

RESPONDING TO POETRY

Not all poems are as readily accessible as those in this chapter, and even those that are take on additional meanings if we approach them systematically, bringing to bear specific reading habits and skills and some knowledge of poetic genres, conventions, and traditions. Experience will give you a sense of what to expect, but knowing what to expect isn't everything. As a reader of poetry, you should always be open—to new experiences, new feelings, new ideas, new forms of expression. Every poem is a potential new experience, and you will often discover something new with every re-reading.

Steps to Follow, Questions to Ask, and Sample Reading Notes

No one can give you a method that will offer you total experience of all poems. But because individual poems share characteristics with other poems, taking certain steps can prompt you both to ask the right questions and to devise compelling answers. If you are relatively new to poetry, encounter a poem that seems especially difficult, or plan to write about a poem, you may need to tackle the following steps one at a time, pausing to write even as you read and respond. With further experience, you will often find that you can skip some steps or run through them quickly and almost automatically, though your experience and understanding of any poem will be enriched if you slow down and take your time.

Try the first step on your own, then we will both detail and demonstrate the others.

1. **Listen to a poem first.** When you encounter a new poem, read through it once without thinking too much about what it means. Try to simply listen to the poem, even if you read silently, much as you might a song on the radio. Better yet, read it aloud. Doing so will help you hear the poem's sound qualities, get a clearer impression of its **tone**, and start making sense of its **syntax**, the way words combine into sentences.

APHRA BEHN

On Her Loving Two Equally

I

How strongly does my passion flow,
Divided equally twixt⁷ two?
Damon had ne'er subdued my heart
Had not Alexis took his part;
5 Nor could Alexis powerful prove,
Without my Damon's aid, to gain my love.

II

When my Alexis present is,
Then I for Damon sigh and mourn;

7. Between.

But when Alexis I do miss,
10 Damon gains nothing but my scorn.
But if it chance they both are by,
For both alike I languish, sigh, and die.

III

Cure then, thou mighty wingèd god,⁸
This restless fever in my blood:
15 One golden-pointed dart take back:
But which, O Cupid, wilt thou take?
If Damon's, all my hopes are crossed;
Or that of my Alexis, I am lost.

1684

Now that you've read Behn's poem, read through the remaining steps and see how one reader used them as a guide for responding. Later, return to these steps as you read and respond to other poems.

2. **Articulate your expectations, starting with the title.** Poets often try to surprise readers, but you can appreciate such surprises only if you first define your expectations. As you read a poem, take note of what you expect and where, when, and how the poem does and doesn't fulfill your expectations.

The title of Aphra Behn's "On Her Loving Two Equally" makes me think the poem will be about a woman. But can someone really "love two equally"? Maybe this is the question the poem will ask. If so, I expect its answer to be no, because I don't think this is possible. If so, maybe the title is a sort of pun—"On Her Loving Too Equally."

3. **Read the syntax literally.** What the sentences literally say is only a starting point, but it is vital. You cannot begin to explore what a poem *means* unless you first know what it *says*. Though poets arrange words into lines and stanzas, they usually write in complete sentences, just as writers in other genres do. At the same time and partly in order to create the sort of aural and visual patterns discussed earlier in this chapter, poets make much more frequent use of **inversion** (a change in normal word order or syntax). To ensure you don't misread, first "translate" the poem rather than fixing on certain words and free-associating or leaping to conclusions. To translate accurately, especially with poems written before the twentieth century, you may need to break this step down into the following smaller steps:

- a. **Identify sentences.** For now, ignore the line breaks and look for sentences or independent clauses (word groups that can function as complete sentences). These will typically be preceded and followed by a period (.), a semicolon (;), a colon (:), or a dash (—).

8. Cupid, who, according to myth, shot darts of lead and of gold at the hearts of lovers, corresponding to false love and true love, respectively.

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The eighteen lines of Behn's poem can be broken down into nine sentences.

1. How strongly does my passion flow, Divided equally twixt two?
2. Damon had ne'er subdued my heart, Had not Alexis took his part;
3. Nor could Alexis powerful prove, Without my Damon's aid, to gain my love.
4. When my Alexis present is, Then I for Damon sigh and mourn;
5. But when Alexis I do miss, Damon gains nothing but my scorn.
6. But if it chance they both are by, For both alike I languish, sigh, and die.
7. Cure then, thou mighty wingèd god, This restless fever in my blood;
8. One golden-pointed dart take back: But which, O Cupid, wilt thou take?
9. If Damon's, all my hopes are crossed; Or that of my Alexis, I am lost.

b. **Reorder sentences.** Identify the main elements—subject(s), verb(s), object(s)—of each sentence or independent clause, and if necessary rearrange them in normative word order. (In English, this order tends to be subject-verb-object except in the case of a question; in either case, dependent clauses come at the beginning or end of the main clause and next to whatever element they modify.)

c. **Replace each pronoun with the antecedent noun it replaces;** if the antecedent is ambiguous, indicate all the possibilities.

In the following sentences, the reordered words appear in italics, nouns substituted for pronouns appear in parentheses:

1. How strongly does my passion flow, Divided equally twixt two?
2. Damon had ne'er subdued my heart, Had not Alexis took (Alexis's or Damon's) part;
3. Nor could Alexis *prove powerful to gain my love* Without my Damon's aid.
4. When my Alexis *is present*, Then I *sigh and mourn* for Damon;
5. But when *I do miss* Alexis, Damon gains nothing but my scorn.
6. But if it chance *both* (Damon and Alexis) are by, *I languish, sigh, and die* For both (Damon and Alexis) alike.
7. *thou mighty wingèd god*, Cure then This restless fever in my blood;
8. *take back* One golden-pointed dart: But which *wilt thou take*, O Cupid?
9. If Damon's, all my hopes are crossed; Or that (dart) of my Alexis, I am lost.

d. **Translate sentences into modern prose.** Use a dictionary to define unfamiliar or ambiguous words or words that seem to be used in an unfamiliar or unexpected way. Add any implied words necessary to link the parts of a sentence to each other and one sentence logically to the next. At this stage, don't move to outright paraphrase; instead, stick closely to the original.

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Below, added words appear in brackets, substituted definitions in parentheses:

1. How strongly does my passion flow [when it is] divided equally between two [people]?
2. Damon would never have (*conquered* or *tamed*) my heart if Alexis had not taken (Damon or Alexis's) (*portion*) [of my heart].
3. Nor could Alexis [have] prove[n] powerful [enough] to gain my love without my Damon's aid.
4. When my Alexis is present, then I sigh and mourn for Damon;
5. But when I miss Alexis, Damon doesn't gain anything (*except*) my scorn.
6. But if it (*so happens*) that both (Damon and Alexis) are [near]by [me], I languish, sigh, and die for both (Damon and Alexis) alike.
7. [Cupid], (*you*) mighty god (*with wings*), cure then this restless fever in my blood;
8. Take back one [of your two] darts [with] pointed gold [tips]: But which [of these darts] will you take, O Cupid?
9. If [on the one hand, you take away] Damon's [dart], all my hopes are (*opposed, invalidated, spoiled*); Or [if, on the other hand, you take away] Alexis's [arrow], I am (*desperate, ruined, destroyed; no longer claimed or possessed by anyone; helpless or unable to find my way*).

e. **Note any ambiguities in the original language that you might have ignored in your translation.** For example, look for modifiers that might modify more than one thing; verbs that might have multiple subjects or objects; words that have multiple relevant meanings.

In the second sentence, "his" could refer either to Damon or to Alexis since both names appear in the first part of this sentence; in other words, this could say either "Alexis took Damon's part" or "Alexis took his own part." But what about the word *part*? I translated this as *portion*, and I assumed it referred back to "heart," partly because the two words come at the ends of lines 3 ("heart") and 4 ("part") and also rhyme. But two other definitions of *part* might make sense here: "the role of a character in a play" or "one's . . . allotted task (as in an action)," and "one of the opposing sides in a conflict or dispute," which in this case could be the "conflict" over the speaker's love. On the one hand, then, I could translate this as "Alexis took his own portion of my heart"; "Alexis played his own role in my life or in this three-way courtship drama"; or "Alexis defended his own side in the battle for my love." On the other hand, I could translate it as "Alexis took Damon's part of my heart"; "Alexis played Damon's role"; or even "Alexis defended Damon's side in the battle for my love."

4. **Consult reference works.** In addition to using a dictionary to define unfamiliar or ambiguous words, look up anything else to which the poem refers that you either don't understand or that you suspect might be ambiguous: a place, a person, a myth, a quotation, an idea, etc.

According to *Britannica.com*, Cupid was the “ancient Roman god of love” and “often appeared as a winged infant carrying a bow and a quiver of arrows whose wounds inspired love or passion in his every victim.” It makes sense, then, that the speaker of this poem would think that she might stop loving one of these men if Cupid took back the arrow that made her love him. But the poem wasn’t written in ancient Rome (it’s dated 1684), so is the speaker just kidding or being deliberately “poetic” when she calls on Cupid? And what about the names “Damon” and “Alexis”? Were those common in the seventeenth century? Maybe so, if a poet could be named Aphra Behn.

5. **Figure out who, where, when, and what happens.** Once you have gotten a sense of the literal meaning of each sentence, ask the following very general factual questions about the whole poem. Remember that not all of the questions will suit every poem. (Which questions apply will depend in part on whether the poem is narrative, dramatic, or lyric.) At this point, stick to the facts. What do you know for sure?

Who?

- Who is, or who are, the poem’s **speaker(s)**?
- Who is, or who are, the **auditor(s)**, if any?
- Who are the other **characters**, if any, that appear in the poem?

The title suggests that the speaker is a woman who loves two people. In the poem, she identifies these as two men—Damon and Alexis. The speaker doesn’t seem to address anyone in particular (certainly not the two men she talks about) except in the third stanza, when she addresses Cupid—first through the **epithet** “mighty wingèd god” (line 13) and then by name (16). (Because Cupid isn’t present, this is an **apostrophe**.)

Where? When?

- Where is the speaker?
- Where and when do any actions described in the poem take place? That is, what is the poem’s **setting**?

No place or time is specified in Behn’s poem. The poem is dated 1684, and the antiquated diction (“twixt,” line 2; “wilt,” 16) seems appropriate to that time. But nothing in the poem makes the situation or feelings it describes specific to a time or place. The speaker doesn’t say things like “Last Thursday, when Damon and I were hanging out in the garden . . .,” for example. She seems to describe situations that keep happening repeatedly rather than specific incidents.

What?

- What is the **situation** described in the poem?
- What, if anything, literally happens over the course of it, or what **action**, if any, does it describe?
- Or, if the poem doesn’t have a **plot**, then how would you describe its internal structure? Even when a poem seems less interested in telling a story than in simply capturing a feeling or describing something or someone, you can still

usually read in it some kind of progression or development or even an argument. When and how does the subject matter or focus or address shift over the course of the poem?

The basic situation is that the speaker loves two men equally. In the second stanza she describes recurring situations—being with one of the men and not the other or being with both of them at once—and the feelings that result. Then, in the third stanza, she imagines what would happen if she stopped loving one of them. The topic or subject essentially remains the same throughout, but there are two subtle shifts. First is the shift from addressing anyone in stanzas one and two to addressing Cupid in stanza three. Second, there are shifts in verb tense and time: the first stanza floats among various tenses (“does,” line 1; “took,” 4), the second sticks to the present tense (“is,” “sigh,” “mourn,” etc.), and the third shifts to future (“wilt,” 16). As a result, I would say that the poem has two parts: in one, the speaker characterizes her situation in the present and recent past; in the other she explores a possible alternative future (that she ends up not liking any better).

6. **Formulate tentative answers to the questions, *Why does it matter? What does it all mean?***

- Why should the poem matter to anyone other than the poet, or what might the poem show and say to readers?
- What problems, issues, questions, or **conflicts** does the poem explore that might be relevant to people other than the speaker(s) or the poet—to humanity in general, to the poet’s contemporaries, to people of a certain type or in a certain situation, and so forth?
- How is each problem or conflict developed and resolved over the course of the poem, or how is each question answered? What conclusions does the poem seem to reach about these, or what are its **themes**?

The title and first two lines pose a question: how strong is our love if we love two people instead of one? We tend to assume that anything that is “divided” is less strong than something unified. The use of the word *flow* in the first line reinforces that assumption because it implicitly compares love to something that flows: a river, for example, “flows,” and when a river divides into two streams, each stream is smaller and its flow less strong than the river’s. So the way the speaker articulates the question implies an answer: love, like a river, isn’t strong and sure when divided.

But the rest of the poem undermines that answer. In the first stanza, the speaker points out that each lover and his love has “aided” and added to the “power” of the other: neither man would have “gain[ed her] love” if the other hadn’t. The second stanza gives a more concrete sense of why: since we tend to yearn for what we don’t have at the moment, being with one of these men makes her miss the other one. But if both men are present, she feels the same about both and perhaps even feels *more* complete and satisfied.