

## 19 THE WHOLE TEXT

In the previous seven chapters, we have been thinking about one thing at a time—setting, word choice, symbolism, meter, stanza form, and so on—and we have discussed each poem primarily in terms of a single issue. Learning to deal with one problem at a time is good educational practice and in the long run will make you a more careful and more effective reader of poems. Still, the elements of poems do not work individually but in combination, and in considering even the simplest elements (speaker, for example, or setting) we have noticed how categories overlap—how, for example, the question of setting in Dickey’s “Cherrylog Road” quickly merges into questions about the speaker, his state of mind, his personality, his distance from the central events in the poem. Thinking about a single issue never does complete justice to an individual poem; no poem depends for all its effects on just one device or one element of the poet’s craft. Poems are complex wholes that demand various kinds of attention, and, ultimately, to read any poem fully and well you need to ask every question about craft, form, and tradition that we’ve asked so far, and many more questions you may learn to ask after more experience in reading poems. Not all questions are equally relevant to all poems, of course, but moving systematically through your whole repertoire of questions will enable you to get beyond the fragmentation of particular issues in order to approach the whole poem and its multiple effects. In this chapter we will consider how the various elements in poems work together.

Below is a short poem in which several issues we have considered come up almost simultaneously.

ELIZABETH JENNINGS

### *Delay*

The radiance of that star that leans on me  
Was shining years ago. The light that now  
Glitters up there my eye may never see  
And so the time lag teases me with how

- 5 Love that loves now may not reach me until  
Its first desire is spent. The star’s impulse  
Must wait for eyes to claim it beautiful  
And love arrived may find us somewhere else.

1953

In most poems, several issues arise more or less at once, and the analytic practice of separating issues is a convenience rather than an assertion of priorities. In "Delay," a lot of the basic questions (about speaker, situation, and setting, for example) seem to be put on hold in the beginning, but if we proceed systematically the poem opens itself to us. The first line identifies the "I" (or rather, in this case, "me") of the poem as an observer of the bright star that is the main object in the poem and the principal source of its imagery, its "plot," and its analogical argument. But we learn little about the speaker. She surfaces again in lines 4 and 5 and with someone else ("us") in line 8, but she is always "me" in the objective case—acted on rather than acting. All we know for certain about her is that she can speak about the time it takes a star's light to reach her and that she contemplates deeply about the meaning and effect of such time lags. We know even less about the setting and situation; somewhere the speaker watches a bright star and meditates on the fact that she is seeing it long, long after its light was actually sent forth. Her location is not specified, and the time, though probably night, could be any night (in the age of modern astronomy, that is, because the speaker knows about the speed of light and the distance of the stars from Earth); the only other explicit clues we have about the situation involve the "us" of the final line and the fact that the speaker's concern with time seems oddly personal, something that matters to her emotional life—not merely a matter of scientific knowledge.

The poem's language helps us understand much more about the speaker and her situation, as do the poem's structure and stanza form. The most crucial word in the first stanza is probably the verb "leans" (line 1); certainly it is the poem's most unusual and surprising word. Because a star cannot literally *lean* on its observer, the word seems to suggest the speaker's perception of her relationship to the star. Perhaps she feels that the star impinges on her, that she is somehow *subject* to its influence, though not in the popular, astrological sense. Here the star influences the speaker because she understands something about the way the universe works and can apply her knowledge of light and the vastness of space in an analogical way to her own life: it "leans" because it tells her something about how observers are affected by what they observe. And it is worth noticing how fully the speaker thinks of herself as object rather than actor or agent. Here, as throughout the poem, she is acted upon; things happen *to* her—the star leans on her, the time lag teases her (line 4), love may not reach her (line 5), and she (along with someone else) is the object sought in the final line.

Other crucial words also help clarify the speaker and her situation. The words "radiance" (line 1) and "[g]litters" (line 3) are fairly standard ones to describe stars, but here their standard meanings are carefully qualified by their position in time. The actual radiance of the starlight occurred many eons before and seems to be unavailable to the speaker, who now sees only glitter, something far less warm and resonant. And the word "impulse" in line 6 invokes technical knowledge about light. Rather than being impulsive or quickly spent, a star must "wait" for its reception in the eye of the beholder, where it becomes "beautiful"; in physics, an impulse combines force and duration. Hence, the receiver of light—the beholder, the acted-upon—becomes important, and we begin to see why the speaker always appears as the object: she is the receiver and interpreter, and the light is not complete—its duration not established—until she receives and interprets it. The star does, after all, "lean" on (depend on) her in some objective sense as well as the subjective one in which she first seems to report it.

The stanza form suggests that the poem may have stages and that its meaning may emerge in two parts, a suggestion confirmed by the poem's form and structure. The first stanza is entirely about stars and stargazing, but the second stanza establishes the analogy with love that becomes the poem's central metaphor. Now, too, more becomes clear about the speaker and her situation. Her concern is about delay, "time lag" (line 4), and the fact that "[l]ove that loves now may not reach me until / Its first desire is spent" (lines 5–6), a strong indication that her initial observation of the star is driven by feeling and her emotional context. Her attempt to put the remoteness of feeling into a perspective that will enable understanding and patience becomes the "plot" of the poem, and her final calm recognition about "us"—that "love arrived may find us somewhere else"—is, if not comforting, nevertheless a recognition that patience is important and that some things do last. Even the sounds of the poem—in this case the way rhyme is used—help support the meaning of the poem and the tone it achieves. The rhymes in the first part of the poem reflect perfectly the stable sense of ancient stars, while in the second stanza we find near-rhymes: there is harmony here, but in human life and emotion nothing is quite perfect.

Here is another short poem whose several elements deserve detailed attention:

ANONYMOUS

*Western Wind*

Western wind, when wilt thou blow,  
 The small rain down can rain?  
 Christ, if my love were in my arms  
 And I in my bed again!

15th century

Perhaps the most obvious thing here is the poem's structure: its first two lines seem to have little to do with the last two. How can we account for these two distinct and apparently unrelated directions, the calm concern with natural processes in the first part and the emotional outburst about loneliness and lovelessness in the second? The best route to the whole poem is still to begin with the most simple of questions—who? when? where? what is happening?—and proceed to more difficult and complex ones.

As in Jennings's "Delay," the speaker here offers little explicit autobiography. The first two lines provide no personal information, but ask a question that could be delivered quite impersonally: they could be part of a philosophical meditation. The abbreviated syntax at the end of line 1 (the question of causality is not fully stated, and we have to supply the "so that" implied at the end of the line) may suggest strong feeling and emotional upset, but it tells us nothing intimate, only that the time is spring (which is when the western wind blows). No place is indicated, no year, no particulars of situation. But lines 3–4, while remaining inexplicit about exact details, make the speaker's situation clear enough: his love is no longer

in his arms, and he wishes she were. (We don't really know genders here, but we can make a guess based on what we know of typical practices in fifteenth-century England.)

The poem's language, a study in contrast, guides us to see the two-part structure clearly. The question asked of the wind in lines 1–2 involves straightforward, steady language, but line 3 bursts with agony and personal despair. The power of the first word of line 3—especially in an age of belief—suggests a speaker ready to bewail his loss in the strongest possible terms, and the parallel statements of loss in lines 3 and 4 suggest not only the speaker's physical relationship to his love but also his displacement from home: he is deprived of both place and love, human contact and contact with his past. His longing for a world ordered according to his past experience is structured to parallel his longing for the spring wind that brings the world back to life. The two parts of the poem both express a desire for return—to life, to order, to causal relationships within the world. Setting has in fact become a central theme in the poem, and what the poem expresses tonally involves a powerful desire for stability and belonging—an effect that grows out of our sense of the speaker's situation and character. Speaker, setting, language, and structure here intertwine to create the intense focus of the poem.

In the following short poem, several elements likewise interrelate:

#### ROBERT HERRICK

##### *Upon Julia's Clothes*

Whenas in silks my Julia goes  
Then, then, methinks, how sweetly flows  
That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see  
5 That brave<sup>1</sup> vibration, each way free,  
O, how that glittering taketh me!

1648

The poem is unabashed in its admiration of the way Julia looks, and nearly everything in its six short lines contributes to its celebratory tone. Perhaps the most striking thing about the poem is its unusual, highly suggestive use of words. “[G]oes” at the end of line 1 may be the first word to call special attention to itself, though we will return in a minute to the very first word of the poem. “Walks” or “moves” would seem to be more obvious choices; “goes” is more neutral and less specific and in most circumstances would seem an inferior choice, but here the

1. Handsome, showy.

point seems to be to describe Julia in a kind of seamless and unspecified motion and from a specific angle, because the poem wants to record the effect of Julia's movement on the speaker (already a second element becomes crucial) rather than the specifics of Julia herself. Another word that seems especially important is "liquefaction" (line 3), also an unusual and suggestive word about motion. Again it implies no specific kind of motion, just smoothness and seamlessness, and it applies not to Julia but to her clothes. Other words that might repay a close look include "vibration" in line 5 (the speaker is finally a little more direct); "brave" and "free," also in line 5; and "glittering" and "taketh" in line 6.

Had we begun conventionally by thinking about speaker, situation, and setting, we would have quickly noticed the precise way that the speaker clothes Julia: "in silks," which move almost as one with her body. And we would have noticed that the speaker positions himself almost as voyeur (standing for us as observers, of course, but also for himself as the central figure in the poem). Not much detail about situation or setting is given (and the speaker is characterized only as a viewer and appreciator), but one thing about the scene is crucial, and this takes us back to the first word of the poem, "whenas." The slightly quaint quality of the word may at first obscure, to a modern reader, just what it tells us about the situation, that it is a *generic* scene rather than a single event. "Whenas" is very close to "when-ever"; the speaker's claim seems to be that he responds this way *whenever* Julia dons her silks—apparently fairly often, at least in his memory or imagination.

Most of the speaker's language is sensual and rather provocative (he is anxious to share his responses with others so that *everyone* will know just how "taking" Julia is), but one rather elaborate (though somewhat disguised) metaphor suggests his awareness of his own calculation and its consequences. In the beginning of the second stanza he describes how he "cast" his eyes: it is a metaphor from fishing, a frequent one in love poetry about luring, chasing, and catching. Julia, of course, is the object. The metaphor continues two lines later, but the angler has caught himself: he is taken by the "glittering" lure. This turning of the tables, drawing as it does on a traditional, common image that is then modified to help characterize the speaker, gives a little depth to the show: whatever the slither and glitter, there is not just showing off and sensuality but a catch in this angling.

Many other elements deserve comment, especially because they quickly relate to each other. Consider the way the poet uses sounds, first of all in picking words like "liquefaction" that are themselves almost onomatopoeic, but then also using rhyme very cleverly. There are only two rhyme sounds in the poem, one in the first stanza, the other in the second. The long *ee* of the second becomes almost exclamatory, and the three words of the first seem to become linked in a kind of separate grammar of their own, as if "goes," "flows," and "clothes" were all part of a single action—pretty much what the poem claims on a thematic level. A lot happens in this short and simple poem, and although a reader can get at it step by step by thinking about element after element, the interlocking of the elements is finally the most impressive effect of all. Although the plot reenacts familiar stances of woman as object and man as gazer, our analysis and reading need to be flexible enough to consider not only all the analytical categories, but also the ways in which they work together.

Going back to poems read earlier in the book—with the methods and approaches you have learned since then—can help you see how different elements of poems interrelate. Look, for example, at the stanza divisions in Dickey's "Cherry-

log Road” (chapter 14) and consider how the neatly spaced, apparently discrete units work against the sometimes frantic pacing of the poem. Or consider the character of the speaker, or the fundamental metaphor of “wreckage” that sponsors the poem, relative to the idea of the speaker. Go back and read Kumin’s “Woodchucks” (chapter 12) while thinking about structural questions; or consider how the effaced speaker works in Rich’s “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” (chapter 12); or think about metaphor in Nemerov’s “The Vacuum.”

Here are several more poems to analyze. As you read them, think about the elements discussed in the previous seven chapters—but rather than thinking about a single element at a time, try to consider relationships, how the different elements combine to make you respond not to a single device but to a complex set of strategies and effects.

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W. H. AUDEN



## *Musée des Beaux Arts*<sup>2</sup>

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The Old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position; how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking  
dully along;

5 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
They never forgot

10 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel’s *Icarus*,<sup>3</sup> for instance: how everything turns away

15 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen

2. The Museum of the Fine Arts, in Brussels.

3. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525?–1569), located in the Brussels museum. According to Greek myth, Daedalus and his son, Icarus, escaped from imprisonment by using homemade wings of feathers and wax; but Icarus flew too near the sun, the wax melted, and he fell into the sea and drowned. In the Brueghel painting the central figure is a peasant plowing, and several other figures are more immediately noticeable than Icarus, who, disappearing into the sea, is easy to miss in the lower right-hand corner.

20 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

1938

- Find a reproduction of the painting—*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, by Pieter Brueghel the Elder—that is the subject of this poem. How is your interpretation affected by examining the painting?

GEORGE HERBERT

*The Collar*

I struck the board<sup>4</sup> and cried, "No more;  
I will abroad!  
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?  
My lines<sup>5</sup> and life are free, free as the road,  
5 Loose as the wind, as large as store.<sup>6</sup>  
Shall I be still in suit?<sup>7</sup>  
Have I no harvest but a thorn  
To let me blood, and not restore  
What I have lost with cordial<sup>8</sup> fruit?  
10 Sure there was wine  
Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn  
Before my tears did drown it.  
Is the year only lost to me?  
Have I no bays<sup>9</sup> to crown it,  
15 No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?  
All wasted?  
Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,  
And thou hast hands.  
Recover all thy sigh-blown age  
20 On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute  
Of what is fit, and not. Forsake thy cage,<sup>1</sup>  
Thy rope of sands,  
Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee  
Good cable, to enforce and draw,  
25 And be thy law,  
While thou didst wink<sup>2</sup> and wouldst not see.  
Away! take heed;

4. Table. 5. Lot. 6. A storehouse; that is, abundance. 7. In service to another.  
8. Reviving, restorative. 9. Laurel wreaths of triumph. 1. Moral restrictions.  
2. That is, close your eyes to the weaknesses of such restrictions.

I will abroad.  
 Call in thy death's-head<sup>3</sup> there; tie up thy fears.  
 30 He that forbears  
 To suit and serve his need,  
 Deserves his load."  
 But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild  
 At every word,  
 35 Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*  
 And I replied, *My Lord.*

1633

- How does knowledge of Herbert's profession—clergyman—help you to interpret the title and the rest of the poem? What do the many metaphors in the poem suggest about the speaker's state of mind?

## ROBERT FROST



### *Design*

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,  
 On a white heal-all,<sup>4</sup> holding up a moth  
 Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—  
 Assorted characters of death and blight  
 5 Mixed ready to begin the morning right,  
 Like the ingredients of a witches' broth—  
 A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,  
 And dead wings carried like a paper kite.  
 What had that flower to do with being white,  
 10 The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?  
 What brought the kindred spider to that height,  
 Then steered the white moth thither in the night?  
 What but design of darkness to appall?—  
 If design govern in a thing so small.

1936

- How does this poem confound our usual preconceptions about “light” and “darkness”? How does its elaborate form complement its theme?

3. *Memento mori*, a skull intended to remind people of their mortality.

4. A plant, also called the “all-heal” and “self-heal,” with tightly clustered violet-blue flowers.



## EMILY DICKINSON

*[My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—]*

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—  
 In Corners—till a Day  
 The Owner passed—identified—  
 And carried Me away—

- 5 And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—  
 And now We hunt the Doe—  
 And every time I speak for Him—  
 The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light  
 10 Upon the Valley glow—  
 It is as a Vesuvian face  
 Had let its pleasure through—

- And when at Night—Our good Day done—  
 I guard My Master's Head—  
 15 'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's  
 Deep Pillow—to have shared—

- To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—  
 None stir the second time—  
 On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—  
 20 Or an emphatic Thumb—

Though I than He—may longer live  
 He longer must—than I—  
 For I have but the power to kill,  
 Without—the power to die—

ca. 1863

- How does Dickinson set up and then defy the reader's expectations through the poem's central metaphor—the speaker's life as a loaded gun? How do the poem's quirks (e.g., the jerky rhythm, the strange syntax, the slant rhymes) contribute to its overall effect?

## BEN JONSON

*Epitaph on Elizabeth, L. H.*

Wouldst thou hear what man can say  
 In a little? Reader, stay.  
 Underneath this stone doth lie  
 As much beauty as could die;

- 5 Which in life did harbor give  
 To more virtue than doth live.  
 If at all she had a fault,  
 Leave it buried in this vault.  
 One name was Elizabeth;  
 10 Th' other, let it sleep with death:  
 Fitter, where it died, to tell,  
 Than that it lived at all. Farewell.

1616

- How are lines 4 and 6 expressing more than just common courtliness? In what ways is poetry as much this poem's subject as the beauty and virtue of Elizabeth?

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### SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Consider the setting of Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" in the sense of both the painting and its location in the museum. In what different ways do the two settings become important? How do they function to frame the story of Icarus, or the theme of suffering? Write an essay in which you discuss the way the poem's setting and structure contribute to the overall effect of the poem.
2. Consider both speaker and situation as you analyze Herbert's "The Collar." How does one of these elements illuminate the other? Write an essay in which you examine the way the poem's whole effect arises from an understanding of the speaker and situation.
3. Discussing Dickinson's "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun," the poet Adrienne Rich has written, "I think it is a poem about possession by the daemon [of artistic creativity], about the dangers and risks of such possession if you are a woman, about the knowledge that power in a woman can seem destructive, and that you cannot live without the daemon once it has possessed you." Write an essay in which you respond to Rich's interpretation of Dickinson's poem.
4. Consider the interrelationships among speaker, structure, stanza form, and tone in Frost's "Design" or any other sonnet you have read in this book. How do the elements combine to create a unique whole? Write an essay in which you closely analyze a sonnet—its structure and language, as well as its subject, situation, imagery, and theme.