Poems and Songs

The 11 basic steps to reading a poem

Step 1: Read through the poem to get a sense of it.

Step 2: Identify the sentences and independent clauses (circle the periods, exclamation points, question marks, and semicolons). For some reason, people always forget that poetry is made up of complete sentences.

Step 3: Read a few lines to figure out the meter (figure out how many stresses there are in a typical line).

Step 4: Note the rhyme scheme (look for a pattern).

Step 5: Read the poem out loud. Try to follow the rhythm. If you do this you'll hear where the poet plays with the rhythm. And you'll hear the rhyme scheme.

Step 6: Look up any words you don't understand.

Step 7: Re-read the poem out loud.

Step 8: Mark off any sections in the poem. These sections may be speeches given by a character, discussions of a particular topic, changes in mood, or a new stage of an argument.

Step 9: Re-read the poem.

Step 10: Figure out the tone -- the emotion -- of the poem.

Step 11: Re-read the poem.

So far you haven't done any analysis. But you've got a rich understanding of the poem. You know how it works as verse, and you've probably read the poem the way the poet meant it to be read.

Now you can start on the analysis -- if you like. If you do choose to analyze the poem (or if you are forced into it by your power-mad professor) you will do a better job because you are alert to what the poem says, and where it changes meaning, tone, sound, or rhythm. This will help you zero in on the important moments in the poem.
Pistol shots ring out in the barroom night
Enter Patty Valentine from the upper hall.
She sees the bartender in a pool of blood,
Cries out, "My God, they killed them all!"
Here comes the story of the Hurricane,
The man the authorities came to blame
For somethin' that he never done.
Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a been
The champion of the world.

Three bodies lyin' there does Patty see
And another man named Bello, movin' around mysteriously.
"I didn't do it," he says, and he throws up his hands
"I was only robbin' the register, I hope you understand.
I saw them leavin'," he says, and he stops
"One of us had better call up the cops."
And so Patty calls the cops
And they arrive on the scene with their red lights flashin'
In the hot New Jersey night.

Meanwhile, far away in another part of town
Rubin Carter and a couple of friends are drivin' around.
Number one contender for the middleweight crown
Had no idea what kinda s_ _ _ was about to go down
When a cop pulled him over to the side of the road
Just like the time before and the time before that.
In Paterson that's just the way things go.
If you're black you might as well not show up on the street
'Less you wanna draw the heat.

Alfred Bello had a partner and he had a rap for the cops.
Him and Arthur Dexter Bradley were just out prowlin' around
He said, "I saw two men runnin' out, they looked like middleweights
They jumped into a white car with out-of-state plates."
And Miss Patty Valentine just nodded her head.
Cop said, "Wait a minute, boys, this one's not dead"
So they took him to the infirmary
And though this man could hardly see
They told him that he could identify the guilty men.

Four in the mornin' and they haul Rubin in,
Take him to the hospital and they bring him upstairs.
The wounded man looks up through his one dyin' eye
Says, "Wha'd you bring him in here for? He ain't the guy!"
Yes, here's the story of the Hurricane,
The man the authorities came to blame
For somethin' that he never done.
Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a been
The champion of the world.

Four months later, the ghettos are in flame,
Rubin's in South America, fightin' for his name
While Arthur Dexter Bradley's still in the robbery game
And the cops are puttin' the screws to him,
lookin' for somebody to blame.
"Remember that murder that happened in a bar?"
"Remember you said you saw the getaway car?"
"You think you'd like to play ball with the law?"
"Think it might-a been that fighter that you saw runnin' that night?"
"Don't forget that you are white."

Arthur Dexter Bradley said, "I'm really not sure."
Cops said, "A poor boy like you could use a break
We got you for the motel job and we're talkin' to your friend Bello
Now you don't wanta have to go back to jail, be a nice fellow.
You'll be doin' society a favor.
That sonofabitch is brave and gettin' braver.
We want to put his ass in stir
We want to pin this triple murder on him
He ain't no Gentleman Jim."

Rubin could take a man out with just one punch
But he never did like to talk about it all that much.
It's my work, he'd say, and I do it for pay
And when it's over I'd just as soon go on my way
Up to some paradise
Where the trout streams flow and the air is nice
And ride a horse along a trail.
But then they took him to the jailhouse
Where they try to turn a man into a mouse.

All of Rubin's cards were marked in advance
The trial was a pig-circus, he never had a chance.

The judge made Rubin's witnesses drunkards from the slums
To the white folks who watched he was a revolutionary bum
And to the black folks he was just a crazy ni___.
No one doubted that he pulled the trigger.
And though they could not produce the gun,
The D.A. said he was the one who did the deed
And the all-white jury agreed.

Rubin Carter was falsely tried.
The crime was murder "one," guess who testified?
Bello and Bradley and they both baldly lied
And the newspapers, they all went along for the ride.
How can the life of such a man
Be in the palm of some fool's hand?
To see him obviously framed
Couldn't help but make me feel ashamed to live in a land
Where justice is a game.

Now all the criminals in their coats and their ties
Are free to drink martinis and watch the sun rise
While Rubin sits like Buddha in a ten-foot cell
An innocent man in a living hell.
That's the story of the Hurricane,
But it won't be over till they clear his name
And give him back the time he's done.
Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a been
The champion of the world.
We Real Cool

By Gwendolyn Brooks

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June (1.). We
Die soon.

(1.) a reference to popular music and enjoying the summer of youth

Discussion Questions:

1. Define “cool” as it applies to you.

2. What role do diction and rhyme scheme play in this poem?
3. How does the reference to the summer of youth tie in to this poem?

4. What are the consequences and benefits of being “cool” as shown in this poem?

5. What is the theme of this poem? Why?

Why does the speaker mention death at the close of this poem?
Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall nowâ€”
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
Sympathy

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals —
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting —
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —
I know why the caged bird sings!
“Man in Black” by Johnny Cash

Well, you wonder why I always dress in black,
Why you never see bright colors on my back,
And why does my appearance seem to have a somber tone.
Well, there's a reason for the things that I have on.

I wear it for the sick and lonely old,
For the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold,
I wear the black in mournin’ for the lives that could have been,
Each week we lose a hundred fine young men.

And, I wear it for the thousands who have died,
Believen' that the Lord was on their side,
I wear it for another hundred thousand who have died,
Believen' that we all were on their side.

Well, there's things that never will be right I know,
And things need changin' everywhere you go,
But 'til we start to make a move to make a few things right,
You'll never see me wear a suit of white.

Ah, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day,
And tell the world that everything's OK,
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back,
'Till things are brighter, I'm the Man In Black.

I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down,
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town,
I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime,
But is there because he's a victim of the times.

And, I wear it for the thousands who have died,
Believen' that the Lord was on their side,
I wear it for another hundred thousand who have died,
Believen' that we all were on their side.

Well, there's things that never will be right I know,
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But 'til we start to make a move to make a few things right,
You'll never see me wear a suit of white.

I wear it for the sick and lonely old,
For the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold,
I wear the black in mournin’ for the lives that could have been,
Each week we lose a hundred fine young men.

Well, we're doin' mighty fine, I do suppose,
In our streak of lightnin' cars and fancy clothes,
But just so we're reminded of the ones who are held back,
Up front there ought 'a be a Man In Black.

Well, there's things that never will be right I know,
And things need changin' everywhere you go,
But 'til we start to make a move to make a few things right,
You'll never see me wear a suit of white.

Ah, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day,
And tell the world that everything's OK,
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back,
'Till things are brighter, I'm the Man In Black.
“Ain’t No Reason” by Brett Dennen

there ain't no reasons things are this way 
every little heart beat, every little breath
its how they've always been and they intend 
people walk a tight rope on a razor's edge
to stay 
carrying their hurt and hatred and weapons
i can't explain why we live this way 
it could be a bomb or a bullet or a pin
we do it everyday 
or a thought or a word or a sentence.
preachers on the podiums speaking to saints 
there ain't no reasons things are this way
prophets on the sidewalks begging for 
its how they've always been and they intend
change 
to stay
old ladies laughing from the fire escape, 
i don't know why i say the things i say,
cursing my name 
but i say them anyway.
i got a basket full of lemons and they all 
but love will come set me free
taste the same 
love will come set me free
a window and a pigeon with a broken wing 
i do believe
you can spend your whole life working for 
love will come set me free
something 
i know it will
just to have it taken away 
love will come set me free
people walk around pushing back their desks 
yes
wearing pay checks like necklaces and 
prison walls still standing tall
bracelets 
some things never change at all
talking 'bout nothing, not thinking about 
keep on building prisons,
their 
gonna fill them all.
keep on building bombs

gonna drop them all

working your fingers bare to the bone

breaking your back, make you sell your soul

like a lung is filled with coal, suffocating

slow

the wind blows wild and i may move

but politicians lie and i’m not fooled

you don't need no reason or a 3 piece suit to argue the truth

the air on my skin and the world under my toes

Slavery stitched into the fabric of my clothes

chaos and commotion wherever i go

love, i try to follow

but love will come set me free

love will come set me free

i do believe

love will come set me free

i know it will

love will come set me free

yes

there ain't no reasons things are this way

its how they've always been and they intend to stay

i can't explain why we live this way;

we do it everyday.