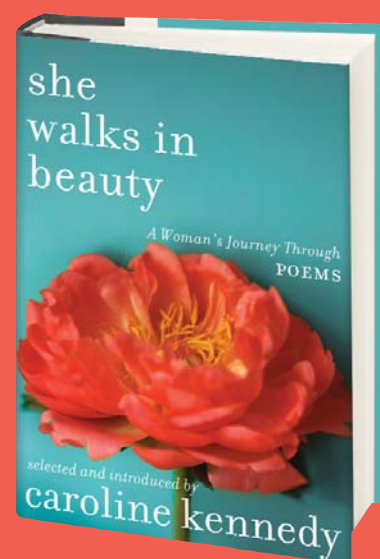


In today's world, as women struggle to balance work and family, to be good mothers and friends, to care for our children and our parents, poetry can help us accept our limitations, and inspire us to overcome them. Poems distill our deepest emotions into a very few words—words that we can remember, carry with us, and share with others as we talk and weave the cloth of life.

—Caroline Kennedy, *She Walks in Beauty*



she walks in beauty

A Woman's Journey Through
POEMS



selected and introduced by
caroline kennedy



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A Simple Guide to Reading Poetry

A Simple Guide to Reading Poetry

This simple guide is designed to heighten your experience and enjoyment of poetry – the words and the sounds, the rhyme and the rhythm, the emotional resonance and meaning to our lives. Read it and revel in the pure joy of *She Walks in Beauty*.

WHAT IS POETRY?

Although there are many definitions of poetry, we needn't understand them all to appreciate and find beauty in it. Poetry is an art form. It uses language to explore and express the amazing experience of being human. This often leads us to expect and search immediately for the *meaning* of a poem. But poetry isn't solely trying to convey meaning to a reader. Rather, it is an attempt to express and generate emotion by engaging our senses. Good poems will suggest valuable, complex ideas, and they will always move us emotionally too.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Sound, rhythm, and imagery play the most powerful roles in poetry, and are therefore its essential components. Further, all the non-verbal sensory "images" that we experience—smells, textures, and tastes—all play a powerful part in any emotional response we have and tend to affect us just as deeply as the visual image.

MEANING IN POETRY

Often we are taught at an early age (if we're taught about poetry at all)

that our primary response after reading a poem should be to figure out *what it means* or *what the poet was trying to say*. But great poems—even good ones—do not have one simple point or lesson that we are supposed to discover. Of course the subject matter or even the *theme* of the poem is important and should be part of our consideration. And there are many great poems that are profoundly smart, full of intellectual insight and wisdom. But poems are not essays or treatises or op-ed pieces.

SOUND

Sound might well be the most neglected element of a poem. We often don't realize that whether hearing the sounds or making them as we speak, the resonance effects us physically and emotionally. Sounds are important because they influence the mood of a poem, and therefore *our* mood while reading. Separate from *what* is being said, the way it sounds makes a difference. A quick example, with help from W. H. Auden's poem *Leap Before You Look* (294): I could write something like "The drinking in bars often causes people to tease each other." Auden writes: "The dirt, the imprecision, and the beer/ Produce a few smart wisecracks every year." Notice, if nothing else, the different effect of the words *tease* and *wisecrack*. They more or less carry the same meaning. But *tease* slips by without much effect, while one almost winces beneath the second syllable of *wisecrack*. And as a result, we *feel* different.

RHYME

Of particular importance to rhythm and unity in a poem is rhyme, the repetition or echoing of sounds. Most people understand this as simple rhyme, when the first consonant sound of two words is different but after that all sounds are the same (year, beer, cheer). In much poetry we are used to these coming at the end of the line. But in truth there are many kinds of echoes

or rhyme for both vowels and consonants. Partial rhymes occur anywhere vowel sounds are similar, even in very different words. So the end of a word like *Tennessee* is echoed in the middle of a word like *everywhere*. Consonant sounds repeated also create partial rhymes, like the hard 'g' sounds in *groundhog* and *egg*, two words we might not think of as rhyming. Whatever the form, rhyme brings pleasurable musical patterns and unity to a poem.

RHYTHM

Scansion is the process of measuring the length and rhythm of a poetic line. You will hear these patterns in many of the poems in this volume. For example, notice that each line except the first in Christopher Marlowe's excerpt from *Hero and Leander* (p12) has ten syllables and a predictable pattern of which ones carry emphasis or accent. Awareness of these elements of a poem—line length and accent pattern—can add greatly to our appreciation. But it needn't be at the forefront of our concerns as we read. In fact, when reading a poem we can't help but be moved by the rhythm of its language.

READING A POEM: EASY AS 1, 2, 3.

A good poem needs to be read a number of times to notice all the various elements at work. Hopefully, a poem will be so powerful and interesting to you that you'll want to go back and read it again, perhaps many times. Strong poems reward this kind of reunion by offering new elements and effects each time. But it might be helpful to think about three different kinds of reading.

1. Give yourself permission to first read a poem simply for its own sake, with your mind and body open to the sensory images and the sounds and rhythms of the language. Don't worry yet about *meaning* or *theme* or the technical particulars of how the poem functions. Just see how the poem *feels*. But even if you never consider the next two levels of reading, you can enjoy and benefit from poems in profound ways just by reading them for how they make you feel.

2. After a number of moving reads, you might want to understand more about the poem and how it accomplishes what it does. You will probably already be aware of the *theme*, the general subject or human experience being explored in the poem. What are the key images or sensory details in the poem? What do we know, if anything, about who is speaking in the poem, the narrator? How would you describe the tone of the poem? Are there any formal patterns apparent in the way the poem appears on the page? Do you hear any repetition in the rhythms of each line? Noticing these elements of a poem will give you a strong understanding of how it was put together, what techniques were employed, and to what effect.

3. If you really want to take your reading a bit further, you can focus in on the particulars: Get a pencil or pen and move through the poem word-by-word, line-by-line, stanza-by-stanza. Consider all of the sensory images in the poem and explore the implications and connotations of each. Are all of these consistent in mood and tone, or do they create a complex, even contrary combination? Look for key words that might repeat throughout the poem. Map the poem. Does it shift in subject? How does the mood change or evolve throughout the poem? Look for the subtle patterns of sound and rhythm in particular words, but also of particular letters and sounds. In just one line from Sylvia Plath's poem *Face Lift*, we have wonderful echoes of sound: "Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg." What, to you, are the most powerful or interesting sounds or rhythms throughout the poem? How do they affect the pace and the mood?

