Poetry

POEM TEXT

I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in
it after all, a place for the genuine.
Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must, these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are
useful. When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible,
the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
do not admire what
we cannot understand: the bat
holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the base-
ball fan, the statistician—
nor is it valid
to discriminate against "business documents and

school-books"; all these phenomena are important. One must make a distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the result is not poetry,
nor till the poets among us can be
"literalists of
the imagination"—above
insolence and triviality and can present

for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," shall we
have it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, you are interested in poetry.

SUMMARY

I don't like poetry either: there's so much else to care about besides all this nonsense. But if you read it with maximum skepticism, you'll find that there's ultimately room for something real in it. Hands that can grip things, eyes whose pupils can grow wider, hair that can stand on end if necessary—these matter not because

they can be explained in some sophisticated-seeming way, but because they have a purpose. Once they evolve to the point where their purpose is incomprehensible, the response is universal: we don't appreciate what baffles us—whether that's a bat roosting upside down or searching for

food, elephants shoving each other, a wild horse rolling in the grass, a vigilant wolf beneath a tree, the hardhearted critic growing annoyed like a horse bothered by fleas, the lover of baseball, or the specialist in numerical data. It's also unreasonable to show bias against business records and

textbooks; each of these things is significant. That said, one has to note a difference: when popularized by mediocre poets, the product doesn't qualify as poetry. Only when our poets can be "literalists of the imagination"—can set aside cheekiness and frivolity and put forward,

for close study, invented worlds that hold realistic ugliness as well as beauty—will we have true poetry. Until then, if you want poems to contain both the basic stuff of poetry (literary language, devices, etc.) *and* an authentic sense of reality, then you actually care about poetry.

THEMES

THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF POETRY

In “Poetry,” the speaker wrestles with what makes a poem worthwhile (or even count as a poem in the first place!). The speaker begins by admitting that they themselves get pretty frustrated with poetry—that all too often it seems pretentious and incomprehensible. But the speaker argues that such traits aren’t intrinsic to the art form. Rather, they result from poets mistakenly assuming that good poetry has to contain obscure, reader-alienating language about grandiose subjects. On the contrary, good poetry is sincere, honest, and, above all, contains “the genuine”—something *real*.

The speaker ironically begins the poem by saying that they, too, "dislike" poetry. They read poetry "with a perfect contempt for it" and acknowledge that there are more "important" things "beyond all this fiddle" (i.e., triviality). The speaker finds that a lot of poetry has nothing going on beneath the surface: it's silly and tedious, all parlor tricks and sleight of hand. Yet the speaker's frustration isn't really with poetry as a whole but with poetry that's "so derivative as to become unintelligible." In other words, the speaker is fed up with poets who imitate other poets so awkwardly that their verse turns into inaccessible nonsense. In this way, Moore's poem responds to a larger discussion about the pretentiousness of poetry.

Indeed, the speaker thinks there are far too many "half poets"—writers whose poems seem challenging or impressive on the surface, but have no real depth. And if people can't "understand" poetry, the speaker declares, they can't "admire" or appreciate it, either. Basically, an impenetrable poem is pointless. Poems, the speaker continues, need to be like "Hands that can grasp" and "eyes / that can dilate"—body parts we value "not because" they lend themselves to fancy "interpretation[s]" but because they're truly "useful." Likewise, the words and devices poets use should serve a purpose; they, too, should help readers *feel* and *see* things.

The speaker thus makes a case for poets being "literalists of / the imagination." That is, they should use their imaginations in service of creating something "raw" and "real." Poets should also be "above / insolence and triviality"; writing poetry is serious work and should be treated as such. This doesn't mean poems can't be playful or ambiguous—it just means that a poem should be more than a bag of tricks, a slick display of the poet's technical skill. Such displays, the speaker suggests, are empty and meaningless, and they degrade people's trust in poetry. Instead, poets should strive to "present [...] imaginary gardens with real toads in them." In other words, poets' invented worlds shouldn't be purely escapist—they should reflect plain, even ugly, realities. Though the "raw materials" poets work with are obviously artificial (words and literary devices can only gesture toward or approximate the real world), the poet's goal should still be to express—and make readers feel—something "genuine."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-29

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in
it after all, a place for the genuine.

"Poetry" begins with the speaker confessing their "dislike" of poetry. This is a rather ironic opening statement for a poem! Surely the speaker's relationship to poetry must be more complex than pure "dislike" if they're writing a poem about it. Still, these first four words are one of the most famous openings in 20th-century poetry, and they set up a nuanced, challenging reflection on the art form.

The speaker adds that "there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle." "Fiddle," in this context, means nonsense or deception. At the same time, it brings to mind the musical instrument, suggesting that musicality can be part of poetry's deceptiveness. Perhaps the speaker thinks poetry needs to do more than just sound nice.

Indeed, the speaker says they read poetry "with a perfect contempt for it." This is hyperbole; if the speaker really felt "perfect contempt" for poetry, why would they bother reading it? This exaggeration suggests that the speaker is feeling fed up with poetry, until, that is, they remember that there is "a place for the genuine" in it. The speaker is caught between feelings of poetry being a load of bologna and the belief that actually there is something real about it after all.

Line 1 is end-stopped, and feels straightforward and emphatic. Lines 2-3, however, are enjambed:

> Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,
> one discovers in
> it after all, a place for the genuine.

Notice how long line 2 is, and how the enjambment makes the line feel as if it's simply overflowing into the next one. The choice to break the line after a preposition makes the poem feel a little more prosaic; ending the line on an image or punchy phrase would be more expected. This unconventional choice signals, perhaps, that poetry doesn't have to be perfectly chiseled in order to convey something "genuine."

In fact, the poem's form is quite experimental. Like other modernist poets, Moore continually pushed the boundaries of what poetry was allowed to be in her era. The poem's use of syllabic meter (in which lines contain a certain number of syllables rather than stresses) feels simultaneously loose and structured, rhythmic but not tightly musical. Most of the poem's stanzas are sestets (but the third stanza is an exception), and its lines range anywhere from 4 to 22 syllables. The poet playfully flouts traditional ideas about what a poem should look or sound like, suggesting that style isn't ultimately what makes a poem matter.

LINES 4-8

Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise

if it must, these things are important not because a high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are
useful.

In lines 4-8, the poem illustrates what makes poetry "genuine." It mentions "Hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate, [and] hair that can rise" as analogues—or effects—of real, "important" poetry. In other words, poetry should evoke and provoke visceral feelings. It should be as "useful" as the reader's natural instincts and should appeal to those instincts.

The parallelism in these lines creates rhythm and musicality, but it also highlights what all these images have in common: the body. Again, the point is that poetry isn't a pure intellectual exercise; it's also intuitive and emotional. Indeed, the speaker says that:

> [...] these things are important not because a
>
> high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them
> but because they are
> useful.

To the speaker, writing poems isn't just about impressing academics or other poets. Its aims should be more practical.

Lines 4-8 are all enjambed so that the poem gains momentum as the speaker describes how poetry can hold readers spellbound—their hands gripping the book, eyes widening, and hair prickling. Yet notice how the shorter, punchier lines 4-5 yield to the looser, baggier lines 6-8. The language gets long-winded again, sounding less like a poem and more like an academic paper (the kind that might contain "high-sounding interpretation"). These contrasting effects reinforce the idea that poetry should sound the way it needs to sound to get a point across.

They also demonstrate the poet's own range. Even as the poem resists sounding too perfect or controlled, it contains its own subtle music. In addition to syllabic meter, the poem uses occasional end rhymes, such as "eyes" and "rise" at the ends of lines 4 and 5. Fittingly, this rhyme intensifies the language just as the speaker is describing poetry's visceral impact.

LINES 8-11

When they become so derivative as to become unintelligible,
the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
do not admire what
we cannot understand:

The speaker says that when "Hands," "eyes," and "hair" grow "so derivative as to become unintelligible" (inscrutable or meaningless), they become impossible to "admire." This seems to refer to the way body parts and bodily attributes can become *vestigial*—no longer useful to a species—over the course of evolution. By analogy, poems cease to be "useful" when they are "so derivative" (imitative) that they become incomprehensible. In other words, poems can make a difference in the world only if readers can understand them. Indeed, the speaker says that no one "admire[s]" something that they "cannot understand."

It's helpful to think of this part of the poem in terms of its literary context. Moore was writing in 1919, toward the beginning of the Modernist movement. Modernists were fed up with age-old literary conventions and determined to discover new modes of expression. Their goal, as Ezra Pound famously put it, was to "make it new." Hence the speaker's insistence on work that isn't "derivative": poets should constantly seek new and original ways to express themselves. Yet while some Modernists took the idea of invention and experimentation to extremes, the speaker of this poem emphasizes the need for poetry to be clear and comprehensible. Work doesn't have to be overly complicated to be fresh and interesting.

Lines 9-11 are all enjambed:

> the same thing may be said for all of us, that we
> do not admire what
> we cannot understand: [...]

The combination of enjambment and unusual line breaks encourages the reader to read this passage quickly and seamlessly, so that the effect is more prosaic than poetic. Moreover, words such as "derivative" and "unintelligible" belong more to an academic or critical vocabulary than a traditionally poetic one. By using these words in a poem about writing authentic poetry, Moore demonstrates poetry's range and flexibility: poems don't have to always sound lyrical.

Notice the colon in the middle of line 11, signaling that the speaker is about to expand on the idea of no one liking what they can't understand.

LINES 11-15

the bat
holding on upside down or in quest of something to eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea, the base-
ball fan, the statistician—

After the colon in line 11, the speaker presents a series of images involving animals:

> [...] the bat
> holding on upside down or in quest of something to
>
> eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a
> tireless wolf under
> a tree, [...]

Despite the colon, there's some ambiguity as to what these animals are meant to illustrate. Most likely, the speaker is listing them as examples of "all of us" who "do not admire what / we cannot understand." But they could also be *examples* of "what / we cannot understand." They might also be meant to illustrate how poetry can or should draw on the material world—things one can actually observe—rather than abstract concepts.

But the speaker doesn't limit themselves to animals; they also describe "the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea." The simile here illustrates the critic's annoyance, perhaps suggesting the inadvisability of writing with critics in mind. If all he can feel is irritation, why bother trying to impress him? The simile also echoes the description of "a wild horse taking a roll," juxtaposing the freedom and pleasure of the horse with the critic's lack of emotion. Perhaps the speaker is hinting that poetry should be written from a wild impulse—the desire to feel or express something.

The speaker also includes in this list "the base- / ball fan" and "the statistician." So while the speaker clearly finds the natural world a great source of inspiration, they're also suggesting that poets need not limit themselves to what has been written about for centuries. Poets should seek inspiration *everywhere*, even in the unlikeliest of places.

Notice the use of anaphora (the repetition of "a" and "the") and more general parallelism in these lines:

- "a wild horse" and "a tireless wolf"
- "a tree," "a horse," and "a flea"
- "the base- / ball fan" and "the statistician"

These repetitions create energy and momentum while stressing that all these images are related. A "statistician" may not seem to have much in common with a "bat" looking for "something to eat"—but both are on a kind of mission (to gather food or data), both are drawn to what they understand best, etc. The speaker effortlessly brings these disparate things into the world of the poem, as if proving how flexible poetry really is.

LINES 16-19

nor is it valid
to discriminate against "business documents and
school-books"; all these phenomena are important. One
must make a distinction
however: when dragged into prominence by half poets, the
result is not poetry,

The speaker goes so far as to say that poets shouldn't "discriminate against 'business documents and / school-books'" in their poems. This is an allusion to the diary of Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, who wrote that "poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books." By contrast, the speaker argues that there are *no* exceptions: absolutely nothing is off-limits to a poem.

The speaker says "all these phenomena are important," but that nonetheless "One must make a distinction" between real poetry and the stuff that is popularized by "half poets." So even as the speaker argues that poetry can incorporate absolutely any material, they warn that not everything masquerading as poetry actually is. Writing poetry, the speaker suggests, requires discipline—the ability not only to say something new but also to say it as well as possible.

Notice the choice of diction in these lines. Moore once again uses academic-sounding words and phrases, such as "nor is it valid," "all these phenomena are important," and "One must make a distinction, however." This language is the opposite of lyrical and beautiful, illustrating the speaker's point that, in the hands of a capable poet, poetry can make room for anything—even "business documents and / school-books."

LINES 20-25

nor till the poets among us can be
"literalists of
the imagination"—above
insolence and triviality and can present
for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them,"
shall we
have it.

Poets can write genuine poetry, the speaker argues, only if they become "literalists of the imagination." This phrase alludes to something the Modernist poet W. B. Yeats wrote about the Romantic poet William Blake. Yeats claimed that Blake was "a too literal realist of the imagination," and that:

> [...] because he believed that the figures seen by the mind's eye, when exalted by inspiration were 'eternal existences,' symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments.

But Moore is on Blake's side here, not Yeats's. Her allusion suggests that poets *should* be so carried away by their own inner visions that they take them literally—that they can't treat them as anything other than real. In other words, poets should take their imaginative lives seriously! The speaker also believes that poets should be "above insolence" (lack of respect) "and triviality" (lack of seriousness). In other words, they should write their work in earnest.

The speaker adds that only when poets "can present / for inspection, 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'" will they succeed in making worthwhile poems. This metaphor has become famous. It suggests that poems shouldn't be purely escapist; they shouldn't just focus on beautiful things or create idyllic fantasy worlds. They should create imaginative worlds that are grounded in reality—that contain unpleasant or funny or even dangerous elements, like "toads." (There may be some

religious or mythological symbolism here: compare the toads in these gardens with the snake in the Garden of Eden, for example.)

Moore places quotation marks around "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," but unlike the other quotations in the poem, this phrase seems to be her own invention. However, it may allude to Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). This famous children's book, which Moore's whole family loved, features a "toad" who performs songs for an imaginary audience—one he believes exists but is "not there at all." So Moore might be hinting that poets need to keep real audiences in mind: audiences who will lose interest in their work if they can't understand it. Even though poets should be "literalists of the imagination," driven by their conviction in the things they dream up, they shouldn't lose touch with reality. Something genuine should lie at the heart of even the most fantastical "imaginary gardens."

LINES 25-29

In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
the raw material of poetry in
all its rawness and
that which is on the other hand
genuine, you are interested in poetry.

In the closing lines, the speaker summarizes the balance poets need to strike in order to write poems that resonate with readers—poems worthy of being called poetry.

The speaker notes that, "on the one hand," poets have at their disposal "the raw material of poetry in / all its rawness." This phrase apparently refers to language itself, and all the literary devices poets use to manipulate it. Language is crude in that it can only ever *represent* or *evoke* the real world. It's terribly limited, yet it's the only "material" poets have to work with.

But one can manipulate this material in all sorts of ways and still fail to produce poetry. That's because poetry must also contain "that which is on the other hand genuine." There has to be something real in there, or the poem will feel empty and false—and therefore won't qualify as true poetry at all.

Notice the use of repetition and parallelism in these final lines:

- the word "poetry" in lines 26 and 29
- "on the one hand" (line 25) and "on the other hand" (line 28)
- "raw" and "rawness" in lines 26 and 27

These devices add emphasis and structure to the passage. For example, the phrase "on the one hand" and "on the other hand" has several key effects. First, it's the language of rational argument: the speaker is above all trying to *persuade* the reader. Second, it suggests that writing poetry is a balancing act. Third, the repetition of "hand" echoes the first stanza's description of "Hands that can grasp." Once again, Moore emphasizes that poetry can't just be intellectual. It has to come from someplace "genuine": the body and the heart, the poet's authentic emotions and experience.

SYMBOLS

GARDENS AND TOADS

The speaker declares that poetry should be able to create "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." These gardens should be able to withstand the close "inspection" of readers and critics. Symbolically, gardens are associated with growth, beauty, harmony, renewal, and so on, whereas toads are associated with ugliness or humble plainness. Toads can even be dangerous (poisonous) as well as unsightly. Moore's standard, then, implies that poetry should be able to create beautiful imaginative worlds—but that beauty alone isn't enough. Those imaginative worlds should also reflect the ugly, dangerous, or just plain humble side of life. They shouldn't be purely escapist; they should be "imaginary" but feel "real."

Gardens can also symbolize the idyllic, as in the Greek myth of Arcadia or the biblical story of Eden. Moore's "toads," then, might be the rough equivalent of the serpent in Eden: symbols of the evil or danger that lurks even within paradise. Or they might reflect the comparable idea that death exists even in Arcadia (a popular theme in Western art and literature). In poetry, then, they are the elements that make the poet's imaginative vision feel grounded and "genuine."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "and can present / for inspection, "imaginary gardens with real toads in them,"'"

POETIC DEVICES

IRONY

"Poetry" ironically begins with the speaker claiming to "dislike" poetry. If they dislike poetry so much, the reader may wonder, then why are they writing a poem? This irony creates immediate intrigue and anticipation: the reader may continue reading just to find out more about this curious contradiction.

Ultimately, it becomes clear that it isn't *really* poetry that the speaker dislikes, but rather insincere "half poets" who are too busy showing off or mimicking other poets to make something of "genuine" value. When the speaker declares, "[T]here are things that are important beyond all this fiddle," they're implying that poems should correspond to something *real* in the *real world*—not become endlessly self-referential or overly

involved in their own workings.

The speaker also uses hyperbole in the second line, saying that they read poetry "with a perfect contempt for it." Of course, if they really felt "perfect contempt" (i.e., scorn or disrespect) for poetry, why would they bother reading it at all? This exaggeration conveys the speaker's frustration with poets who don't take their craft seriously, while suggesting that such "insolence" (line 23) might completely alienate poetry's audience.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "I too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle. / Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses metaphors to illustrate the kind of "genuine" poetry they want more of. For instance, lines 4-6 imply that poems should resemble (or perhaps consider as their audience) "Hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate," and "hair that can rise / if it must." As a metaphor or analogy for good poetry, this suggests that poems should evoke—and/or provoke—visceral emotions.

In lines 11-14, the speaker says that people "do not admire what / [they] cannot understand," then expands on this idea with a series of images that may have metaphorical implications:

> [...] the bat,
> holding on upside down or in quest of something to
>
> eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under
> a tree, [...]

These images are all of animals existing out in the world, perhaps suggesting that poetry, too, should have a wildness about it—should itself live and breathe and move. Yet the speaker also invokes "the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels / a flea." This simile might imply that critics barely feel anything at all, except occasional annoyance, and therefore aren't the audience poets should have in mind when writing.

In line 25, the speaker says that poets should ultimately strive to create "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." This metaphor suggests that while poetry is an artificial product of language, the impetus that drives a poem should be "real." Poets shouldn't just toy around with rhythm, form, etc., for the sake of it—they should attempt to convey or provoke something "genuine."

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-6:** "Hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate, hair that can rise / if it must"
- **Lines 11-14:** "the bat / holding on upside down or in quest of something to / eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under / a tree, the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse that feels a flea"
- **Line 24:** "imaginary gardens with real toads in them"

REPETITION

The poem contains a great deal of repetition and parallelism, which add rhythm, musicality, and emphasis to the language.

Take the repetition of "it" in the first three lines, for example:

> I too, dislike **it**: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
> Reading **it**, however, with a perfect contempt for **it**, one discovers in
> **it** after all, a place for the genuine.

The reader knows that "it" refers to poetry because of the poem's title, yet by refusing to say the word "poetry" in the first few lines, the speaker subtly enacts the very "contempt" they're describing. The *sound* of all those "its" has an almost prickly feel to it, evoking the speaker's distaste.

There is also repetition and parallelism in lines 4-5:

> Hands **that can** grasp, eyes
> **that can** dilate, hair **that can** rise

Parallelism creates a pleasing cadence and suggests the similarity of all the things the speaker is describing. "Hands," "eyes," and "hair" are all parts of the body that correlate to sensation: holding a book, reading a poem, hair standing on end from anticipation.

Similarly, there is both repetition and parallelism in lines 13-16: the repetition of "horse," anaphora (the repetition of "a" and "the"), and numerous parallel phrases:

- "a wild horse" and "a tireless wolf"
- "a tree," "a horse," "a flea"
- "the base- / ball fan" and "the statistician"

This extensive list of examples, set in parallel, emphatically illustrates the speaker's point: that poetry should correspond to things in the real world, things that ordinary people can understand and relate to.

And while the speaker may have avoided using the word "poetry" in the opening few lines, this isn't true in the fourth stanza, where they repeat "poets" / "poetry" several times.

(This repetition of words that share the same root is called polyptoton). By this point, it's clear that the speaker doesn't *really* dislike poetry; they only dislike "half poets" (people who seem to think poetry is a game meant to impress other poets or critics). They actually seem quite happy to discuss poetry: the word comes up twice in the final stanza, too!

The final stanza also uses polyptoton:

> the raw material of poetry in
> all its rawness

The repetition of "raw" / "rawness" drives home the idea that poets' "material"—language—is fairly rudimentary. In other words, there's something clumsy and messy about all the words and devices writers have at their disposal. The only way to imbue them with meaning is to remember the "genuine" things one is using them to represent.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "it"
- **Line 2:** "it," "it"
- **Line 3:** "it," "genuine"
- **Line 4:** "that can"
- **Line 5:** "that can," "that can"
- **Line 8:** "become," "become"
- **Line 13:** "a," "horse," "a"
- **Line 14:** "a," "the," "horse," "the"
- **Line 15:** "the"
- **Line 19:** "poets," "poetry"
- **Line 20:** "poets"
- **Line 26:** "raw," "poetry"
- **Line 27:** "rawness"
- **Line 29:** "genuine," "poetry"

ALLUSION

"Poetry" contains several allusions that add depth to the poem's argument. Moore was well known for incorporating quotations into her poetry, and this poem is no exception.

In lines 18-19, the speaker says that poets shouldn't "discriminate against 'business documents and / school-books" in their poetry. This is a reference to the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, who wrote in his diary that "poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books." Moore pushes back against this idea, suggesting that poetry knows no such limitations. In other words, everything—including the driest, most unpoetic material—is fodder for the poet's imagination.

Lines 22-23 then challenge poets to be "literalists of / the imagination." This phrase alludes to the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, who, in writing about English Romantic poet William Blake, argued:

> The limitation of [Blake's] view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature; and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind's eye, when exalted by inspiration were 'eternal existences,' symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments.

This allusion suggests that, like Blake, poets should be so convinced by or devoted to the things they see in their imaginations that they shouldn't resort to mere "style" or tricks, as these surface "trivialit[ies]" will only detract from their true "vision." Poets should instead write with real passion and purpose; every choice they make should stem from deep conviction about what they're trying to do.

Finally, the speaker says that poets should aim to create "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." This phrase belongs to Moore herself; no source for the supposed quotation has ever been discovered. However, it may subtly allude to Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, a famous children's book that inspired some elaborate inside jokes in Moore's family. The book features a toad who was completely "mastered by his imagination" and whose "songs are all conceit and boasting and vanity." So disconnected from reality was "Mr. Toad" that he performed his songs for "an audience that was not there at all." If Moore intended this allusion, it would echo the poem's argument that poetry shouldn't be all parlor tricks and pretty deception. (If it is, what's the point of it? Who is it even for?)

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "business documents and / school-books"
- **Lines 21-22:** "literalists of / the imagination"
- **Line 24:** "imaginary gardens with real toads in them"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's many enjambments give it a headlong, free-flowing momentum. Many of the enjambed lines are quite long, so the lack of a pause following them makes the language look almost as loose as prose. Look at lines 2-3, for example:

> Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,
> one discovers in
> it after all, a place for the genuine.

This wordy sentence practically spills over from line 2 to line 3; the line break after "in" looks almost arbitrary, as if the poet only broke the line because the line couldn't hold anything else.

Meanwhile, other enjambments seem to speed things up. Here are lines 4-6:

Hands that can grasp, eyes
that can dilate, hair that can rise
if it must [...]

Here, enjambment emphasizes quick, instinctive actions: the reflexive dilation of "eyes" and the "ris[ing]" of hair. It also helps produce an end rhyme between "eyes" and "rise." Notice how the poem then returns to longer, looser lines, still enjambed but to very different effect:

[...] these things are important not because a

high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them
but because they are
useful; [...]

As in lines 2-3, the enjambments here correspond with jam-packed, overflowing lines. Overall, the poem's enjambments help illustrate the range of ways in which poets can manipulate language—for visual or dramatic effect, emotional impact, and more. It's as if the poet is trying to prove how much poetry is capable of.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "in / it"
- **Lines 5-6:** "rise / if"
- **Lines 6-7:** "a / high-sounding"
- **Lines 7-8:** "are / useful"
- **Lines 9-10:** "we / do"
- **Lines 11-12:** "bat / holding"
- **Lines 12-13:** "to / eat"
- **Lines 13-14:** "under / a"
- **Lines 16-17:** "valid / to"
- **Lines 17-18:** "and / school-books"
- **Lines 18-19:** "distinction / however"
- **Lines 20-21:** "be / "literalists"
- **Lines 21-22:** "of / the"
- **Lines 22-23:** "above / insolence"
- **Lines 23-24:** "present / for"
- **Lines 24-25:** "we / have"
- **Lines 26-27:** "in / all"
- **Lines 27-28:** "and / that"
- **Lines 28-29:** "hand / genuine"

VOCABULARY

Fiddle (Line 1) - Nonsense or deception.

Contempt (Line 2) - Disdain or disgust.

Dilate (Lines 4-5) - Expand (referring particularly to the expansion of the pupils, as in dim lighting conditions).

High-sounding interpretation (Lines 6-7) - A pompous or overly complex explanation.

Unintelligible (Line 8) - Incomprehensible.

Derivative (Line 8) - Imitative; trying to be like something else.

Immovable (Line 14) - Unable to be moved emotionally; hardhearted; implacable.

Statistician (Lines 14-15) - A specialist in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting numerical data.

Discriminate against (Lines 16-18) - Hold a bias or prejudice against.

Phenomena (Line 18) - Things, facts, or occurrences.

Make a distinction (Lines 18-19) - Observe the difference(s) between one thing and another.

Prominence (Line 19) - Popularity or common knowledge.

Literalists (Lines 20-22) - People who interpret words, phrases, etc. in their most straightforward or literal sense. "Literalists of the imagination" suggests people who recognize the truth within imaginary worlds, or who can make imaginary worlds seem real.

Insolence (Lines 22-23) - Impertinence; lack of respect.

Triviality (Lines 22-23) - Frivolity; lack of seriousness or significance.

Inspection (Lines 23-24) - Close scrutiny (here suggesting the analysis of the reader or critic).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Poetry" consists of five stanzas, most of which are sestets (six-line stanzas). In the 1921 version shown here—one of several versions Moore published over the course of her career—the third stanza has only five lines. The poem doesn't follow a traditional form, and in many ways is quite experimental. In that way, it's characteristic both of Moore's poetry and the early 20th-century modernist movement. Its long, prosaic, heavily enjambed lines, cascading diagonally down the page, seem to push the boundaries of what a poem can look or sound like. Lines 14-15 even break in the middle of a word, a highly unusual kind of enjambment. These effects help illustrate the speaker's argument that nothing is outside the realm of poetry: not even "business documents" or "school-books."

While many of the poem's lines are long and wordy, others are very short. These shorter lines provide contrast and demonstrate the dynamic tools poets have at their disposal. All in all, the poem's experimental form reflects the speaker's desire to expand the definition of poetry, even while arguing that poems should above all engage with something "genuine."

METER

"Poetry" is written in syllabic meter, meaning that there are a certain number of *syllables* per line rather than a certain number or pattern of *stresses*. So, for instance, the first line of each stanza contains exactly 19 syllables—although subsequent lines are less exact. The second line of every stanza, for example, has between 19 and 22 syllables, except for line 25 in the last stanza, which contains only 14 syllables; the third line of each stanza has between 10 and 12 syllables, except for line 15 in stanza 3, which has only 7 syllables; and so on. (Moore revised "Poetry" heavily throughout her career, and some versions of the poem follow a more strict syllabic pattern than others.)

The overall effect of syllabic meter is that it feels more relaxed and unencumbered than accentual meter, but more structured and rhythmic than free verse. Its use here seems to reflect the speaker's philosophy: namely, that poets should take poetry more seriously, but shouldn't shy from the unconventional in their poems. Moore used syllabics often in her poems and helped popularize the technique in 20th-century poetry.

RHYME SCHEME

Although there are some subtle end rhymes throughout the poem, "Poetry" doesn't follow a consistent rhyme scheme. In most stanzas, the fourth and fifth lines form either a perfect or imperfect rhyme: "eyes"/"rise," "what"/"bat," "of"/"above," "and"/"hand." The pattern breaks in the third stanza, however, which has only five lines rather than six. (These choices reflect Moore's various revisions of the poem: in an earlier version, this stanza had six lines, and "valid" rhymed with "did.") Meanwhile, the other lines in each stanza are unrhymed.

The poem's lack of a strict rhyme pattern contributes to its looser, more prosaic feel. It has some musicality, but it resists traditional poetic rhythms and sounds. It seems to want readers to question their assumptions about what belongs in a poem, so it avoids the orderly and predictable.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Poetry" can be interpreted as Moore herself, since the poem directly addresses what the point of "all this fiddle" (poetry) is. The speaker is using a poem to confess their "dislike" of poetry, as well as their belief in its ability to express something "real" or "genuine," so it's safe to say the speaker and poet are one and the same.

That said, this isn't a poem about the speaker's life. It's about poetry! The speaker provides many opinions about the art form, but no personal detail. (Though the many animal references here—the "bat," etc.—reflect Moore's famous, lifelong love of animals.) The speaker believes pretentious "half poets" are turning the craft into a circus rather than taking it seriously. Basically, they're a poet who "demand[s]" that poetry be written in earnest.

SETTING

The poem has no physical setting; it takes place entirely in the speaker's mind as they express their frustration and hopes for poetry. When they do point to the physical world, it is only as an example of the "raw material" the poet has at their disposal. This material includes not only traditional poetic inspiration, such as the world of animals and nature, but also "the base- / ball fan, the statistician," and "business documents and / school-books." Basically, the speaker argues that nothing is off-limits to poetry, as long as it's used in service of something "genuine," something that matters.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

One of America's most recognizable poets, Marianne Moore wrote "Poetry" in 1919, a couple of years before the publication of her first book. She would go on to revise the poem many times, and famously cut all but the first three lines in her 1967 *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*. This radical revision spurred controversy among readers who knew and admired the original poem.

In a 2009 *Slate* article, poet Robert Pinsky reflects on Moore's "Poetry":

> Moore, as I understand her project, champions both clarity and complexity, rejecting the shallow notion that they are opposites. Scorning a middlebrow reduction of everything into easy chunks, she also scorns obfuscation and evasive cop-outs. Tacitly impatient with complacency and bluffing, deriding the flea-bitten critic, unsettling the too-ordinary reader, she sets forth an art that is irritable, attentive, and memorably fluid.

Beyond this poem, too, Moore's work is known for its keen intelligence, meticulous and almost scientifically precise descriptions, and diligent observations of both the human and animal world. Moore also frequently incorporated vastly different kinds of quotation in her work, so that many consider her the inventor of "collage" poetry. "Poetry," which challenges poets to write more "genuine" poetry while still demanding that poetry be rigorous and innovative, showcases all of these inclinations.

Moore is generally considered a modernist poet, alongside such contemporaries as T.S. Eliot, H.D., William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound. The Imagists, in particular, considered her

their own, but Moore distinguished her work from theirs in that she still valued meter and rhyme in her work—even though she thought there was much more to poetry than its ability to *sound* like poetry. In fact, Moore skillfully walked the line between traditional and untraditional, finding ways to innovate within familiar structures. For instance, her famous use of syllabic meter (where lines contain a set number of syllables rather than accents) was uncommon in the English tradition, but in Romance languages was quite ordinary. For her own part, Moore considered the poet Edith Sitwell an enormous influence on her interest in and experimentation with rhythm. Later, Moore became a friend and mentor to Elizabeth Bishop, whose style drew on Moore's in some ways.

Though her work gained steadily in popularity over the course of her lifetime, Moore distanced herself from the literary scene. She had literary friends who went out of their way to help her get published, yet she continued to turn to her mother for revision advice. All in all, Moore was deeply conflicted about poetry and often preferred baseball-watching and museum-going to the literary world in which she became a recluctant star. "Poetry" speaks clearly to this ambivalence, as the speaker admits that they—like many people—"dislike" poetry, but argues for the importance of authentic and disciplined verse.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Poetry" was first published in 1919, a year after the end of World War I and a year *before* the passage of the 19th Amendment, which gave women in the United States the right to vote. Moore was active in the women's suffrage movement; she wrote letters to local newspapers, sometimes submitting anonymously and other times using a pseudonym. But the poem itself makes no direct reference to these seismic historical events; instead, it focuses wholeheartedly on the nature and purpose of poetry.

At the same time, the context of WWI, women's suffrage, and other events of the period (such as the 1918-1920 flu pandemic) lend real gravitas to the speaker's statement that "there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle." Moore was profoundly aware that poetry can seem rather silly—even pretentious—in the face of more pressing "phenomena." Yet at the end of the day, she was pulled back to poetry again and again as a mode for "genuine" expression. It might not be the most important thing in the world, "Poetry" argues, but it serves a real purpose.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Revising "Poetry" — Read about Moore's complicated relationship to her own poem, including her many revisions over the years. (http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/poem/2009/06/marianne_moores_poetry.html)
- A Reading of the Poem — "Poetry" read aloud by actress Kathy Bates. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifRn-FbS6bY)
- A Biography of the Poet — Learn more about Marianne Moore at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/marianne-moore)
- The Purpose of Poetry — Moore isn't the only poet to try to define what poetry is and why it's important. Here are 20 other poets on the same subject. (https://www.flavorwire.com/413949/20-poets-on-the-meaning-of-poetry)
- Marianne Moore: A Reluctant Poet — Learn more about the fascinating figure who "prefer[red] baseball, museums and circuses to literature." (https://buffalonews.com/lifestyles/web-extra-holding-on-upside-down-a-life-of-poet-s-poet-marianne-moore/article_61409f3d-2ab7-54bb-a1e8-115a85ffda31.html)
- A Moore Documentary — Watch a short film on Moore's life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHw-9EEMowU)

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