

## ***Controlled Panic: How to translate and paraphrase poems***

*“Help! I don’t understand the poem! Not just the fancy interpretation part, I mean the actual words! I don’t understand the actual words!”*

Yes, this will happen to you. And no, it doesn’t mean that you are a poetry failure or that there’s something wrong with you. It just means that you are beginning the study of a new subject that has its own idiosyncrasies, was potentially written a long time ago, and let’s face it, that you are not that experienced with...yet.

Much like your grandparents may still not understand the subtleties of Twitter or Snapchat, or understand the slang of the moment (I’m not giving any examples of slang because chances are I don’t understand them either), you may feel a barrier to some poems simply because of the time period it was written in. But if we don’t work to remove these barriers, then we are missing out on some of those truly *universal* human thoughts that we do have in common with previous generations--the emotions and thoughts that transcend time and place. So, our job is to learn what we can do to understand the basics of what a poem is saying, so we can get to the point where we can appreciate those universal moments of the human experience.

### ***Our goal:***

You have to figure out what the poem **says**, before you can figure out what it **means** or **does**..

- **says**: literal summary or paraphrase
- **means**: interpretation, big idea, insight, speculation
- **does**: analysis, connection, explanation

Examples from “Design”

Design (by Robert Frost)

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,  
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth  
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth--  
Assorted characters of death and blight  
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,  
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.

**What it says:** A first-person speaker finds a fat white spider on a flower holding a moth.

**What it means:** Perhaps some unseen force ironically brought spider, moth, and flower together in a scene that is horrible and beautiful just like nature but filled with a sense of order and purpose. (interpretation)

**What it does:** The visual image of white created by spider, moth, and flower, creates a barren and ironic sensation in the reader... (analysis)

***Common barriers to understanding what a poem says:***

- Run-on sentences and ideas
- Unknown vocabulary
- Unusual syntax (word order)
- Archaic usage
- Unclear pronouns/antecedents
- Missed mood and tense markers

***Unknown Vocabulary***

Advice: You need to know the definitions of words; they're the foundation of what the poem says.

Strategies:

- Look them up in a dictionary (when possible).
- Keep a list of words you've looked up.
- ***Look up words you "know" but don't seem to be used in the way you know. Many words aren't used with the meaning that you immediately assume.***

- Use context clues (dictionary is not allowed on the AP test).
- Use root word clues.
- Don't be freaked out by alternate spellings.

### ***Archaic Usage***

Advice: Learn these words.

Strategy: Read a lot of old poems and amass a working glossary

- Old fashioned words:
  - Oft (often), thou (you as subject), thee (you as object) dost (do), art (are), ere (before), thine (yours)
- Poetic contractions
  - ne'er (never), e'er (ever), ta'en (taken),

### ***Run on Sentences or Ideas***

Keep reading until the logical conclusion of an idea

Strategies:

- Use punctuation: **Periods** are a stronger break than **semicolons** which are a stronger break than **commas**.
- Use these breaks as the point at which you do a summary or paraphrase
- Know when to re-read; know when to move forward
  - Sometimes you have to know what's going on before you can move forward.
  - Sometimes continuing reading will help give you the context for a previous difficult to understand line

### ***Unusual Syntax***

Know what our current day brain prefers for spoken English sentence order: Subject, verb, object, other stuff.

Currently preferred: I saw the moon last night

- I(subject) saw(verb) the moon(object) last night (other stuff).

Poetry (and times of yore):

- Last night, the moon I saw...
- Saw I, last night, the moon
- The moon saw I last night...

Strategy: Move around words, phrases, or clauses to rearrange ideas in a more understandable order.

### ***Unclear Pronouns and Antecedents***

Review what you know about antecedents

- An antecedent is the main noun that comes before a pronoun.
  - The coat is red. It is pretty. (Coat is the antecedent for the pronoun "it")

Strategy:

- Put your finger pronouns that you encounter and immediately read backwards to try and find its antecedent.
- Proximity does not always determine the antecedent; you need to read with meaning as well.
- Process of elimination

Practice

These beauteous forms,  
 Through a long absence, have not been to me  
 As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:  
 But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din  
 Of towns and cities, I have owed to **them**,  
 In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
 Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;

**Exercise:** Apply the strategies above to translate making sure to specify the antecedent for the pronoun “them.” \_\_\_\_\_.

### ***Mood and Tense Markers***

Advice: Review what you know about how tense and mood affect meaning.

- Mood: *Indicative* (it’s happening) vs. *subjunctive* (it *could* happen but not necessarily)
  - Subjunctive examples
    - If I could sing...**or** Could I sing...
    - If I had a million dollars...**or** Had I a million dollars...
    - If I were taller...**or** Were I taller
- Tense: Present tense (it rains), past tense (it rained) super past tense/pluperfect (it had rained[before something else happened]), future (it will rain), future perfect (it will have rained)

Practice:

Had we but world enough and time,  
This coyness, lady, were no crime.  
We would sit down, and think which way  
To walk, and pass our long love’s day.  
Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side  
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide  
Of Humber would complain.

### **Exercise:**

Apply all the strategies above to translate, making sure to explain how grammatical mood affects the meaning.

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**Practice/Exercise:** Translate line for line

***Sir Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)***

<sup>1</sup>One day I wrote her name upon the strand, \_\_\_\_\_  
But came the waves and washed it away: \_\_\_\_\_  
Agayne I wrote it with a second hand, \_\_\_\_\_  
But came the tyde, and made my paynes his pray. \_\_\_\_\_  
<sup>5</sup>“Vayne man,” sayd she, “that doest in vaine assay, \_\_\_\_\_  
A mortall thing so to immortalize, \_\_\_\_\_  
For I my selve shall lyke to this decay, \_\_\_\_\_  
And eek my name bee wyped out lykewize.” \_\_\_\_\_  
“Not so,” quod I, “let baser things devize \_\_\_\_\_  
<sup>10</sup>To dy in dust, but you shall live by fame: \_\_\_\_\_

My verse your vertues rare shall eternize, \_\_\_\_\_  
And in the heavens wryte your glorious name. \_\_\_\_\_  
Where whenas death shall all the world subdew, \_\_\_\_\_  
Our love shall live, and later life renew." \_\_\_\_\_

Apply strategies:

1. Do a line-for-line translation of the poem. You should find that you use almost all of the strategies above.
2. Once you've done a translation, what universal ideas does Spencer explore? What complex interpretation can you develop?

### ***Walt Whitman (1819-1892)***

A NOISELESS, patient spider,  
I mark'd, where, on a little promontory, it stood, isolated;  
Mark'd how, to explore the vacant, vast surrounding,  
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself;  
Ever unreeling them—ever tirelessly speeding them. 5

And you, O my Soul, where you stand,  
Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,—seeking the spheres, to connect the

Till the bridge you will need, be form'd—till the ductile anchor hold;  
Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my Soul.

#### **Exercise:**

Translate in your head and then write a complex interpretation statement with modified devices.