

Chapter One – What Is Poetry?

Poetry is as universal as language and almost as ancient. The most primitive people have used it and the most civilized have cultivated it. In all ages and in all countries poetry has been written and eagerly read or listened to by all kinds of people. The intelligent and the sensitive individual appreciate it greatly and it has appealed, in its simpler forms, to the uneducated and to children. Why? Firstly because gives pleasure, People have read it, listened to it, or recited it because they liked it, because it gave them enjoyment. But this is not the whole answer. Poetry in all ages has been regarded as important, not simply as a form of amusement. Rather it has been regarded as something central to existence, something having unique value to the fully realized life, something without which we are spiritually impoverished. To understand the reason for this we need to have an understanding of what poetry is – provisional, because people have always been more successful at appreciating poetry than at defining it.

Initially poetry might be defined as a kind of language that **says more** and **says it more intensely** than does ordinary language. In order to understand this fully, we need to understand what is that poetry “says.” For language is employed on different occasions to say quite different kind of things: in other words, language has different uses.

Perhaps the most common use of language is to communicate information. We say that it is nine o’clock, that there is a good movie downtown, That George Washington was the first president of the United States, That the bromine and iodine are the members of halogen group of chemical elements. This we might call the practical use of language; it helps us to understand the ordinary level of business living.

But it is primarily to communicate information that novels and short stories and plays and poems are written. These exist to bring us a sense and a perception of life, to widen and sharpen our contacts with existence. Their concern is with experience. We all have an inner need to live more deeply and fully with greater awareness, To know the experience of others and to know better our own experience. The poet, from his own store of felt, observed, or imagined experiences, selects, combines, and recognizes. He creates significant new experiences for the reader--significant because focused and formed--in which the reader can participate and that he may use to give him a greater awareness and understanding of his world. Literature, in other words, can be used as a gear for stepping up the intensity and increasing the range of our experience and as a glass for clarifying it. This is the literary use of language, for literature is not only an aid to living but a mean to living. (A third use of language is as an instrument of persuasion.)

Suppose, for instance, we are interested in eagles. If we want simply to acquire information about eagles, we may turn to an encyclopedia or a book of natural history. There we find that the family of *Falconidae*, to which eagles belong, and other information about height, weight and etc. But unless we are interested in this information only for practical purposes, we are likely to feel a little disappointed, as we thought we had grasped the feather of the eagle but not its soul. True, we have

learned many facts about the eagle, but we have missed somehow its lonely majesty, its power, and the wild grandeur of its surroundings that would make the eagle something living rather than a mere museum specimen. For the living eagle we must turn to literature

The Eagle

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

QUESTIONS

1. What is peculiarly effective about the expressions “crooked hands,” “Close to the sun,” “Ringed with the azure world,” “wrinkled,” “crawls,” and “like a thunderbolt”?
2. Notice the formal pattern of the poem, particularly the contrast of “he stands” in the first stanza and “he falls” in the second. Is there any other contrast between the two stanzas?

When “The Eagle” has been read well, readers will feel that they have enjoyed a significant experience and understand eagles better, though in a different way, than they did from the encyclopedia article alone. While the article **analyzes** our experience of eagles, the poem in some sense **synthesizes** such an experience. Indeed, we may say the two approaches to experience—the scientific and the literary—complement each other. And we may contend that the kind of understanding we get from the second is at least as valuable as the kind we get from the first.

Literature, then, exists to communicate **significant experience**—significant because it is concentrated and organized. Its function is not to tell us about experience but to allow us imaginatively to **participate** in it. It is a means of allowing us, through the imagination, to live more fully, more deeply, more richly, and with greater awareness. It can do this in two ways: by **broadening** our experience—that is, by making us acquainted with a range of experience with which, in the ordinary course of events, we might have no contact— or by **deepening** our experience—that is, by making us feel more poignantly and more understandingly the everyday experiences all of us have. It enlarges our perspectives and breaks down some of the limits we may feel.

We can avoid two limiting approaches to poetry if we keep this conception of literature firmly in mind. The first approach always looks for a lesson or a bit of moral instruction. The second expects to find poetry always beautiful. Let us consider one of the songs from Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labor’s Lost* (5.2).

Winter

William Shakespeare (1564—1616)

When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipped and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
“Tu-whit, tu-who!”

A merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson’s saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marian’s nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
“Tu.whit, tu-who!”

A merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: saw (11), brooding (12).
2. Is the owl’s cry really a “merry note? How are this adjective and the verb “sings” employed?
3. In what way does the owl’s cry contrast with the other details of the poem?

In this poem Shakespeare communicates the quality of winter life around a sixteenth-century English country house. But he does not do so by telling us flatly that winter in such surroundings is cold and in many respects unpleasant, though with some pleasant features too (the adjectives cold, unpleasant, and pleasant are not even used in the poem). Instead, he provides a series of concrete homely details that suggest these qualities and enable us, imaginatively, to experience this winter life ourselves. The shepherd blows on his fingernails to warm his hands; the milk freezes in the pail between the cowshed and the kitchen; the cook is slovenly and unclean, “greasy” either from spattered cooking fat or from her own sweat as she leans over the hot fire; the roads are muddy; the folk listening to the parson have colds; the birds “sit brooding in the snow”; and the servant girl’s nose is raw from cold. But pleasant things are in prospect. Tom is bringing in logs for the fire, the hot cider or ale is ready for drinking, and the soup or stew will soon be ready. In contrast to all these familiar details of country life is the mournful and eerie note of the owl.

Obviously the poem contains no moral. If we limit ourselves to looking in poetry for some lesson, message, or noble truth about life, we are bound to be disappointed. This limited approach sees poetry as a kind of sugarcoated pill—a wholesome truth or lesson made palatable by being put into pretty words. What this narrow approach really wants is a sermon—not a poem, but something inspirational. Yet “Winter,” which has appealed to readers for more than four centuries, is not inspirational and contains no moral preachment.

Neither is the poem “Winter” beautiful. Though it is appealing in its way and contains elements of beauty, there is little that is really beautiful in red, raw noses, coughing in chapel, nipped blood, foul roads, and greasy cooks. Yet the second limiting approach may lead us to feel that poetry deals exclusively with beauty—with sunsets, flowers, butterflies, love, God—and that the one appropriate response to any poem is, after a moment of awed silence, “Isn’t that beautiful!” But this narrow approach excludes a large proportion of poetry. The function of poetry is sometimes to be ugly rather than beautiful. And poetry may deal with common colds and greasy cooks as legitimately as with sunsets and flowers.

Poetry takes all life as its province. Its primary concern is not with beauty, not with philosophical truth, not with persuasion, but with **experience**. Beauty and philosophical truth are aspects of experience, and the poet is often engaged with them. But poetry as a whole is concerned with all kinds of experience—beautiful or ugly, strange or common, noble or ignoble, actual or imaginary. Paradoxically, an artist can transform even the most unpleasant or painful experiences into works of great beauty and emotional power. Encountered in real life, pain and death are not pleasurable for most people; but we might read and reread poems about these subjects because of their ability to enlighten and move us. A real-life experience that makes us cry is usually an unhappy one; but if we cry while reading a great novel or poem it is because we are deeply moved, our humanity affirmed. Similarly, we do not ordinarily like to be frightened in real life, but we sometimes seek out books or movies that will terrify us. Works of art focus and organize experiences of all kinds, conveying the broad spectrum of human life and evoking a full range of emotional and intellectual responses. Even the most tragic literature, through its artistry of language, can help us to see and feel the significance of life, appealing to our essential humanity in a way that can be intensely pleasurable and affirming.

There is no sharp distinction between poetry and other forms of imaginative literature. Although some beginning readers may believe that poetry can be recognized by the arrangement of its lines on the page or by its use of rhyme and meter, such superficial signs are of little worth. The *Book of Job* in the Bible and Melville’s *Moby Dick* are highly poetical, but the familiar verse that begins “Thirty days hath September, / April, June, and November...” is not. The difference between poetry and other literature is only one of degree. **Poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature.** It is language whose individual lines, either because of their own brilliance or because they focus so powerfully on what has gone before, have a higher voltage than most language. It is language that grows frequently incandescent, giving off both light and heat.

Ultimately, therefore, poetry can be recognized only by the response made to it by a practiced reader, someone who has acquired some sensitivity to poetry. But

there is a catch here. We are not all equally experienced readers. To some readers, poetry may often seem dull and boring, a fancy way of writing something that could be said more simply. So might a color-blind person deny that there is such a thing as color.

The act of communication involved in reading poetry is like the act of communication involved in receiving a message by radio. Two devices are required: a transmitting station and a receiving set. The completeness of the communication depends on both the power and clarity of the transmitter and the sensitivity and tuning of the receiver. When a person reads a poem and no experience is received, either the poem is not a good poem or the reader is not properly tuned. With new poetry, we cannot always be sure which is at fault. With older poetry, if it has acquired critical acceptance—has been enjoyed by generations of good readers—we may assume that the receiving set is at fault. Fortunately, the fault is not irremediable. Though we cannot all become expert readers, we can become good enough to find both pleasure and value in much good poetry, or we can increase the amount of pleasure we already find in poetry and the number of kinds of poetry in which we find it. The purpose of this book is to help you increase your sensitivity and range as a receiving set.

Poetry, finally, is a kind of **multidimensional language**. Ordinary language—the kind that we use to communicate information—is one-dimensional. It is directed at only part of the listener, the understanding. Its one dimension is intellectual. Poetry, which is language used to communicate experience, has at least four dimensions. If it is to communicate experience, it must be directed at the whole person, not just at your understanding. It must involve not only your **intelligence** but also your **senses, emotions, and imagination**. To the intellectual dimension, poetry adds a sensuous dimension, an emotional dimension, and an imaginative dimension.

Poetry achieves its extra dimensions—its greater pressure per word and its greater tension per poem—by drawing more fully and more consistently than does ordinary language on a number of language resources, none of which is peculiar to poetry. These various resources form the subjects of a number of the following chapters. Among them are connotation, imagery, metaphor, symbol, paradox, irony; allusion, sound repetition, rhythm, and pattern. Using these resources and the materials of life, the poet shapes and makes a poem. Successful poetry is never effusive language. If it is to come alive it must be as cunningly put together and as efficiently organized as a tree. It must be an organism whose every part serves a useful purpose and cooperates with every other part to preserve and express the life that is within it.

The Two Ravens

Anonymous (15th century)

As I was walking all alone,
I heard two ravens making a moan;
One said to the other,
"Where shall we go and dine today?"

"In behind that old turf wall,
I sense there lies a newly slain knight;
And nobody knows that he lies there,
But his hawk, his hound and his lady fair."

"His hound is to the hunting gone,
His hawk to fetch the wild-fowl home,
His lady's has taken another mate,
So we may make our dinner sweet."

"You will sit on his white neck-bone,
And I'll peck out his pretty blue eyes;
With one lock of his golden hair
We'll thatch our nest when it grows bare."

"Many a one for him is moaning,
But nobody will know where he is gone;
Over his white bones, when they are bare,
The wind will blow for evermore."

QUESTIONS

1. This is a modernized version of a folk ballad, a narrative poem composed before Gutenberg's invention of moveable type (c. 1436). Such ballads were meant to be recited or sung, and they were composed in simple stanzaic form (usually in abcb quatrains or in rhyming couplets: aa bb cc and so forth) to make them easier to remember. They often concerned events of the day and served therefore as primitive newspapers. They usually contained a good deal of dialogue and frequently had refrains that listeners could sing in unison. This poem tells an implied story of false love, murder, and disloyalty. What purpose does the ballad serve by having the story told from the point of view of the two scavenging birds? How do they emphasize the atmosphere of the poem?
2. The poem presents few details about the knight, his lady, or his followers. Is there enough information for the reader (or listener) to form a plausible theory about what has happened? How does the lady know that the knight lies dead behind the dike? What is implied by the facts that "Many a one for him makes moan" but no one knows what has become of him except his hawk, his hound, and his lady? That he is "new-slain" but his lady has already "taken another mate"? Does the poem lose or gain in effect by not being entirely clear?

Chapter Two – Reading the Poem

The primary purpose of this unit is to develop your ability to understand and appreciate poetry. Here are some preliminary suggestions:

1. Read a poem more than once. A good poem will no more yield its full meaning on a single reading than will a Beethoven symphony on a single hearing. Two readings may be necessary simply to let you get your bearings. And if the poem is a work of art, it will repay repeated and prolonged examination. One does not listen to a good piece of music once and forget it; one does not look at a good painting once and throw it away. A poem is not like a newspaper, to be hastily read and cast into the wastebasket. It is to be hung on the wall of one's mind.

2. Keep a dictionary by you and use it. It is futile to try to understand poetry without troubling to learn the meanings of the words of which it is composed. You might as well attempt to play tennis without a ball. One of your primary purposes while in high school and college should be to build a good vocabulary, and the study of poetry gives you an excellent opportunity. A few other reference books also will be invaluable. Particularly desirable are a good book on mythology (like Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*) and a Bible.

3. Read so as to hear the sounds of the words in your mind. Poetry is written to be heard: Its meanings are conveyed through sound as well as through print. Every word is therefore important. The best way to read a poem is just the opposite of the best way to read a newspaper. One reads a newspaper as rapidly as possible; one should read a poem as slowly as possible. When you cannot read a poem aloud, lip read it: Form the words with your tongue and mouth even though you do not utter them. With ordinary reading material, lip-reading is a bad habit; with poetry, it is a good habit.

4. Always pay careful attention to what the poem is saying. Though you should be conscious of the sounds of the poem, you should never be so exclusively conscious of them that you pay no attention to what the poem means. For some readers, reading a poem is like getting on board a rhythmical roller coaster. The car starts, and off they go, up and down, paying no attention to the landscape flashing past them, arriving at the end of the poem breathless, with no idea of what it has been about. This is the wrong way to read a poem. One should make the utmost effort to follow the thought continuously and to grasp the full implications and suggestions. Because a poem says so much, several readings may be necessary, but on your very first reading you should determine the subjects of the verbs and the antecedents of the pronouns.

5. Practice reading the poems aloud. When you find one you especially like, make friends listen to it. Try to read it to them in such a way that they will like it too. (a) Read it affectionately, but not affectedly. The two extremes oral readers often fall into are equally deadly. One is to read as if one were reading a tax report on a railroad timetable, unexpressively, in a monotone. The other is to elocute, with artificial flourishes and vocal histrionics. It is not necessary to put emotion into reading a poem. The emotion is already there. It only wants a fair chance to get out. It will express itself if the poem is read naturally and sensitively. (b) Of the two extremes, reading too fast offers the greater danger than reading too slow. Read slowly enough that each word is clear and distinct and that the meaning has time to sink in. Remember that your friends do not have the advantage, as you do, of having the text before them. Your ordinary rate of reading will probably be too fast. (c) Read the poem so that the rhythmical pattern is felt but not exaggerated. Remember that poetry, with few exceptions, is written in sentences, just as prose

is, and that punctuation is a signal as to how it should be read. Give all grammatical pauses their full due. Do not distort the natural pronunciation of words or normal accentuation of the sentence to fit into what you have decided is its metrical pattern. One of the worst ways to read a poem is to read it ta-dum ta-dum ta-dum with an exaggerated emphasis on every other syllable. On the other hand, it should not be read as if it were prose. An important test of your reading will be how you handle the end of a line that lacks line-ending punctuation. A frequent mistake of the beginning reader is to treat each line as if it were a complete thought, whether grammatically complete or not, and to drop the voice at the end of it. A frequent mistake of the sophisticated reader is to take a running start upon approaching the end of a line and fly over it as if it were not there. The line is a rhythmical unit, and its end should be observed whether there is punctuation or not. If there is no punctuation, you ordinarily should observe the end of the line by the slightest of pauses or by holding on to the last word in the line just a little longer than usual, without dropping your voice. In line 12 of the following poem, you should hold on to the word “although” longer than if it occurred elsewhere in the line. But do not lower your voice on it: it is part of the clause that follows in the next stanza.

The Man He Killed

By Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Had he and I but met
 By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
 Right many a nipperkin!
 But ranged as infantry,
 And staring face to face,
I shot at him and he at me,
 And killed him in his place.
 I shot him dead because –
 Because he was my foe,
Just so – my foe of course he was;
 That's clear enough; although
 He thought he'd 'list perhaps,
 Off-hand like – just as I –
Was out of work – had sold his traps –
 No other reason why.
 "Yes; quaint and curious war is!
 You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
 Or help to half-a-crown.

One starting point for understanding a poem at the simplest level, and for clearing up misunderstanding, is to paraphrase its content or part of its content. To **paraphrase** a poem means to restate it in different language, so as to make its prose sense as plain as possible. The paraphrase may be longer or shorter than the poem, but it should contain all the ideas in the poem in such a way as to make them

clear to a puzzled reader, and to make the central idea, or **theme**, of the poem more accessible.

QUESTIONS

1. In informational prose the repetition of a word like “because” (9-10) would be an error. What purpose does the repetition serve here? Why does the speaker repeat to himself his “clear” reason for killing a man (10-11)? The word “although” (12) gets more emphasis than it ordinarily would because it comes not only at the end of a line but at the end of a stanza. What purpose does this emphasis serve? Can the redundancy of “old ancient” (2) be poetically justified?
2. Someone has defined poetry as “the expression of elevated thought in elevated language.” Comment on the adequacy of this definition in the light of Hardy’s poem.

A Study of Reading Habits

by Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

When getting my nose in a book
Cured most things short of school,
It was worth ruining my eyes
To know I could still keep cool,
And deal out the old right hook
To dirty dogs twice my size.

Later, with inch-thick specs,
Evil was just my lark:
Me and my coat and fangs
Had ripping times in the dark.
The women I clubbed with sex!
I broke them up like meringues.

Don't read much now: the dude
Who lets the girl down before
The hero arrives, the chap
Who's yellow and keeps the store
Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:
Books are a load of crap.

Larkin’s poem (above) may be paraphrased as follows:

There was a time when reading was one way I could avoid almost all my troubles—except for school. It seemed worth the danger of ruining my eyes to read stories in which I could imagine myself maintaining my poise in the face of threats and having the boxing skills and experience needed to defeat bullies who were twice as big as I.

Later, already having to wear thick glasses because my eyesight had become so poor, I found my delight in stories of sex and evil: imaging myself with Dracula cloak and fangs, I relished vicious nocturnal adventures. I fancied myself a criminal who beat and tortured his vulnerable victims, leaving them broken and destroyed!

I don't read much anymore, because now I can identify myself only with the flawed secondary characters, such as the flashy dresser who wins the heroine's confidence and then betrays her in a moment of crisis before the cowboy hero comes to her rescue, or the cowardly storekeeper who cringes behind the counter at the first sight of danger. Getting drunk is better than reading - books are full of useless lies.

Notice that in the paraphrase, figurative language gives way to literal language; similes replace metaphors and normal word order supplants inverted syntax. But a paraphrase retains the speaker's use of first, second, and third person, and the tense of verbs. Though it is neither necessary nor possible to avoid using some of the words found in the original, a paraphrase should strive for plain, direct diction. And since a paraphrase is prose, it does not maintain the length and position of poetic lines.

A paraphrase is useful only if you understand that it is the barest, most inadequate approximation of what the poem really "says" and is no more equivalent to the poem than a corpse is to a person. After you have paraphrased a poem, you should try to see how far short of the poem it falls, and why.

In what respects does Larkin's poem say more, and say it more memorably, than the paraphrase? Does the phrase "full of useless lies" capture the impact of "a load of crap"? Furthermore, a paraphrase may fall short of revealing the theme of the poem. "A Study of Reading Habits" represents a man summing up his reading experience and evaluating it—but in turn the poem itself evaluates him and his defects. A statement of the theme might be like this:

A person who turns to books as the source of self-gratifying fantasies may, in the course of time, discover that escapist reading no longer protects him from his awareness of his own reality, and he may out of habit have to find other, more potent, and perhaps more self-destructive means of escaping.

Who Is the Speaker and What Is the Occasion?

To aid us in the understanding of a poem, we may ask ourselves a number of questions about it. Two of the most important are *Who is the speaker?* and *What is the occasion?* A cardinal error of some readers is to assume that a speaker who uses the first person pronouns (*I, my, mine, me*) is always the poet. A less risky course would be to assume that the speaker is someone other than the poet. Poems, like short stories, novels, and plays, belong to the world of fiction, an imaginatively conceived world that at its best is "truer" than the factually "real" world that it reflects. When poets put themselves or their thoughts into a poem, they present a version of themselves; that is, they present a person who in many ways is like themselves but who, consciously or unconsciously, is shaped to fit the needs of the

poem. We must be careful, therefore, about identifying anything in a poem with the biography of the poet.

Terence, this is stupid stuff

By A.E. Houseman (1859-1936)

"Terence, this is stupid stuff:
You eat your victuals fast enough;
There can't be much amiss, 'tis clear,
To see the rate you drink your beer.
But oh, good Lord, the verse you make,
It gives a chap the belly-ache.
The cow, the old cow, she is dead;
It sleeps well, the horned head:
We poor lads, 'tis our turn now
To hear such tunes as killed the cow.
Pretty friendship 'tis to rhyme
Your friends to death before their time
Moping melancholy mad:
Come, pipe a tune to dance to, lad."

Why, if 'tis dancing you would be
There's brisker pipes than poetry.
Say, for what were hop-yards meant,
Or why was Burton built on Trent?
Oh, many a peer of England brews
Livelier liquor than the Muse,
And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man.
Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink
For fellows whom it hurts to think:
Look into the pewter pot
To see the world as the world's not.
And faith, 'tis pleasant till 'tis past:
The mischief is that 'twill not last.
Oh I have been to Ludlow fair
And left my necktie god knows where,
And carried half-way home, or near,
Pints and quarts of Ludlow beer:
Then the world seemed none so bad,
And I myself a sterling lad;
And down in lovely muck I've lain,
Happy till I woke again.
Then I saw the morning sky:
Heigho, the tale was all a lie;
The world, it was the old world yet,
I was I, my things were wet,
And nothing now remained to do
But begin the game anew.

Therefore, since the world has still
Much good, but much less good than ill,

And while the sun and moon endure
Luck's a chance, but trouble's sure,
I'd face it as a wise man would,
And train for ill and not for good.
'Tis true, the stuff I bring for sale
Is not so brisk a brew as ale:
Out of a stem that scored the hand
I wrung it in a weary land.
But take it: if the smack is sour,
The better for the embittered hour;
It should do good to heart and head
When your soul is in my soul's stead;
And I will friend you, if I may,
In the dark and cloudy day.

There was a king reigned in the East:
There, when kings will sit to feast,
They get their fill before they think
With poisoned meat and poisoned drink.
He gathered all that springs to birth
From the many-venomed earth;
First a little, thence to more,
He sampled all her killing store;
And easy, smiling, seasoned sound,
Sate the king when healths went round.
They put arsenic in his meat
And stared aghast to watch him eat;
They poured strychnine in his cup
And shook to see him drink it up:
They shook, they stared as white's their shirt:
Them it was their poison hurt
- I tell the tale that I heard told.
Mithridates, he died old.

However, caution is not prohibition. Sometimes events or ideas in a poem will help us to understand the poet's life. More importantly for us, knowledge of the poet's life may help us understand a poem. There can be little doubt, when all the evidence is in, that "Terence, this is stupid stuff" (above) is Houseman's defense of the kind of poetry he writes, and that the six lines in which Terence sums up his beliefs about the function of poetry are Houseman's own beliefs. On the other hand, it would be folly to suppose that Houseman ever got drunk at Ludlow fair and once lay down in "lovely muck" and slept all night in a roadside ditch.

We may well think of every poem, therefore, as being to some degree *dramatic* – that is, the utterance of a fictional character rather than of the person who wrote the poem. Many poems are expressly dramatic. The fact that Philip Larkin was a poet and novelist, and for many years the chief administrator of a university library, underscores the wide gap between the author and speaker of "A Study of Reading Habits."

In "The Man He Killed" (above) the speaker is a soldier; the occasion is his having been in battle and killed a man – obviously for the first time in his life. We

can tell a good deal about him. He is not a career soldier: he enlisted only because he was out of work. He is a workingman: he speaks a simple and colloquial language. He is a friendly, kindly sort who enjoys a neighborly drink of ale in a bar and will gladly lend a friend a half a crown when he has it. He has known what it is to be poor. In any other circumstance he would have been horrified at taking a human life. It gives him pause even now. He is trying to figure it out. But he is not a deep thinker and thinks he has supplied a reason when he only has supplied a name: "I killed the man...because he was my foe." The critical question of course is why was the man his "foe." Even the speaker is left unsatisfied by his answer though he is not analytical enough to know what is wrong with it. Obviously this poem is expressly dramatic. We need know nothing about Thomas Hardy's life (he was never a soldier and never killed a man) to realize that the poem is dramatic. The internal evidence of the poem tells us so.

What Is the Central Purpose of the Poem?

A third important question that we should ask ourselves upon reading any poem is *What is the central purpose of the poem?* Our only reliable evidence of the poem's purpose is the poem itself. The purpose may be to tell a story, to reveal human character, to impart a vivid impression of a scene, to express a mood or emotion, or to convey vividly some idea or attitude. Whatever the purpose is, we must determine it for ourselves and define it mentally as precisely as possible. Only by relating the various details in the poem to the central purpose or theme can we fully understand their function and meaning. Only then can we begin to assess the value of the poem and determine whether it is a good one or a poor one. In "The Man He Killed" the central purpose is quite clear: It is to make us realize more keenly the irrationality of war. The puzzlement of the speaker may be our puzzlement. But even if we are able to give a more sophisticated answer than his as to why men killed each other we ought still to have a greater awareness, after reading the poem, of the fundamental irrationality in war that makes men kill who have no grudge against one another and who might under different circumstances show each other considerable kindness.

By What Means Is That Purpose Achieved?

Once we have answered the question *What is the central purpose of the poem?* we can consider another question, equally important to full understanding: *By what means is that purpose achieved?* It is important to distinguish means from ends. The question is partially answered by describing the poem's dramatic framework, if it has any. The complete answer requires an accounting of various resources of communication that we will discuss in the rest of this unit.

The most important preliminary advice we can give for reading poetry is to maintain always, while reading it, the utmost mental alertness. The most harmful idea one can get about poetry is that its purpose is to soothe and relax and that the best place to read it is lying in a hammock with a cool drink while low music plays in the background. You *can* read poetry lying in a hammock, but only if you refuse to put your mind in the same attitude as your body. Its purpose is not to soothe and

relax but to arouse and awake, to shock us into life, to make us more alive. Poetry is not a substitute for a sedative.

An analogy can be drawn between reading poetry and playing tennis. Both offer great enjoyment if the game is played hard. Good tennis players must be constantly on the tips of their toes, concentrating on their opponent's every move. They must be ready for a drive to the right or left, a lob overhead, or a drop shot barely over the net. They must be ready for topspin or underspin, a ball that bounces crazily to the left or right. They must jump for the high ones and run for the far ones. And they will enjoy the game almost exactly in proportion to the effort they put into it. The same is true of reading poetry. Great enjoyment is there, but this enjoyment demands a mental effort equivalent to the physical effort one puts into tennis.

The reader of poetry has one advantage over the tennis player: Poets are not trying to win matches. They may expect the reader to stretch for their shots, but they *want* the reader to return them.

General Questions That Will Help You Read, Understand, and Appreciate Poetry

1. Who is the speaker? What kind of person is the speaker?
2. Is there an identifiable audience for the speaker? What can you know about this audience?
3. What is the occasion?
4. What is the setting in time (hour, season, century, etc.)?
5. What is the setting in place (indoors or out, city or country, land or sea, region, country, etc.)?
6. What is the central purpose of the poem?
7. What is the poem about? State the central idea or theme of the poem in a single sentence.
8. What is the tone of the poem? How is it achieved?
9. Outline the poem so as to show its structure and development. What kind of poem is it (ode, sonnet, dramatic monologue, lyric poem, etc.)? Why is this type of poem an appropriate means to communicate the author's theme?
10. Summarize the events of the poem.
11. Paraphrase the poem.
12. Discuss the diction (the word choice) of the poem. Point out words that are particularly well chosen and explain why.
13. Discuss the imagery of the poem. What kinds of imagery are used? Is there any structure to the imagery?
14. Point out and explain any symbols. If the poem is allegorical, explain the allegory.
15. Point out examples of metaphor, simile, conceit, personification, metonymy, or any other literary device and explain their significance and/or appropriateness.
16. Point out and explain any examples of paradox, overstatement, understatement, and/or irony. What is their function? Why are they used?
17. Point out and explain any allusions. What is their function? Why are they used?