This comment places more emphasis on how a poem affects a reader than on how a poem is defined. By characterizing poetry as "undefinable," Robinson acknowledges that it can include many different purposes, subjects, emotions, styles, and forms. What effect does the following poem have on you?

**William Hathaway (b. 1944)**

**Oh, Oh**

My girl and I amble a country lane, moo cows chomping daisies, our own sweet saliva green with grass stems.

"Look, look," she says at the crossing, "the choo-choo's light is on." And sure enough, right smack dab in the middle of maple dappled summer sunlight is the lit headlight — so funny.

An arm waves to us from the black window. We wave gaily to the arm. "When I hear trains at night I dream of being president," I say dreamily. "And me first lady," she says loyally. So when the last boxcars, named after wonderful, faraway places, and the cabooses chug by we look eagerly to the road ahead. And there, poised and growling, are fifty Hell's Angels.

**MORE HELP WITH CLOSE READING**

**An Annotated Version of "Oh, Oh"**

After you've read a poem two or three times, a deeper, closer reading — line by line, word by word, syllable by syllable — will help you discover even more about the poem. Ask yourself: What happens (or does not happen) in the poem? What are the poem's central ideas? How do the poem's words, images, and sounds, for example, contribute to its meaning? What is the poem's overall tone? How is the poem put together?

You can flesh out your close reading by writing your responses in the margins of the page. The following interpretive notes offer but one way to read Hathaway's poem.
Hatchaway's poem serves as a convenient reminder that poetry can be full of surprises. Full of confidence, this couple, like the reader, is unprepared for the shock to come. When we see those "fifty Hell's Angels," we are confronted with something like a bucket of cold water in the face.

But even though our expectations are abruptly and powerfully reversed, we are finally invited to view the entire episode from a safe distance—the distance provided by the delightful humor in this poem. After all, how seriously can we take a poem that is titled "Oh, Oh"? The poet has his way with us, but we are brought in on the joke, too. The terror takes on comic proportions as the innocent couple is confronted by no fewer than fifty Hell's Angels. This is the kind of raucous overkill that informs a short animated film produced some years ago titled Bambi Meets Godzilla: you might not have seen it, but you know how it ends. The poem's good humor comes through when we realize how pathetically inadequate the response of "Oh, Oh" is to the circumstances.

As you can see, reading a description of what happens in a poem is not the same as experiencing a poem. The exuberance of "I scream..." and the surprise of Hatchaway's "Oh, Oh" are in the hearing or reading rather than in the retelling. A paraphrase is a prose restatement of the central ideas of a poem in your own language. Consider the difference between the following poem and the paraphrase that follows it. What is missing from the paraphrase?

**ROBERT FRANCIS (1901–1987)**

**Catch**

Two boys uncoached are tossing a poem together,
Overhand, underhand, backhand, sleight of hand, every hand,
Teasing with attitudes, latitudes, interludes, altitudes,
High, make him fly off the ground for it, low, make him stoop,
Make him scoop it up, make him as-almost-as-possible miss it,
Fast, let him sting from it, now, now fool him slowly,
Anything, everything tricky, risky, nonchalant,
Anything under the sun to outwit the proxy,
Over the tree and the long sweet cadence down,
Over his head, make him scramble to pick up the meaning,
And now, like a posy, a pretty one plump in his hands.

Paraphrase: A poet's relationship to a reader is similar to a game of catch. The poem, like a ball, should be pitched in a variety of ways to challenge and create interest. Boredom and predictability must be avoided if the game is to be engaging and satisfying.