

## Transcript: Philosophy VIDEO 2.7 – Poetry! Q Needs A Change Of Pace

Let's play a game. But no more card games. Word games. That's the ticket. Take out a pencil and paper.

Provide the following. (You may find it easier just to read these instructions. But I'll also read them out loud.)

1. Singular noun. Two syllables.
2. Verb. One syllable.
3. Plural noun. One syllable.
4. Singular noun. One syllable.
5. Singular noun. One syllable.
6. Plural noun. Two syllables. (Must rhyme with the selection for 1, above.)
7. Singular noun, two syllables.
8. Singular noun, one syllable.
9. Verb, one syllable.
10. Verb, one syllable.
11. Adjective, three syllables.
12. Plural noun, one syllable.
13. Plural noun, one syllable.
14. Plural noun, one syllable. (Must rhyme with the selection for 10.)

My lovely wife was kind enough to act as adult test-subject, producing the following scientific result:

An ashtray did my spirit seal;  
 I rode no human shoes;  
 She seemed a vase that could not feel  
 The tent of earthly news.  
 No anthill has she now, no horse;  
 She neither knits nor toasts.  
 Rolled round in earth's bejeweled course,  
 With frogs, and blots, and ghosts.

Wait! What?

OK, what's going on here is that I took a William Wordsworth poem and turned it into a Mad Lib. Here's the famous original, with variable bits underlined.

A slumber did my spirit seal;  
 I had no human fears;  
 She seemed a thing that could not feel  
 The touch of earthly years.  
 No motion has she now, no force;  
 She neither hears nor sees;  
 Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
 With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Now what happens is you take your 14 words—the ones you wrote down—and substitute them in, in order, for the underlined bits. Get it?

You're a Romantic poet and you didn't know it!

How exciting!

I picked this poem for a reason. Way back in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, while philosophers were worried about Hempel and Popper and non-black non-ravens, English professors were totally wondering how to interpret poetry—literature?

They picked this particular Wordsworth poem as a place to pick fights about it. It became kind of traditional fighting turf for a while. F.W. Bateson and Cleanth Brooks started it and then, I think, E.D. Hirsch made it a tradition. Feel free to forget those names, but, be aware, the fights go on. There are lots of live arguments about how people do, and should, interpret texts, whether or not they keep worrying poor Wordsworth like an old bone.

I'm going to say something now—not nearly enough—about arguments about how people do, and should to interpret ... ah, but what even should be the direct object here of interpret: texts, words, things, people?

The original dispute focused on whether interpreting poetry means reading Wordsworth's mind, in effect. Is the proper interpretation of a poem the author's intended meaning, or what's in the author's head? Or maybe proper interpretation means focusing on what the words mean. (Who cares what Wordsworth thought? He's gone. The worth must now be only in the words.)

Let's get on with our game. You now have a fresh poem, semi-randomly generated using my Mad Lib-style method. I'll bet your poem is probably pretty weird. Pretty nonsensical-looking. It sounds kind of old-fashioned and Wordsworth-y, but it isn't Wordsworth's poem anymore.

Suppose—just suppose—you could earn a million bucks if you could come up with some way of interpreting your weird poem that makes it make sense. I actually have no money to offer you. You'll just have to do it for the love of the game.

Let me start with my poem—my wife's, rather.

An ashtray did my spirit seal;  
I rode no human shoes;

Sounds to me like someone just died of cancer from cigarettes. And now they are lying in their coffin and we see them there. They are wearing shoes. But a dead person doesn't need shoes. A dead person isn't doing any more walking. I'm doing great! Let's keep going.

She seemed a vase that could not feel  
The tent of earthly news.



OK, it's a female. She is a vase. A breakable thing. She's dead, after all. A vessel. Precious? Now empty? "The tent of earthly news" is kind of a problem. If you fold a newspaper it looks like a tent?

In Shakespearean English 'tent' can be short for 'intent'. It can also mean a surgical probe. In *Troilus and Cressida*, by Shakespeare, the great and wise Hector declares:

*Modest doubt is call'd  
The beacon of the wise, the tent that searches  
To the bottom of the worst*

Hector is saying: if you are smart, you'll approach life like a doctor examining a wound. You'll poke down in there, nasty as it is, to see if there's infection or something needing extraction. Kind of a gross image. In the context of the play there are a lot of puns on 'tent'. The Greeks are living in tents, around Troy, and there's a lot of infection and disease, and a lot of worrying about plans, intents, and whether they are rotten. So maybe you could say, metaphorically, the play is about poking into the tents with a tent to see what the tent is. Sometimes I think Shakespeare makes too many puns.

Anyway, back to my poem—my wife's poem.

Maybe the poem says that the dead female, who is like a vase, can't feel the doctor's probe anymore—or the probe of the world and all the usually bad news it contains. So it's a way of saying the bright side of being dead is you don't have to read about bad news anyone. But why would an author use archaic medical terms from *Troilus and Cressida*? Or a newspaper metaphor? I got no idea.

No anthill has she now, no horse;

OK, I give up. The poem is very weird. More to the point, I don't want you to watch me interpret my poem. I want you to interpret your poem—which I'm sure is weird, too. And the thing I want you to do is: notice how you try to feel your way towards a possible interpretation. How do you know when you're stuck? What do you do to get unstuck?

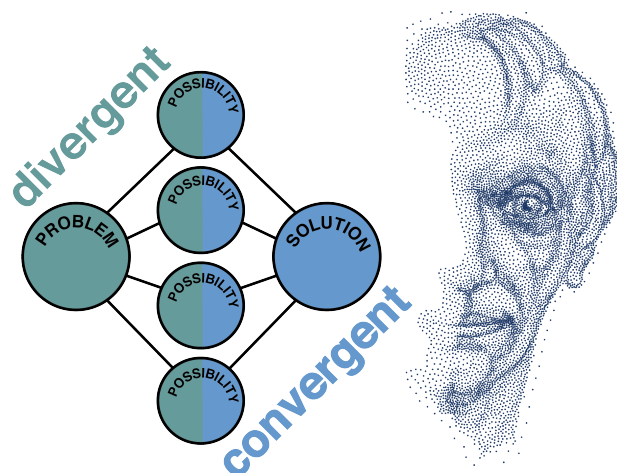
Notice what I did, and maybe take a cue from that. It's kind of like I'm trying to read the mind of the poet, even though I know no one really wrote it. A meaning is a message. A message needs a messenger. Is that right? What do you think?

In interpreting, I'm also thinking about words, as opposed to author thoughts. I had trouble with 'tent', obviously, so I went to find the biggest darn dictionary I could find. You want a big dictionary to play this game well. Like Scrabble.

In addition to thoughts and words, I'm thinking about things. A newspaper can be made into a tent. That's a physical fact—a possible connection. Shoes pointing up out of a coffin, and the thought that they are no use to the person wearing them. That is nowhere in the poem, but I came up with it by imagining possible physical connections between things mentioned in the poem, and then thoughts based on those possible physical connections.

Maybe there's a connection with my divisions between different senses of question: putting Nature to the question—what's a tent like? What are shoes like? There's putting People to the question—interpreting a poem is sort of like interrogating its author. So much so that if it doesn't have an author, we have to pretend it does, to play the interpretation game. There's putting Myself to the question—is my interpretation working? If not, better back up and take another run at it from a different angle.

But is interpreting a poem a matter of asking questions—of things or authors or yourself? I want you to do it. Interpret your poem. But try to notice what you are doing while you do it. Are you asking and answering questions internally. Are you engaging in divergent and convergent design thinking? (Sorry, that's a bit ahead of our story. I mentioned it in a previous video but it's something you'll get to in the design segment.)



Are you advancing hypotheses? If so, in what sense? Are you testing your hypotheses? Or are you just desperately seeking confirmation. You are just trying to find anything that makes any sense. And then you stop. That's normally considered very bad. I said it was a way to write a bad essay for your English class. Very unscientific and unrigorous. But maybe its an essential stage in thinking and/or perfectly fine when it comes to understanding poetry. Maybe it's a thing we have to do all day to get along, from the time that we are babies to the time that we finally get a Ph.D. in Philosophy.

OK, here's a really hard one. Make of it what you will—what you can. Suppose you were writing a computer algorithm, an app, to generate interpretations of poems. Maybe a bit like Google translate—you know how you can translate a text into another language, then back, and it comes out all funny. But an interpretation of a poem isn't just a translation of a poem into another language—although maybe it's sort of like that. Anyway, I know you obviously have no hope whatsoever of whipping up an app for poetry interpretation. But, even so, do you have any idea what strategy you might employ: what chunks of stuff would you need your algorithm to operate on. Words, thoughts, things in the world? Operate how? Would your algorithm have to first generate questions, then generating answers in response?

I know, I know. There's no market for an app that can generate interpretations of fake Wordsworth poems. Everyone wants Pokemon and Candy Crush, not that. But thinking about it is kind of a roundabout way of asking: how do I do it?

Because we do it all the time. Not play Mad Lib games with Wordsworth, or even interpret literature. We make sense of the world, of the things other people say, of the things they do, the meanings of events. That's a mess. But note: it's not obviously either an inductive or a deductive mess, per se.

One reason I included this video is that it's got no Plato, no Newton, no Popper, no non-black non-ravens in it. (Unless you put some in your poem. Don't blame that on me!) I doubt that interpreting poetry is a matter of deduction, or disconfirmation, or any of that. Then what?

Is thinking, in ordinary life, more like interpreting a poem, or more like solving a scientific problem?

Like I said before: I kind of wish we had an English professor on our teaching team. But you can't have everything. If we had one, maybe the module would more videos about interpreting poetry, and a lot fewer videos about non-black non-ravens. Just a thought.

In the next video I wrap things up.