

How Poems Mean

ONE INTERPRETATION

$$(E=mc^2) \approx (M=ti^2)$$

When a written or verbal message is ambiguous, it means that it can have more than one meaning, and it's often unclear which meaning is intended. Ambiguity is not good if the objective is to inform or explain.

With poetry though, the objective can be different because some poets want mainly to enrich our lived experience. This is why some of the greatest poems are not only ambiguous but actually rely on ambiguity for their overall effect.

Albert Einstein's famous formula shows that mass and energy are part of same physical reality. Furthermore, a small amount of mass is equivalent to an enormous amount of energy. In terms of poetry, this formula can usefully be translated as:

$$[\text{Poem's Meaning}] = [(\text{its text}) \times (\text{its interpretations})^2]$$

Many poems, including short ones, do not come right out and say what they mean. Poets use symbols, images, and sounds to create a network of associations, often broad and deep, in a reader's mind, and it's this network which expresses multiple coexisting interpretations. This is why, just like a small amount of mass equals a large amount of energy, lots of prose commentary and analysis is required to clarify even a short poem's meaning. This is how ambiguity enriches a poem. This is how many poems mean.