Elements of Poetry
Reading the Poem
#1

To aid us in understanding a poem…Two of the most important questions are *Who is the speaker?* and *What is the occasion?*

A cardinal error of some readers is to assume that a speaker who uses first-person pronouns is always the poet. However, caution is not prohibition. Sometimes events or ideas in a poem will help us understand episodes in the poet's life. More importantly, knowledge of the poet's life may help us understand a poem.

A third important question upon reading any poem is *What is the central purpose of the poem?* Only by relating various details of the poem to the central purpose or theme can we assess the value of the poem and determine whether it is a good one or a poor one.

Once we have answered the question *What is the central purpose of the poem?* We can consider another question, equally important to understanding: *By what means is that purpose achieved?*

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A. E. Housman, *Is my team plowing*
From *A Shropshire Lad* (1896)

"Is my team plowing,
    That I was used to drive
And hear the harness jingle
    When I was man alive?"

Ay, the horses trample, 5
    The harness jingles now;
No change though you lie under
    The land you used to plow.

"Is football playing
    Along the river shore, 10
With lads to chase the leather,
    Now I stand up no more?"

Ay, the ball is flying,
    The lads play heart and soul;
The goal stands, Up, the keeper 15
    Stands Up to keep the goal.

"Is my girl happy,