

13.

## A POET TEACHES ANALYSIS

Beth Devore

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### What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this essay, you'll learn how analyzing a poem can help you build skills for analyzing other types of texts and rhetorical situations. In poetry, authors make very intentional choices in language, punctuation, and structure to convey meaning; this essay will focus on how learning to notice those choices in poetry can help us become more critical of the choices made by writers of other genres as well as become more intentional in our choices in writing.

### Key Terms

- Diction
- Syntax
- Form

Somewhere between the time we first read Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and the time we enter a first-year composition classroom, poetry transforms from a fun, playful read to a frustrating, mysterious genre. Poems are deceptive. They use few words, often containing only a sentence, but despite looking simple, they contain layers of meaning.

Poetry is a genre of noticing and capturing moments and of rendering the abstract concrete. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser (alongside Scottish painter Mark Gilbert) worked with third-year medical students at the University of Nebraska to provide “lessons in looking.” During these lessons, the medical students were asked to record observations, either in writing or by sketching, about the standardized patients, or actors pretending to “suffer from various ailments. The visual cues they provide, like the slumped posture and lack of expression that could signal depression, are easy to overlook in a hurried examination—but they become more obvious when the medical student borrows a page from the painter’s easel or the poet’s notebook” (Mangun)<sup>1</sup>. Kooser noted that while one can look at a list of symptoms and make a diagnosis, when doctors really observe their patients, they may come to a different conclusion. Kooser suggests that rather than burying themselves in charts and test results, “the doctor should take a close look at the

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1. Mangun, Katherine. “Learning to See, in Order to Heal.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. 53, no. 26, 2 Mar. 2007, [www.chronicle.com/article/learning-to-see-in-order-to-heal/](http://www.chronicle.com/article/learning-to-see-in-order-to-heal/).

patient, paying attention to body language” (Mangun). Students in the program found that the close observation required by poetry and sketching helped them to be aware of each patient’s individuality and come up with more accurate diagnoses and treatment plans.

Just as the practice of writing poetry can help medical students gain skills for diagnosing patients, analysis of poetry can help readers gain critical reading and writing skills through “lessons in looking.” Writing an analysis essay involves breaking down all of the pieces of the text to understand how they work together to create the whole text. When analyzing a text, we often get into a routine. Class discussion of a text frequently follows the same format as we pick out the main points of an article, discuss an author’s credentials for writing a piece, and look for numbers as evidence of logical appeals or personal anecdotes meant to evoke emotions. After a few class periods of these types of discussions, we may find ourselves skimming the text looking for specific features without really even reading the text; just like the medical students fell into a routine of looking at a list of symptoms rather than looking at an individual patient, we fall into a routine of looking at a list of features rather than individual texts. Poems break us out of that routine by requiring us to pay closer attention to the choices the writer has made. When there are no studies cited within the text or there is no data to prove the writer’s point, we’re forced to look at the text from a new angle.

Poems, more than most other genres, place exaggerated attention on diction, syntax, and form. This makes them an ideal genre for practicing analysis and transferring those skills into our own academic writing. When James M. Lang, author of “Distracted: Why You Should Teach Like a Poet,” visited Kathleen Fisher’s introductory theology class, he observed her students completing an exercise drawing on “the ancient tradition of Torah study, in which practitioners slowly read the sacred scriptures of Judaism aloud to one another, pausing and discussing and questioning at every turn.”<sup>2</sup> During a 20-minute exercise, students were asked to examine individual words and phrases while engaging with each other to question and discuss the words and images in a passage from the Book of Genesis. Lang observed that the activity opened “a striking new lens onto [a text] a student has encountered many times before” (Lang). Poetry’s insistence that every word, every punctuation mark, and every line break add meaning to the text makes it an ideal genre for this type of close analysis; as readers, we must slow down and examine each choice the writer has made to understand how all of the elements of the poem come together to create meaning.

**Diction** is a person’s word choice or language. Different types of communication call for different types of diction. With our friends and family, we may use a more casual, conversational diction. We might use more professional diction in communication with our boss. In academic writing, we use more formal, polished language. When we think of poetry, we often think of flowery, “high falutin” language; however, poetry makes use of any available language and spans the spectrum of language from ordinary, everyday language to scientific language to elevated, sublime language. Some poems combine multiple levels of diction as Jericho Brown does in “The Tradition” where he uses the scientific genus names of flowers, such as aster, nasturtium, and delphinium, alongside common names of flowers, like foxglove and baby’s breath, as well as everyday words like dirt and planted.<sup>3</sup> The contrast between this language forces us to stop and question why Brown combines these different levels of diction: why are some flowers referred to with their Latinate scientific genus name while using the common name for others? why use dirt instead of the more elevated soil? why use planted instead of sowed?

Because of the short nature of a poem, every word counts and poets select words carefully to craft meaning in the poem. Brown’s word choices require us to consider not only the denotations, or dictionary definitions of the words, but also the connotations, or the associations, emotional reactions, and other meanings that are attached to a word. If we consider Brown’s choice of the word dirt rather than soil using the denotations, we might come to the conclusion that soil is fertile and provides a place for plants to thrive; dirt, on the other hand, is less desirable for planting and lacks the nutrients for plants to grow. Choosing this word at the beginning of the poem alongside the scientific plant names suggests infertile, inhospitable conditions for growth and sets up Brown’s final line: “*John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.*” This message of inhospitable landscapes deepens when we consider the connotations

2. Lang, James M. “Distracted Minds: Why You Should Teach Like a Poet.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 Dec. 2021, [www.chronicle.com/article/distracted-minds-why-you-should-teach-like-a-poet](http://www.chronicle.com/article/distracted-minds-why-you-should-teach-like-a-poet).

3. Brown, Jericho. “The Tradition.” *Poets.org*. Academy of American Poets, [www.poets.org/poem/tradition](http://www.poets.org/poem/tradition).

of dirt. Dirt may bring up associations of the grave as we consider images of dirt being tossed on top of a coffin, which further emphasizes the deaths of the men Brown lists in the final line of the poem. Dirt also carries connotations of the racist notion of whiteness being associated with cleanliness while Blackness is associated with dirtiness. The interactions between the varying levels of diction allow Brown to craft a complex message about race, identity, life, and death in just fourteen lines.

In addition to forcing readers to examine individual words, poetry also requires readers to rethink conventions of grammar and mechanics. While academic and professional writing make use of Standard English, poetry frequently breaks from the conventions of standard punctuation, capitalization, and sentence structure to create new layers of meaning in the poem. For example, in “Homage to H & the Speedway Diner,” Bernadette Mayer does not use standard punctuation or capitalization:

h’s wife thinks he spends too much time there (which he does)  
 so she started calling him by their dog’s name, peaches  
 h is a big fan of northern exposure, oh & i  
 forgot to mention the biscuits & gravy. (lines 22-25)<sup>4</sup>

Rather than seeing the lack of periods at the ends of sentences, the comma splice after exposure, and the lack of capitalization for proper nouns as mistakes, readers must question why Mayer made the choice to stray from standard conventions for writing: what effect does the lack of punctuation have on the way we read the poem? why has Mayer included some punctuation like the parentheses and a few commas (including what would normally be seen as a comma error)? what does Mayer achieve by refusing to capitalize Peaches, Northern Exposure, or I?

The opening line of “Homage to H & the Speedway Diner” establishes that the diner is “like a cave full of pictures” and Mayer continues to build the informal atmosphere of the diner with images of the steak tartare that is instead called “just raw hamburger with an egg yoke” and sells for \$2.25 and a waiter “who kneels when he takes your order.” When combined with these images, the informal use of punctuation and capitalization highlights the diner’s lack of pretension and builds a conversational voice that makes readers feel welcome in this setting. Allowing the speaker of the poem to praise the diner without the use of periods to break up ideas emphasizes the speaker’s admiration for H and the diner by allowing the praise to spill out without pause.

Similarly, poets also use **syntax**, or word order, to add to the meaning of the text. The most common syntactical pattern in English is subject-verb-object, but poets often invert this syntax. When Emily Dickinson describes an encounter with a snake in “A narrow Fellow in the Grass,” she writes, “His notice instant is—” with the verb coming at the end of the sentence to create a rhythm and repetition of sound that mimics the hiss of a snake in a way traditional syntax would not.<sup>5</sup> Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall” starts with a similar technique: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”<sup>6</sup> This unexpected word order causes us to pause and to wonder in a way that the more direct “There is something that doesn’t love a wall” would not. Frost carries this sense of wonder and curiosity throughout the poem as the speaker questions the need for a fence between two plots of land that contain only trees while his neighbor insists on maintaining the wall: “My apple trees will never get across / and eat the cones under his pines, I tell him. / He only says, ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’” By starting with inverted syntax, Frost places the emphasis on the word “something” and calls readers to question what that something that doesn’t love walls may be; when the curiosity evoked by the first line is combined with the neighbor’s repetition of “Good fences make good neighbors,” Frost asks readers to reevaluate the role these barriers play in our relationships and whether they are as positive as the neighbor suggests.

Poetry can also take many **forms** that dictate strict organization of ideas and of language. An abecedarian is a 26-line poem with the first line of the poem starting with the letter A and all of the following lines working through the alphabet until the final line begins with the letter Z.<sup>7</sup> A sestina is a 36-39-line poem that repeats the same 6 words in various patterns in each stanza.<sup>8</sup> An English-

4. Mayer, Bernadette. “Homage to H & the Speedway Diner.” Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49757/homage-to-h-the-speedway-diner](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49757/homage-to-h-the-speedway-diner).

5. Dickinson, Emily. “A narrow Fellow in the Grass (1096).” Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49909/a-narrow-fellow-in-the-grass-1096](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49909/a-narrow-fellow-in-the-grass-1096).

6. Frost, Robert. “Mending Wall.” Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44266/mending-wall](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44266/mending-wall).

7. For an example of an abecedarian, see Natalie Diaz’s “Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation”.

8. For an example of a sestina, see Elizabeth Bishop’s “Sestina.”

language haiku is a 3-line poem of 17 syllables.<sup>9</sup> In a concrete poem, the shape and appearance of the poem contribute to meaning as much as the words do.<sup>10</sup> Although academic writing may not have the same complex rules for repetition and syllable counts as formal poetry, analysis of poetry forces readers to question how ideas are put together and why the poet has chosen a specific form to convey their ideas, which in turn teaches us to question how other texts, from magazine articles to academic journals to print and television ads, are structured.

The villanelle form is composed of six stanzas: five tercets (three-line stanzas) and one quatrain (a four-line stanza). The form makes use of refrains by repeating the first and third lines of the first stanza in a specific pattern throughout the poem. The repetition of full lines allows poets to explore themes of obsession; these repeated lines turn into images that we cannot get out of our minds as we read and they can feel a bit haunting. In Maria Hummel's "Letter to My Blackout," the first tercet sets readers up for a lively, fun house party full of excess: "Dear sip, dear shotgun, dear pound: / beneath the house, the kegs roll in; / the party flips its switches down."<sup>11</sup> The lines "Dear sip, dear shotgun, dear pound" and "the party flips its switches down" become the refrains for the poem, and the repetition at first serves to emphasize the excess of alcohol consumed at the party. However, the repetition also allows Hummel to switch the tone of the poem halfway through; what starts as a joyful party where the speaker dances with a stranger becomes a terrifying and traumatic moment by the fourth and fifth tercets:

*Let's go, he says, upstairs now.*  
 My cup spills. My shirt is skin.  
 Dear sip, dear shotgun, dear pound,

I won't. Get lucky. Get found. (Hummel, lines 10-13)

The repetition of "Dear sip, dear shotgun, dear pound" emphasizes the danger the speaker is in; because of the amount of alcohol those in attendance at the party have consumed, there is no one who will find her upstairs. In addition to using repetition to create haunting images, the villanelle (and other forms focused on repetition) also accommodates a conversational style of writing. In conversation, we often circle back to ideas and repeat ourselves. This creates the feeling that the speaker of the poem is speaking directly to the reader and builds a level of intimacy between speaker and reader. The repetition also creates a logical process for reading as we come to expect certain lines in specific places and draws our attention to the lines that do not repeat as well as to lines where the refrain is varied.

Other forms, like prose poetry, challenge our understanding of other genres. For example, on the surface, a prose poem looks like prose in the form of sentences and paragraphs without traditional line breaks and stanzas. When we look at prose, we have a set of expectations for the genre, such as a clearly defined subject, linear progression of ideas, and a sense of closure at the end; however, a prose poem dissolves the boundaries of genres and breaks down the rules and limits we've assigned to genres by combining the visual form of prose with poetic devices such as figurative language, alliteration, and repetition. Rather than providing linear organization and developed ideas, prose poetry is often elliptical and fragmentary. For example, Joy Harjo's poem "Invisible Fish," places images of evolving fish learning to walk alongside images of humans coming ashore to "paint dreams on the dying stone" followed by images of Chevy trucks on the ocean floor.<sup>12</sup> The placement of these distinct images within the same paragraph causes readers to pause and consider how ancient images of hieroglyphics and modern images of automobiles relate to one another as well as how those human artifacts fit in with the images of the evolving fish. Harjo's poem forces readers to reexamine the rules of genre by creating surprise in the narrative structure with the attention to language and the overlap of time periods. The prose poem also provides readers with a familiar framework, the sentence and the paragraph, that can be used to discuss abstract topics. When looking at "The Invisible

9. For an example of an English haiku, see Chinaka Hodge's "Small Poems for Big," which is comprised of twenty-four haiku honoring The Notorious B.I.G.

10. For an example of a concrete poem, see Marilyn Nelson's "Fingers Remember."

11. Hummel, Maria. "Letter to My Blackout." Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/150043/letter-to-my-blackout](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/150043/letter-to-my-blackout).

12. Harjo, Joy. "Invisible Fish." Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/101674/invisible-fish-swim-this-ghost-ocean](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/101674/invisible-fish-swim-this-ghost-ocean).

Fish,” we do not have to analyze Harjo’s decisions regarding line breaks or rhyme schemes; instead, we can focus on the way the poem explores the interconnectedness of past and present, human and nonhuman.

During a panel on poetry and protest, Jericho Brown suggested that form creates an architecture for emotion.<sup>13</sup> The rules for a villanelle, haiku, sonnet, or any other form provide a structure for writers to explore topics that other genres often try to strip of emotion in a quest for objectivity; however, emotion is an important part of understanding the complexity of topics like race, gender, and sexuality. Because poets write using a different set of tools than scholars or journalists use, the analysis of poetry can help us look at topics from new angles. In “The Tradition,” Brown draws a parallel between flowers and John Crawford, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown and forces us to look at their deaths differently than a news article, a legal document, or a scholarly journal would. Similarly, Hummel’s “Letter to My Blackout” takes readers to a house party where a rape occurs and uses the villanelle’s repetition to create the loss of control, the fear, and the helplessness that are not captured in other genres.

When looking at longer texts, such as articles or books, we may not be able to give each individual word as much attention as we can when analyzing a 14-line poem; however, by embracing poetry’s lessons in looking, we can gain new ways of analyzing other texts. By learning to pay attention to diction, we can identify when writers of articles are using language intentionally to make our stomachs turn, our skin crawl, our blood boil. We can also learn to be more intentional with our own word choice in writing to create similar effects on our readers. Poetry teaches us to see deviations from Standard English—in language, grammar, and mechanics—as choices rather than mistakes; this lens allows us to look more critically at the use of language, grammar, and mechanics in other genres to understand how the authors are creating effects by straying from Standard English’s rules. This also provides us with new possibilities for our own writing by giving us permission to break from Standard English when the standard’s rules place limitations on our ability to communicate ideas effectively.

While poetry’s form often differs significantly from other genres, by learning to question why a poet chose a villanelle over an abecedarian or a prose poem instead of a haiku, we can learn to question how writers of other genres forge relationships between ideas through their choices in organization. As writers, we also become more conscious of our own choices in how we put ideas together. The analysis of poetry helps us become better critical readers, which in turn helps us become better critical writers. Academic writing can often be seen as formulaic and dry, but through analyzing poetry, we can learn to be more intentional in how we create meaning in any genre of writing.

## Discussion Questions

- Poetry is often seen as a genre of emotion. We usually don’t get much information about the author’s credentials and the majority of poems don’t include statistics or other data, so we’re forced to think about persuasion and rhetorical appeals in new ways. When research isn’t clearly cited or we know nothing about the author, what does credibility look like? Does credibility even matter in this genre of writing? When there is no data, what does an appeal to logic or reason look like?
- Poets like Bernadette Mayer often omit punctuation rather than following the rules of Standard English in order to create certain effects for the reader. Similarly, poets also add punctuation that goes against the rules of Standard English. For example, in “The Tradition,” Jericho Brown uses periods rather than commas to separate items in a list in the lines: “Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium.” and “John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.” Similarly, in “Letter to My Blackout,” Hummel breaks up the first line of the fifth tercet with periods: “I won’t. Get lucky. Get found.” How do those choices affect the way we read those lines? How would we read them differently if Brown had chosen to use commas in the list instead or if Hummel had eliminated the periods after won’t and lucky?
- Form has been said to provide a structure for emotion; form is one way of making the abstract concrete. Read a sestina, such as Raych Jackson’s “A sestina for a black girl who does not know how to braid hair,” Randall Mann’s “The Mortician in San

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13. Brown, Jericho, Philip Metres, and Barbara Jane Reyes, panelists. “Poetry & Protest.” Literary Cleveland Inkubator Online Writing Conference, 16 July 2020.

Francisco,” or William Meredith’s “The Jain Bird Hospital in Delhi.” What do you notice about the form? How does the meaning of individual words change with each repetition? How does the repetition affect the way you engage with the subject of the poem? What emotions come through in these poems?

## About the Author



Beth Devore

KENT STATE

<https://www.kent.edu/ashtabula/profile/elizabeth-devore>

<https://twitter.com/EEDevore>

Elizabeth Devore is an Associate Lecturer of English at Kent State University at Ashtabula. Her poetry has appeared in *The Bark* magazine, the *Great Lakes Review* narrative map project, and elsewhere. She teaches creative writing, composition, and has special interest in dogs in literature.