *art* out of. A poem or song about love, for example, *might* reflect the author's own romantic history, but it might not (or it might do so only indirectly). Making good and meaningful art often requires "fictionalizing" what really happened.
7. **The little things that matter: tone, imagery, diction, simile/metaphor, form, stanzas.** The language of lyric poetry is NOT that of our ordinary speech. Instead, everything is carefully arranged, from the choices of individual words (the "diction"), the comparisons that are used (the similes and metaphors), the breaks between lines and stanzas that cause readers to pause (poems often don't "look" like ordinary text), the meter of stressed and unstressed syllables, and even the rhyme scheme. In lyric poetry, every word is there for a *reason*. In a good lyric poem, these various elements work together to present a unified experience to the reader. When reading master poets, your working assumption should generally be that any choice they make is a *deliberate* one, and that things that seem odd/wrong on first reading are, in fact, simply invitations to engage with the poem more deeply.
8. **Translation matter (a lot).** Because lyric poetry is so "exact", it is basically impossible to give a *perfect* translation of any poem from one language to another. Inevitably, *something* will need to be changed, whether this be the sound of different words or the shades of meaning they convey to reader. This is both a challenge and opportunity for translators, and many of the ancient world's most famous poems (by Sappho, Horace, Rumi or others) have been translated many, many times. The translators have often been poets themselves, who see themselves as providing an "interpretation" (rather than a literal "translation") of the poem in question. These interpretations will, inevitably, reflect not only the original source material, but also the interpreters' own choices regarding poetic form and style.
9. **Poems talk to other poems.** The common practice of poets translating other poets reflects a more general truth: poems "talk" to other poems. Knowing about this can often help the reader understand the poem at a deeper level. This can occur in several ways. First, many authors of lyric poems write "cycles" of poetry, where they return to the same (or image, or even word) again and again, each time adding some new/different twist on it. Second, many poems reference other poems, especially those with which they think their readers may be familiar (so, the Torah, the New Testament, the Quran, the Iliad/Odyssey, and Ovid's mythological stories have

all been favorite topics). When they do so, though, the goal is generally NOT to simply reproduce or paraphrase the original. Instead, they often *use* the reader's knowledge of the original source to make some new/unexpected connection.

- 10. Reading "about" a poem is a poor substitute for reading a poem.** Lyric poetry can be (and has been!) ruined for many people who might have potentially enjoyed it, because of the context in which they first encountered it: as a school assignment where they were forced to explain what the poem "means" (usually after consulting a teacher or textbook). It's worth remembering that lectures/books/websites about poetry (including this one!) shouldn't be mistaken for poetry itself. Reading *about* what a poem means, or how it uses "symbolism," or even the trials/tribulations of the author's personal life can make poetry seem much more boring/academic than it is actually meant to be. Poems, like songs, need to be able to speak for themselves.

WHAT IS POETRY? SAME FAMOUS DEFINITIONS

Emily Dickinson. "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?"

Matthew Arnold. "Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life — to the question: How to live."

Robert Frost. "Poetry is what gets lost in translation."

Dylan Thomas. "Poetry is what in a poem makes you laugh, cry, prickles, be silent, makes your toe nails twinkle, makes you want to do this or that or nothing, makes you know that you are alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own."

W.H. Auden. "One demands two things of a poem. Firstly, it must be a well-made verbal object that does honor to the language in which it is written. Secondly, it must say something significant about a reality common to us all, but perceived from a unique perspective. What the poet says has never been said before, but, once he has said it, his readers recognize its validity for themselves."

ACTIVITIES

Ob God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son" / Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on" / God say, "No, " Abe say, "What?" / God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but" / "The next time you see me comin' you better run" / Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?" / God says, "Out on Highway 61" (Bob Dylan, Highway 61 Revisited).

Option 1: Ancient Poems, Modern Songs. For this activity, you'll be comparing an ancient poem (from the reading assignment) to a modern song (whose lyrics you'll need to provide as part of the assignment). Here's what I'd like you to do:

1. Choose ONE of the poems from the reading assignment that you find interesting. In a few sentences, say a bit about why you find this poem interesting: does it have to do with poem's subject/theme? The poem's "voice"? The use of simile/metaphor? Something about the way it sounds.
2. Now, choose a modern song (with lyrics) that you think is (in some ways) *similar* to this poem. For example, the similarity might be "poems about jealousy" or "break-up poems" or "a poem featuring the ocean as a central image." I'd encourage you to try to get more specific than "poems/songs about love" (there are a ton of these!). In a few sentences, say a bit about the song's importance to you, and why you chose it.
3. Now, I'd like you to compare/contrast the poem and song lyrics with respect to at least THREE of following poetic elements.
 - a. Voice/Audience: Who is "speaking" in each? If there is a certain "audience" (for example, some poems/songs are written "to" the beloved, while others are written "to" society at large), who is it?
 - b. Tone: Is the poem/song serious? Sarcastic? Heartbroken? Hopeful? How can you tell?
 - c. Imagery: What are the central images in each?
 - d. Diction and word choice: What sorts of words are used in each? (Informal language? Academic language? What is the emotional "tone"?)
 - e. Metaphor and simile: What sorts of comparisons are made in each work?
 - f. References: Does the poem/song make reference to things "outside" the text? Does it reference current events? What is the *attitude* of the poem/song to these references?

You should write 400 to 600 words total.

Option 2: Poetry Imitation. Write a "modern" imitation of ONE of the poems from this week's assignment. Now, explain (in 150 words or so) about how your poem compares to the original. What did you change? Keep the same? Why?