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# Reading aloud



Our first encounter with a poem should involve reading it aloud, after a preliminary silent reading. The silent reading prepares us for any complicated or surprising features within it. These might include obscure words, a striking change in rhythm (the 'metre' of the poem: see the Glossary for definitions of this and other technical terms), the insistence or otherwise of its rhyming pattern, the presence of more than one speaker, and so on. If it is a long poem, then we will read and consider it, section by manageable section.

The essential point about these first readings, both silent and aloud, is that as any good poem is inexhaustible, we should treat our initial meeting with it as an introduction. If we can absorb something of the poem's meaning and tone, that is a sufficient beginning. A poem that revealed all of itself on the first reading would be a very shallow work.

Reading aloud recognises that poets want their works to be heard. A slower process than reading silently, it encourages us to savour the words – their sounds as much as their sense. These qualities, in fact, are usually intimately related. Poetry began as an oral art where rhythm and rhyme assisted memory in the preservation of poets' works. Today, we most often encounter poetry in printed form, yet even contemporary poets who know that their poems will be presented in that medium, write with their ears attuned to the sounds of their speech and the voice of their poetry. This is evident if we look closely at their use of language.

The aural appeal of words is not cultivated by poets for its own sake. The characteristics of the sounds of language reveal its meanings, just as groupings of words, phrases and stanzas contribute to the subtleties of thought and emotion that even an apparently straightforward lyric may convey.

Consider this poem by William Shakespeare from his play *As You Like It*:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind,      ['wind' is pronounced to rhyme with 'rind']  
Thou art not so unkind

## 4 STUDYING POETRY

As man's ingratitude;  
 Thy tooth is not so keen,  
 Because thou art not seen,  
 Although thy breath be rude.  
 Heigh-ho! sing, heigh-ho! unto the green holly:  
 Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly:  
 Then, heigh-ho, the holly!  
 This life is most jolly.

Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,  
 That dost not bite so nigh  
 As benefits forgot:  
 Though thou the waters warp, [warp = to roughen by freezing]  
 Thy sting is not so sharp  
 As friend remembered not.  
 Heigh-ho! sing, heigh-ho! unto the green holly:  
 Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly:  
 Then, heigh-ho, the holly!  
 This life is most jolly.

Our preliminary silent reading alerts us to the regularity of the poem's metrical and rhyming scheme, and to its strikingly boisterous refrain at the end of both stanzas. More significantly, however, our first reading should reveal that the poem treats two different ideas held in a tension: while nature's cruelties are recognised by the speaker, humanity's behaviour is judged to be far worse and so, in a backhanded way, nature emerges praised, in spite of its harshness, and is even encouraged in its brutality.

Much of the impact of the meaning of the poem is communicated through the sounds of its words, which can only be fully appreciated if we read it out loud, with careful attention to those sounds. The opening line alone is replete with aural appeal:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind.

First there is the repetition of the verb, giving further insistence to its imperative form. The speaker is wilfully encouraging nature in its assault as if to prove his point that it is less painful than humanity's cruelties, and he imitates the sound of wind in the device of onomatopoeia (see Glossary). This opening to the work is surprising and arresting, for we could not imagine that anyone would be so receptive to the wintry tempest. Thus we are encouraged to read on for an explanation. In a poem in which the perversity of human nature is the principal subject, Shakespeare has aptly appropriated a perverse attitude for his speaker. A recognisable truth of human experience is being approached in an oblique and, therefore, captivating way.

In 'blow', we hear the wind even as it is being addressed. The repetition is introduced by a strong alliteration on 'b' which is paralleled by that on 'w' in 'winter wind'. We sense the impact of the blustery wind as we speak those initial words. The old pronunciation of 'wind' contains within it also the echo of the word 'whined' – onomatopoeic again, and associated with a cry of complaint. We can hear how all these elements of sound are being orchestrated. Then, the personification of wind in the address to it as 'thou' (in the formal second person) brings it disturbingly close to human life: it appears that it has motivations like ours – unkindness, for example. And, again, the sound of the word, particularly the vowel combination 'ou', reminds us of wind's howling. In just five words, Shakespeare combines a series of sounds to evoke the experience to which he is referring. By focusing on them in this way, we can explain in detail how the effect is achieved and appreciate it more fully.

The clever subtlety of the poem's argument – its 'wit' – is revealed most strikingly in its aural qualities. There is, for example, its longest word – 'ingratitude' – with its four syllables. Reading aloud, we must dwell on that abstract noun, and because it is at the end of a line which ends with a semi-colon, we pause further to absorb the fullness of its unpleasantness. The speaker's point is that this is worse than wind's assault. This point is aided by our extended enunciation of 'ingratitude', particularly as it contains that grating, accented second syllable after the negative prefix. Reading this poem and concentrating on this word, we are also introduced to the wider world of Shakespeare's thought. Ingratitude was an evil that especially agitated him. He isolates it for denunciation later in his great tragedy *King Lear*, again emphasising how humanity's display of this vice puts us at a disadvantage with respect to nature:

Ingratitude! thou marble-hearted fiend,  
More hideous, when thou show'st thee in a child,  
Than the sea-monster!

There, as in this poem, the dramatic sound of the word is essential to its impact.

We return to the contrast of monosyllables, just as we return to nature and wind in particular. The negativity (although qualified) of nature's processes is again captured in the reference to its 'rude' breath. The adjective sounds as coarse as the attribute itself. Reading the poem silently, we note the attribution. Reading it aloud, we hear it and the reference is more forceful.

Then there is the violent contrast in tone:

Heigh-ho! sing, heigh-ho! unto the green holly:  
Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly:  
Then, heigh-ho, the holly!

This different tone (see Glossary) of over-pitched merriment – in the laughing language of the repeated 'heigh-ho!' – balances the bitter allusions to nature's

and humanity's unkindness. The glib alliteration on 'f' – 'friendship is feigning' (pretence) – serves almost to dismiss this most serious indictment, especially as it is framed by 'Heigh-ho!' The overall effect is a recognition of the fallibility of human behaviour combined with a determination not to be oppressed by it. As *You Like It*, where the poem appears, is a comedy, not a tragedy. The jocular sounds of the words, to which even such neutral elements as 'holly' contribute, achieve the comedic resolution: 'This life is most jolly'.

This forced merriment leaves a bitter after-taste (or, more accurately, after-sound) of something imperfectly resolved, perhaps like life itself. The aural impression of the earlier negative concepts has not been entirely dispelled by this too-aggressive jocularly. A refrain usually confirms the subject of a poem. Shakespeare, in the abundant variety of his genius, uses the device here, but subversively, imaginatively, provocatively.

No one would suggest that all of the above features would be noted, or should be, on the initial reading aloud of 'Blow, blow, thou winter wind'. But that experience opens our ears as well as our eyes to the poem's several dimensions of meaning.

### Question

To what other qualities of the language of this poem would you draw attention?

To hear some different sounds, we now look at 'A Birthday', in which the Victorian poet, Christina Rossetti, enunciates an emotion rarely encountered in her writings. She was described by her brother as 'replete with the spirit of self-postponement'. That is to say that Christina Rossetti is usually a poet of unhappiness, especially of the lack of fulfilment in love. But this is not so here, and we should note, in reading the poem aloud, the way the sounds of her words and the cadences of her phrases convey the unusual experience, in her poetry, of the celebration of joy:

My heart is like a singing bird  
     Whose nest is in a watered shoot;  
 My heart is like an apple tree  
     Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;  
 My heart is like a rainbow shell  
     That paddles in a halcyon sea;      [halcyon = tranquil]  
 My heart is gladder than all these  
     Because my love is come to me.  
  
 Raise me a dais of silk and down;  
     Hang it with vair and purple dyes;      [vair = squirrel fur]  
 Carve it in doves and pomegranates,

And peacocks with a hundred eyes;  
 Work it in gold and silver grapes,  
 In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys; [fleur-de-lys = iris flower, heraldic lily]  
 Because the birthday of my life  
 Is come, my love is come to me.

The essence of the artistry of this poem is in the repetition accumulating to exultation in the use of the present tense. In the first stanza there is the series of similes, introduced in the usual way by 'like'. This is how the speaker defines her mood of joy. But splendid as they are in their beauty, fecundity and peacefulness, they do not do justice to her sublime happiness:

My heart is gladder than all these  
 Because my love is come to me.

The meaning is clear. How do the sounds of the poetry assist it? Why must it be read aloud to be fully appreciated?

In reading it aloud, the repetitions, with their rhythmical pulse, are more insistent; the phrase 'like a singing bird' actually sings as we say it; there is an aural exhilaration in 'a watered shoot', and those boughs heavily hung with abundant fruit are more immediately envisaged, bearing their glad burden in the sound of 'thicket fruit'. We hear the rainbow shell (as well as picture its beauty) paddling in a tranquil sea, in that onomatopoeic verb with its implied personification.

The second stanza has a ceremonious tone in the use of the imperative verb which opens it: 'Raise'; in the series of these (a grammatical repetition) which follow – 'Hang', 'Carve', 'Work' – and in the depiction of the dais on which she will indeed be raised as she has been exalted by her lover. These strong verbs are declarative in sound, indicating an emotion that is definite in its happiness and secure in its triumph. But even more significant is the decoration of the platform and its strange details: 'carve it in doves and pomegranates'. It is exotic because such happiness is rare. But we do not merely see it or picture it in our mind's eye. The sound of a word like the deliciously polysyllabic 'pomegranates' – a word which we would probably never utter in our lifetimes were it not for reading it aloud in a poem such as this – emphasises the distinctiveness of the emotion and the occasion. The same is less ostentatiously true of 'fleurs-de-lys'. In savouring those words and phrases we are linked to the special experience they communicate. Again, repetition is important; the adjective 'silver', for example, abets the exquisite luxury of the occasion.

The culmination of Rossetti's accomplished technique of repetition and of our understanding of the need to read the poem aloud is in the closing lines:

Because the birthday of my life  
 Is come, my love is come to me.

The caesura, or brief pause, after ‘come’ (signalled by the comma) introduces the final repetition of the declaration of the arrival of love and her birth as a human being as a consequence of it. In reading aloud, our pause there might seem to be a preparation for a new revelation about the experience. The surprise, of course, is that there is no surprise, nor can there be. She has attained the summit of human happiness and no amount of repetition can exhaust it. Our reading aloud of that last clause is both especially emphatic and conclusive: it reveals that the knowledge of love is the ultimate truth and the consummation of life. This is enacted by the accumulating repetitions and the air of finality at the close. The device of enjambement in those last two lines assists this, as the penultimate line runs on into the last. It is another technique of accumulation. Such devices are not used by poets merely for decoration. They assist the communication of meaning and, in recognising them, we can explain and communicate our enjoyment of the work.

### Question

What is the significance of the natural imagery, used throughout the poem?

Finally, we should read aloud the following poem, ‘Sleep’, by the twentieth-century Australian poet, Kenneth Slessor. In writing about his choice of language here, Slessor referred to the ‘narcotic effect of the repetition of certain consonant-structures and vowel sounds’. This is proof, if it were needed, that poets want us to hear their poems:

Do you give yourself to me utterly,  
 Body and no-body, flesh and no-flesh,  
 Not as a fugitive, blindly or bitterly,  
 But as a child might, with no other wish?  
*Yes, utterly.*

Then I shall bear you down my estuary,  
 Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,  
 Take you and receive you,  
 Consume you, engulf you,  
 In the huge cave, my belly, lave you [lave = wash]  
 With huger waves continually.

And you shall cling and clamber there  
 And slumber there, in that dumb chamber,  
 Beat with my blood's beat, hear my heart move  
 Blindly in bones that ride above you,  
 Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded,  
 Through viewless valves embodied so –

Till daylight, the expulsion and awakening,  
 The riving and the driving forth,  
 Life with remorseless forceps beckoning –  
 Pangs and betrayal of harsh birth.

‘Sleep’ seeks to induce the pleasurable sensation of being lulled into the experience it describes, through such rhythmical rhymes as ‘utterly’/‘bitterly’, the cadence of ‘Take you and receive you’, with long ‘u’ sounds which are continued in ‘Consume you, engulf you’. The effect is of a lullaby in a poem that would take us back to our pre-existent state, before birth, in the womb. Those ‘u’ sounds are reminiscent of a mother’s cooing to a baby.

Slessor draws upon a variety of sounds to achieve his ‘narcotic’ effect – sounds which we can only appreciate if we read the poem aloud. The gentleness of the verb ‘slumber’, echoed in the neighbouring adjective ‘dumb’ and sustained in the ‘amb’ of ‘chamber’, modulates to the more assertive development of the implicit alliteration on ‘b’ in those words, in the following line:

Beat with my blood’s beat . . .

Slessor’s point (articulated through the technique of his diction) is that sleep has its own activity, for all its peacefulness and womb-like security. This is asserted further in the next line, with its stronger alliteration on ‘d’ which is consummated in the conjunction with the earlier ‘b’ alliteration in the last word:

Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded . . .

The sequence of narcotic effects concludes with a final, gentler alliteration on ‘v’ in a lulling rhythm:

Through viewless valves embodied so.

To close the poem, in contrast, Slessor brings us back to our waking existence. Daily awakening is akin to being born anew and both are judged negatively by the poet. Their criticism is articulated through the sounds of the words in his last stanza. ‘Expulsion’ is not only a negative concept, but its sound is brusque, almost violent. We notice how carefully Slessor has placed it before the otherwise neutral (even positive) ‘awakening’, thereby investing that concept with negativity too. The violence of the verbs in the next line:

The riving and the driving forth . . .

with their relentless emphasis and harsh assonance on ‘i’ makes a clear judgement of the daily process which is intensified as the comparison with birth focuses specifically on a difficult, reluctant birthing. Life is seen as an insistent doctor or midwife, dragging us protestingly into this world:

with remorseless forceps beckoning –

## Pangs and betrayal of harsh birth.

The consonant dominating these grim lines is 's', to the point of a hiss in 'remorseless'. It contrasts harshly with such gentle sounds (most notably 'b' sounds and the gentle 'lave' with its echo of 'love', at the poem's centre) earlier in the poem as Slessor explores the antithesis between sleep and waking, our pre-existent womb-life and life itself.

**Question**

How and why does the reading aloud of this poem help us to memorise it?

Whenever possible, we should take the opportunity to listen to poets reading their works – whether on recordings or live at poetry readings. There are accounts of at least two enjoyable occasions when Alexander Pope, in the early eighteenth century, read his *Rape of the Lock* aloud to appreciative audiences. At the end of that century, the essayist William Hazlitt recorded that when he heard the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge reading aloud, 'the sense of a new style and a new spirit in poetry came over me'. Tennyson's resonant voice, 'mouthing out his hollow o's and a's / Deep-chested music', thrilled his audiences in the nineteenth century. Recordings by W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot in the twentieth century give surprising insights into the meaning of their poems as we listen to how they hear them. P. J. Kavanagh remarks that

I made nothing of John Berryman's Dream Songs until I heard him recite them. He ranted, raved, he went falsetto on occasion, individualising the different voices that intrude into the poem, 'Henry', 'Mr Bones', and so on. It was a crazed performance, but it made perfect sense of the poems. Afterwards I could read, because I could 'hear', the Songs.<sup>1</sup>

Our own reading aloud of poetry has the advantage, too, that the process will help us to remember those lines of poetry, especially if we repeat the poem or passage a few times. We will come to know them 'by heart'. Abiding in our subconscious, phrases and cadences will be recalled and their meanings pondered anew. A poem remembered reveals the riches of its meaning throughout our lives.

**Sample question with guidelines**

How do the sounds of this poem by Seamus Heaney augment its meaning?

1. 'Ranting and anting', *The Spectator*, 2 December 1995, p. 52.

**REQUIEM FOR THE CROPPIES**

The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley –  
 No kitchen on the run, no striking camp –  
 We moved quick and sudden in our own country.  
 The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.  
 A people, hardly marching – on the hike –  
 We found new tactics happening each day:  
 We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike  
 And stampede cattle into infantry,  
 Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.  
 Until, on Vinegar Hill, the fatal conclave.  
 Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.  
 The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.  
 They buried us without shroud or coffin  
 And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.

*Notes:*

- The 'croppies' were so called because of the short-cropped hair of these Irish rebels who sympathised with the French revolutionaries at the end of the eighteenth century.
- A requiem mass is offered in Roman Catholicism for the souls of the departed – 'requiem', meaning 'rest', being the initial Latin word of the mass. This poem is a rite of commemoration of these dead ones.

- 'Requiem for the Croppies' is a sonnet, so it is in a form which is notable for the compression of meaning and intensity of utterance. This is suitable for conveying the excitement and danger of the croppies' story.
- The brisk sounds of the opening phrases and lines – particularly the 'c' sounds – capture the 'quick and sudden' action of the rebels' progress through the countryside.
- Alliteration on 'r', in the phrase 'reins and rider', adds to the aural immediacy of flight and pursuit, and the noise of a word such as 'stampede' is climactic in this context.
- The second section of the poem is quieter as the slaughter of the croppies on Vinegar Hill in 1798 is remembered. The impetus of the earlier lines is now replaced by a series of closed units:

Until, on Vinegar Hill, the fatal conclave.

- The emotive element in Heaney's presentation is conveyed aurally, as well as visually, in a word such as 'blushed', which alliterates with 'broken' and 'buried' to intensify the sense of grief appropriate to a requiem. These words are almost blurted out in the sadness of the memory of the occasion.

**Question**

How does your reading aloud of the following sonnet by Shakespeare assist your appreciation of its subject matter?

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought  
I summon up remembrance of things past,  
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,  
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:  
Then can I drown an eye (unused to flow)  
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,  
And weep afresh love's long cancelled woe,  
And moan th' expense of many a vanished sight:  
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,  
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er  
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,  
Which I new pay as if not paid before.  
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,  
All losses are restored and sorrows end.

**Assignment**

Consider the issue of reading aloud and memorising poetry, for recitation and personal satisfaction and pleasure. Choose two or three poems (or sections from longer poems) which you would learn by heart, explaining your choice and the matters of technique, in the poetry, which assist the process of memorising.

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