

## POETRY: OUT OF CHAOS & INTO ORDER

Overview: Greek mythology beautifully envisions Chaos as the primogenitor of everything - the dark majesty and mystery of creation incarnate that spawns the first three primordial gods: mother earth, Gaea, the prison-like region of the Underworld, Tartarus, and the most beautiful immortal cosmic force, Eros (Love). Likewise, we may view poetry as a creation born out of the chaotic unconscious that in turn relies on earthly images to reveal the heart's darker core because of our deep compacity and need for love.

Activity 1: Read the below advice for reading a poem or in other words, creating order out of chaos, which is our brain's natural inclination. You may wish to make interactive notes (Hint. Not hint.) in the margins.

### READING A POEM: 20 STRATEGIES

#### A Guide For The Perplexed

By MARK YAKICH

*The Atlantic*, November 2, 2014

At one time or another, when face-to-face with a poem, most everyone has been perplexed. The experience of reading a poem itself is as likely to turn us off, intellectually or emotionally, as it is to move us. Unless patronized by celebrities, set to music, accompanied by visuals, or penned by our own children, poems do a terrible job of marketing themselves.

All those ragged lines and affected white spaces make them appear as though they should be treated only as pieces of solemn art. Look but don't get too close, and definitely don't touch. But what if the fine art of reading poetry isn't so fine after all? What if the predicament about poems is precisely our well-intentioned but ill-fitting dispositions toward reading them?

Here are 20 modest proposals toward rethinking the act of reading a poem.

1. Dispel the notion that reading poetry is going to dramatically change your life. Your life is continually changing; most of the time you're simply too busy to pay enough attention to it. Poems ask you to pay attention—that's all.

2. When you read a poem, especially a poem *not* meant to be a "spoken word" poem, always read it out loud. (Never mind what they said in grammar school—to subvocalize so that you won't bother your peers.) Your ear will pick up more than your head will allow. That is, the ear will tell the mind what to think.

3. Try to meet a poem on its terms not yours. If you have to "relate" to a poem in order to understand it, you aren't reading it sufficiently. In other words,

don't try to fit the poem into your life. Try to see what world the poem creates. Then, if you are lucky, its world will help you re-see your own.

4. Whether or not you are conscious of it, you are always looking for an excuse to stop reading a poem and move on to another poem or to do something else entirely. Resist this urge as much as possible. Think of it as a Buddhist regards a pesky mosquito. The mosquito, like the poem, may be irritating, but it's not going to kill you to brave it for a little while longer.

5. People will tell you there are two kinds of poems: the "accessible poem" whose intent and meaning are easy to appreciate, and the "obscure poem" whose intent and meaning are difficult to appreciate. It's up to you how hard you want to work.



*Still Life With Book*  
By Richard Diebenkorn

6. If you don't know a word, look it up or die.

7. A poem cannot be paraphrased. In fact, a poem's greatest potential lies in the opposite of paraphrase: ambiguity. Ambiguity is at the center of what is it to be a human being. We really have no idea what's going to happen from moment to moment, but we have to act as if we do.

8. A poem has no hidden meaning, only “meanings” you’ve not yet realized are right in front of you. Discerning subtleties takes practice. Reading poetry is a convention like anything else. And you learn the rules of it like anything else—e.g., driving a car or baking a cake.

9. As hard as it sounds, separate the poet from the speaker of the poem. A poet always wears a mask (persona) even if she isn’t trying to wear a mask, and so to equate poet and speaker denies the poem any imaginative force that lies outside of her lived life.

10. When you come across something that appears “ironic,” make sure it’s not simply the speaker’s sarcasm or your own disbelief.

11. “Reading for pleasure” implies there’s “reading for displeasure” or “reading for pain.” All reading should be pleasurable: Like sex, it pleases to a greater or lesser degree, but pleasure ultimately isn’t the only point.

12. A poem can feel like a locked safe in which the combination is hidden inside. In other words, it’s okay if you don’t understand a poem. Sometimes it takes dozens of readings to come to the slightest understanding. And sometimes understanding never comes. It’s the same with being alive: Wonder and confusion mostly prevail.

13. Perform marginalia. Reading without writing in the margins is like walking without moving your arms. You can do it and still reach your destination, but it’ll always feel like you’re missing something essential about the activity.

14. There is nothing really lost in reading a poem. If you don’t understand the poem, you lose little time or energy. On the contrary, there is potentially much to gain—a new thought, an old thought seen anew, or simply a moment separated from all the other highly structured moments of your time.

Try to see what world the poem creates. Then, if you are lucky, its world will help you re-see your own.

15. Poetry depends on pattern and variation—even non-linear, non-narrative, anti-poetic poetry. By perceiving patterns and variations on those patterns, your brain will attempt to make order out of apparent chaos. “Glockenspiel,” “tadpole,” and “justice” have ostensibly nothing to do with each other, and yet your brain immediately tries to piece them together simply because they are there for the apprehending.

16. As your ability to read poems improves, so will your ability to read the news, novels, legal briefs, advertisements, etc. A Starbucks poster a few years ago read: *Friends are like snowflakes...each one is unique.* How true. But isn’t snow also cold and ephemeral? Let’s hope our friends are not.

17. Reading poetry is not only about reading poetry. Its alleged hermetic stylizations of syntax and diction can enhance your awareness of the world, even those things that don’t deal directly in words. A dress, a building, a night sky—all involve systems of pattern-recognition and extrapolation.

18. The very best way to read a poem is perhaps to be young, intelligent, and slightly drunk. There is no doubt, however, that reading poems in old age cultivates a desire to have read more poems in youth.

19. Someday, when all your material possessions will seem to have shed their utility and just become obstacles to the toilet, poems will still hold their value. They are rooms that take up such little room. A memorized poem, or a line or two, becomes part internal jewelry and part life-saving skill, like knowing how to put a mugger in an arm-lock or the best way to cut open a mango without slicing your hand.

20. Reading a good poem doesn’t give you something to talk about. It silences you. Reading a great poem pushes further. It prepares you for the silence that perplexes us all: death.

---

Response: What is your take away about how Atlantic author Mark Yakich suggests “the perplexed” should go about reading a poem?

Activity 2: Let's try reading a poem. From the poems below, choose the ONE that appeals to you to read, think, and enjoy. Begin by following Yakich's Rule #2, then make your way through other rules that will allow you to interact with the poem. You must DO Rule #13, which is anything you notice no matter how small, odd, or unrelated. Just hang in there and read. Discussion to follow.

---

**won't you celebrate with me**

By Lucille Clifton

won't you celebrate with me  
what i have shaped into  
a kind of life? i had no model.  
born in babylon  
both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?  
i made it up  
here on this bridge between  
starshine and clay,  
my one hand holding tight  
my other hand; come celebrate  
with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed.

**[love is more thicker than forget]**

By e. e. cummings

love is more thicker than forget  
more thinner than recall  
more seldom than a wave is wet  
more frequent than to fail

it is most mad and moonly  
and less it shall unbecome  
than all the sea which only  
is deeper than the sea

love is less always than to win  
less never than alive  
less bigger than the least begin  
less littler than forgive

it is most sane and sunly  
and more it cannot die  
than all the sky which only  
is higher than the sky

**The Coming of Light**

By Mark Strand

Even this late it happens:  
the coming of love, the coming of light.  
You wake and the candles are lit as if by themselves,  
stars gather, dreams pour into your pillows,  
sending up warm bouquets of air.  
Even this late the bones of the body shine  
and tomorrow's dust flares into breath.

**Fast Break**

By Edward Hirsch

In Memory of Dennis Turner, 1946-1984

A hook shot kisses the rim and  
hangs there, helplessly, but doesn't drop,

and for once our gangly starting center  
boxes out his man and times his jump

perfectly, gathering the orange leather  
from the air like a cherished possession

and spinning around to throw a strike  
to the outlet who is already shoveling

an underhand pass toward the other guard  
scissoring past a flat-footed defender

who looks stunned and nailed to the flood  
in the wrong direction, trying to catch sight

of a high, gliding dribble and a man  
letting the play develop in front of him

in slow motion, almost exactly  
like a coach's drawing on the blackboard,

both forwards racing down the court  
the way that forwards should, fanning out

and filling the lanes in tandem, moving  
together as brothers passing the ball

between them without a dribble, without  
a single bounce hitting the hardwood

until the guard finally lunges out  
and commits to the wrong man

while the power-forward explodes past them  
in a fury, taking the ball into the air

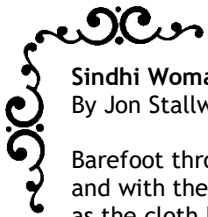
by himself now and laying it gently  
against the glass for a lay-up,

but losing his balance in the process,  
inexplicably falling, hitting the floor

with a wild, headlong motion  
for the game he loved like a country

and swiveling back to see an orange blur  
floating perfectly through the net.





**Sindhi Woman**  
By Jon Stallworthy

Barefoot through the bazaar,  
and with the same undulant grace  
as the cloth blown back from her face,  
she glides with a stone jar  
high on her head  
and not a ripple in her tread.

Watching her cross erect  
stones, garbage, excrement, and crumbs  
of glass in the Karachi slums,  
I, with my stoop, reflect  
they stand most straight  
who learn to walk beneath a weight.

**A Noiseless Patient Spider**  
By Walt Whitman

A noiseless patient spider,  
I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,  
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, filament,  
out of itself  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the  
spheres to connect to  
Till the bridge you will need be formed, till the ductile  
anchor hold,  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O  
my soul.

**In an Artist's Studio (1861)**  
By Christina Rossetti

One face looks out from all his canvases,  
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:  
We found her hidden just behind those screens,  
That mirror gave back all her loveliness,  
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,  
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,  
A saint, an angel--every canvas means  
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.  
He feeds upon her face by day and night,  
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,  
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:  
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;  
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;  
Not as she is, but as she fills his dreams.

**Zero Plus Anything Is a World**  
By Jane Hirshfield

Four less one is three.  
Three less two is one.  
One less three  
is what, is who,  
remains.  
The first cell that learned to divide  
learned to subtract.  
Recipe:  
add salt to hunger.  
Recipe:  
add time to trees.  
Zero plus anything  
is a world.  
This one  
and no other,  
unhidden,  
by each breath changed.  
Recipe:  
add death to life.  
Recipe:  
love without swerve what this will bring.  
Sister, father, mother, husband, daughter.  
Like a cello  
forgiving one note as it goes,  
then another.

**God Went to Beauty School**  
By Cynthia Rylant

He went there to learn how  
to give a good perm  
and ended up just crazy  
about nails  
so He opened up His own shop.  
"Nails by Jim" He called it.  
He was afraid to call it  
Nails by God.  
He was sure people would  
think He was being  
disrespectful and using  
His own name in vain  
and nobody would tip.  
He got into nails, of course,  
because He'd always loved  
hands--  
hands were some of the best things  
He'd ever done  
and this way He could just  
hold one in His  
and admire those delicate  
bones just above the knuckles,  
delicate as birds' wings,  
and after He'd done that  
awhile,  
He could paint all the nails  
any color He wanted,  
then say,  
"Beautiful,"  
and mean it.