

How Poems Mean

ONE INTERPRETATION

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

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

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

Einstein's famous formula for translating mass into energy ($E=mc^2$) says that mass and energy are equivalent, implying that a small amount of mass is equivalent to an enormous amount of energy. In terms of poetry, this formula can usefully be translated as $M=wi^2$:

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

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 in the reader's mind, and it's this network which expresses multiple coexisting interpretations. This is why, just like a small amount of mass equals an enormous 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.