

Reading Poetry; in addition to knowing the structure of the language of poetry (rhyme, rhythm and meter), you need to know how to read more subtle, contextual elements such as: 1) voice, 2) mis-en-scène, and 3) implied (or stated) narrative.

Voice refers to who is speaking to whom in the poem; if the poem uses a first person "I" then there is a first-person narration—a persona in the poem (not necessarily the poet) is speaking. If the poem uses a second person "you" then the poet is addressing...whom? the reader? another character in the poem? another character in the poet's imagination? the poet or the persona of the poet him/ herself? If the poem uses a third person narration, simply describing a scene as if in a voice-over in a film, then you have a third person narration. Most significantly in poems that are set to music, composers often render musically a shift from one voice to another, as in Schubert's setting of Heine's "Der Doppelgänger" given below. (Original German by Heinrich Heine):

Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen,
In diesem Hause wohnte mein Schatz;
Sie hat schon längst die Stadt verlassen,
Doch steht noch das Haus auf demselben Platz.

Da steht auch ein Mensch und starrt in die Höhe
Und ringt die Hände vor Schmerzensgewalt;
Mir graust es, wenn ich sein Antlitz sehe -
Der Mond zeigt mir meine eigne Gestalt.

Du Doppelgänger, du bleicher Geselle!
Was äffst du nach mein Liebesleid,
Das mich gequält auf dieser Stelle
So manche Nacht, in alter Zeit?

(English):

The night is calm, the avenues are quiet,
My sweet one lived in this house;
She has already left the city long ago,
The house certainly still stands, in the same place.

A man is standing there, too, staring up into space,
And powerfully wringing his hands in torment.
It horrifies me, when I see his countenance,
The moon shows me my own form.

You my fearful double, you pale partner!
Why do you ape the pain of my love,
That has tortured me here in this spot
So many a night, in times long ago?

Notice that stanzas one and two mix first and third person narration; the persona of the poet is describing a night scene as if in a voice-over in a film, and he refers to the fact that he is observing the scene, in the various phrases including the word "I". A shift occurs and the very beginning of the third stanza—the persona of the poet speaks directly to his double. Schubert renders this shift in the voice of the poem with a powerful transformation of his musical materials. Take a look at the work and hear for yourself what he does! And keep your eyes sharp for voices like these in other poems.

The **mis-en-scène** of a poem describes the scene—what you see, what you hear, what you feel about what the persona of the poet is saying, and how these elements develop. You can think of mis-en-scène as how the stage is set; you can think of what you would do setting up a video shoot of the poem; what kind of light would you use? what exactly would you see? Among the many ways of setting the scene, take a look at Goethe's "Wandrer's Nachtlied II": Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Prose Translation by Hyde Flippo

Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen in Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.

Over all the hilltops
is calm.
In all the treetops
you feel
hardly a breath of air.
The little birds fall silent in the woods.
Just wait... soon
you'll also be at rest.

Two things strike me about this poem: 1) there is a gradual shift from third person to second person narration; the poem begins with a voice-over, or omniscient narration—someone simply observes a scene. The "you" seems thick with multiple possibilities; it suggests a companion, another person in the company of the poem's persona; it also suggests the persona speaking to himself, as in a gentle and tender reassurance tone one's self that I too will soon rest, and 2) there is a gradual zooming in, a narrowing of focus from a wide-angle perspective (hilltops) to closer (treetops) to the (little birds) to the "you" who will soon be at rest. Poets often write images in a series like this—a narrowing in, like the now quite archaic transition in film--iris-in.

Poets often **imply narratives** just behind the surface of the images they write. Consider this poem by Heinrich Heine "Im wunderschönen Monat mai.":
Heine, "Im wunderschönen Monat mai" German (original):

Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,
Als alle Knospen sprangen,
Da ist in meinem Herzen
Die Liebe aufgegangen.

Im wunderschönen Monat Mai,
Als alle Vögel sangen,
Da hab' ich ihr gestanden
Mein Sehnen und Verlangen.

English:

In the wonderfully beautiful month of May
When all the buds are bursting open,
There, from my own heart,
Bursts forth my own love.

In the wonderfully beautiful month of May
When all the birds are singing,
So have I confessed to her
My yearning and my longing.

On the surface this is a lovely description of an innocent spring scene of a lover speaking of his love in an analogy with the rebirth of spring. Flowers blossom = love blooming in his heart; bird singing = speaking of love to his beloved. But here knowledge of German helps if you can notice something the English translation misses: the verbs in the German are all in the past tense. Why? To me this is a poem written on say a cold, dark, November day in fond memory of the previous spring when the persona of the poem spoke to his beloved of his love. And if you think about it, the persona in the poem leaves out the most crucial part of his memory—what did she say in response to your declaration of love? It is likely left out because the memory of rejection is so painful. Schumann sets the binary relationship between a present tense and a past tense with ingenuity. Listen to his setting of this song and hear how Schumann sets the oscillation between an implied dismal present and hopeful but likely disappointing past.