

I DON'T GET IT!

"I don't understand these lines!"

Words can be looked up in a dictionary or a thesaurus. Lines or sentences can't. So, while you might know all the words, when they are put together you can't discover the meaning. Everyone has this problem at some time or another.



It can seem a more common problem in poetry for various reasons:

- poetry is usually compact. Writers try to say what they have to say in a small number of words. Writers of stories and plays can use as many words as they like and frequently use too many.
- writers are often trying to say something which in itself is quite complicated.
- poets often write in a very personal way. Sometimes as if they didn't care if the reader understood or not. This can make some poetry hard to understand.
- a lot of the poetry we are asked to read by exam boards and teachers was written a long time ago – hundreds and hundreds of years sometimes. That means the words used are sometimes unfamiliar (though perhaps we should be more surprised how much we do understand) or have (and this seems really unfair!) changed their meaning.
- word order is often unusual in poetry, especially pre-20th C poetry when precise forms of verse such as sonnets required a regular rhyme and/or rhythm. To achieve this, word order is often altered: e.g. 'Silent was the flock in woolly fold'.
- imagery – the use of imagery can help us to see things much more clearly; it can make abstract things concrete; it can startle us and make us see things in a new way. Sometimes, though, an image can be a cause of confusion, too. This might not be your fault. The poet might be using an image which has a lot of meaning for him or her but a limited or unclear one for the reader. Or (similar to word usage) the image may no longer be clear to a modern reader. It is also possible that the poet's use of imagery is not successful in this instance.

I STILL DON'T GET IT!!

Poetry is not about techniques it is about meaning.

The poet will try to communicate something to you. If he or she is successful in making you see the meaning, then you might want to see how it is achieved, what techniques have been used.

As I've said elsewhere, a poem is not a Rubik Cube to be solved. But those who say there is no key to unlock a poem are not necessarily correct. Sometimes I have missed something important and when it's pointed out to me, I can see the poem much more clearly. Sometimes there are some references which I just don't get. When I look them up or have them explained, I do get it. But, mostly, writers don't want to hide their meaning. They want you to get it, to read and go 'Ah! Yes, that's right.'

Only pretentious writers want to hide their meaning. Perhaps they are afraid that if they make it clear we'll see that they didn't have much to say to begin with. However, some writing (poetry included) is difficult because what's being said is difficult. Some things are easy to explain, to discuss, to express – some things are hard. That's life. The trick is to be able to see what's difficult and try to understand it, because it's worth it – and, on the other hand, what is complicated because the writer didn't want to make it understandable or wasn't a good enough writer to be able to make it clear.

And then there are poets who are just a bit mad.

The Poet Didn't Even Know!!

It can be wonderful to hear the poet read his or her work. It can be really helpful to listen to them talk about how it came to be written and what it means to them. Equally, it can be disorienting for a student to hear a poet say, 'Well, I'm not sure what it means...' or 'I've changed my mind about this poem. I used to think... Now I tend to feel that it... But I'm not sure.'

'Help!' screams the student. 'If you don't know, how am I supposed to?' Or, more to the point, 'How am I supposed to write an exam answer?'

This kind of thing is not uncommon and the student(s) need reassurance. Firstly, it's clear that the poem has more than one possible interpretation. The other side of the coin is, surely, 'If you don't know, then my interpretation is likely to be as good as anyone's!' As always, individual ideas are welcomed by examiners as long as (a) they are relevant to the question and (b) they are backed up by some logical argument and/or quotation.

Secondly, the point needs to be made that meanings can change. This is difficult for students to grasp but if we take examples from long ago, it becomes clearer. Something written by Shakespeare will have had a particular meaning for his audience in the theatre. When the text became written down and published, his readers may have felt slightly differently about it - and he wasn't around to argue. In the subsequent centuries, his words have been interpreted in many ways and we frequently find that they acquire particular relevance in new historical situations. Some of the heroics take on a dreadful irony in the context of modern views on war; some of the chicanery of a villain like Richard III can suddenly seem newly apposite when put into the mouth of a contemporary politician.

All of this is simply to say, readers bring their own contexts and create their own meanings. The thoughts of the writer comprise just one aspect. 'Never trust the teller, trust the tale' is still a very helpful adage.