

Introduction to Poetry by Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Discussion Questions

1. What words and images stand out to you?
2. What is your emotional reaction to the poem (e.g., surprise, dismay, anger)?
3. Read the poem a second time and identify any figurative language (e.g., simile, metaphor, hyperbole) you encounter.
4. What do they think Collins is saying about the study of poetry?
5. According to Collins, what is the real goal of reading poetry?