

● Week 2

2. Listening to a Voice Tone

4) My Papa's Waltz

by Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.



1) Biography and background: Background: Theodore Roethke (1908-1963) was born and grew up in Saginaw, Michigan, eventually going on to Harvard and then into teaching poetry in Washington. He had a conflicted relationship with his father. He loved him, but feared him at the same time. The greenhouse that his father and uncle owned, as well as the woods beyond, filled the poet's childhood with the wonders of the natural world. Roethke followed his father around as he worked and idolized him. Roethke's father died of cancer when Roethke was fifteen, and it shook the boy's world. Long after that traumatic event, Roethke struggled with depression and mental illness. Roethke's writing often referred to his childhood and, as we see in this poem, his father. "My Papa's Waltz" was published in a magazine in 1942, then again in Roethke's book *The Lost Son and Other Poems*.

Poet and writer James Dickey once named Roethke the greatest of all American poets: "I don't see anyone else that has the kind of deep, gut vitality that Roethke's got. Whitman was a great poet, but he's no competition for Roethke."

2) Themes and Topics: Daddy's had a little too much whiskey, and now he's waltzing around the kitchen with his son. Their waltz is pretty clumsy – the pans are sliding from the shelf, and mom's not too happy about that. The father must be a guy who works with his hands, because his knuckles are rough, and he deals with a lot of dirt. This dance may not be all fun and games for the boy – he keeps scraping his ear on his dad's belt buckle, ouch! And his dad is keeping time, perhaps not so gently, on the boy's head. In the end, the father dances the boy off to bed.

It is an intriguing poem, partly because of its ambiguity. It can be read as both a story of a child terrorized by and abusive father and a child having a playful romp with his daddy before bedtime. / memory of father, playfulness and fear, missed feeling towards the past, child and parent relationship, family ties. Waltz and romp, clinging, drunkenness, dizzy, knuckle, buckle

3) Style and Structure:

Tone, in written composition, is an attitude of a writer toward a subject or an audience. Tone is generally conveyed through the choice of words, or the viewpoint of a writer on a particular subject. Every written piece comprises a central theme or subject matter. The manner in which a writer approaches this theme and subject is the tone. The tone can be formal, informal, serious,

comic, sarcastic, sad, or cheerful, or it may be any other existing attitude. In this poem, the tone is a mixed one, half playful, half terrified. There's an ambiguity built up in the poem so that, on the one hand this is a light and frolicking poem, yet there's darkness and uncertainty too. The child hangs on to the whiskey drinking father like death, and the father's dirty hand beats time on his son's head. Not an orthodox word to use in this context.

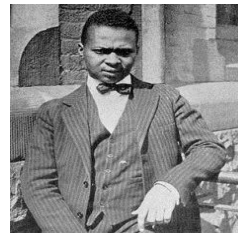
Rhyme: The poem has a regular and full rhyme scheme, abab, with an exception in the first stanza.

- 4) Imagery and diction:** "Waltz" in the title and the fourth/fifteenth lines gives an image of playfulness and cheerfulness and happiness.

5) For A Lady I Know

by Countee Cullen (1903-1946)

She even thinks that up in heaven
Her class lies late and snores
While poor black cherubs rise at seven
To do celestial chores.



- 1) Form and style: 4 lines in two stanzas rhyming abab. What's effective about this format is that it possesses a childish quality, reminiscent of nursery rhymes, which is disturbing when the content of the poem is considered
- 2) Story: The poem is talking about how a high-class woman thinks that, even in Heaven, there will be servants. She thinks that she can sleep late, relax, and do whatever she wants while an African-American is there to get up early and wait on her. It is obvious that this woman believes Heaven will be exactly like Earth, at least in that aspect. Her view could even be considered somewhat childish. Also, the author seems to be making fun of this woman for what she believes and maybe wants to get her attention in order to change her beliefs.
- 3) Christian perspective: From a Christian perspective, I think this poem is funny. I know that this is not what Heaven will be like because God created all men to be equal. He did not create different races for one to be lower and serve the others. Also, Heaven is perfect and without sin; therefore, there cannot be servants in Heaven because that would not be a perfect world for them. I think this poem does a good job of showing the ignorance that we, as humans, can have and the sometimes crazy ideas that we believe. The words, "heaven" and "cherubs" allude to the Bible. Heaven is said to be the holiest place possible, accessible to people of divinity, goodness, piety, faith, and other values. Cherubs are angels. The allusion is critical in understanding the irony. If the reader does not grasp the great significance of the meaning of cherubs and heaven, he/she will not understand the major irony displayed in this poem.
- 4) Themes: Pride, class discrimination; the absurdity of racism. The importance of heaven and the cherubs is that both are divine. The lady in "For a Lady I Know" honestly believes that not only are there classes in heaven, but there is separation of wealthy and poor. The insanity of this belief is topped only by the belief that there is superiority of the white race in heaven. The irony of a woman thinking she will be able to enter heaven because of her status and have African American slaves (

6) I like to see it lap the Miles

by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

I like to see it lap the Miles -
And lick the Valleys up -
And stop to feed itself at Tanks -

And then - prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains -
And supercilious peer
In Shanties - by the sides of Roads -
And then a Quarry pare

To fit it's sides
And crawl between
Complaining all the while
In horrid - hooting stanza -
Then chase itself down Hill -

And neigh like Boanerges -
Then - prompter than a Star
Stop - docile and omnipotent
At it's own stable door -



there's not much "plot" in this brief, riddle-like poem. In it, Dickinson describes the progress of a strange creature (which astute readers discover is a train) winding its way through a hilly landscape. The speaker admires the train's speed and power as it goes through valleys, stops for fuel, then "steps" around some mountains. The animal-like train passes by human dwellings and, though it observes them, doesn't stop to say hello. Instead, it goes on ahead, chugging loudly as it passes through a tunnel, and steams downhill. Finally, the train (compared in the end to a powerful horse) stops right on time at the station, its "stable."

Line 1

I like to see it lap the Miles —

- The speaker admires the speed and stamina of – what exactly? She only says that she likes to see "it" as it travels.
- The double-edged verb used here, "lap," immediately brings to mind two different actions. The speaker could either be describing a racehorse, flying through the laps of a racetrack for mile, or a cat, languidly lapping up miles like milk.
- Either way, something is moving across a landscape – fast.
- If we remember the alternate title of the poem, "The Railway Train," we can already guess that she's probably watching a train moving along the tracks.

Line 2

And lick the Valleys up —

- Going off of the second meaning of "lap" in line 1, the image of the mystery animal "lick[ing] the valleys up" follows on this theme of eating and consumption. "It," the train, is eager to eat up (metaphorically speaking) the distance it covers.
- This use of the word "lick" is an example of personification. The train is described in human terms, because it "licks" the valleys: it's as if the train has a tongue.
- Trains can't actually lick, of course, but it's a strong image that gives us an idea of how the train moves through the valleys.

Line 3

And stop to feed itself at Tanks —

- Another eating-related metaphor appears here, as the mystery creature "stop[s] to feed itself at tanks" (3).
- Trains, back when Dickinson was writing, were all powered by steam, which was generated by burning wood, coal, or oil.
- So, this must be a reference to the train being loaded with fuel so that it can keep moving.
- Let's keep chugging along and see where else this train goes.

Line 4-5

And then — prodigious step Around a Pile of Mountains —

- After its pit stop, the train goes onward, to step effortlessly around mountains – not just one, but a "pile."
- We have a great sense of just how massive this locomotive is so far; it's large enough to require tanks of food, and to skip around mountain ranges.
- Despite all the animal-like descriptions, this train is certainly no real animal...

Lines 6-7

And supercilious peer

In Shanties — by the sides of Roads —

- The train "superciliously" (that is, haughtily or condescendingly) looks into the ramshackle buildings by the roadside.
- Clearly, the speaker can't get enough of personification. The train isn't just a big iron thing—it actually has a personality.
- We think that by giving the train a snooty attitude, the speaker might be telling us that she's not totally sold on this new technology. What do you think?

Lines 8-10

And then a Quarry pare

To fit its Ribs

And crawl between

- Now the train "crawls" through a narrow tunnel or passage in the mountainous terrain.
- Some of the words here are a bit strange, so we'll help you out.
- "Pare" is a word you've probably heard before. Ever used a "paring knife" to "pare" (cut) up a piece of fruit?
- "Quarry" is a place where stone is cut from the ground.
- "Ribs" seems to be a metaphor for the train tracks—can't you picture the resemblance?
- "Paring" a "quarry" makes it sound as though the thing slices through rock as effortlessly as a knife through an apple.
- Of course, it probably wasn't quite that easy to cut away the rocks for the train. But you get the idea.

Lines 11-12

Complaining all the while

In horrid — hooting stanza —

- The mystery creature whines horribly as it moves through the rock, making a loud ruckus.
- What did we tell you about the personification in this poem? By describing it as "complaining," the speaker gives the train even more personality.
- Check out the use of the word "stanza." It makes us think of stanzas of poetry, which have a rhythmic quality. It seems like the horrible sounds coming from this thing are rhythmic, too.

Line 13

Then chase itself down Hill —

- Freed from the tunnel, the train eagerly goes downhill. This line has a light, playful quality. (We can't help but picture a cute puppy chasing its tail.)
- It's also like a riddle: What can chase itself?
- Answer: a train made up of multiple cars, each one following the engine down the hill.

Line 14

And neigh like Boanerges —

- The creature lets out a rumbling cry, or "neigh," which reminds us of its horse-like qualities from the first lines.

- The speaker compares it to Boanerges, a Biblical name that means "son of thunder," and generally refers to a booming, loud preacher or public speaker.

Lines 15-17

Then — punctual as a Star

Stop — docile and omnipotent

At its own stable door —

- In these lines the speaker uses a simile. She says that the train is "punctual as a star."
- Stars, of course, show up in the sky at a specific time each night. It sounds like the speaker is suggesting that the train is as punctual as nature.
- At last, the creature stops, right on time, and placidly returns to its home, or "stable" (another horse reference to bear in mind).
- In these final lines, the speaker also describes the train as "docile and omnipotent." This characterization again gives humanlike (or even super-humanlike) qualities to the train. On the one hand, the train is "docile," or submissive. On the other hand, it's "omnipotent," or all-powerful.
- The train, in other words, is a complicated thing with many qualities and many characteristics. And it's all pretty new to the speaker, so maybe she's still not quite sure what to make of it.

Symbol Analysis

Though sleuth-like readers will soon figure out that the mystery creature referred to here is actually a train, Dickinson uses an extended metaphor to depict the train as a kind of super-powerful, foreign animal. This reminds readers that the train moves through the natural world, but doesn't belong to it. The train is personified with various creaturely traits; as we read it, we might compare it to a whole menagerie of different animals. However, all of these familiar characteristics eventually only make this manmade beast seem all the more strange and extraordinary.

- Lines 1-4: The train-animal (tranimal?) is obviously a ravenous one; it doesn't simply travel along, but rather gobbles up miles and valleys, before feeding itself (that is, refueling).
- Lines 11-12: The train is a vocal creature, and the description of its complaints in "horrid—hooting stanza" (12) emphasize its wildness and incomprehensibility. The alliteration here ("horrid," "hooting") highlights the uncivilized quality of its speech; think of an owl hooting creepily in a dark forest, or hyenas laughing wildly.
- Line 13: There's a kind of fun, puppy-like quality to this line; the train "chase[s] itself downhill" the way a playful pup might chase its tail.
- Lines 14-17: Here, the train is a horse. It neighs loudly and returns peacefully to its stable. The simile Dickinson employs in line 14 is also a bonus Biblical allusion ("Boanerges" is an Aramaic nickname that Jesus once gave two of his vociferous disciples. It means "sons of thunder").

Furthermore, Dickinson's crisp alliteration ("star," "stop," "stable") brings a kind of clipped precision to this stanza, kind of like a horse trotting briskly home.

Symbol Analysis

The general theme of the first stanza is eating and drinking – the train is a ravenously hungry creature, and as it travels, it consumes and consumes. There's some interesting mixed feelings here; while the speaker claims to "like" watching it, the hungry animal is a little menacing in its devouring path through the countryside. We're not sure what exactly to make of it...but maybe that doesn't matter. After all, the personified train is capable of eating all it wants, without our permission (it can even feed itself without human help, apparently, as we see in line 3).

- Lines 1-2: The speaker announces that she enjoys the way the train eats up the landscape – the alliteration here ("like," "lap," "lick") implies the speaker savors her view of the train the way that the train savors its consumption of the miles and valleys.
- Line 3: The creature "stop[s] to feed itself at tanks" – literally, to refuel itself for the journey ahead. What's interesting about this image is the idea that the train feeds itself, rather than being fed by human caretakers.

Symbol Analysis

While this concept only shows up very briefly in the poem's final stanza, it strikes us as an interesting one. Dickinson's comparison of the train to living, earthly creatures (like a horse) puts it in the frame of our environment and our natural world, but this last comparison to a star makes the train seem otherworldly, as though it has a kind of alien life of its own.

- Line 15: The simile comparing the train to a star speaks again to its power; the trains moving along the railway are a manmade equivalent to the celestial bodies (sun, planets, stars) that move predictably through the heavens. The train is "punctual as a star" – which is to say, as punctual (steady and on time) as the most reliable thing in our known universe.

LANDSCAPE

Symbol Analysis

Trains move. They move through cities, they move through the countryside, and they move through small little towns in the middle of nowhere. Even though "The Railway Train" is a short poem, we find a lot of landscape description in it. It's not only a poem about a train, in other words; it's also a poem about nature, cities, and all that good outdoors stuff.

Check out some examples:

l. 2: In the second line, we see the train moving through "valleys." The train is taking us right through the great outdoors.

l. 5: The train also makes its way around "a pile of mountains." More lovely nature images here.

l. 7: In this line, we move into a more urban landscape. We're no longer in the beautiful mountains and valleys, but in "shanties" and "by the sides of roads."

l. 14: The speaker describes the train as "punctual as a star." Again, an image of landscape—the night sky—is being evoked. The image is used to show us just how "punctual" the train is: it's as regular as the stars that appear in the sky every night.

ANALYSIS: FORM AND METER

For the most part, Ballad Stanza

Dickinson's poems are often described as "hymn-like," which is actually a pretty good way of thinking about her sing-songy, musical verse; they're best read aloud to make sure you really feel the consistent beat. This steady rhythm comes from the iambic meter that Dickinson employs. An "iamb" is a two-syllable metrical unit, or "foot" made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. An iamb makes the sound da-DUM. For example, the word "itself" is a good sample iamb – say it out loud to yourself (another iamb! Goodness gracious, they're everywhere.) right now: it-self. See what we mean?

Let's take a couple of Dickinson's lines out for a spin next:

I like to see it lap the Miles—
and lick the Valleys up—

Try really hitting those bold, italicized (stressed) syllables hard – can you feel it? The undulating rhythm of these iambic lines is what lends them their air of musicality.

You probably noticed that the first line has four stresses (like, see, lap, Miles), while the second has only three (lick, Val-, up). This pattern of iambic tetrameter (that is, four-iamb meter) and iambic trimeter (three-iamb meter) is known as ballad meter – as in, the meter most commonly used in folk ballads. Two sets of these alternating lines – a total of four lines, or one quatrain – is called ballad stanza. Dickinson's poem follows the classic rhyme scheme for ballads, ABCB.

Want to know more about Dickinson's rhyme, particularly her slant rhyme? Check out "Calling Card."

ANALYSIS: SPEAKER

The speaker in this riddle is even more mysterious than the subject of the riddle itself. We can figure out that she's talking about a train ("she" being an arbitrary gender assignment) – but who is doing the talking? We have no idea.

"I like to see it lap the Miles" presents us with a rather extreme version of what we call the "Lyric I," a nifty term for the unnamed speaker – you know, "I" – in a lyric poem. This mysterious "I" isn't exactly a character, and may or may not even be a person. Here, all we know is that the speaker is a keen observer, who's watching the train as it courses through the landscape.

The speaker's feelings are ambiguous, and seem intentionally unclear; the opening declaration that "I like to see it lap the Miles" (1) is kind of a red herring. In fact, though the speaker declares that she/he/it "likes" to watch the train, the rest of the poem seems to imply that this admiration is also tinged with unease. Whatever or whoever "I" happens to be isn't quite so sure what to make of this newfangled invention, and it's this feeling of ambiguity that's the most important characteristic of the speaker.

ANALYSIS: SETTING

Where It All Goes Down

The landscape the poem takes us to is fairly non-specific, but we can imagine it clearly nonetheless. The speaker describes a train winding its way over miles, dipping through valleys and around and into mountains. The speaker commands a view of the train's whole course through this scenery, and sees it punctually pull into a station at the end of the line. Whenever we read this

poem, we imagine ourselves standing where the speaker is – perhaps at the crest of a hill or mountain top, watching the train as it huffs and puffs its way through the countryside lying before us. To us 21st century, car-driving readers, it's a scenic, romantic view, and we like to linger there and "watch it lap the Miles."

If we're taking the biographical route with this poem, we might imagine the real-life landscape that Dickinson was writing about – the hills and valleys of her native Massachusetts, as the first railroad trains rolled in and out of her hometown, Amherst. The town, situated in verdant western Massachusetts, is close to the Holyoke mountains, and we can just imagine a steaming train winding through the trees and fields of a 19th-century landscape (for help with this imaginary exercise, think of those terrific aerial shots of the Hogwarts Express winding through the verdant English countryside in the Harry Potter films).

7) For My Daughter (1940)

by Weldon Kees (1914-1955)

Looking into my daughter's eyes I read
Beneath the innocence of morning flesh
Concealed, hintings of death she does not heed.
Coldest of winds have blown this hair, and mesh
Of seaweed snarled these miniatures of hands;
The night's slow poison, tolerant and bland,
Has moved her blood. Parched years that I have seen
That may be hers appear: foul, lingering
Death in certain war, the slim legs green.
Or, fed on hate, she relishes the sting
Of others' agony; perhaps the cruel
Bride of a syphilitic or a fool.
These speculations sour in the sun.
I have no daughter. I desire none.



- 1) Weldon Kees was born in Beatrice, Nebraska and attended Doane College, the University of Missouri and the University of Nebraska, earning his degree in 1935. In addition to writing, Kees was passionate about painting and throughout his life created many forms of art including experimental films. In 1955 Kees took his sleeping bag and his savings account book and disappeared, leaving his car on the Golden Gate Bridge. It is not known whether he killed himself or went to Mexico. Harry Weldon Kees (February 24, 1914 – July 18, 1955) was an American poet, painter, literary critic, novelist, playwright, jazz pianist, short story writer, and filmmaker. Despite his brief career, he is considered an important mid-twentieth-century poet of the same generation as John Berryman, Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Lowell. His work has been immensely influential on subsequent generations of poets writing in English and other languages and his collected poems have been included in many anthologies. Harold Bloom lists the publication of Kees's first book *The Last Man* (1943) as an important event in the chronology of his textbook *Modern American Poetry* as well as a book worthy of his Western Canon.
- 2) Five years after his disappearance and presumed suicide, Kees's *Collected Poems* was first published. In his introduction to that volume, Donald Justice called Kees "among the three or four best of his generation." Justice went on to note that "Kees is original in one of the few ways that matter: he speaks to us in a voice or, rather, in a particular tone of voice which we have never heard before." Kees's *Collected Poems* have since been reprinted twice. His collection of fiction, *Ceremony and Other Stories*, first appeared in 1983.

The Person in the Poem

8) Monologue for an Onion

by Suji Kwock Kim (1969-)

I don't mean to make you cry.
I mean nothing, but this has not kept you
From peeling away my body, layer by layer,

The tears clouding your eyes as the table fills
With husks, cut flesh, all the debris of pursuit.
Poor deluded human: you seek my heart.

Hunt all you want. Beneath each skin of mine
Lies another skin: I am pure onion--pure union
Of outside and in, surface and secret core.

Look at you, chopping and weeping. Idiot.
Is this the way you go through life, your mind
A stopless knife, driven by your fantasy of truth,

Of lasting union--slashing away skin after skin
From things, ruin and tears your only signs
Of progress? Enough is enough.

You must not grieve that the world is glimpsed
Through veils. How else can it be seen?
How will you rip away the veil of the eye, the veil

That you are, you who want to grasp the heart
Of things, hungry to know where meaning
Lies. Taste what you hold in your hands: onion-juice,

Yellow peels, my stinging shreds. You are the one
In pieces. Whatever you meant to love, in meaning to
You changed yourself: you are not who you are,

Your soul cut moment to moment by a blade
Of fresh desire, the ground sown with abandoned skins.
And at your inmost circle, what? A core that is

Not one. Poor fool, you are divided at the heart,
Lost in its maze of chambers, blood, and love,
A heart that will one day beat you to death.



1. Born in 1969, Suji Kwock Kim was educated at Yale College; the Iowa Writers' Workshop; Seoul National University, where she was a Fulbright Scholar; and Stanford University, where she was a Stegner Fellow. Her first book of poems, *Notes from the Divided Country* (Louisiana State University Press, 2003) was chosen by Yusef Komunyakaa for the 2002 Walt Whitman Award.
2. Kim's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Poetry*, *Paris Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *DoubleTake*, *Yale Review*, *Salmagundi*, *Threepenny Review*, *Ploughshares*, *New England Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Asian-American Poetry: The Next Generation*, and other journals and anthologies.

9) I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

by William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,

When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.



- 1) Discussing prose written by poets, Joseph Brodsky has remarked, “the tradition of dividing literature into poetry and prose dates from the beginnings of prose, since it was only in prose that such a distinction could be made.” This insight is worth bearing in mind when considering the various prose works of the *poet* William Wordsworth. For Wordsworth poetic composition was a primary mode of expression; prose was secondary. Wordsworth seems to have written prose mostly in order to find a structure for his poetic beliefs and political enthusiasms.
- 2) Over the course of a prolific poetic career, in fact, Wordsworth produced little prose, though he did compose two works of lasting general interest, one on poetics—“Preface to Lyrical Ballads”—and the other on the landscape of his native region—his tourist handbook, *A Guide through the District of the Lakes*, which retains more than a local interest as geographical background to his poems and biography. Wordsworth is not, of course, remembered as a prose writer but as a poet of spiritual and epistemological speculation, a poet concerned with the human relationship to nature. Yet recently, certain critics, as part of a revisionist critique of older interpretations of Wordsworth’s verse, have turned to his political essays for evidence, especially concerning the poet’s rejection of his youthful radicalism. Wordsworth’s political writings, especially “A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,” *The Convention of Cintra* (1809), and *Two Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmoreland* (1818), while historically significant, are of primary interest as background for the poetry: for Wordsworth, poetics always determined politics.