Ars Poetica

POEM TEXT

1 A poem should be palpable and mute
2 As a globed fruit,

3 Dumb
4 As old medallions to the thumb,

5 Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
6 Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

7 A poem should be wordless
8 As the flight of birds.

        *

9 A poem should be motionless in time
10 As the moon climbs,

11 Leaving, as the moon releases
12 Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

13 Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
14 Memory by memory the mind—

15 A poem should be motionless in time
16 As the moon climbs.

        *

17 A poem should be equal to:
18 Not true.

19 For all the history of grief
20 An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

21 For love
22 The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

23 A poem should not mean
24 But be.

SUMMARY

The speaker outlines the qualities they think good poetry must possess. A poem, the speaker says, should be something you can touch but which doesn't speak, like a round fruit.

It should be speechless, like an old medal your stroke with your thumb (i.e., it should be evocative without saying anything).

It should be as silent as the old stone of a window ledge overgrown with moss.

A poem shouldn't use words, much like like a flock of birds as it flies (perhaps in the sense of moving freely, through instinct, etc.).

A poem, the speaker says, should be timeless, moving like the moon as it rises.

It should move past readers in the same way that the moon frees branches from the darkness of the night one by one (by reflecting light upon them).

It should move past readers like the moon moves past trees in winter, leaving behind one memory at a time.

A poem, the speaker says again, should be timeless, moving like the moon as it rises.

A poem should be what it is (or is about), not strive for some greater truth.

For example, it could capture all the grief humankind has ever experienced in the image of an empty doorway or a leaf from a maple tree.

Similarly, a poem could speak about love by gesturing to grasses moving in the wind and two distant lights on a coastline above the sea.

A poem should not strive to mean something; a good poem should simply exist.

THEMES

THE ESSENCE OF POETRY

Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica" is a manifesto for how poetry should be written (and read). Through a series of cryptic but confident statements, the speaker suggests that a poem should be a sensuous experience in its own right, not an argument to be decoded for its meaning. According to the speaker, in fact, "A poem should not mean / But be." In other words, poetry should *show* rather than *tell* the reader something about the world—or else simply revel in being part of the world. Moreover, it should retain its mystery rather than spelling everything out for the reader.

The speaker begins by effectively challenging the reader, stating that poetry should be "Silent" and "wordless." Of course,

this doesn't mean everyone should stop writing poetry, but that poetry as an art form is different from everyday speech, or language used solely to convey information.

The speaker likens poetry (or poetry as it should be) to a series of evocative images: a "globed fruit," "old medallions," the mossy stone underneath a window, and the "flight of birds." Each of these images is effectively silent, yet conjures up stories, feelings, and entire worlds. The "medallions," for example, might evoke a particular war and all the experiences that come with serving in an army.

Just as an object can speak for itself, the poem suggests, so too can poetry. Without carrying an obvious message, poetry can make the reader sense a web of associations and implications extending far beyond a particular poem without needing to tie the poem down to one particular meaning. In short, it expresses the inexpressible.

The poem further suggests that poetry disrupts the reader's natural experience of time. As it alters the reader's relationship to language, it strengthens their connection to the present moment, paradoxically putting them in touch with eternity. A poem, in this sense, works like "the moon," which changes position in the night sky but seems to remain "motionless" when viewed from the earth. At the same time, moonlight transforms the earth, "releas[ing]" each branch of a tree out of darkness and into light. Similarly, a poem can change a person's *inner* landscape—triggering "memor[ies]," thoughts, and feelings—while remaining effectively "motionless in time" on the page.

Finally, the speaker rejects the idea that poetry aims at literal truth. It's something more than that, though harder to define. Poetry can distill large, complex feelings and ideas into memorable images that may be technically fictional. Moreover, ordinary truth and knowledge depend on analysis, while a poem speaks to something beyond definition.

The speaker offers up images that crystallize "grief" and "love," two of the most powerful human emotions. For example, the speaker evokes love by describing "The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea." It's impossible to say *exactly* what these images mean, but they conjure up a mysterious sense of intimacy and connection. They *resonate* with the concept of love, but they don't try to define or even describe what love is. According to the speaker, then, good poetry avoids spelling things out and lets readers draw their own conclusions. (Arguably, the poem resists exactly the kind of analysis presented here!)

The poem puts its argument most succinctly in its famous closing couplet: "A poem should not mean / But be." This claim resembles the writing advice, "Show, don't tell," but takes it a step further. "Show, don't tell" suggests that creative writing should demonstrate rather than explain its meaning, but "Ars Poetica" suggests that a poem shouldn't *mean* at all, at least not

in a conventional sense. A poem that *means* could say one thing while actually intending another, whereas a poem that simply *exists* is its own justification and can't remain intact through when paraphrased. In the end, a poem should present itself to readers as an evocative, yet mysterious object.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Between Lines 8-9
- Lines 9-16
- Between Lines 16-17
- Lines 17-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

On first reading, Macleish's "Ars Poetica" can seem like a pretty tough nut to crack—though it would probably reject the idea that it's a nut to crack at all! This poem is all about the hard-to-define aspects of poetry that make it what it is: *poetry*. Expressing the inexpressible; stopping time in its tracks; creating a powerful aesthetic experience—these are all wonderful things that poetry can do, the speaker argues.

The poem is divided into three sections, each of which deals with a different aspect of what "a poem should be." The first stanza uses four [similes] to state that poetry should make no sound or shouldn't speak. The first couplet argues more specifically that

> A poem should be palpable and mute
> As a globed fruit,

Let's take a grapefruit as the "globed fruit" here. Grapefruit has a bumpy surface; it's "palpable" because it can be touched and held, but it doesn't scream out, "Hey! I'm a grapefruit!" It just sits there in the fruit bowl, silently testifying to its own existence.

A poem's "palpability," this image suggests, comes from the sense that it is an aesthetic object in and of itself. It can be held and even, in a way, *tasted* in the mouth when spoken out loud. And, a poem can't actually *speak* for itself, telling the reader what it is and means. Good poetry, in other words, isn't written to *tell* someone something, but to *be* an experience in and of itself.

Throughout its three sections, the poem uses evocative sound patterning to make its case. Here, notice how [assonance], [alliteration], and [consonance] put that piece of fruit right *there* on the page:

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,

That long /o/ assonance evokes the roundness of the fruit (try saying it out loud), while the plosive /p/ sounds feel tactile and satisfying to say. The poem creates a sensory, even *sensuous*, experience for the reader.

LINES 3-4

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

The next three couplets effectively restate the argument made in the first couplet about a poem being "palpable and mute"—something you can *feel* yet which doesn't *speak*.

The second and third couplets continue the phrase begun in line 1: "A poem should be [...]" Both couplets also turn again to imagery that revolves around touch. First, the speaker says that a poem ought to be "Dumb / As old medallions to the thumb" (note that the word "dumb" here means speechless). Each time the speaker says something like this, it's worth asking: what are the properties of the object being mentioned, and how can a poem share them?

An "old medallion" might, for example, be a war medal. It might have once communicated something very specific (e.g., Private Andrews being commemorated for an act of bravery). Over time, though, this medallion has been worn down, made smoother. Its engravings aren't as sharp as they once were. Now, when you rub it with your thumb, it seems to to softly echo what it once stood for. Touching its erosion might make you think about the inevitable passage of time (i.e., the way time softens the past), even though the literal medallion *itself* says nothing about this idea.

The rhyme between "Dumb" and "thumb" subtly reflects this smooth silence, as their ending /m/ sounds stop the exhalation of air.

LINES 5-8

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—
A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

The third couplet focuses on a window, whose stone ledge has been worn down through repeated use over time. Just like every other couplet in the poem, there is a lot to unpack here!

First, notice the speaker's precise choice of words. They don't say "window," but "casement." "Casement" is one of those fancy-sounding words that seem to pop up in poetry more than it does anywhere else (when was the last time you said it in real life?). It refers specifically to the outer ledge of a window (rather than the inner sill).

Note, too, that windows are portals of a sort, ways of looking

out or in on a different world, offering a glimpse into another realm. Imagine seeing one of these old windows on a visit to some ancient castle. The window's mere existence might make onlookers think about the castle's entire history of kings, queens, and courtiers. The moss that creeps along the ledge might make people think about the way time and nature eventually reclaim humanity's creations. Of course, the window itself is silent; it doesn't say anything of these things. Likewise, a poem might evoke images and sensations in readers without directly stating them.

Listen to the sibilance of this couplet, which casts a ghostly hush over the poem:

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

Then, in the final simile of the stanza, the speaker states that a poem ought to be "wordless / As the flight of birds." How can a poem, a *written* work of art, not use words?

It's the reader's job to unpack the paradox. That "flight of birds" perhaps suggests freedom and majesty. Remember, too, that birds migrate by *instinct*; they don't get together and plan where to fly. A poem, this image implies, relies on grace and instinct to soar off the page, taking the reader along with it.

Note, too, how the couplet rhyme gets slightly modified here:

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

That dangling syllable softens the rhyme, and deliberately so. It's as if the rhyme has been tucked inside line 7 in order to be more "wordless" itself.

LINES 9-12

A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,
Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

In the poem's second section, the speaker argues that a poem should be "motionless in time." This might mean that it should conjure a sense of timelessness.

Using another simile, the speaker compares this moving-motionlessness to the way the "moon climbs" overhead. (It's also possible to read that as more like "while," meaning a poem should be motionless *even while* the moon rises, standing still even as the rest of the world turns; such thorny wordplay is what makes "Ars Poetica" so rich!)

The moon doesn't *look* like it's going anywhere; it *appears* still in the sky despite the fact that it is constantly orbiting the earth. Similarly, a poem might *create* powerful effects without it being obvious that it's doing anything at all. People might be moved

by a poem, without seeing the inner machinery at work that creates that (e)motion.

Lines 11 and 12 ("Leaving [...] trees") develop this idea further, characterizing poetry as something that should always be in a state of departure—that is, as something that's constantly eluding the grasp of those who would like to pin it down and make it talk. A poem might seem like a still object, but words are in a state of constant negotiation, an ever-changing web of connections and shared understanding (as T.S. Eliot once [wrote](), words "will not stay in place / will not stay still").

The moon, too, is *always* moving even when it appears otherwise. While the moon makes its way across the night sky, it [metaphorically]() touches each branch on the trees with moonlight. As the speaker puts it, moonlight "releases / Twig by twig the night-entangled trees." That is, it frees each twig from darkness one by one, releasing them from the *entanglement* of night. Notice how the [diacope]() "twig" makes this process seem painstaking and incremental.

This perhaps speaks to a level of detail that is pertinent to both the creation and the consumption of poetry. It's an art form that asks people to pay granular attention to language, demanding heightened attention to a particular sound—say, or the use of prickly /t/ [consonance]() (as in, "**T**wig by **t**wig nigh**t**-en**t**angled **t**rees").

LINES 13-16

> *Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,*
> *Memory by memory the mind—*
> *A poem should be motionless in time*
> *As the moon climbs.*

Lines 13 and 14 expand on the [simile]() comparing a poem to the moon. Here, the speaker seems to focus more directly on poetry's effect on the *mind*.

As with the previous [couplet](), the speaker states that poetry should always feel like it's "leaving"—that is, slipping away from view. The speaker might mean that one of poetry's key traits is that *something* about it remains ungraspable, always just beyond reach, slipping through listeners' fingers.

Just as it frees each little "twig" from the night's darkness, it moves through the mind "Memory by memory." The [parallelism]() here might suggest that a poem moves through the mind just as the moon moves through the sky: that moon illuminates the scene "Twig by twig" just a poem illuminates people's minds "Memory by memory."

There's more playful wordplay here, too, with the [polyptoton]() of "**Leaving**, as the moon behind the winter **leaves**." That second "leaves" refers to both the leaves on trees (which aren't actually *there* in winter) and the way the "moon" *moves*. That is, the speaker might also be saying that the way a poem enters and *exits* the imagination is analogous to the way the moon illuminates the trees before leaving them in *darkness* again. The

leaves get lit up, sure, but eventually, they're shrouded in the night once more.

The humming /m/ [alliteration]() and [consonance]() ("**m**oon," "**m**emory," "**m**ind") make the poem's language more distinctly poetic, even hypnotic. Lines 15 and 16 then directly repeat lines 9 and 10. This is no accident; on the contrary, this is a way for the poem to perform its own "motionless[ness] in time." That is, the section comes full circle.

LINES 17-18

> *A poem should be equal to:*
> *Not true.*

In the poem's third and final section, the speaker focuses on poetry's relationship with truth and meaning. Lines 17 and 18 *seem* to reduce the art form to a simple equation:

> A poem should be equal to:
> Not true.

Imagine a pair of scales, with poetry on one side and falsehood on the other. These, the speaker says, should be *equal*—that is, they should weigh, or perhaps feel, the same. Alternatively, the speaker might be saying that a poem should be "equal to" in the sense that it should be equal to *what it is about*; that is, a poem *about* love should *encompass* love. Again, the poem's phrasing is deliberately playful and open to multiple interpretations.

Overall, what the speaker seems to be getting at here is that poetry is not some mere *vehicle* for allegedly profound truth; poetry is an object/experience *in and of itself*.

There is also a hint of humorous [irony]() at play here. In formulating this statement as, well, a *formula*, the poem borrows language that feels relevant to the pursuit of truth. That is, this sounds like *math*—and statements in math are either true or they're not! It's as though the poem plays dressing up here, wearing a cloak of truth while also *undermining* truth as an end goal in and of itself. The speaker thus rejects truth as the sole aim of poetry; there's more to it than that.

LINES 19-22

> *For all the history of grief*
> *An empty doorway and a maple leaf.*
> *For love*
> *The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—*

The two [couplets]() that run from lines 19 to 22 are perhaps the most abstract in the poem. The speaker presents examples of poetry capturing the powerful emotions "grief" and "love" through seemingly disconnected images, illustrating the concept of poetry being "equal to" something rather than "true." That is, poetry doesn't need to talk about grief or love to be a poem about grief or love. It can capture "all the history of

grief" in the image of "An empty doorway and a maple leaf." It can capture "love" with an image of tall grasses and lights above the water.

What do "an empty doorway and a maple leaf" have to do with grief? What do grasses and lights have to do with love? The poem doesn't tell readers. And, really, there is no single correct answer.

- "An empty doorway" might suggest absence; after all, it was once an *occupied* doorway, a place where someone stood. It was once filled, perhaps, with the shape of someone who is now gone.
- A maple leaf, meanwhile, might suggest sweetness. Or it might have fallen from a tree, testifying to the fact that all things die.
- The image of "two lights above the sea" perhaps evokes two star-crossed lovers.
- Perhaps those "leaning grasses" connote people leaning on each other.
- Maybe this seaside scene conjures memories of a rendevous with a beloved on the beach.

These images could conjure any number of associations for the reader, and that's the point: a poem can capture the essence of grief and love (be "equal to" these emotions) without being "true" in the sense of saying "this is what grief/love **are**."

LINES 23-24

> *A poem should not mean*
> *But be.*

The final [couplet](#) contains the poem's most famous statement:

> A poem should not mean
> But be.

This puts a clever spin on the poem's [refrain](#) of "A poem should be." The statement, the speaker argues, can simply end there: a poem should simply *exist*. Let poems be suggestive, evocative, provocative, and unresolvable, in other words!

A poem is more like life itself than some precise equation. People don't try and reduce every lived moment to its "truth"—so, the speaker seems to ask, why should they do that with a poem? A common complaint that people make about poetry is that they don't *get it*, as if it speaks in a language that they are yet to learn. This poem argues that there is nothing to *get* other than the experience of the poem itself: those thoughts, feelings, and associations that wash over you as you read the poem—they *are* the poem. A poem is an experience just like any other: swimming in the sea, eating a delicious meal, kissing a loved one. These things don't have to mean something beyond themselves, and neither does poetry.

Notice how the plosive /b/ [alliteration](#) in the last line ("But

be")—and the fact that this line consists of just two syllables—makes this declarative statement emphatic and memorable.

There's a subtle shift in the [rhyme scheme](#) here, too. "Be" is a [slant rhyme](#) with "mean," but it's also a *full* rhyme with the word that ends line 22: "The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea." This delays that click that comes with perfect rhyme, but makes it extra satisfying on the ear when it finally arrives.

⚅ SYMBOLS

🍁 THE EMPTY DOORWAY AND MAPLE LEAF

In the poem's final section, the speaker presents striking images meant to illustrate the idea that a poem "should be equal to: / Not true." In other words, these images are meant to *encompass* things like "grief" and "love."

First, the speaker presents the example of "all the history of grief" being captured by "An empty doorway and a maple leaf."

That empty doorway, perhaps, represents loss; presumably, it wasn't always empty. And that maple leaf perhaps represents the bittersweet nature of memory (the sweetness of thinking of the past, the bitterness of knowing that this past is gone forever). It also might represent the inevitability of death: maples are deciduous trees, which means once a year they shed their leaves (and grow new ones). The leaves fall off and die, drifting through parks and roads as gentle reminders that all things must come to an end.

Of course, the poem doesn't knock the reader over the head with any of these ideas; it just places the doorway and leaf on the page and lets the reader come to their own conclusions about how they relate to "the history of grief."

> **Where this symbol appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 20:** *"An empty doorway and a maple leaf."*

🌱 THE GRASSES AND THE LIGHTS

In the poem's penultimate [couplet](#), the speaker offers up two potential [symbols](#) for love:

> For love
> The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

As with the images of grief in the previous couplet, the poem presents these two images without any further explication.

Perhaps those grasses are "leaning" because they've been bent from the weight of two lovers lying on the ground. Their love, in a way, has left its impression on the earth. Or perhaps the grass is swaying in the wind, which represents the fleeting,

unpredictable nature of love. Maybe those "two lights" represent two lovers; maybe they're stars in the sky, reflecting the illuminating power of love.

It's less about *decoding* these images and more to do with accepting the feelings they evoke. They illustrate how poetry can turn anything into something else—transforming, here, "leaning grasses" and "two lights above the sea" into love itself.

> **Where this symbol appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 22:** "The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—"

⚒ POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Ars Poetica" uses alliteration throughout, along with the related sonic devices consonance and assonance. In general, these devices help distinguish poetry from other types of writing. They make language sound more musical and, well, *poetic*. They essentially push the reader to pay special *attention* to language and help to bring the poem's imagery, similes, and symbols to life on the page.

In the very first line, for example, the speaker says that "A poem should be palpable and mute" (an example of both alliteration and consonance). Those plosive /p/ sounds pop out of the line, supporting the idea that poetry should be a *sensory* experience (one the reader can almost touch). The sounds of the poem seem "palpable" themselves.

Later in the same section, the speaker uses /s/ alliteration and broader sibilance to evoke the "silence" being described:

> Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
> Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

Thanks to all those /s/ sounds, the lines are whispy and whispery. The poem's sounds thus evoke the imagery at hand.

Elsewhere, alliteration simply adds emphasis and interest to the poem's language. Take the /m/ sounds that fill the poem's second section, in the words "motionless," "moon," "memory," and "mind." This alliteration add a gentle, even hypnotic hum to the poem, making it feel more exciting and alive. Meanwhile, the crisp, sharp /t/ sounds of "Twig by twig" and "night-entangled trees" (again, a mixture of both alliteration and consonance) seem to capture the way the moon slowly but steadily illuminates the tree bit by bit.

> **Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Line 1:** "poem," "palpable"

> - **Line 5:** "Silent," "sleeve-worn stone"
> - **Line 9:** "motionless"
> - **Line 10:** "moon"
> - **Line 12:** "Twig," "twig," "trees"
> - **Line 13:** "moon"
> - **Line 14:** "Memory," "memory," "mind"
> - **Line 15:** "motionless"
> - **Line 16:** "moon"
> - **Line 21:** "love"
> - **Line 22:** "leaning," "lights"
> - **Line 24:** "But be"

PARADOX

"Ars Poetica" includes statements that seem perplexing and downright impossible. Dig a little deeper, though, and these paradoxes are essential to the speaker's argument about what poetry "should be."

Most strangely, perhaps, the speaker says that a poem should be "mute," "Dumb," "Silent," and "wordless." How can a poem, a *written* work of art, not use language?

Really, this suggests that poetry shouldn't *speak* outright—it shouldn't just go and tell readers what to think. Instead, it should *evoke* images, emotions, memories, and so forth. Just as you can pick up and hold a "globed fruit" or run your thumb along worn "medallions," poems should be aesthetic objects that you can touch and feel, things that don't have to come right out and tell you what they are.

> **Where Paradox appears in the poem:**
>
> - **Lines 1-8:** "A poem should be palpable and mute   / As a globed fruit, / Dumb / As old medallions to the thumb, / Silent as the sleeve-worn stone / Of casement ledges where the moss has grown— / A poem should be wordless   / As the flight of birds."

REPETITION

Repetition appears in a variety of forms throughout "Ars Poetica." The speaker repeatedly begins lines with the phrase "A poem should be," for example. This insistent anaphora helps to keep readers/listeners focused on the speaker's argument. That is, it repeatedly reminds readers that all these images and similes are meant to illustrate what poems "should be."

The speaker then twists this phrase in the poem's famous closing couplet:

> A poem should not mean
> But be.

A poem, in other words, should exist as an object and experience on its own terms. The earlier repetition makes this

idea of what a poem should "not" do stand out to the reader's ear, and it thus helps the poem's final moment land with more power.

There are other examples of anaphora and broader [parallelism](link) in the poem as well, which make the poem sound very poem-like, for lack of a better term! For instance, the poem frequently repeats the structure "A poem should be [blank] as [blank]," calling attention to its many [similes](link). Turning to this format again and again suggests that the speaker is searching and searching for the best way to describe poetry (and perhaps coming up short, because poetry, by this poem's very definition, defies "meaning").

This parallelism also highlights connections between the poem's ideas. Take the phrases "Twig by twig" and "Memory by memory." The sonic echo here emphasizes the idea that poems move through the mind just as the moon moves through the night, illuminating memories just as moonlight illuminates trees. The [diacope](link) *within* these phrases, meanwhile, highlights how poetry and moonlight both work incrementally, transforming their worlds bit by bit, word by word, sound by sound.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** *"A poem should be"*
- **Line 2:** *"As"*
- **Line 4:** *"As"*
- **Line 7:** *"A poem should be"*
- **Line 8:** *"As"*
- **Line 9:** *"A poem should be"*
- **Lines 9-10:** *" motionless in time   / As the moon climbs,"*
- **Line 11:** *"Leaving," ", as the moon"*
- **Line 12:** *"Twig," " by ," "twig"*
- **Line 13:** *"Leaving," ", as the moon," "leaves"*
- **Line 14:** *"Memory," " by ," "memory"*
- **Line 15:** *"A poem should be"*
- **Lines 15-16:** *" motionless in time   / As the moon climbs."*
- **Line 17:** *"A poem should be"*
- **Line 19:** *"For"*
- **Line 21:** *"For"*
- **Line 23:** *"A poem should"*

SIMILE

"Ars Poetica" is filled with [similes](link), as the speaker reaches for ways to articulate what, exactly, "A poem should be." Each of these similes is evocative and striking, helping readers better understand what the speaker is getting at.

The fact that the speaker uses similes rather than [metaphors](link) also matters. The speaker never says "a poem **is** *such and such*" but rather that it works **like** *such and such*. It repeatedly turns away from objective "truth," finding *outside images* to capture poetry's essence. And this is just what poetry does: turn to

other images, like, say, "An empty doorway," to convey its ideas rather than shouting them directly.

In the first section, the similes all focus on how a poem should work its magic without saying anything at all. Each of the similes/images here helps the reader better understand the speaker's point, which is basically that a poem should *show* rather than *tell*—the way a worn-out window might gesture towards a whole history of use without saying a single word about it. It should be something you can *feel*, like a "globed fruit" that you can hold in your hand.

The similes in the second section (lines 9 to 16) suggest that a poem should create the experience of timelessness. And it should do so in a way that is akin to the ascent (and eventual disappearance) of the moon each night. That is, it should work almost imperceptibly, changing the reader's mind like moonlight on adjusting the shadows in a forest, while eventually leaving it all behind as if nothing ever happened.

These striking images probably conjure up certain connotations and feelings in readers' minds, and that's part of the point. The speaker is showing how poetry can simply "be" through this very poem itself.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 9-16

📄 VOCABULARY

Palpable (Line 1) - Tangible; something you can touch.

Mute (Line 1) - Unspeaking.

Dumb (Line 3) - Unspeaking.

Medallions (Line 4) - This might refer to actual medals—small, round objects that commemorate an event or action—or simply to medal-shaped accessories.

Sleeve-worn (Line 5) - Made smooth by the window being opened and closed.

Casement ledges (Line 6) - Window sills on the outside of a building.

Night-entangled (Line 12) - Wrapped up in the darkness of night.

⏱ FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Ars Poetica" consists of 24 lines broken up into 12 [couplets](link), or two-line stanzas. All but one of these couplets rhyme (that is, has an AA rhyme scheme).

Those couplets, in turn, are grouped into three sections, each of which explores one aspect of what the speaker thinks "A poem should be."

- The first section argues that poetry should be "wordless" and "silent."
- The second argues it should be timeless and move through the mind as the moon moves through the night.
- The third argues that it "should not mean / But be"—that is, that poetry should be an aesthetic object/experience in and of itself, not some code to be cracked.

As the title reveals, "Ars Poetica" is, of course, an *ars poetica*—a statement on the craft of poetry.

METER

"Ars Poetica" doesn't use meter. Its lines vary greatly in length, ranging from eleven to just one syllable. It's not entirely written in free verse, given that there's a relatively steady rhyme scheme, but the lack of regular meter keeps the language feeling free and loose. In short, it reflects the fact that a poem can "be" whatever it wants.

RHYME SCHEME

"Ars Poetica" uses rhyming couplets, for the most part creating a general rhyme scheme of AA BB CC etc.

Some of these are perfect rhymes ("mute"/"fruit" in lines 1-2, "Dumb"/"thumb" in lines 3-4), while others are slant rhymes ("mean"/be" in the final two lines).

There are also two moments when this couplet pattern changes more dramatically. In the poem's second and third sections, the rhyme scheme is more like AA BB CD DD. That is, the third couplet doesn't rhyme, but introduces a rhyme sound that then repeats in the final couplet of the section:

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[...] leaves, C
[...] mind— D
[...] time D
[...] climbs. D
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And:

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[...] love C
[...] sea— D
[...] mean D
[...] be. D
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Mind/time/climbs and sea/mean/be are again slant rhymes, but the echo between these words is clear.

Variations like this loosen the poem up; it's musical and playful

without feeling rigid or stiff.

👤💬 SPEAKER

The poem focuses entirely on its subject (poetry) rather than *who* is speaking. The speaker clearly has a lot of opinions about how poetry should be written and read, but readers don't learn anything else about this speaker. This makes sense given that the poem is making an argument that applies to *all* readers and writers of poetry.

🌄 SETTING

"Ars Poetica" doesn't have any particular setting. Again, it's a poem making an argument about poetry—and this argument, in theory, should apply to any poetry, anywhere, at any time. As such, the poem doesn't pretend to be set anywhere other than on the page in front of the reader. Its images, similes, and symbols may evoke particular sights and places (a moss-covered window ledge, a moonlit night, an empty doorway, grasses by the sea), but this simply reflects the power of power to stir up the imagination.

ⓘ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The American poet Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982) wrote "Ars Poetica" in 1926 while living in Paris (acquaintances included Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald). The poem has arguably become more famous than the poet himself, who once gently complained that it had "haunted" him ever since he published it. When students would ask him if a poem shouldn't mean anything, MacLeish would reply that what he really meant was "a poem should be its meaning and not try to mean its meaning."

"Ars Poetica" has been widely anthologized and is often cited as a prime example of Imagism, a sub-genre of literary modernism. Modernist writers challenged the established literary norms inherited from the 19th century. These norms were both formal—that is, related to the actual way that poems were expected to be written—and social: sex, drugs and alcohol, feminism, and working-class life all became new subjects for serious literature during this period. Imagism, meanwhile, refers to a loose-knit movement that encouraged direct, to-the-point language and clear, precise imagery. ("In a Station of the Metro," by Ezra Pound, is one of the most famous examples of Imagist poetry.)

The term "ars poetica" is Latin for "the art of poetry." The form stretches all the way back to the ancient Roman poet Horace, who wrote his widely-quoted *Ars Poetica*, in the form of a letter

presenting advice to novice poets, around the year 15 BCE. For other takes on the ars poetica, check out Wallace Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry," Paul Verlaine's "ars poetica," Czelaw Milosz's "Ars Poetica?" or "Poet's Work" by Lorine Niedecker.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Modernist writers were responding to a world undergoing rapid, widespread change. Inventions such as the airplane and telephone altered people's lives immensely in a short space of time, while cities grew denser as more and more people began moving from the countryside to urban centers. New technologies and industries improved the quality of life for many people while also contributing to widespread pollution and unsafe working conditions.

The immense violence of World War I, meanwhile, shook ideals inherited from the previous century and shattered the old European order. The new technologies that had seemingly improved life for so many were used to kill on an industrial scale. MacLeish served as an ambulance driver and artillery officer during the war, later writing about his experiences in "Memorial Rain."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Hear MacLeish read and discuss "Ars Poetica" (starting at 21:44) and other poems. (https://www.loc.gov/item/95770413)

- A MacLeish Biography — Read more about MacLeish's life and work in this biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/archibald-macleish)

- The Paris Review Interview — Check out a free excerpt of this interview with MacLeish in which he talks about the poet's role in society. (https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3944/the-art-of-poetry-no-18-archibald-macleish)

- The Art of Poetry — Read more about the ars poetica form and check out examples from other poets. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/ars-poetica)

HOW TO CITE

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