

Poems and Songs

The 11 basic steps to reading a poem

Step 1: Read through the poem to get a sense of it.

Step 2: Identify the sentences and independent clauses (circle the periods, exclamation points, question marks, and semicolons). For some reason, people always forget that poetry is made up of complete sentences.

Step 3: Read a few lines to figure out the meter (figure out how many stresses there are in a typical line).

Step 4: Note the rhyme scheme (look for a pattern).

Step 5: Read the poem out loud. Try to follow the rhythm. If you do this you'll hear where the poet plays with the rhythm. And you'll hear the rhyme scheme.

Step 6: Look up any words you don't understand.

Step 7: Re-read the poem out loud.

Step 8: Mark off any sections in the poem. These sections may be speeches given by a character, discussions of a particular topic, changes in mood, or a new stage of an argument.

Step 9: Re-read the poem.

Step 10: Figure out the tone -- the emotion -- of the poem.

Step 11: Re-read the poem.

So far you haven't done any analysis. But you've got a rich understanding of the poem. You know how it works as verse, and you've probably read the poem the way the poet meant it to be read.

Now you can start on the analysis -- if you like. If you do choose to analyze the poem (or if you are forced into it by your power-mad professor) you will do a better job because you are alert to what the poem says, and where it changes meaning, tone, sound, or rhythm. This will help you zero in on the important moments in the poem.

“The Hurricane” by Bob Dylan

Pistol shots ring out in the barroom night
Enter Patty Valentine from the upper hall.
She sees the bartender in a pool of blood,
Cries out, "My God, they killed them all!"
Here comes the story of the Hurricane,
The man the authorities came to blame
For somethin' that he never done.
Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a
been
The champion of the world.

Three bodies lyin' there does Patty see
And another man named Bello, movin' around
mysteriously.
"I didn't do it," he says, and he throws up his
hands
"I was only robbin' the register, I hope you
understand.
I saw them leavin'," he says, and he stops
"One of us had better call up the cops."
And so Patty calls the cops
And they arrive on the scene with their red
lights flashin'
In the hot New Jersey night.

Meanwhile, far away in another part of town
Rubin Carter and a couple of friends are drivin'
around.
Number one contender for the middleweight
crown
Had no idea what kinda s__ _ was about to go
down
When a cop pulled him over to the side of the
road
Just like the time before and the time before
that.
In Paterson that's just the way things go.
If you're black you might as well not show up on

the street
'Less you wanna draw the heat.

Alfred Bello had a partner and he had a rap for
the cops.
Him and Arthur Dexter Bradley were just out
prowlin' around
He said, "I saw two men runnin' out, they
looked like middleweights
They jumped into a white car with out-of-state
plates."
And Miss Patty Valentine just nodded her head.
Cop said, "Wait a minute, boys, this one's not
dead"
So they took him to the infirmary
And though this man could hardly see
They told him that he could identify the guilty
men.

Four in the mornin' and they haul Rubin in,
Take him to the hospital and they bring him
upstairs.
The wounded man looks up through his one
dyin' eye
Says, "Wha'd you bring him in here for? He ain't
the guy!"
Yes, here's the story of the Hurricane,
The man the authorities came to blame
For somethin' that he never done.
Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a
been
The champion of the world.

Four months later, the ghettos are in flame,
Rubin's in South America, fightin' for his name
While Arthur Dexter Bradley's still in the
robbery game
And the cops are puttin' the screws to him,

lookin' for somebody to blame.
"Remember that murder that happened in a
bar?"
"Remember you said you saw the getaway car?"
"You think you'd like to play ball with the law?"
"Think it might-a been that fighter that you saw
runnin' that night?"
"Don't forget that you are white."

Arthur Dexter Bradley said, "I'm really not sure."
Cops said, "A poor boy like you could use a
break
We got you for the motel job and we're talkin'
to your friend Bello
Now you don't wanta have to go back to jail, be
a nice fellow.
You'll be doin' society a favor.
That sonofabitch is brave and gettin' braver.
We want to put his ass in stir
We want to pin this triple murder on him
He ain't no Gentleman Jim."

Rubin could take a man out with just one punch
But he never did like to talk about it all that
much.
It's my work, he'd say, and I do it for pay
And when it's over I'd just as soon go on my
way
Up to some paradise
Where the trout streams flow and the air is nice
And ride a horse along a trail.
But then they took him to the jailhouse
Where they try to turn a man into a mouse.

All of Rubin's cards were marked in advance
The trial was a pig-circus, he never had a chance.

The judge made Rubin's witnesses drunkards
from the slums
To the white folks who watched he was a
revolutionary bum
And to the black folks he was just a crazy ni_ __ .
No one doubted that he pulled the trigger.
And though they could not produce the gun,
The D.A. said he was the one who did the deed
And the all-white jury agreed.

Rubin Carter was falsely tried.
The crime was murder "one," guess who
testified?
Bello and Bradley and they both baldly lied
And the newspapers, they all went along for the
ride.
How can the life of such a man
Be in the palm of some fool's hand?
To see him obviously framed
Couldn't help but make me feel ashamed to live
in a land
Where justice is a game.

Now all the criminals in their coats and their
ties
Are free to drink martinis and watch the sun
rise
While Rubin sits like Buddha in a ten-foot cell
An innocent man in a living hell.
That's the story of the Hurricane,
But it won't be over till they clear his name
And give him back the time he's done.
Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a
been

The champion of the world.

We Real Cool

By Gwendolyn Brooks

We real cool. We

Left school. We

Lurk late. We

Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We

Thin gin. We

Jazz June (1.). We

Die soon.

(1.) a reference to popular music and enjoying the summer of youth

Discussion Questions:

1. Define “cool” as it applies to you.
2. What role do diction and rhyme scheme play in this poem?

3. How does the reference to the summer of youth tie in to this poem?
4. What are the consequences and benefits of being “cool” as shown in this poem?
5. What is the theme of this poem? Why?

Why does the speaker mention death at the close of this poem

“Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall nowâ€”
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

Sympathy

I KNOW what the caged bird feels, alas!

When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;

When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals —
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting —
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,

When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —
I know why the caged bird sings!

“Man in Black” by Johnny Cash

Well, you wonder why I always dress in
black,
Why you never see bright colors on my
back,
And why does my appearance seem to
have a somber tone.
Well, there's a reason for the things that I
have on.

I wear the black for the poor and the
beaten down,
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town,
I wear it for the prisoner who has long
paid for his crime,
But is there because he's a victim of the
times.

I wear the black for those who never read,
Or listened to the words that Jesus said,
About the road to happiness through love
and charity,
Why, you'd think He's talking straight to
you and me.

Well, we're doin' mighty fine, I do suppose,
In our streak of lightnin' cars and fancy
clothes,
But just so we're reminded of the ones
who are held back,
Up front there ought 'a be a Man In Black.

I wear it for the sick and lonely old,
For the reckless ones whose bad trip left
them cold,
I wear the black in mournin' for the lives
that could have been,
Each week we lose a hundred fine young
men.

And, I wear it for the thousands who have
died,
Believin' that the Lord was on their side,
I wear it for another hundred thousand
who have died,
Believin' that we all were on their side.

Well, there's things that never will be right
I know,
And things need changin' everywhere you
go,
But 'til we start to make a move to make
a few things right,
You'll never see me wear a suit of white.

Ah, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day,
And tell the world that everything's OK,
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on
my back,
'Till things are brighter, I'm the Man In
Black

“Ain’t No Reason” by Brett Dennen

there ain't no reasons things are this way
its how they've always been and they intend
to stay
i can't explain why we live this way
we do it everyday
preachers on the podiums speaking to saints
prophets on the sidewalks begging for
change
old ladies laughing from the fire escape,
cursing my name
i got a basket full of lemons and they all
taste the same
a window and a pigeon with a broken wing
you can spend your whole life working for
something
just to have it taken away
people walk around pushing back their desks
wearing pay checks like necklaces and
bracelets
talking 'bout nothing, not thinking about
their

every little heart beat, every little breath
people walk a tight rope on a razor's edge
carrying their hurt and hatred and weapons
it could be a bomb or a bullet or a pin
or a thought or a word or a sentence.
there ain't no reasons things are this way
its how they've always been and they intend
to stay
i don't know why i say the things i say,
but i say them anyway.
but love will come set me free
love will come set me free
i do believe
love will come set me free
i know it will
love will come set me free
yes
prison walls still standing tall
some things never change at all
keep on building prisons,
gonna fill them all.

keep on building bombs
gonna drop them all
working your fingers bare to the bone
breaking your back, make you sell your soul
like a lung is filled with coal, suffocating
slow
the wind blows wild and i may move
but politicians lie and i'm not fooled
you don't need no reason or a 3 piece suit
to argue the truth
the air on my skin and the world under my
toes
Slavery stitched into the fabric of my clothes
chaos and commotion wherever i go

love, i try to follow
but love will come set me free
love will come set me free
i do believe
love will come set me free
i know it will
love will come set me free
yes
there ain't no reasons things are this way
its how they've always been and they intend
to stay
i can't explain why we live this way;
we do it everyday.