

Talking about Poetry

Most of the poems can, of course, be simply read and enjoyed without any help or background information. However, to fully appreciate a piece of literature and get the maximum enjoyment out of it, it is advisable to read it closely and critically, more thoroughly than you would read, for example, certain sections of a daily paper.

What is more, there are a number of techniques which can be learned and which will help the reader to get the most out of any poem or work of fiction.

Poems are often divided into *verses* (also called *stanzas*).

Robert Frost's poem consists of four verses, each of four *lines*.

The *rhyme scheme* of the first verse is a b a.

The pattern produced by stressed and unstressed syllables is known as *metre*,

One unit of **stressed** and **unstressed syllables** is called a *foot*.

The lines of Frost's poem, for example, have four feet:

x / | x / | x / | x /
But I | have pro|mises| to keep

When you read this line aloud, however, you will see that its *rhythm* does not correspond to the metre because some syllables are stressed differently. You might, for example, read it like this:

But 'I have 'promises to 'keep.

When talking about a poem, it may be helpful to consider the following points. For example, what is the poet talking about? What is the *subject matter* or *theme* of the poem? Does it take place anywhere? Is there a particular *setting*? Is a particular *atmosphere* created?

What's the *tone* of the poem, i.e. the poet's *attitude* towards the reader? Is it serious or playful, formal or informal or perhaps ironic? Poets often like to express things in a more effective, individual way, e. g. by using *images*. Instead of simply saying that somebody is strong, a poet might use a *simile*: "He was as strong as a horse." or a *metaphor*: "He was a tower of strength." Certain words, besides their actual meaning, can have additional *connotations* for the reader. For example, the word "home" means the place where somebody lives, but for a particular reader it may have connotations of being happy/unhappy, secure/insecure, etc. Writers frequently choose words knowing- or hoping, that they will have particular connotations for the reader.

Stopping by woods on a snowy evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
 His house is in the village though;
 He will not see me stopping here
 To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
 To stop without a farmhouse near
 Between the woods and frozen lake
 The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
 To ask if there is some mistake.
 The only other sound's the sweep
 Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost

1. Analyse a) the metre and rhythm, b) the rhyme scheme. What effect is produced by them? Is it the same effect?
2. How would you describe the atmosphere of the poem? The sound of some words can help in creating an atmosphere. Can you find examples of words which the poet might have chosen for this reason?
3. What connotations - if any - do the words "snow" and "sleep" have for you?
4. The last line repeats the line before. What effect does this have? Do you think the two lines should be spoken in the same way when read aloud?
5. Having read the poem several times, what can you say about its subject matter and its setting?
6. What do we learn about the feelings of the speaker ("I")? We're not really told why he interrupts his journey, but which line comes closest to giving the reason in your opinion?
7. Some people see a symbolic meaning in Frost's poem. They interpret the snow-filled woods as a symbol for the power of beauty or death. Comment on this interpretation. Can you suggest any other interpretation?
8. Even after repeated reading, the poem leaves a number of questions open. What questions do you ask yourself on reading it?
9. It has been said that a poem is created not by the poet alone, but also by the reader. Try and explain this, using Frost's poem as your example.