

A Study Guide

The Matter is Black Life: Poetry for Engaging and Overcoming

Reading poetry involves the pleasurable activity of energetic engagement with words and ideas. This study guide is designed to facilitate your recreational and intellectual enjoyment of the curated poems for this series. Below are tips for reading poetry in general, followed by suggestions and references for each theme. We encourage you to dialogue with the poems by taking notes, annotating, and recording your impression, reactions, and responses as you read. Poems are meant to be read more than once; each subsequent reading of a poem reveals new layers of meaning, nuance, and texture that contribute to your appreciation of the poem. Enjoy!

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Some Tips for Reading Poetry

Here are some paths into reading a poem.

- Think about and deconstruct the title. What thoughts and feelings does the title bring to mind? In literary studies, we call this exercise casting a “horizon of expectation.” Casting this horizon establishes initial expectations for the meaning a literary work might provide.

- On the first reading, identify the poem's topic. In other words, what is the poem about? Additionally, what is your general response to the poem?
- Upon your second reading of the poem, seek to identify the **persona** or voice of the poem. In other words, who is speaking? In literary studies, we distinguish the persona/voice of the poem from its author since the latter is free to create a speaker other than his/her/their self.
- Who is the **addressee** of the poem? In other words, who is the persona speaking to and why?
- Identify the main organizing idea. Then, locate the sub-ideas that support the main organizing idea of the poem.
- To enhance your understanding of the poem's meaning, examine the power of language based on the poet's intellectual and creative use of literary devices such as metaphor, irony, and alliteration. For those trained in reading poetry, feel free to draw upon literary devices you are familiar with to establish a poem's meaning or verbal artistry.
- Now that you have examined the literary aspects of the poem, identify the poem's theme. What "central" message does the poem communicate to readers?

To start thinking about the African American Poetry Canon, consider these points as well.

- What cultural relevance does the poem's central message hold for the series theme, "The Black Matter Is Life?"
- Consult the resources provided. Entertain how this information might add to your understanding of the poem's theme and the matter of Black life.

You might also review, "[What's African American About African American Poetry?](#)" a panel discussion among Black poets Kevin Young, Harryette Mullen, Tracie Morris and Cornelius Eady.