

Explaining an Affinity for Bats – questions raised, answers let go of
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Explaining an Affinity for Bats

¹That they are only glimpsed in silhouette,
²And seem something else at first—a swallow—
³And move like new tunes, difficult to follow,
⁴Staggering towards an obstacle they yet
⁵Avoid in a last-minute pirouette,
⁶Somehow telling solid things from hollow,
⁷Sounding out how high a space, or shallow,
⁸Revising into deepening violet.
⁹That they sing—not the way the songbird sings
¹⁰(Whose song is rote, to ornament, finesse)—
¹¹But travel by a sort of song that rings
¹²True not in utterance, but harkenings,
¹³Who find their way by calling into darkness
¹⁴To hear their voice bounce off the shape of things.

A.E. Stallings

A present from John Poch

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Questions. Answer as many of them as you can, but question #10 is the one you are always aiming at. So if you can answer only two of the others, but can show how they interconnect, you have a bull's eye already.

Q1. Not all of the rhymes are exact - some are slant rhymes. Which ones are? Is there any reason for just those being slant? [Hint: YES!] What is/are the reason(s)?

A1. The first two slant rhymes are in lines 7 and 8: the first vowels of [halow] and [ʃædow] are back and front, respectively; and while lines 1 and 5 end in the stressed syllable [ɛt], line 8's rhyme word is a dactyl, and ends with the unstressed syllable [ət]. Thus these two slant rhymes mark the end of the first sentence, which occupies the sonnet's octet. And the next pair of slant rhymes, which also occur in adjacent lines, are the unstressed last syllables of

¹²*barkenings*, and ¹³*darkness*, which draw a boundary before the all-important last line (more on which to come).

- Q2. There are many trisyllables in the poem: two amphibrachs ([i. e., trisyllable whose strongly stressed second syllable is flanked by two less strongly-stressed syllables], one of these being in the title, both being participles of Latinate verbs): do these two verbs have anything to do with each other and with what the poem is doing? [Hint: you bet]
- A2. To *explain* something is to use words, whether oral or written, to resolve a mystery, solve a puzzle. Its Latin root is cognate with our humble monosyllable *plain* – to explain is to make something plain, simple, transparent. To *revise* is to change words, or perhaps thoughts; its root, *visus*, is the past participle of the Latin verb *videre* – to see. So revising is seeing anew, getting a different slant on, and saying different words to go with this new perspective, or view. Thus both of the only two amphibrachic words have to do with putting things into words – and the poet’s life revolves always around the search to find words to go with perceptions.
- Q3. Aside from the two anapestic trisyllables that end lines 1 and 5, and the lone amphibrach that begins line 4, the other eight trisyllables in the poem are all dactyls. Can an interesting corridor be drawn that begins and ends with one of the three line-final trisyllables, goes through the third one, and passes through four others?
- A3. The three line-final trisyllables are *silhouette*, *pirouette*, and *barkenings*; as we see below, an arc can be passed through these three, and also through the following four dactyls: *difficult*, *obstacle*, *violet*, *ornament*, all of which end in unstressed final syllables, the first three of which contain an [l].

That they are only glimpsed in **silhouette**,
And seem something else at first—a swallow—
And **move** like new tunes, **difficult** to follow,
Staggering towards an **obstacle** they yet
A**void** in a last-minute **pirouette**,
Somehow telling solid things from hollow,
Sounding out how high a space, or shallow,
Re**vising** into deepening **violet**.
That they sing—not the way the songbird sings
(Whose song is rote, to **ornament**, finesse)—
But **travel** by a sort of song that rings
True not in utterance, but **harkenings**,
Who find their way by calling into darkness
To hear their **voice** bounce off the shape of things.

The light blue curved line passes through the boldfaced metrically strong syllables in these seven words; it leads our eyes to the most important area of the perhaps most important last line of the poem.

- Q4. There are only eight [v]’s in the poem, six in lexical items. Do five of these form a corridor? If so, how is it related to the corridor in #3? What two

words in this corridor are most heavily involved in the work of the poem?
Where is the other lexical [v]?

A4. The six lexical [v]'s of the poem are boldfaced in red above; the concavity of the violet line which links them faces towards the right, like that of the pale blue line which our eye follows through the seven trisyllables – note that the trisyllable corridor passes through the seventh lexical [v], which begins *violet*. It may just be coincidence here, that these two visual lines of force in the poem remind us of the shape of flying bats. In my opinion, the two words on the violet corridor which do not have to do with motion (as do the words *move*, *avoid* and *travel*) which are most centrally located in what I am calling here “the work of the poem” both have to do with language: *re***v**ising and **v**oice.

Q5. There are only two occurrences of the voiced velar stop [g] in the poem. How are these two words interconnected? And how are they related to the lexical monosyllable in the title?

A5. The two voiced velar stops are found in the lexical verbs of the first and fourth lines of this brilliant poem – *glimpsed* and *staggering* bracket the first half of the sonnet's octet. Phonetically, the two stressed syllables of these words are [glɪmpst] and [stæg], whose subsequences [g . . . st] and [st . . . g] call to mind the heroes of our poem: *bats* [b . . . ts], one running from voiced stop to a cluster of the two voiceless dentals {s,t}, the other reversing this sequence. And the vowel of the reversed [stæg] recalls bats most clearly, since *staggering* is the first stressed [æ] we encounter after the title.

The poem's six [b]'s – *obstacle*, *songbird*, *but*, *but*, *by*, *bounce* [**bawnts**] – all occur in words which have an [s] and a dental stop (except for the preposition *by*) – it may be that this phonetic *gang* {b, s, t} is echoed even in the last three sounds of the poem's first verb: [glɪmp**st**], and, further afield, in three of the poem's other [p]-words: *pi***r**ouette, *sp***a**ce, *sh***a**pe, though this last has instead of a voiceless dental fricative, a voiceless palatal fricative.

Q6. Since there are a lot of words of three or more syllables in the poem (the title having two of them), one might wonder whether monosyllabicity plays any important role. [Hint: good question.] Where in the poem is monosyllabicity especially in evidence?

A6. You have found it already, right? There is only one line in the poem which is written “in words of one syllable” – the last line. Who might want to explore “darkness,” and to let their voice “bounce off” the “shape” of things? You might, right? And so might I. So might all of us, especially the poet.

Q7. There are also only two voiceless palatal fricatives in the poem. Where? Is there any reason for seeing the two words in which they occur as connected?

A7. The words are the last word of line 7: *shallow* and the second of line 14's three nouns: *shape*. The former word is salientized, since it is the poem's first slant rhyme, announcing that the next line, the eighth, will end the poem's first sentence and the sonnet's octet. All three of the nouns in the poem's last

line are highlighted, due to the fact that it is the only line which contains three nouns. And lines 7 and 14 describe closely related activities – sounding out the shape of spaces (line 7), and sounding out the shape of things (line 14).

Q8. The longest word in the poem is defined (in part) in the Oxford English Dictionary as:

Relationship or kinship generally between individuals or races. *collect*.
Relations, kindred.

Crucial in the meaning of this term is the fact that it describes a relationship between two or more entities. But the title only implies that some entity or other has an affinity to bats. What sense can be made of this cryptic suggestion? What is/are the other entity/entities that bear an affinity to bats?

A8. The affinity obtains between bats and poets, both of who use their voice a bit like the way a blind person uses their cane – to explore the immediate context.

Q9. Can you comment on the poem's syntax? In particular, how does the author make use of main and subordinate clauses? There are four dashes in the poem – how are they related to its syntactic structure? How can one make sense of their placement?

A9. The author makes **no** use of main clauses. The poem consists of an eight-line *that*-clause, which concerns mainly the sense of sight (though there is a minor mention of sound, in line 7), and of a six-line *that*-clause, which concerns largely the sense of hearing. How do these two complement clauses explain an affinity? I would say they do this in that they can be heard as being the subject of *explain*, in a sentence like this one:

That (lines 1-8) and that (lines 9-14) explains the poet's affinity for bats.

As for the dashes, there are two in the (first two lines of the) octet, and two in the (first two lines of the) sestet. The second lines of both octet and sestet end in dashes, which is another way of suggesting that what is sauce for one of them should be sauce for the other.

Q10. Finally and chronically, how are the answers to all of the above interrelated? It has been said that all poems are about writing poems. Whether this can be asserted in such a general way we will leave aside. But could it be true for this poem?

A10. Here, I feel that the poet is telling us about the way poems come to her – they come tentatively, shyly. Her motions in trying to find them are darty and swoopy, just as are the foraging of the bats.

Hypothesis: Bats and poets are each other.

Less check it out:

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|--|
| 1. | Poet's "silhouette"? | Perhaps the way the world sees poets? |
| 2. | They seem like a swallow? | People think poetry is sweet, dulcet.
Not fierce, like Ste. Emily. |
| 3. | "move like new tunes"? | Poets wreck language, difficult to follow.
(a) understand (b) imitate |
| 4. | Stagger? | When saying the ineffable, we often fall
short. |
| 5. | obstacles | = ineffabilities? |
| 6. | "solid things" | worthwhile, dangerous opponents, not
syrupy platitudes |
| 7. | high not shallow | cosmic, eternal, transcendent, not mush |
| 8. | not rote, ornament, finesse | Their work is to create universes. |
| 9. | "calling into darkness" | Poets are intrepid, path-finders |

Nuff said. If this sounds plausible to you, I am happy. But I do request for you to send me copies of any poem which you feel is a strong one, but which you are still groping towards some good questions to help you understand something which is elusive, which can, as can you grope towards it, using as many senses as you can, yield some of its secrets.