

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO



HOW TO READ
A POEM

“Completely brilliant. I wish I were young again with these by my side. It’s like being in a room with marvellous tutors...they are a joy to read.”

JOANNA LUMLEY

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW
IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Malcolm Hebron

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Introduction

This book is written with one aim: to help you read, understand and appreciate poetry. The English language has an extraordinarily rich stock of poems to its credit, from the epic *Beowulf*, written perhaps as early as the eighth century, to the poetry of Simon Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy and the many other fine writers working today.

And all this wonderful stock is there to be *read*. Do you really need a guide to that? Can't you just get on and read it? You certainly can. But there is some stuff you just have to know if you are going to get the most out of it. Reading poetry *well* is something I am still learning to do, and in this book I pass on where I have got up to so far.

Listening to ghosts

I've never seen a ghost. But there's a house I know in Devon which used to be a barn. One day the owner went downstairs and found a man standing there, in Victorian clothes. He was just standing, lost in thought, in the middle of the kitchen. After a time, without a word, the visitor left.

So I'm quite willing to accept there may be ghosts out there. I've just never seen one myself. But I have, in one way, had many meetings with the dead, and you have, too: through reading books.

It's easy to forget what strange things books *are*. The shelf I'm looking at, right now, holds the words of human beings from all sorts of times and places: just by opening these volumes, I can let their voices flood into my mind. I can share the experiences of a soldier in the First World War, listen to someone who was in love in the 16th century, lose myself in a story that takes me to the taverns of 17th-century Spain.

Through their writings, authors from different ages, and all sorts of different places, have sent their experiences out into the world where, miraculously, they have survived, while the writers themselves have lived their lives and passed on. And the most distilled, intense record they have left us is to be found in poetry.

Let's go back to my ghost story from Devon. But now imagine it's *you* who goes downstairs. There in front of you, in flickering candlelight, is an old man, dressed in Victorian clothes. He has white hair. He

leans on a stick. The room is quite bare, but there's a tall mirror in front of him. He stares into it for a while. You stand, transfixed. Then he starts speaking – to you, or to himself? Has he even seen you? It's hard to tell. His voice is quiet, almost a whisper.

This is what he says:

*I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin
And say, 'Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!'*

*For then I, undistrest
By hearts grown cold to me,
Could lonely wait my endless rest
With equanimity.*

*But Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide.*

Then a long silence falls. The candle sputters and goes out. Not knowing how, you find yourself outside. But the words of the old man stay with you.

I'm getting old, he seemed to be saying, my skin is wasting away, my body is frail. If only my feelings would fade away as well! Then I wouldn't mind if people felt coldly towards me, for I could just wait calmly for death to come. But no, Time won't let me off the hook. Still I feel the passions and desires that I did when I was a young man in the noon of life, surging

through me. I'm old on the outside, but young on the inside, close to death yet still so alive. Why can't my feelings go away and leave me in peace?

It's a sad thought – the shadows are lengthening... Is that what it's like being old? Some of what he says seems odd, and surprising.

And view my wasting skin...

Curious words. Why *view*, and not *see*? A *view* suggests you're having a good long look, like the view from a clifftop. And *wasting*, not *wasted*: that *-ing*, that little word ending, makes us think that the skin is wasting away, *right now, even as he looks in the mirror*.

And the *fragile frame* is presumably the man's body, yet it makes you think of some tottering wooden barn, shaken by *throbbings of noontide*, as if his feelings are like a wind or an earthquake stirring the foundations, making the whole structure creak. The poet doesn't sound as if he is feeling sorry for himself, though. His verses are delivered in a dignified, unhurried way, through lines of measured rhyming verse, with some thoughtful, educated words, such as *equanimity* (meaning calmness, or self-control). That's not how we sound when we're asking for sympathy. There is no complaint here, just a restrained statement of feeling.

For then I, undistrest...

Undistrest is another unusual word: the life the poet dreams of is one defined by its absence of distress rather than by any positive quality.

And look at that word the poem ends on: *noontide*. In the Bible noontide was associated with temptation: Christian monks used to talk about the *noontide demon*. You don't need to know this to understand the poem, but the poet clearly knew it, and his image is carefully chosen. This is a poem about a particular kind of temptation: the temptation of youthful desire and passion.

Well, that is one way of reading a poem. On this occasion you met the ghost of the poet and novelist, Thomas Hardy.

Another way of reading a poem is to see it as a *journey*. It takes us from the familiar to the strange, from the known to the unknown. In this poem, Hardy takes us on a journey from looking into a mirror – a familiar experience – to what must be for most of us the unknown, strange world of being old yet flooded with the passions of youth.

Some poems, especially from earlier history, sound rather grand, as if a wizard or prophet is speaking. A lot of modern poetry is more like someone chatting to you across the table. But in both cases – whether it's the prophet speaking, or the companion across the table – a poem makes you put other things to the back of your mind and *give the speaker your attention*.

That's what this book is about. Its aim is to give you some suggestions on how we can pay attention to poetry, and make the most of its message. "It is the business of the poet to touch our hearts by showing his own," was how Thomas Hardy put it. The pages

that follow are about how to be touched. How to read a poem. How to listen to ghosts.

Section One: What?

What's it about?

“The poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese.” (G K Chesterton)

When we read a poem for the first time, a useful thing to do is *to forget it's a poem*. We need to be clear *what* it is saying before we think about *how* it is saying it. (There are poems about all sorts of things though not many, as Chesterton reminds us, on the subject of cheese.)

Love and Friendship

*Love is like the wild rose briar,
Friendship, like the holly tree –
The holly is dark when the rose-briar blooms
But which will bloom most constantly?*

*The wild rose-briar is sweet in spring,
Its summer blossoms scent the air;
Yet wait till winter comes again
And who will call the wild-briar fair?*

*Then scorn the silly rose-wreath now
And deck thee with the holly's sheen,
That when December blights thy brow
He still may leave thy garland green.*

(Emily Bronte, 1818-1848)

In other words...

Love is like a rose, and friendship is like the holly. Next to the blooming rose, the holly seems dull. But which one would you rely on? In spring and summer, the rose is in bloom and smells lovely. But in winter it fades away. Forget about love, then, which is wonderful but short-lived, and go for friendship. Then, when your winter time comes, you still have a friend you can count on.

Or, to put it in a sentence: *romantic love is wonderful but short-lived, while friendship is permanent and won't desert you.*

You might ask: “Why didn't she just say that and save us all some time?” But Bronte has put these thoughts across in a way which is musical, which moves in pleasant rhythmic way, and gives us pictures to go with the abstract ideas. All of this helps us to remember it. Another poet, W. H. Auden, defined poetry simply as “memorable speech”.

The paraphrase above is what we call the **argument** of the poem.

Once we have an idea of the argument, we can ask: “What does it make us think about?” The poem above turns our mind to love and friendship, but maybe to other things, too – how so often in life the

most exciting things only last for a short time, while the most valuable ones are those we don't pay much attention to.

The subjects that a poem makes us think about are its **themes**. It's a common misconception that the ideas of poetry are deep: often they are quite simple, and familiar. But Bronte expresses what is a common idea in a vivid, striking way and in so doing she makes the familiar seem unfamiliar. Another famous remark about poetry is that it gives us (in the words of Alexander Pope) "What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed".

Let's look at a harder poem. Emily Bronte led us by the hand and pointed out what her images meant. But not all poets do this. Sometimes they give us more work to do. Here's another poem about a rose.

The Sick Rose

*O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:*

*Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.*

(William Blake, 1757-1827)

Where Bronte kindly told us what the rose and holly



William Blake's hand-coloured print, presenting *The Sick Rose* in his typical style

stood for, Blake is not so considerate. So all we can do is retell the strange little story:

*You're ill, rose! There's a worm, which is invisible
and flies in the stormy night and it's found you in your
bed and it's destroying you with its love.*

So what do the rose and the worm mean? I don't know. *No one knows*. Critics and scholars still debate these mysterious eight lines. And Blake didn't help us by writing down the answer on the back. Perhaps even *he* didn't know! Maybe it was a vision or dream that he just wrote down because it felt significant to him.

A rose is associated in our minds with love, beauty, fragility (as in the previous poem). And it's clear that the worm here is something dangerous – it's invisible, it flies in a storm, it destroys with a *secret love*. Could it be one of those insects that gets into flowers and