

FEAR

NO

POETRY!

FEAR NO POETRY! The Essential Guide To Close Reading

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The Essential Guide
to Close Reading

Gwee Li Sui



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INTRODUCTION

WHAT, ME WORRY?

Poetry is scary! This is what people tell you or communicate to you indirectly by their twitching, shrugging, or skirting of eyes whenever it gets mentioned. Poetry is scary because it is regularly perceived as difficult to enjoy or, for that matter, understand. Some have this opinion that poetry is spiritual or otherworldly and thus beyond the grasp of common folks who live ordinary lives and think ordinary thoughts. Others give you the impression that it is written and read by self-absorbed people. As such, it is useless to practical existence, which has to be more grounded in reality and more socially adjusted.

The actual truth may lie in between: there may be reasons behind these perceptions without the kind of consequences they imply. Indeed, like it or not, one cannot be introduced to poetry and its study without some degree of worry. This reaction is natural. As a reader, you may feel that reading a poem is like encountering not just complex writing but a whole new alien language. As a student, you may find yourself frustrated by your persistent failure to know what a discussion of a poem requires of you. As a teacher or instructor, you may feel quietly inadequate about training others to read something you yourself find mysterious and abstruse.

Fear no longer! What I have written here is a modest book that aims to lead you to confront the scariness of verse and take charge of your own reading. The content draws from my long and winding journey as a poet, an artist, a literary critic, and an educator and therefore deviates much in formulation from the bulk of literary guides you may find in the market. **My primary goal is to get you to experience a poem from the inside, not as lines of text but as art that touches a nerve in life.** I want to believe that I can bring to the teaching of verse what is not often understood well, let alone communicated enough, about it.

After all, what is poetry? Let me use as a springboard these words from a poem by Singaporean poet Grace Chia, “To a Virgin Poet”:

Poetry is emotion motioned,
letters with legs,
riverdancing across the page,
doing high fives,
whistling a tune,
trampled upon,
sliced along,
pounding each other to a war song.¹

We have here an interesting definition of poetry that shows linguistic characters turning into *animate* characters. The words are coming alive; they are doing things, many things, and things are being done to them – casually, lovingly, and violently. What we are encountering is this notion that language becomes something else in verse because, in it, the relationship between words and what words do changes!

Thus, I want to begin by making some key corrections to the regular assumptions about verse we may know of. Firstly, while many people make the profound-sounding claim that poetry is about life, poetry is also *not* about life. This point should resolve for us the kind of embarrassment we may feel whenever we find ourselves wondering why we do not always understand poetry readily. **Poetry is art about life.** Reading a poem may not grant you instant clarity about what it means; perhaps all you feel at first is mild curiosity that leads you to consider reading it again. When we analyse a poem in an activity we sometimes conflate with reading a poem, what we are doing is really to observe its art.

Secondly, you may also have heard it said before that poetry is about language, that poetry is beautiful language or sophisticated language. Poetry may, in some ways, relate to language, but it is, in more ways,

¹ Grace Chia, *Cordelia* (Singapore: Ethos Book, 2012), 92.

not about language. At a fundamental level, you cannot, for example, teach proficiency in a language via poetry because poetry often teaches you to ignore or break the rules of language. Poetry does this curious thing of getting you to experience **language as a creative rather than a grammatical medium, language at its own limits**. Thus, someone who is not very good at expressing himself or herself in a language may, in fact, appreciate well what a poem is doing.

Thirdly, in the teaching of poetry as an academic subject, **the difference between reading a poem and writing an analysis is not drawn regularly**. The two activities involve distinct skill sets, and yet, due to their lack of distinction, students come to regard themselves as divided into two groups: those who can “do poetry” and those who cannot. But someone who can write or make a good argument may not know *where* the poetic enjoyment is. Conversely, another who loves poetry because he or she enjoys its life may not be able to translate this enjoyment into a good critical response. The understanding should establish clearly why a poetry reading class cannot be replaced by a course in language, critical thinking, creative writing, or professional writing.

All these fine considerations are brought into my instruction for close reading here. Hopefully, I can effect a change in the way you read a poem by changing the way you understand poetry itself. On top of this, I intend for the book to be of particular interest to Singaporeans not just in its engagement with how poetry is normally taught in Singaporean schools. Many of my analyses and exercises do concern known works produced by poets from Singapore. **My broader aim is to fit the study of Singaporean verse into a general study of verse and show that, by and large, the same skills are involved**.

I draw all my poems for study from the excellent anthology *&Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond*, edited by Edwin Thumboo and published by Ethos Books in 2010. If there is need for a companion anthology, that can be it. But do take note that a few poems here vary from the versions found in the volume and even in their original sources. Such differences highlight a quiet strength of my book. As effort has been made to check

each poem directly with its writer or copyright holder, I am alert to slight but still troublesome typographical errors and subtle changes across editions. I have thus chosen earlier forms of some poems and later forms of others so that we may have what I consider the best version of each poem for close study here.

Stylistically, this book is composed with a dual reception in mind. **It can be read entirely for personal enrichment or used as a guide for regular group discussions**. By a group here, I mean both a standard classroom context as well as a general adult reading group. The sole criterion is that every reader must be committed to reading these poems and engaging the various exercises regularly. The exercises need not be followed rigidly or conducted in sequence. Yet, while you are free to choose what is best for your own training purposes, you should make sure that real work is being done. This book will have failed considerably if all it encourages is passive, airy reading without motivated or systematic engagement of a sort.

There are three main sections in the book. The first section, **“The Basics”**, grounds all the work of analysis to be pursued in the other sections. It sets down everything you need to know to launch into the activity of close reading and the work of writing a critical response. Section Two, **“The Unseen Poem”**, contains seven sets of exercises for studying poems you are presumably encountering for the first time. Section Three, **“The Singaporean Poem”**, extends this practice with seven more sets that specifically involve what we call Singaporean poetry. The wish here is to get you to overcome a related fear, the fear of Singaporean verse, and to feel assured that, by this point, you should have acquired all the skills to analyse it well. No worries!

THE BASICS

SECTION ONE

THE BASICS

Technically, reading a poem is not the same as doing a close reading of a poem. Many people – especially students and teachers – nonetheless assume their similarity because the distinction is not often spelt out enough. You do not need to perform a close reading of a poem before you can enjoy it as a reader. **Do not invalidate this more ordinary and simpler relation you can have to poetry.** At this level, only you and the poem exist as a unit. If you cannot like a poem after reading it, try to give it a second chance; read it again. If it still falls flat and leaves you unmoved, so be it.

However, to do a close reading, you are really creating *an analysis*. Much of your enjoyment of a poem here is tied to your own ability to analyse it well. The more you involve yourself in a critical reflection, the more you should be enjoying yourself – because this is a different kind of pleasure! In this activity, the question of whether you like a poem or not or whether a poem is objectively good or bad is irrelevant. **The potential for enjoyment remains because you are the one creating it.** You create this in a way where others can share in it when they encounter your reading.

I am presenting as plainly as I can in this section what a close analysis typically involves. In Chapter One, an easy, grounding notion of verse is provided before I proceed to differentiate between reading a poem and studying it. In Chapter Two, I give a sense of the basic parts of a poem, what you should look for when you want to reflect on it holistically. Chapter Three is essentially an essay-writing guide; it offers some useful pointers to how you should construct your critical response. Lastly, Chapter Four is a literary glossary that carries the most basic terms you ought to know.

Every chapter is made up of two short parts for you to be able to manage your time for learning or teaching. **The time to spend on each of these parts should be roughly the same.** Thus, if you are drawing from the current section for classroom teaching, you may wish to pay attention to how long you are taking with one part the first time. You may also pick and choose the lessons that you feel are necessary for instruction since these chapters and their parts are only loosely put in sequence here. Every part closes with **a boxed space** that contains three special activities that you ought to engage either on your own or in a group or class.

CHAPTER ONE

READER, MEET POETRY

Most of us know a poem when we see it. However, when we are asked to define it, that becomes a different matter. We hesitate; we are less sure about what it is we actually know. What *is* a poem? Some say that it is **a painting in words** or **a sculpture in words** and are quite right. A poet does use words in the way a painter uses colours. He or she gives form to words in the way a sculptor carves or bends his materials into particular likenesses. Others call a poem **words with music**, and there is certainly a strong connection between poetry and song that we should not forget to observe.

To some, a poem can be recognised instantly as text with a shape, any shape other than the shape – or, rather, shapelessness – of prose. Prose runs from the left side of a page to the right, from one line to the next, until it is done. It has no need of shape or consideration for it. To identify a poem by means of this contrast to prose, by seeing it as anything unprosaic, is convenient, but it is not entirely accurate. After all, there can be poems that, for all intents and purposes, do look like prose; we call these **prose poems**. A short, randomly shaped piece of text is also not automatically a poem.

Perhaps we should just treat a poem as writing with specific qualities. **A poem is what expresses meaning in an imaginative and rhythmic way that brings out an experience of beauty.** This beauty, in turn, arouses distinct emotions within us. A poem is always such an enabler of feeling. It causes us to encounter an inner sensation that feels unique and yet also part of us. To understand this fact firsthand, let us not rush into an overly technical definition now. Let us keep our thoughts untangled and accept that a poem is simply a piece of text whose form, words, and movement can stir us powerfully.

1. Poetry Love

Reading a poem is **one of the great simple pleasures of life**. Poetry has been around for almost as long as human civilisation has existed in many parts of the world. There may well be oral versions of it among other animal species too – and why not? What we find natural to suspect is that poetry has an implicit relationship with language and culture. Because of this relationship, it is easy to take for granted how personally satisfying – as opposed to culturally satisfying – a poem can be. A poem is able to make us feel special; it can make us feel understood or capable of understanding another person. It can also make us feel loved or capable of loving.

A poem is able to empower us, convince us that we have the resource to comprehend great mysteries, move the universe, or change the course of our lives. Whether we go on and pursue any of these goals is a question of our choice; poetry does not take away our power to affect our own lives freely. It does not make anybody different from the person he or she decides to be. In this sense, **poetry cannot change the world**. Change happens only when people allow something, including themselves, to be changed. Ultimately, people – not art, knowledge, politics, or, for that matter, status, power, or wealth – are agents of change.

What a poem does grant us is **an encounter with the way another feels**. This “other” can be a person, an animal, an inanimate object, or something purely fictional. The feeling is not, as often misunderstood, the real or immediate feeling of the poet. Rather, the poet himself or herself creates such a feeling so that he or she can experience it. The experience offered by a poem may be impossible or inaccessible under normal circumstances. So a young boy can feel a married woman’s struggles, and a modern city-dweller can feel an ancient warrior’s anger. A reader who has never gone to the zoo, let alone the North Pole, can encounter a moment in a polar bear’s life.

A poem takes us into deeply human and private terrains. Even if the feeling belongs to, say, a polar bear, still something in how it is able to

touch us remains deeply human. By being thus broad and yet human-centred, a poem can expose us to what is inspiring as well as life’s negativities: hate, suffering, meaninglessness, and so on. It can make us feel not just happy but also as defeated as an ant trapped in honey. Through the latter, we may come to believe that we are entering the nature of sadness or powerlessness itself. A poem can lead us to know pain, horror, and cruelty as though we were the ones perilously caught in their devastation.

Again, poetry does not make us go out and absorb these qualities as part of ourselves without thought. It cannot turn us into miserable folks any more than it can transform us into happy or purposeful people.

Poetry invites and does not dictate. When it dwells on the depressing, it gives us a chance to identify with those with negative experiences and to see sense through their hearts and minds. The poet may or may not have known these experiences personally. It is likelier that, through **the sheer creative act**, the poet puts himself or herself at the centre of a very subjective experience. Well-chosen and well-arranged words allow him or her to fashion what appears to possess both truth and sincerity.

William Shakespeare, that chief figure of the English Renaissance, places the poet in the company of some interesting folks:

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.

The lunatic, the lover and the poet

Are of imagination all compact:

One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,
That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt:
The poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, **the poet’s pen**
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name.

Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed a bear!²

Shakespeare finds the lunatic, the lover, and the poet belonging together in the same category of humans. These individuals see more than most do because they are open to a mental resourcefulness that lies beyond “cool reason”. However, the way each of them relates to the imagination is subtly different: the madman is sensitive out of weakness whereas the lover stirs from an excess of emotions. The poet, in fact, shows **strength of mind** when he or she plucks from “airy nothing” what is then fixed with place and identity, “a local habitation and a name”. Crucially, Shakespeare does not see this potential as alien to the ordinary folk. One *knows* what it is like to feel in joy “some bringer of that joy” or to mistake a bush for a bear when in fear!

The imagination is a truly amazing human power. It is what activates us as readers of verse to see connections and realities we have not seen before and find newness in the ordinary around us. The imagination can cause us to live in the space between two raindrops and think the thoughts of a little flea. It can bring us to encounter the greatness in absent people or sense complexity in simple events or simplicity in complex ones. We can believe through it that we are uncovering – just during the moment when we are reading a poem – truths as hidden as the depth of a soul or a secret of life itself.

This freedom from immediate reality can lead us to regard poetry as **a form of escapism**. By this, I mean that poetry seems to let us forget our worldly affairs and, for a time, become irrelevant to our own lives. It is true that this is one of poetry’s pleasures, one of art’s magical properties, but it is unfair not to consider how such an escape can be good as well. In fact,

² William Shakespeare, *Midsummer's Night Dream* 5.1.4-22.

we should all take regular mental breaks especially when the beautiful, the sublime, and points of view distinct from our own are involved. We can experience through them **release from stress, claustrophobia, alienation, and a sense of futility**. We may return to practical living recharged, more connected, and humanised.

Remember that a poem is always a thing of *both* the imagination and human experience, and it is important to recognise this duality for two basic reasons. Firstly, we can grasp from it that, in a poem, a poet’s imagination does not act to fill in for a lack in real experience. Rather, it constructs or adds to the experience **in a way that makes evident an inherent possibility for beauty**. Secondly, because of this relationship, a poem is just not a mere conveyer of an experience but also **a constructed thing**. It can be discussed in terms of the effect it produces as well as the devices that help to make this effect possible.

Do you know that you are already familiar with how pleasing poetry is in your day-to-day life? For example, you must know how special it feels to receive a card with poetic lines from a friend, a relative, or a lover and how this feeling is distinct from the card’s message. You also enjoy the poetic in song lyrics, this fact explaining why marketers like to use jingles – essentially crude poems – to promote their wares. Public speakers tend to employ the poetic to move their audiences. Consider the wartime speeches of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the famous “I have a dream” speech by American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. Then, there are the moments in movies you find too emotional for words and call poetic: why do you say that?

Try It Out!

1. Ask yourself what a poem is. Write down as many responses as you can find yourself having. If you have a group, get everyone to share his or her responses and identify the popular definitions.
2. One of the ways to start appreciating poetry is to **write your own poems**. Do not worry about how well you are writing at this stage. Think of someone you wish to give a poem to – and then compose it! If you have not written a poem before, this is the perfect time to start.
3. If you have a group, **declare a Poetry-Writing Day**. On this day, all members of your group should aim to craft every message he or she produces – a note, an email, or a SMS – to look like a poem. Have everyone share some of these messages at your next session.

2. Reading versus Studying

When we study a poem or teach it to others, we must **never divorce the reading from the pleasure**. This is a fundamental rule that learners and educators should bear in mind and aim to maintain in practice. I have begun this chapter by inviting you to reflect on the experience of reading, to wrestle with what a poem is. A poem is not a mere snippet of text. If we treat it as such, as something that exists primarily for its message, then we overlook its “thing-ness”. We overlook the fact that **a successful poem cannot appear in some other way**; it cannot be rewritten in another form.

Just because a poem speaks does not mean that there must be a message or a moral. What always takes priority in a poem independent of its message is an experience. **A poem that is not experienced is simply not read**. One can analyse a poem, even in a brilliant, technical way, without having experienced it; one merely reads it as *text*. But to do so will not develop you into the kind of reader I like to see more of, a reader who refuses to treat a poem as a means to an end. We do not enjoy a meal if the point is to be done with it. We do not enjoy a game of tennis if all we desire is physical exercise.

When we treat reading functionally, we get to the end without entangling ourselves in the process emotionally. We remain detached as individuals from the experience of poetry, and a large part of what a poem is remains unexplored by us. Here, I am indeed drawing a basic distinction between an intellectual engagement with poetry and a holistic one. Like medicine, poetry should nurse a whole person and not just be a way to its own end. An interpretation of a poem can reward us better *not* by assuring us that we are smart or competent. Rather, we are enriched when we strangely feel that a poem **takes something from us**, leaving us feeling human in its wake.

So let us do away with a results-based mindset when we are engaging a poem! Remember that poetry itself has existed long before its teaching in schools and universities, and a study of it in a work should accord

it due respect. An interpretation does not just mean describing what a poem says textually, nor does a poem mean whatever we want it to mean. As such, when we ask or are asked what a poem is saying, we should really refrain from limiting ourselves to talking about this poem's message. The question means to pose: **what is it we are enjoying?** In a poem, there is always something to be understood this way, something to be enjoyed.

To enjoy a poem is not the same as to like a poem. We need not like a poem that we enjoy as its close reader, and, conversely, we can always enjoy something without liking it. The difference may sound rhetorical, like a play with words, but do indulge me a while more as I am trying to make a critical point by means of this distinction. It is conceivable, for example, that we enjoy the company of someone we do not like particularly because liking or disliking has to do more with our own tastes, preferences, interests, and personality. A roomful of people can hardly find everyone in it liking the same poems or the same poets.

However, to enjoy a poem, our liking is just one component of our experience and may not even be the most crucial one. What we fundamentally apprehend in enjoyment is the way a poem works in parts and as a whole, what it is doing with language and *to* language, how everything in it falls together. In other words, when we enjoy a poem, we are really enjoying **our own awareness of its composition**. We derive enjoyment from both its experience and an understanding of how this itself is produced imaginatively. When we study a poem, we are effectively looking **to describe this enjoyment**.

On this note, I go on to make another fine distinction, between "reading a poem" and "studying a poem". These phrases tend normally to be interchangeable, but we should learn to tell them apart in practice. When we read a poem, our pleasure is personal and internal only; because we are connecting it to ourselves alone, the poem can mean whatever we want it to mean. Indeed, human, subjective uniqueness sees to it that different people coming to a poem must emerge with different meanings. As such, as private pleasure, there is no need for us

to convince another person. It is usually enough to say that we like a poem or dislike another, and our reasons say a lot about us.

However, when we study a poem, as with the academic study of anything, **communication is central**. The ability to describe our enjoyment clearly and accurately allows others to know what it is we are enjoying. It also allows them to assess whether or not we are making reasonable connections and thus valid or good points. Therefore, when we study a poem, it becomes irrelevant what the poem may mean privately or randomly to us. I once had a bad fall while carrying an ice-cream cone as a child, and the episode left me seeing ice cream in a negative light. But this fact is irrelevant to how I should interpret Wallace Stevens's well-known poem, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream". I should only observe the meaning of ice cream here **in terms of experiences others can relate to**.

Let me thus spell out systematically what we should do and the rationale for it:

1. As students of verse, we must look to communicate well what we think. In view of this end, **clear expression** is necessary.
2. Because our intention is to communicate, we have to seek to make sense. As such, **proper reasoning** is necessary too.
3. When we make connections, we should always do so in a way where others can agree with us. Meaning is, in this sense, social because **it has to be relatable**.

Given such a dynamic nature, every interpretation is naturally open to being interpreted further. Others can agree or disagree with it, correct, challenge, refine, or expand it because there is no absolute, final answer. However, **while there are ultimately no right and wrong readings of a poem, there are good and bad ones**. A bad reading is one that communicates poorly, fails to make good sense, or argues mysteriously or in a circle.

Here then are our two **paradoxes** of poetry reading; a paradox is a truth that only appears to contain a contradiction. The first one I have

states that, **while a poem can mean anything, it also has very definite meanings**. As private readers, we can read a poem to mean whatever we like, but, on a social level, a poem cannot be that vague or the point of its own material existence would be defeated. This is a paradox that needs to be understood and taught well to students so that they know how a subjective reading of a poem can still be evaluated objectively. What is being assessed in the reading is how sensible, persuasive, or insightful it is.

A second paradox tells us that, **while a poet may write a poem, it is you the reader who can understand it**. The American poet Carl Sandburg confesses as much when he notoriously says: "I've written some poetry I don't understand myself."³ A poem that can be understood only by its writer is of no use to all of us who are students of verse. Thankfully, no such poem exists theoretically since we are always able to raise meanings even out of a jumble of words, let alone an absurd or cryptic poem. A poet's explanation is, as such, less urgent and central to a reader than the reader's own enjoyment. Because a poem's accessible meanings lie in *your* enjoyment, it is *your* interpretation that can generate its proper study.

Try It Out!

1. Take some time to flip through an anthology of verse and **make a note on the poem you like most**; then ask a friend to do the same. If you have a group, get everybody to do this with your course anthology, whichever it is. Invite each person to share his or her chosen poem and say why he or she likes it.
2. **List the differences between reading a poem and studying it**. Are there poems you like to read but consider difficult or less interesting to study? Are there also poems you enjoy as a literature student but will not read again at your own leisure?
3. Do you think that it is difficult to study a poem? **Make a list of reasons why you think that it *can* be difficult**. If this exercise is done in a group, there is no need to share the reasons openly. Advise everyone to keep his or her own list and revisit it once in a while, ticking off any reason that is no longer applicable later.

³ George Plimpton, *The Writer's Chapbook: A Compendium of Fact, Opinion, Wit, and Advice from the Twentieth Century's Preeminent Writers* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 99.