Eating Poetry

SUMMARY

The speaker declares that his mouth is covered in ink. Nothing makes people as happy as eating poetry, he says—which is exactly what he has been doing.

The nearby librarian, meanwhile, is totally shocked by the speaker's behavior. She looks sad and tucks her hands into her dress as she walks by.

The speaker has eaten up all the poetry in the library, to the point that there's none left. The room is dark now, and dogs start making their way up the stairs from the basement.

The dogs are in a frenzy, their eyes wide and rolling and their legs looking like a bush on fire. The librarian, who is pretty understandably upset by all this, starts stomping her feet and crying.

The poor woman simply doesn't get it, the speaker says, before getting down onto his knees and licking her hand like a dog. The librarian shrieks in response.

The speaker feels like this poetry has transformed him into a totally new person. Still acting like a dog, he growls and barks at the librarian, and then bounds around with happiness in the quiet darkness of the library.

THEMES

THE POWER OF POETRY

"Eating Poetry" is a surreal and darkly comic poem that celebrates poetry's ability to excite the imagination and bring joy to its readers. The poem opens with the speaker "eating poetry" in a library, much to the startled librarian's distress. By the poem's end, the speaker has begun to joyously bounce around like a dog and declares that he's "a new man—a testament to the mysterious, transformational power of poetry.

No happiness, the speaker declares at the poem's start, can compare to the feeling of "eating" poetry. The speaker's passion for poetry manifests as a rabid bodily hunger: he gobbles up poems to the point that "ink runs from the corners of [his] mouth," an image that presents poetry as something delicious, messy, and indulgent.

The nearby librarian, meanwhile, is shocked at the speaker's destructive and increasingly animalistic behavior—which makes sense when readers consider that her job is to organize, categorize, and safeguard the books in the library. But poetry unleashed, the speaker suggests, isn't something that can be so easily contained again; once consumed (that is, read), it can inspire a kind of passion or intense feeling in its readers that onlookers simply can't understand.

Thus, once the "poems are gone," the speaker having devoured them all, things get even wilder: dogs arrive out of nowhere (perhaps symbolically representing the speaker's instinctive passion for words) and, by the poem's end, the speaker is snarling and barking himself. Whether or not readers take this image literally, poetry clearly seems to have awakened some primal joy within the speaker that he can't hold back.

He also can't necessarily *articulate* this joy to the terrified librarian, who "does not understand"—perhaps a reference to the way that it's often hard to explain to others how a certain piece of art makes one feel. But for this speaker, that's no problem: so long as he has poetry to feast on, he will "romp with joy."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Ink runs from ...
... been eating poetry.

The poem starts *in media res*—that is, right in the middle of the action. The speaker, as promised by the title, is in the act of "eating" poetry. While this is really a metaphor for the act of *reading* poetry, the poem treats this consumption quite literally—as if poetry were a kind of delicious, juicy meal. The speaker eats poems so voraciously, in fact, that their ink "runs from the corners of [his] mouth"—like the juice of berry, or maybe even blood.

Already, then, the poem feels strange, surreal, and darkly comic. The reader knows that people don't *literally* eat poetry, but presenting it in such a way paints reading poetry as something pleasurable, decadent, and sensuous. It also implies that poetry is a kind of nourishment, sustaining the imagination in the way that food sustains the body. In fact, the speaker insists that nothing else compares to the joy he feels when gobbling up poems.

This first stanza, like all the others, has three lines (making it a tercet). These are all strongly end-stopped as well, the confident periods at the end of each like implying that the speaker is in no hurry: he wants to savor every bite. Though he eats the poems furiously, nothing can pull him away from doing

so—he is in a state of ecstasy and intense concentration.

The speaker's sensuous language itself serves as a kind of testament to poetry's powers. Note the rich consonance and alliteration in the first line, for example:

> Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.

Try saying this line out loud—it's quite satisfying to the ear, and intentionally so!

Strand's characteristically off-beat humor runs throughout the poem, but there's also a serious purpose behind the eating metaphor. By centering the poem itself around something distinctly *poetic*—something that is clearly not true in a literal sense—the poem asks the reader to engage in the same imaginative work that the speaker so clearly relishes.

LINES 4-6

The librarian does ...
... in her dress.

The second stanza ("The librarian [...] in her dress") situates the action in a library. It also develops the key juxtaposition between the poem's two characters: the speaker and the librarian.

On the one hand, the speaker does what you're supposed to do in a library: consume literature. But the *way* in which he does so—like a wild animal tearing at the flesh of its prey—is totally at odds with the quiet, polite etiquette expected of those who visit the library. His passion for poetry is something primal and uncontainable, sensuous and immediate.

Libraries, by contrast, are places where books are organized, categorized, safeguarded, and *made sense of*. Poetry as an art form, this poem implies, resists all this.

The librarian, then, feels affronted by the speaker's actions. Here, poetry inspires a kind of passion that the librarian simply cannot "believe." Lines 5 and 6 portray her as reticent and downbeat in response to this display of raw passion, with her "sad" eyes and hands tucked away "in her dress."

Notice how the use of simple, monosyllabic words here creates a kind of heaviness that matches with the library's mood. The language is spare and lacking in any obvious poeticism apart from, perhaps, the alliterating /h/ sound in "her" and "hands."

LINES 7-9

The poems are ...
... and coming up.

In the third stanza ("The poems [...] coming up"), things get even weirder. The speaker manages to devour *all* of the library's poems. And, as if some kind of supernatural intervention is taking place, the lights in the library go "dim." It's as though the speaker has been taken over by a primal force—and that the same force now affects the environment around him. This might speak to the way that certain works of art can change one's perception of the entire world.

This mystical strangeness only intensifies in line 9:

> The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming up.

Something about the speaker's actions seems to summon dogs up from the basement. Note the use of the definite article here (these are "[t]he dogs" rather simply "dogs"), which suggests that the dogs are familiar—that is, specific—dogs to the speaker.

Why are there dogs in the basement of this library? Who knows! They might not even be real dogs, but rather a symbolic extension of the speaker's own animalistic nature, brought on by the consumption of poems. Perhaps the basement is akin to the speaker's subconscious mind, his animal instincts, which are unleashed by poetry. In other words, they come from below the surface—the world of instinct and imagination.

Of course, it's a scary moment too! This stanza reads like directions in a horror movie script, in turn heightening the atmosphere of threat and danger (particularly towards the librarian). The point here is to portray poetry as exciting and mysterious, desirable if not fully explainable.

Also note the anaphora in each line of this tercet—that repetition of "The" again and again. This creates suspense, slowing the poem down to create something like the charged quiet before a monster strikes from the shadows.

LINES 10-12

Their eyeballs roll, ...
... feet and weep.

The fourth tercet ("Their eyeballs [...] feet and weep") focuses mainly on the dogs, which the speaker seems to have summoned through eating poetry. Like the speaker himself, these animals are wild, passionate creatures. The primal, instinctive joy that the speaker feels towards poetry maps onto the behavior of the dogs, making them appear rabid and dangerous, with rolling "eyeballs" and legs that seem to "burn" like a bush on fire.

The sounds of the lines themselves are rich and evocative, filled with consonance and alliteration of bold /b/ and luxurious /l/ sounds:

> Their eyeballs roll,
> their blond legs burn like brush.

The anaphora of the word "their" creates a sense of building rhythm and momentum as well. It's as though the poem has turned up its own poeticism in order to match the increasing intensity of the moment.

The simile here is also interesting: it describes the dogs' legs as "burning like brush"—that is, like easily flammable vegetation.

This heightens the poem's surreal, darkly comic atmosphere, and also contributes to the sense of danger.

In turn, the librarian starts to lose control, both of the library and of her own emotions. She starts stomping her feet and crying, apparently overwhelmed by the chaos taking over all around her. The assonance of "feet" and "weep" here has a whiny quality that matches with the librarian's feeling of desperation.

Again, the reader must consider what the juxtaposition between the speaker and the librarian suggests at this moment. The speaker is a force of chaos, while the librarian stands for control and order. Perhaps this is the poem's wider point: that poetry doesn't need to be controlled or explained.

LINES 13-15

She does not ...
... she screams.

In the fourth stanza ("She does not understand [...] she screams"), the speaker starts acting like the dogs from the basement. Like a dog, he goes to lick the librarian's hand, which makes her, rather understandably, scream!

The speaker seems to be acting entirely on instinct, all boundaries and societal expectations shed. And the librarian—the manager of an orderly, organized domain—is totally perplexed by the speaker's strange behavior.

Again, this might be a commentary on the way that poetry can affect people in different ways, and how the feeling that it gives one person might be impossible to fully articulate to another. To that end, the blunt, unemotional period after "screams" might suggest that the speaker can't understand the librarian's response either.

The rhyme between "understand" and "hand" is the first of its kind in the poem—as if the text is becoming more *poetic* as it moves along. The assonant chime between "knees" (line 14) and "screams" has a similar effect, also picking up on the /ee/ assonance at the end of the previous stanza ("feet and weep").

LINES 16-18

I am a ...
... the bookish dark.

In essence, the poem ends with a stand-off between the librarian and the speaker. Through the consumption of poetry, the speaker has become a "new man." That man, of course, still seems to be acting a lot like a dog, snarling and barking at the librarian and bounding about "with joy" in the darkness of the library. Poetry has clearly unleashed some primal, instinctive happiness within the speaker that has transformed him completely.

The "bookish[ness]" of the "dark," meanwhile, perhaps speaks to the way that reading or writing poetry can shut the rest of the world out, dimming the lights on everyday reality and bringing up the spotlight on some new creation of the mind.

The poem draws attention to itself as an object made out of language by using obvious patterning: each stanza ends with a firm full stop and begins with a parallel "I [verb]" phrase. The anaphora of "I" at the start of each line and those end-stops combine to give the ending a dramatic rhetorical flourish. The poem also ends with a satisfying rhyme between "bark" and "dark," as if to emphasize that this particular arrangement of language insists on being understood *specifically* as poetry.

Of course, if this were real life, someone would probably call the cops on the speaker. But part of the nature of poetry, and, specifically, the interaction between poet and reader, is the agreement to suspend disbelief and treat things as real that patently aren't. Through this surreal episode, then, the speaker transmits a sheer, joyous love for poetry—with no actual librarians harmed in the making of this poem.

SYMBOLS

THE DOGS

The dogs that suddenly arrive in the middle of the poem make for quite a shocking, sudden intrusion. Why they bound up the stairs, and where they really come from, is pretty mysterious! But whether or not they're real dogs, they symbolize the wild, primal forces of the human imagination—which, here, have been unleashed by the consumption of poetry.

For one thing, the dogs arrive from the basement. This suggests, on a symbolic level, that they're a kind of subconscious force, existing below the surface in the speaker's mind.

They also show up in a frenzied, wild state (line 10 explains how "their eyeballs roll" and their legs seem to "burn"). They thus mirror and intensify the speaker's own wildness at this moment: the way he's eating poetry like an animal, free from all decorum and social etiquette. Poetry, implies this poem, can release a kind of instinctive joy that doesn't need to be categorized, reigned in, or overly explained (a position that the librarian seemingly can't understand).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming up. / Their eyeballs roll, / their blond legs burn like brush."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Devices like alliteration make "Eating Poetry" sound more distinctly poetic. In a poem that's all about poetry's joyful powers, alliteration is like a set of fireworks going off in celebration.

Alliteration first pops up in the poem's opening line:

> Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.

That humming /m/ sound adds emphasis to the phrase "my mouth," and makes it seem as if the speaker is trying to fit as much poetry—and poetic sound—into his body as he humanly can.

Soon enough, the librarian appears, frightened by the speaker's actions. The breathy /h/ sounds in line 6's "her hands in her dress" seem a bit frantic, like the poem's pulse rate is increasing.

The atmosphere of danger only intensifies when the dogs from the basement arrive, apparently summoned by the speaker's actions. The dogs' "blond legs burn like brush," the force of the alliterating syllables making the dogs seem frightening and wild. It's as though the line catches fire with /b/ and /l/ sounds to match with the burning metaphor.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "my mouth"
- **Line 6:** "walks with," "her hands," "her"
- **Line 11:** "blond," "legs," "burn," "like," "brush"
- **Line 14:** "her hand"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora appears twice in the poem: in the third and sixth stanzas. In both instances, this repetition creates drama and tension.

In the third stanza, anaphora also heightens the poem's surreal, dark humor:

> The poems are gone.
> The light is dim.
> The dogs are on the basement stairs [...]

Note that these lines also feature parallel grammar: "The" [blank] "is/are" [blank]. This, combined with the steady end-stops, creates an intense, perhaps creepy atmosphere not far removed from a horror movie. It's quiet, too quiet—but the dogs (*dogs!?*) are on their way! Each sentence is like a little episode with a cliffhanger, drawing the reader into the action, making them wonder what's going to happen next.

The sixth and final stanza achieves a similar effect, ending the poem on a mysterious, unresolved note:

> I am a new man.
> I snarl at her and bark.
> I romp with joy [...]

The similarity and simplicity of each sentence generate tension—which makes sense, given that the speaker and the librarian are in a kind of stand-off. The repeated "I" also perhaps suggests that the speaker has all the power in this situation, harnessing poetry's wild potential.

That said, this repetition could also hint that the speaker is in fact *alone*. This arguably all takes place in the speaker's imagination, itself a kind of celebration of poetry's power, an idea which the "bookish[ness]" of the dark supports.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "The"
- **Line 8:** "The"
- **Line 9:** "The"
- **Line 16:** "I"
- **Line 17:** "I"
- **Line 18:** "I"

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration and consonance, is one of the ways that the speaker makes the poem sound more distinctly *poetic* (as opposed to prose-like). "Eating Poetry" celebrates poetry itself, and sound patterning is part of the way that it does this.

Generally speaking, the assonance is pretty subtle. Phrases like "like mine" in the opening stanza give the reader a sense of the speaker's voracious appetite for poetry, while the nasally long /ee/ sounds capture the librarian's panic in words like "feet" and "weep" in line 12, "knees" in line 14, and "she screams" in line 15. The latter sounds have a desperate, whiny quality, mimicking the librarian's reaction to the speaker's "eating" of poetry.

More assonance pops up in the last stanza, combining with consonance to create internal slant rhymes:

> I am a new man.
> I snarl at her and bark.

The shared sounds make the lines feel sturdy, robust. The strength of the sound suggests that the speaker really is a "new man"—that poetry has rejuvenated him by unleashing his wild side.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "like mine"
- **Line 4:** "believe," "she sees"
- **Line 8:** "is dim"
- **Line 12:** "feet," "weep"
- **Line 14:** "knees"
- **Line 15:** "she screams"
- **Line 16:** "am," "man"
- **Line 17:** "snarl," "bark"

CONSONANCE

Though Strand mostly opts for simple, spare vocabulary, there are moments when consonance, like its cousins alliteration and assonance, draws attention to the poem's language as distinctly *poetic*.

Take the /n/, /m/, and /k/ sounds that fill the first line:

> Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.

The poem kicks off with sonic intensity, these repeated sounds conveying the speaker's passionate reading/eating.

In the fourth stanza ("Their eyeballs [...] feet and weep"), /l/ and /b/ sounds give the lines a lavish, sensuous quality (which is something the speaker implicitly admires about poetry, even that he likes to *eat it):*

> Their eyeballs roll,
> their blond legs burn like brush.

The increase in consonance here matches the intensity of what's happening, the speaker apparently summoning a pack of dogs through his consumption of poetry.

The last stanza ends the poem with one last blast of harsher sound. Here, "bark" (line 17) chimes with "bookish dark," the snappiness of the /k/ making the speaker, in his new dog-like form, seem all the more ravenous and threatening.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Ink runs," "corners," "my mouth"
- **Line 3:** "eating poetry"
- **Line 6:** "walks with," "her hands," "her"
- **Line 9:** "basement stairs"
- **Line 10:** "eyeballs roll"
- **Line 11:** "blond," "legs," "burn," "like," "brush"
- **Line 12:** "to stamp," "feet"
- **Line 14:** "her hand"
- **Line 16:** "am," "new man"
- **Line 17:** "snarl," "bark"
- **Line 18:** "bookish dark"

END-STOPPED LINE

Most of the poem's lines are end-stopped, coming to a clear pause before moving on to the next. All this end-stopping makes the poem feel dramatic and episodic, each line offering a bit more of the action while making the reader wonder what will happen next. They control the poem's pace, making it feel tense and strange.

Note, for example, how every line in the first stanza ends with the finality of a period. It's as though the speaker is savoring every single bite of poetry, lingering over its metaphorical taste. The speaker clearly relishes each delicious mouthful of the stuff, the end-stops further suggesting his intense and single-minded appetite.

When the librarian appears, she can't believe what she's witnessing. The speaker terrifies her with his wildness. In the third stanza ("The poems are gone [...] and coming up"), end-stops combine with simple language to create an almost horror movie-like atmosphere—as if anything could happen next.

This tension never really lets up. The last stanza uses three more end-stopped sentences. These are mostly monosyllabic and use anaphora too, making the ending feel like a stand-off or a cliffhanger.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "mouth."
- **Line 2:** "mine."
- **Line 3:** "poetry."
- **Line 4:** "sees."
- **Line 6:** "dress."
- **Line 7:** "gone."
- **Line 8:** "dim."
- **Line 9:** "up."
- **Line 11:** "brush."
- **Line 12:** "weep."
- **Line 13:** "understand."
- **Line 15:** "screams."
- **Line 16:** "man."
- **Line 17:** "bark."
- **Line 18:** "dark."

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem juxtaposes the speaker—the man who loves "eating poetry"—with the librarian, whose job it is to organize, categorize, and safeguard the library's delicious poetry.

Essentially, they represent opposing forces: the speaker is chaotic, instinctive, passionate, while the librarian stands for conservatism and reservation. Of course, the poet, Mark Strand, almost certainly has no actual gripe with libraries! This is just a way of imploring readers to grab poems with both hands—to devour them with full-throated enthusiasm, and not to worry too much about trying to understand them or explain

them away.

The speaker and librarian are like two entirely different creatures. The speaker is animalistic in his hunger for poetry, while the librarian can't believe that anyone would act in such a wild, primal way (in line 4, she "doesn't believe what she sees"). By the end of the poem, the speaker snarls and barks like a dog while the librarian screams in fright.

Readers don't have to take the scene literally. Instead, the juxtaposition between the poem's two characters pushes readers to consider their own attitudes toward poetry, perhaps instructing them to trust their own instincts when they read.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Line 3
- Lines 4-18

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The whole poem, arguably, is built around an extended metaphor. People can't literally eat poetry, and instead the poet uses this as a metaphor for consuming—that is, reading—the stuff. This little metaphorical switch portrays poetry as something sensuous, nourishing, and vital (like food).

This main metaphor also says something about *how* to read poems. The speaker doesn't sit there eating his poems neatly with a knife and fork. He *devours* them, ink running down his mouth. Poems are there to be consumed with relish and immediacy, not picked apart for their meaning (or not as a replacement for enjoying them, at least). People should enjoy their sound like they do the taste of delicious food, this metaphor suggests.

Later in the poem, dogs appear, perhaps representing the speaker's unleashed sense of wildness and primitive joy. The speaker himself becomes increasingly dog-like, which sets him apart from the librarian—whose job is to categorize and safeguard the library's books.

The poem treats all this quite literally, but readers don't necessarily have to. Instead, they can understand that the poet is using this heightened, figurative language to spark readers' imaginations. Readers approaching the poem must suspend their disbelief for a while.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Ink runs from the corners of my mouth."
- **Line 3:** "I have been eating poetry."
- **Line 7:** "The poems are gone."
- **Lines 17-18:** "I snarl at her and bark. / I romp with joy in the bookish dark."

SIMILE

Roughly halfway through the poem, dogs appear from the "basement," almost as if summoned by the speaker's wild and voracious consumption of the library's poetry. These dogs mirror the speaker's animalistic behavior, which so frightens the librarian. Line 11 describes the dogs' legs as burning "like brush," the poem's one simile.

"Brush" here is meant in the sense of shrubbery; the yellow hair of the dogs' legs looks like it's on fire. Their legs aren't *literally* burning; instead, the simile speaks to the passion and intensity of their movement, their hair swishing wildly as they frantically bound up the stairs. The simile also might paint the dogs as hellish and dangerous.

The dogs themselves are likely symbolic of the speaker's instinctive, primal passion that gets unleashed when he reads poetry. The fact they look like they are on fire, then, suggests that this is how the speaker feels after eating a whole library of poems: like he himself is aflame, wild with energy and excitement.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "their blond legs burn like brush."

VOCABULARY

Brush (Line 11) - Shrubbery/vegetation.

Snarl (Lines 17-17, Line 17) - Growl with bared teeth.

Bookish (Lines 18-18, Line 18) - Academic, devoted to reading, studious.

Romp (Lines 18-18, Line 18) - Play enthusiastically and joyfully.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Eating Poetry" has six three-line stanzas, a.k.a tercets. Its language is straightforward and clear, without steady meter or rhyme. The fact that it's broken up into these regular stanzas, then, is one of the few things that actually marks it out as a poem. These neat, quick stanzas also make the poem feel like it unfolds episodically, moving from scene to scene and building tension throughout.

As a poem *about* poetry, "Eating Poetry" is also part of a long line of meta-poetry. It's not quite an *ars poetica*—a poem that explains or theorizes about the purpose and principles of the art form—but it comes close. That is, the speaker's voracious appetite for eating poetry might suggest poems should be enjoyed for their sensuous qualities and not overthought.

METER

"Eating Poetry" is written in free verse. It has no regular meter, which keeps things feeling instinctive and unplanned, like the speaker is simply talking as he thinks. In a way, then, the poem's lack of meter mirrors the speaker's primal, animalistic behavior.

That said, the poem does slip into some fairly steady iambic rhythms in places (an iamb being a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed beat pattern). Take the third stanza, which is almost entirely made up of iambs (even as the line lengths vary):

> The poems | are gone.
> The light | is dim.
> The dogs | are on | the base- | ment stairs | and com-|
> ing up.

The rhythm here adds to the poem's building tension. Moments like this also give the poem just enough of a poetic feel without becoming too strict or controlled.

RHYME SCHEME

Though it has a neat stanza form, "Eating Poetry" doesn't have a rhyme scheme to go with it. A regular rhyme pattern would probably sound too neat and ordered for a speaker who gobbles up language with a wild and voracious appetite.

That said, the poem does end with one clear rhyme: "bark"/"dark" in its two final lines. This closes the poem on a musical, satisfying note that evokes the speaker's delight at being filled up with poetry.

SPEAKER

The poem is someone who clearly loves—really, really loves—poetry. He starts the poem off by claiming he's been gobbling up poems to the point that ink runs down his face (a delightfully figurative way of describing the act of reading poetry), and quickly claims "there is no happiness" quite like consuming the stuff. Indeed, it makes him feel like "a new man."

The speaker also stands in sharp contrast to the librarian, who looks on with shock and horror. The librarian's presence might speak to the need to categorize and safeguard language, whereas the speaker prefers to simply devour it. The speaker's behavior, then, might say something about how the speaker (and perhaps the poet himself) thinks poems should be read: with relish, delight, and passion.

SETTING

The poem takes place in a library, where the speaker is devouring poetry (the poem treats this eating pretty literally, but readers can understand that this is all a way of figuratively describing what it feels like to *read* poetry, not chow down on pieces of paper). The poem stays in the present tense throughout, making the action feel immediate and spontaneous.

A library is generally a quiet, proper space, making the speaker's passionate consumption all the more out of place. The poet, of course, almost certainly has no real gripe with libraries! Instead, this contrast is meant to illuminate the intuitive and sensuous joys of reading poetry, to show how quiet words on the page can spark passionate feelings in those who read them.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Mark Strand was a former U.S. poet laureate who lived from 1934 to 2014. "Eating Poetry," one of Strand's most widely read poems, appeared in his sophomore collection, *Reasons for Moving*, published in 1968. This was the book that helped to establish Strand's reputation as a poet.

In many ways, "Eating Poetry" is characteristic of Strand's writing. It uses spare, tightly controlled vocabulary and lacks a specific sense of time or place. The poem also features a surreal, dark sense of humor, and it implicitly celebrates individuality and the human imagination. Strand's surrealism has its roots in writers like Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, and Wallace Stevens. Strand also attributes his surrealism to visual artists such as Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico, and Rene Magritte.

In an interview, Strand had this to say about "Eating Poetry": "When I wrote that poem, I wasn't sure what I was writing about. It took me weeks to figure it out [...] psychological repression is a feature of that poem. The dogs are the self that would be liberated. They are the animal, impulsive, uncontrollable elements in my nature, especially in my appetite for poetry." For Strand, then, poetry is something immediate, intuitive, and sensuous.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem was published in the late 1960s, a turbulent time filled with political anxiety and counter-cultural rebellion. This was also the height of the Vietnam war; in 1968, the year in which *Reasons for Moving* came out, the U.S. spent a sum on the conflict equivalent to $576 billion in today's money. The conflict war dominated the airwaves, the cultural scene, and the American psyche.

Critics often observe, however, that Strand's poetry rejects its specific historical context. Instead, as in this poem, his poems often situate themselves in an unspecified and unsettling sense of time and place. This is true of the other poems in the collection, though Strand's "Sleeping with One Eye Open"

(from the preceding book of the same name) was inspired by actual historical events (namely the threat of the Cold War).

Strand's upbringing was not rooted in one place. Instead, his family moved frequently, and Stand spent much of his childhood in South and Central America. This restless youth perhaps informs the way Strand's early poems seem to take place outside of the eras—and places—in which they were written.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Mark Strand's Biography — Learn more about Strand's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/mark-strand)
- Strand's Artistic Imagination — A podcast in which Strand talks about creativity and inspiration. (https://www.nypl.org/blog/2014/12/02/podcast-mark-strand)
- Strand in His Own Words — An interview in which the poet talks about his early works. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWfkvGxyg78)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a recording of Strand reading his poem aloud. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52959/eating-poetry)
- Another Side of Strand — Mark Strand was also an accomplished visual artist, making collages like those pictured in this interview. (https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mark-strands-playful-collages)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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