I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
  Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in
  it after all, a place for the genuine.
    Hands that can grasp, eyes
    that can dilate, hair that can rise   5
      if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are
  useful. When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible,
  the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
  do not admire what   10
  we cannot understand: the bat
    holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
  a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the base-
  ball fan, the statistician –   15
    nor is it valid
      to discriminate against 'business documents and

school-books'; all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction
  however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry,
  nor till the poets among us can be   20
    'literalists of
    the imagination' – above
      insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them,' shall we have
  it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,   25
  the raw material of poetry in
    all its rawness and
    that which is on the other hand
      genuine, you are interested in poetry.

What does Moore mean when she references 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'?

Regardless of how you may define it, poetry, just like fiction and drama, has a particular set of strategies, or conventions, which poets use to create meaning from experience. And while Hall references the uniqueness of poetry as 'unsayable', Moore recognizes a kind of 'genuine rawness'.

What makes poetry, then? For one thing, poems are shorter than other genres of the literary imagination. And, the language of poetry is much more concentrated than the language of prose fiction, prose non-fiction or drama. In poetry, experience is distilled into fewer words, and so those words must have more impact, more dimension, more potency.

Remember these points as you approach any poem for the first time:
- The subject matter of poetry is no different than any other genre of literature. If a human being can have an experience, that experience can serve as the subject of a poem.
- Experiences translate into feelings. Some poets explore or confront feelings, rationalize feelings or intellectualize feelings, but poetry is the vehicle for conveying emotion, either directly or indirectly.
- In order to experience a poem you must be willing to experience the form. Read the poem aloud, if possible, several times. Read strictly according to the syntax (sentence structure). Let the punctuation of the poem determine your pauses and stops. The end of a line does not automatically signal a full stop unless there is a period; a slight pause is indicated otherwise.
- If you don't know the meaning of a word, stop and look it up. Every word in a poem has been carefully chosen for a reason, so you need to understand them all.
- Think about the speaker of the poem and also about the situation that the speaker is referring to. What do you know about each?
- Think about the title and determine if it refers to the situation or the speaker either directly or indirectly.

Considering types of poetry: lyric, narrative and dramatic

Lyric poems were originally composed to be sung or chanted. Today, lyric poems are the largest group and include highly personal, subjective and melodic reflections about ideas, abstractions, people or places. Odes and elegies are considered specific types of lyric poem. An elegy is written on the occasion of someone's death, and an ode is typically a longer lyric that uses elevated language to describe a serious, often abstract, subject.

Narrative poems tell stories, and so, like fiction, contain plot, setting, characters and point of view. The longest of these narrative poems are called epics. Shorter, highly rhythmic narratives called ballads often have repeated lines, like a refrain in song.

Dramatic poems have an invented speaker, or persona, who speaks in a dramatic monologue as a soliloquy or in a scene from a play.

Considering structure and language
A word about translation

Poems in translation will require you to understand that the artistry of the translator governs the choices he or she makes in translating specific words. A translator's understanding of the original language with its nuances and meanings allows for a faithful rendering of a poem. Subtleties, including the original poet's use of specific conventions and their effects, are not ignored by the translator. The translated poem, however, is not regarded as identical to the original. The fluid nature of language, as well as the translator's intentions, create something new. The translator's artistry stands on its own merit.

Speaker and persona

Speaker and persona – what's the difference? The difference relies upon the use of pronouns in a given poem. If a first-person 'I' voice is used, we can assume that either the poet is speaking directly to us, as he or she would in a diary entry, or that the speaker is a character the poet has created with a singular personality and perspective.

It is problematic and even dangerous to assume that the 'I' voice of the poem is the poet. Such an assumption would mean that the poet is confessing his or her feelings, admitting actions or proclaiming an understanding in a completely self-conscious manner. To assume that the persona, the 'I' voice, is the poet, is the same as assuming that any first-person narrator is, in fact, the writer speaking directly to the reader. Only extensive biographical information could confirm that the 'I' voice is that of the poet speaking directly about his or her own experience. It is always best to assume that the persona is a voice created by the poet, to render the experience of the poem in a personal, immediate and engaged manner.

Sometimes, the voice of the poem is termed 'speaker', despite the pronouns used in the poem. A voice that references 'he', 'she', 'it' or 'they' is called a speaker. This speaker functions in a similar way to a third-person narrator in prose fiction. This voice is less personal, less intimate and less immediate than the voice of the persona.

Time and place

Determining the speaker or persona of a poem is only part of your assessment. Where the speaker is located, when he or she is speaking, if anyone else is present, and why they are even speaking – all are significant questions that you will need to answer. Some poems require you to have knowledge of an actual time, place or historical event. Often, a direct allusion to a literary or historical figure carries with it an equally specific emotional meaning.

EXERCISE 2

Read the following poem by Eavan Boland and answer the questions that follow.

'Patchwork' by Eavan Boland (1990)

> I have been thinking at random
> on the universe
> or rather, how nothing in the universe
> is random—
>
> (there's nothing like presumption late at night.)   5
>
> My sumptuous
> trash bag of colors—
> Laura Ashley cottons—
> waits to be cut
> and stitched and patched   10
>
> but there's a mechanical feel
> about the handle
> of my secondhand sewing machine,
> with its flowers
> and Singer painted orange on it.   15
> And its iron wheel.
>
> My back is to the dark.
> Somewhere out there
> are stars and bits of stars
> and little bits of bits.   20
> And swiftness and brightness and drift.
>
> But is it craft or art?

> I will be here
> till midnight,
> cross-legged in the dining-room,   25
> logging triangles and diamonds,
> cutting and aligning,
> finding greens in pinks
> and burgundies in whites
> until I finish it.   30
>
> There's no reason in it.
>
> Only when it's laid
> right across the floor,
> sphere on square
> and seam on seam,   35
> in a good light—
> a night-sky spread—
> will it start to hit me.
>
> These are not bits.
> They are pieces.   40
>
> And the pieces fit.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you know about this speaker or persona?
2. How does time function in this poem?
3. What effect does the structure produce?
4. What is the tone of this poem?
5. How does punctuation function in this poem?

Diction

Flowery, ornate language has often been associated with poetry, but as a student of poetry you will see that not all poems are written in elevated language. Many poems are expressed with simple, straightforward, even colloquial language. In older poems, you will often encounter archaic terms or phrasings that are unfamiliar. A dictionary is a necessity when you read poetry.

Another consideration of diction in poetry is the way in which poets use the connotation of a word. Connotations – implied meanings – are loaded with emotion. Poets use these emotional connotations to add impact and create intensity for the speaker or for the situation the speaker addresses.

Syntax

No matter how a poem may look on the page, as a reader you must read the poem with full awareness of its syntax. Poets often vary word order to change rhyme schemes or rhythm patterns, such as introducing metrical variations. The order of the words within sentences affects not only how the words sound, but also how they suggest meaning. This order can

therefore alter our understanding of a poem. Inversion – reversing accepted syntactic patterns such as subject, verb and object – creates emphasis, or stress, on a particular word.

Briefly consider the first four poems in this chapter as examples of variations in syntax. 'London' has a regular and consistent syntactic pattern; each stanza, with four lines, contains a single sentence that works to enhance rhythm and rhyme. In 'We Wear the Mask', the syntax is a bit more varied. While the initial stanza is comprised of one sentence, the second and third stanzas have two sentences each – the variation of line lengths within the stanzas produce an interesting effect when compared to 'London'. While Dunbar's poem has a clear rhyme pattern, the effect of the unrhymed final line in the second and third stanzas emphasizes the unpredictable, stressing the unseen masks worn by African Americans as they struggled against the racist 'Jim Crow' laws of the late 19th century.

Adrienne Rich's 'Planetarium' is composed of only one sentence, though many sentences are implied through capitalization and spacing. Moore's 'Poetry' offers even more variation of syntax. Some sentences stop at the end of lines and others seem to run on for many lines. Moore's use of enjambment (run on, no end stop lines) between stanzas signals to the reader that enjambed stanzas must be regarded as a single unit of meaning, and consequently, a single unit of understanding.

Figurative language – metaphor, simile, personification

Figures of speech attempt to define something in terms of comparison to something else which is more familiar. Metaphor, simile and personification are all useful to poets who are trying to convey meaning and emotion to their readers. In **similes**, the comparison is stated using the words 'like' or 'as'. **Metaphors** make the same comparison but without the comparative words. To say that 'his fist is a hammer' (metaphor) or 'his fist was like a hammer' (simile) convey the same meaning. This meaning is produced through the comparison of two essentially unlike things expressed directly in metaphor and indirectly through simile. In personification, an abstraction is defined with human qualities. To say that 'love sat patiently by the door, waiting' works through a comparison of the animate and inanimate. Such a comparison creates a picture in the mind, but it also functions by forming meaning. Abstract concepts are made concrete through such comparisons.

Figurative language helps the reader create a picture within the mind's eye, and while that picture, or image, is most often visual, it can also be auditory or tactile. Figurative language becomes a way for us to imagine more clearly, more precisely. By using figurative language, poets enable their readers to access their senses more fully.

Sound – onomatopoeia, assonance, consonance, alliteration

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, poems are meant to be read aloud, because the sound of the words on the page is central to the poem's meaning. Sound devices, then, are significant and you must train your ear to 'hear' them.

Onomatopoeia is a wonderful device in which the word sounds like what it describes – 'splat', 'bubble', 'gurgle' and 'murmur' are all onomatopoeic words.

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds within a line or series of lines in a poem. Assonance creates a rhythmic effect, as when E.E. Cummings writes 'on a proud round cloud in white high night'.

Consonance is the repetition of a consonant sound within a line of poetry, as can be seen in these lines from the Emily Dickinson poem "Twas later when the summer went …":

> 'T was sooner when the cricket went
> Than when the winter came,
> Yet that pathetic pendulum
> Keeps esoteric time.

Alliteration in a line of poetry involves the repetition of the beginning consonant sound in a series of two or more words, such as in this line from a Robert Frost poem, 'Acquainted with the Night': 'I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet' – note the repetition of the 's' sound.

Assonance, consonance and alliteration are significant because the manipulation of sound creates an effect on the reading experience – words can be stressed and rhythms can be either intensified or broken.

EXERCISE 3

Read the following poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins and answer the questions that follow.

'God's Grandeur' by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1877)

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
>   It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
>   It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;   5
>   And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
>   And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
> Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
>
> And for all this, nature is never spent;
>   There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;   10
> And though the last lights off the black West went
>   Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
>   World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

QUESTIONS

1 How many different types of poetic conventions can you spot in this poem? What effects do they have on tone?

2 What is the effect of the assonance in line 6, and how does it underscore what is being described?

3 What is the message of this poem and how do specific images and sounds contribute to this message?

Structure – narrative, discursive, descriptive, reflective/meditative

The organizational frameworks for poems are determined by the poet's message, and his or her intention. Some organizational principle will guide the presentation of ideas. For example,

stories are told within a chronological framework, regardless of their genre. So, if a poet's intention is narrative, some kind of chronology will form the 'spine' of the body of this poem.

This type of chronology is not typical of poems that are reflective in nature. When we think about any subject, when we reflect on a specific incident or even an abstraction, our minds often move randomly, switching from one sensory impression to another seemingly without reason. Thus, reflective poems are typically more randomly structured than those that seek to narrate a story.

If the poet's message is to create a clear and accurate portrayal, we say that the poem has a descriptive framework or structure. Such descriptive structures will rely on vivid, often visual detail to sketch the poem's subject into the mind of the reader.

Likewise, in the presentation of argument, what is known as the discursive framework, the poet needs to be convincing. Often poets will choose to dramatize an event that will argue a point more subtly. A vivid, detailed account of a scene can then become the structural framework of their argument.

Rhyme scheme

A rhyme scheme is the pattern of rhyme established by a poem, based on the sound at the end of each line. Looking across history, there are dozens of different formulaic rhyme schemes in use, strictly laid down by the conventions of the type of poem. Alternatively, some poems will avoid a regular rhyme scheme altogether.

Rhyme schemes are commonly mapped out using a system of letters, each letter denoting a different rhyme sound. For example, here is John Donne's 'Death be not Proud', with the rhyme scheme mapped out:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee	a
Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou art not soe,	b
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,	b
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee.	a
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,	a
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,	b
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,	b
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.	a
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,	c
And dost with poyson, warre, and sicknesse dwell,	d
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,	d
And better then thy stroake; why swell'st thou then?	c
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,	e
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.	f

Remember, it is not enough in poetic analysis just to describe the rhyme scheme; you must also say what effect the rhyme scheme has, and how it contributes to meaning. Does the rhyme accent certain lines, and hence emphasize certain meanings? Does it produce a peaceful or a dissonant effect? Reading the poem aloud will help you to sense the poetic effect more clearly.

Metre

Poets use sound to create meaning and to elicit emotion in the reader. One way that poets create meaning is through the purposeful, patterned arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables in words. A stressed syllable has more emphasis, more sound, than an unstressed syllable, so if words are arranged in a set pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, a rhythm is created. Scansion is the process of scanning a line of poetry to determine this pattern of rhythm. By measuring the basic unit of a line, called a foot, we can describe the pattern. A foot consists of one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables, and they fall into the following categories:

- The **iamb** is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: e.g. 'enough'
- The **trochee** is a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable: e.g. 'dearly'
- The **anapaest** (also spelt anapest) is composed of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable: e.g. 'understand'
- The **dactyl** is a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables: e.g. 'desperate'
- And, a **spondee** is formed by two stressed syllables: e.g. 'help me'

A line is measured by the number of feet it contains:

- Monometer – one foot
- Dimeter – two feet
- Trimeter – three feet
- Tetrameter – four feet
- Pentameter – five feet
- Hexameter – six feet
- Heptameter – seven feet
- Octameter – eight feet

The most common metre in English poetry is based on iambic feet. Shakespeare's blank verse is essentially unrhymed iambic pentameter. End-stopped lines, run-on lines and enjambed lines all affect the rhythm of the poem.

As with rhyme, you should think about how the metre contributes to the overall tone and meaning of a poem. Does it make, for example, the poem rushed and breathless, or slow and steady, and how do these effects shape or emphasize the content of the poem?

Stanza forms – terza rima, villanelle, sonnet, free verse, concrete poems

As with rhyme schemes and metre, poetry has throughout its history also adopted several formulaic stanza forms. Part of the poet's skill has been to demonstrate his own flair and originality, but within the confines of a particular pattern of stanzas. The following are the most common of the stanza forms.

Terza rima consists of a series of three-line stanzas (tercets) with the rhyme scheme aba, bcb, cdc, ded, and so on. At the end of the poem, an extra line is often added to complete the structure: yzy z.

A **villanelle** is a poem of 19 lines, written in iambic pentameter. The poem is composed of five triplets (three lines) and a quatrain (four lines). Line 1 is repeated as lines 6, 12 and 18. Line 3 is repeated as lines 9, 15, and 19. The entire poem moves on only two rhymes: aba aba aba aba aba abaa.

There are many variations of **sonnet**, including the English or Shakespearean sonnet and the Italian, or Petrarchan, sonnet. Both are 14 lines in length, but the difference is in structure. In the first, the sonnet divides into three units of four lines each (three quatrains) followed by a final two-line unit (rhyming couplet). In the second, the fundamental break is between the first eight lines (an octave) and the last six (a sestet). The rhyme scheme in the Shakespearean sonnet is typically abab, cdcd, efef, gg, while the Petrarchan is typically

abbaabba cdecde. Traditional sonnets are written in iambic pentameter. A sonnet is a perfect form for arguing a point that is brought to conclusion at the end.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,   5
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;   10
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

– William Shakespeare, Sonnet 130 (1609)

Poems written in **free verse** avoid regular metre and consequently have no obviously perceivable rhythm. These poems often have highly irregular line lengths, but may also use repetition of words or phrases.

Concrete poems often draw their meaning less from the words used in the poem and more from the physical arrangement or shape on the page. These shapes are visually recognizable.

Appreciation

When you read poetry, you are using your imagination, your senses, your intelligence and your emotions. Reading poetry requires you to hear the sound of it, even if you cannot read the poem aloud. It also requires you to pay attention to every detail, from line length, to punctuation, to lack of punctuation, to capitalization, to rhyming words, to words that look like they should rhyme but don't – everything. Every word, every line, every space is purposeful. Nothing in a poem is arbitrary.

And so, to be alert, to be prepared to observe the poem, you need to read slowly and purposefully. For all of the poems that follow in this section, you will be asked to focus on a few details. Because interpretation is based on analysis, and analysis is based on keen observation or description, close reading in poetry requires that you are able to observe the poet's strategies. Some of these strategies, like subject matter, are obvious. Other strategies are less so. The subtlety of a shift in verb tense, for instance, may not be apparent on a first reading. The use of enjambment, or the placement of a caesura, can be equally significant because in all instances, these subtle details create effects that translate into meaning, into understanding and into feeling.

As you work through these poems, focus on your own emotional or intellectual reactions. You might find that by reading carefully and patiently, you discover that access point where the poem 'opens' for you, where you find the 'secret room' of the 'unsayable', or where you find the pleasure in reading poetry.

Guidelines for reading poetry

The following list provides a kind of road map for reading poetry. You can use these guidelines to approach any poem as the first step in analysis:

1. Read the poem, preferably aloud, several times.
2. Pay attention to the title. Has your understanding of the title changed as a result of reading the poem?
3. Do you perceive a speaker or a persona? What do you know about him or her? Is gender important? Does the speaker have personality or does he or she seem detached or disembodied? Do you respond personally to this voice? Does it engage you emotionally? Intellectually? Does the speaker address someone else in the poem? Can you determine their relationship to each other?
4. What is the situation in the poem? Does it take place at a specific time or place? Is location important?
5. How is imagery used in regard to defining both the situation and the speaker? What images strike you as particularly effective in terms of creating tone/attitude? Which of your senses are evoked through imagery – visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, kinaesthetic, organic?
6. What tones are created? A few to consider include: reflective, nostalgic, playful, ironic, sad, bitter, humorous, sincere, objective, formal, informal, solemn, satiric or serious.
7. What is the central purpose? To describe, to persuade, to tell a story, to reveal a moment in time, to reflect, to philosophize? Something else?
8. Does the poet draw your attention to a specific word, either though placement, repetition, allusion or connotation? Do some words take on metaphorical or symbolic meaning?
9. What sound devices are used in the poem? Consider: onomatopoeia, alliteration, assonance, consonance and rhyme. Is there a regular or irregular rhythm? If the rhythm is established through a metrical pattern, identify any breaks and/or shifts in that metrical pattern.
10. How does the shape of the poem, its structure and its architecture, work to underscore meaning? What effect does enjambment or punctuation produce? Does the physical structure of the poem reveal meaning?