How to **POISON** your poem

Perspective **O**bjective **I**nterpretation of ambiguities **S**hifts **O**utcome **N**ew understanding

Poison is a common dramatic device used in theatre and film (e.g. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Rob Reiner's *The Princess Bride*) not only to advance a plot, but also as a way of infusing a palpable tension into a scene more insidiously, subtly, or implicitly than an obvious weapon like a sword. We feel its effects without seeing it.

With the P.O.I.S.O.N. annotation method, readers/reciters unveil the implicit tension in a poem to create a more dramatic recitation. In performance, the poem becomes a script, and poetic form is implicit stage direction. Line breaks, stanza breaks, white space, enjambment, italics, punctuation, rhythm, and many other formal choices made by the author of a poem can be interpreted by a reciter as a guide on how to recite it.

Perspective: One of the first questions to pose when reading a poem has to do with the perspective from which the poem is written. Who is/are the speaker(s) or character(s) in the poem? How many points of view are represented? What is the relationship between and among the different perspectives represented in the poem? Take a moment to list these, and identify.

Objective: What is the underlying objective, motive, or goal behind each of the voices or characters in this poem? If these are not readily apparent, create a plausible backstory for each character or voice that can help round out the character. This is not biographical information about the poet; rather, it is background about the character.

What are the sources of tension or conflict within, between, and among the different characters?

Interpretation of Ambiguities: Ambiguity is when a word or statement is open to more than one possible interpretation. Shakespearean drama and most great poetry are often filled with ambiguities, which is what makes them so rich for interpretation by readers and actors. What are the ambiguities in your chosen poem, and what possible interpretations do they allow for? You do not have to choose between interpretations, but are encouraged to allow multiple—even contradictory—interpretations to exist simultaneously. (This is called a paradox.)

Shifts: Where are the shifts in: tone, power, perspective, momentum, etc.? Mark the places in the poem where these shifts occur and consider how these shifts might be interpreted in a dramatic recitation.

Outcome: What is the outcome (apparent or implied) of the objective, conflict, or tension? What is your character's internal state by the final line of the poem?

New Understanding: What has/have the speaker(s) discovered about themselves or the world through this poem? What about you, the reader/reciter?