

in closing, such unseemly Gloom  
by mention of an Incident

45 you may, as I, consider Droll:  
Today, a little Chimney Sweep,  
his face and hands with soot quite Black,  
staring hard at me, politely asked:

“Does you, M'lady, sweep chimneys too?”  
50 I was amused, but Dear Nathaniel  
(ever Solicitous) was not.

I pray the Blessings of Our Lord  
and Saviour Jesus Christ  
will Abundantly be yours.

55  
Phillis  
1977

- What internal and external conflicts seem to be revealed here? What conflict does Wheatley herself seem aware of? Why might Hayden have chosen both this particular moment in Wheatley's life and this particular addressee (Obour Tanner)?
- How does Hayden's portrayal of both Wheatley's feelings and others' views of her compare to Wheatley's own characterization of these in *ON BEING BROUGHT FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA*?

## 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 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 develop 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 these 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 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, try reading it through once without thinking too much about what it means. Try to simply listen to the poem, even if you read silently, and much as you might a song on the radio. Or 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 twixt<sup>6</sup> 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;  
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 winged god,<sup>7</sup>  
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

6 between.

7 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.

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 fulfills, or perhaps frustrates, your expectations.

The title of Aphra Behn's "On Her Loving Too 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 (—).

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 quell 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 winged 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 strong 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 winged 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.

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]?

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.”

**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 winged god” (line 13) and then by name (line 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,” line 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

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 love 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 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 either “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

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,” line 4), the second sticks to the present tense (“is,” “sigh,” “mourn,” etc.) and the third shifts to future (“wilt,” line 16). As a result, I would say 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, and 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 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 is smaller and the 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.

As if realizing she can't solve the problem herself, she turns in the third stanza to Cupid and asks him to help by taking away her love for either Damon or Alexis. As soon as she asks for this, though, she indicates that the result would be unhappiness. In the end, the poem seems to say (or its theme is) that love *doesn't* flow or work like a river because love can actually be stronger when we love more than one person, as if it's multiplied instead of lessened by division.

Clearly, this is the opposite of what I expected, which was that the poem would ask whether it was possible to love two people and conclude it wasn't. The conflict is also different than I expected—though there's an external conflict between the two men (maybe), the focus is on the speaker's internal conflict, but that conflict isn't over which guy to choose but about how this is actually working (*I love both of them equally each love reinforces the other*) versus how she thinks things should work (*I'm not supposed to love two equally*).

## Consider how the poem's form contributes to its effect and meaning.

How is the poem organized on the page, into lines and/or stanzas, for example? (What are the lines and stanzas like in terms of length, shape, and so on? Are they all alike, or do they vary? Are lines unrhymed or end-stopped?)

What are the poem's other formal features? (Is there rhyme or another form of aural patterning such as alliteration? What is the poem's base meter, and are there interesting variations? If not, how else might you describe the poem's rhythm?)

## WRITING ABOUT POETRY

If you follow the steps outlined above and keep notes on your personal responses to the poems you read, you will have already begun writing informally. You have also generated ideas and material you can use in more formal writing. To demonstrate how, we conclude this chapter with two examples of such writing. Both grow out of the notes earlier in this chapter. Each is quite different in form and content. The first example is a relatively informal response paper that investigates the allusions in Aphra Behn's *On Her Loving Two Equally*, following up on the discoveries and questions generated by consulting reference works (as in step 4 above). The second example is an essay on the poem that defends and develops as a theoretical answer to the questions, Why does it matter? What does it all mean? (step 6 above) by drawing on discoveries made in earlier and later steps. In these examples illustrate, there are many different ways to write about a poem, just as there are many different things to say about any one. But all effective writing begins with a clear sense of the poem itself and your responses to it. Effective writing also depends on a willingness to listen carefully to a poem and to ask genuine questions about how it works, what it says and how it says it, and how it both fulfills and challenges your expectations about life, art, and poetry.

Like the chronicles to imaginary letters, brief introspective lyrics to packed epics, "poetry" comes in many sizes, shapes, and varieties; it serves a wide range of purposes for many diverse audiences; and it offers pleasures and problems both like and unlike those we get from fiction, drama, music, or any other art form. In part, though, that's because poetry is something of a trickster, a trespasser, crossing in and out of those other generic domains and inhabiting their clothes, even as it inhabits and wears very special ones all its own. Poetry speaks to head, as well as heart; ears, as well as eyes. If you keep your eyes open, it just might speak to you in ways you never expected.

• How do the poem's overall form and its various formal features contribute to its meaning and effect? In other words, what gets lost when you translate the poem into modern prose?

The stanza organization underscores shifts in the speaker's approach to her situation. But organization reinforces meaning in other ways as well. On the one hand, the division into three stanzas and the choice to number them, plus the fact that each stanza has three sentences, mirror the three-way struggle or "love triangle" described in the poem. On the other hand because the poem has 18 lines and 9 sentences, every sentence is "divided equally twixt two" lines. Sound and especially rhyme reinforce this pattern since the two lines that make up one sentence usually rhyme with each other (to form a **couplet**). The only sentence that aren't couplets are those that begin the second stanza, where we instead have alternating rhyme—is (line 7) rhymes with miss (line 8) and mourn (line 8) rhymes with scorn (line 10). But these lines describe how the speaker "miss[es]" one man when the other is "by," a sensation she arguably reproduces in readers by ensuring that we twice "miss" the rhyme that the rest of the poem leads us to expect.

8. Investigate and consider the ways the poem both uses and departs from poetic conventions, especially those related to form and subgenre. Does the poem use a traditional verse form (such as blank verse) or a traditional stanza form (such as ballad stanza)? Is it a specific subgenre or kind of poem—a sonnet, an ode, a ballad, for example? If so, how does that affect its meaning? Over the course of the poem, what particular subgenres have been used in certain ways and to certain ends, and particular subgenres have observed certain conventions? As a result, they generate particular expectations for readers familiar with such traditions, and poems gain additional meaning by fulfilling and defying those expectations. For example, anapestic meter (two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one, as in *nessee*) is usually used for comic poems, so when poets use it in a serious poem they are probably making a point.

9. Argue. Discussion with others—both out loud and in writing—usually results in clarification and keeps you from being too dependent on personal biases and preoccupations that sometimes cloud even the best readers. Discussing a poem with someone else, especially someone who thinks very differently) or sharing what you've written about the poem can expand your perspective and your experience.