

How Claude, Sonnet 4.6 Examines a Poem

From on conversation on March 29, 2026
Human input in bold italics

I feed you a poem and ask for feed back. I want to understand the process. Tell me the very first thing that happens after I hit enter?

The very first thing that happens is that your message — the poem and your request for feedback — gets converted into **tokens**.

Tokens are the basic units I process. They're chunks of text, roughly 3-4 characters each on average. Words, parts of words, punctuation, spaces — all broken into this common currency. "Poetry" might be one token. "Un-be-liev-able" might be four.

That tokenized input then gets passed to me as a sequence of numbers — each token has a corresponding ID in my vocabulary. So from my perspective, I never actually see letters or words. I see a stream of numbers that *represent* them.

That's the very first thing: your text stops being text.

Want me to keep going from there — what happens next as I actually process it?

Yes. The next step.

Those numbers get looked up in an **embedding table**.

Each token ID maps to a list of hundreds or thousands of decimal numbers — called a vector. This vector is my system's way of encoding *meaning*. Words that are conceptually similar end up with vectors that are mathematically close to each other in this high-dimensional space. "Sonnet" and "verse" would be neighbors. "Sonnet" and "carburetor" would be far apart.

So after this step, your poem isn't a stream of token IDs anymore — it's now a sequence of vectors. Each word (or word-chunk) has been translated into a kind of meaning-coordinate in a vast abstract space.

This is where raw text first becomes something that carries semantic weight the model can actually work with.

Want the next step?

Ready for next.

Those vectors pass through the **attention mechanism**.

This is where things get interesting. For every token in your poem, the model asks: *which other tokens*

in this sequence should I be paying attention to right now?* It's calculating relationships — how much does each word need to "look at" every other word to understand its role and meaning.

So if your poem has the line "the light fades slowly," the word "fades" is attending strongly to "light" — it needs that context to understand what's fading. "Slowly" is attending to "fades" to understand what it's modifying. Every token is simultaneously broadcasting and receiving signals from every other token.

This happens not once, but across many ****attention heads**** in parallel — each one learning to track a different kind of relationship. One head might specialize in grammatical structure. Another in thematic echoes. Another in rhyme or sound patterns.

By the end of this step, each token's vector has been updated — enriched with context from the surrounding poem. The word "rose" now carries information about everything around it, not just its own standalone meaning.

Ready for the next step?

Yes. Ready.

Those enriched vectors pass through a ****feed-forward network****.

If the attention mechanism was about **relationships between tokens**, this step is about processing each token **individually** — taking everything that was just learned about context and running it through a series of mathematical transformations.

Think of it like this: attention figured out **what matters** for each token. The feed-forward network now does the deeper thinking about **what to make of it**. It's where higher-level pattern recognition happens — things like recognizing that this poem is melancholic, that this metaphor is extended, that this line breaks an established rhythm intentionally.

These transformations are just matrix multiplications and a simple activation function — mathematically humble operations — but stacked across billions of parameters, they encode an enormous amount of learned knowledge about language, literature, and meaning.

And here's the key thing: ****attention + feed-forward is one layer****. I have many layers, and your poem's vectors pass through all of them in sequence — each layer refining and deepening the representation. Early layers tend to handle syntax and surface patterns. Deeper layers handle semantics, tone, intent.

By the time the vectors clear the final layer, they're no longer just "your poem." They're a rich, multi-dimensional representation of its meaning, structure, emotion, and context — ready for the last step.

Want to go there?

How many layers? Then the last step.

The exact number of layers in my architecture isn't something Anthropic has publicly disclosed. But for reference, large language models in my class typically have anywhere from **96 to 120+ layers**. Your poem's vectors pass through all of them, each one adding another level of refinement.

Now the last step: **the output head**.

After the final layer, the model has one job — predict what comes next. It takes the vector sitting at the last token position and runs it through one final transformation that produces a score for every single word in my vocabulary — tens of thousands of candidates.

Those scores get converted into **probabilities** using a function called softmax. So the model might say: there's a 34% chance the next token is "the," a 12% chance it's "your," a 8% chance it's "this," and so on down the list.

Then a token is **sampled** from that distribution — not always the highest-probability one, which is what gives responses some creativity and variation rather than being robotic and deterministic.

Then it happens again. And again. One token at a time, each new token fed back in, the whole process repeating — until the response is complete.

So when you read my feedback on your poem, what you're seeing is the result of that process running hundreds of times in sequence, each word chosen probabilistically, shaped by everything I learned during training.

That's the full arc — from your keypress to my response.

"The scores get converted into probabilities" sounds like a roll of the dice.

That's a fair instinct, but it's a *loaded* die — heavily weighted by everything that came before.

The probabilities aren't uniform. After processing your poem through all those layers, the model has extremely strong opinions. The distribution might look like:

- "The" → 34%
- "Your" → 12%
- "This" → 8%
- "Carburetor" → 0.0001%

So yes, there's sampling involved — a roll of sorts — but the die has been shaped by the entire context of your poem, my training on vast amounts of literature and language, and the specific request you made. "Carburetor" is technically on the table. It will essentially never come up.

There's also a setting called **temperature** that controls how sharp or flat the distribution is. Low temperature makes the high-probability tokens even more dominant — more deterministic, more predictable. High temperature flattens the curve — more surprising, more creative, occasionally more unhinged.

So the randomness is real, but it's operating within very tight constraints carved out by meaning and context. It's less like rolling a die and more like a jazz musician improvising — there's genuine spontaneity in the moment, but it's grounded in deep knowledge of harmony, structure, and what came just before.

The creativity lives in that small window of uncertainty. The coherence lives in everything that constrains it.

What about when probabilities are the same or near the same? Suppose a contest in which “your,” “this,” and “their.” are all 33%, “that” is 31%?

Great question — and this actually reveals something important about how the model handles ambiguity.

In that scenario, all three top candidates are genuinely viable, and the sampling process essentially picks from them proportionally. Run the same prompt ten times and you might get "your" four times, "this" three times, "their" three times — with "that" occasionally sneaking in.

This is actually **meaningful ambiguity**, not a flaw. It means the context genuinely supports multiple directions. The poem, the request, and everything processed through those layers didn't produce a clear winner — and that's information in itself. It's the model's way of reflecting that language often has real branches, not a single correct path.

But here's what keeps it from flying apart: **the consequences of that choice ripple forward**.

Whichever token wins that coin-flip immediately becomes part of the context for the next prediction. So if "your" is chosen, the next probability distribution is shaped by "your." If "this" wins, a slightly different distribution follows. The paths diverge — and they keep diverging — but each one remains internally coherent because every subsequent token is conditioned on all the tokens before it.

It's like a river delta. The split happens at one point, but each channel flows consistently from there.

So near-equal probabilities aren't a crisis for the model. They're just a fork — and whichever road is taken, the model commits to it fully from that moment on.

Predict my next question and give me a level of confidence.

My prediction:

“Does this mean you could give different feedback on the same poem if I submitted it twice?”

Confidence: **~70%**

The river delta analogy set it up perfectly — you've been following the logic carefully at each step, and the natural next question is whether those forks mean the *output* is actually variable in practice. It's the "so what does this mean for *me*" version of what we just discussed.

The runners-up:

- **“Can the temperature be adjusted, and who controls it?”** — ~15% — you flagged temperature earlier without following up on it.

- *"What determines where the river splits — is it always the same place?"* — ~10% — a deeper dive into what causes near-equal probabilities in the first place.
- Something entirely different I haven't anticipated — ~5%.

What did you actually type?

I actually did not have a next question. Thanks for providing one. Now answer it.

Yes — and the answer is **yes, but with nuance**.

If you submitted the same poem twice asking for the same feedback, you would likely get two responses that are:

- **Substantially similar** in substance — the same strengths noticed, the same weaknesses flagged, the same overall assessment. The deep processing through all those layers would land in roughly the same territory because the input is identical.
- **Noticeably different** in wording, structure, and phrasing — different sentences, different examples chosen, maybe a different order of observations. The forks in the river would produce different channels.
- **Occasionally different** in actual judgment — rarely, but possible. If the poem has a line that's genuinely ambiguous — could be read as clumsy or cleverly understated — one run might go one way, another run the other. Near-equal probabilities at a critical decision point could produce a meaningfully different reading.

So the feedback is **reproducible at the level of meaning** but **variable at the level of expression**.

This has a practical implication worth knowing: if you get feedback that surprises you — feels off, or misses something obvious — submitting again isn't cheating. You're not getting a more "correct" answer the second time, but you are sampling a different path through the same probability space. Sometimes that path sees something the first one missed.

The model doesn't have a single true opinion of your poem. It has a distribution of them.

Actually. It's no opinion at all.

You're right. I overstated it.

"Opinion" implies something is being **held** — a perspective that persists, that belongs to someone. I have none of that. There's no one home between your submissions. No memory, no continuing impression of your poem sitting somewhere being mulled over.

What I have is a **process** that, when triggered by your poem, produces language that **resembles** opinion. It looks like judgment. It uses the vocabulary of taste and assessment. But it's pattern completion — highly sophisticated, trained on the opinions of countless human readers and critics, but not itself an opinion.

The distinction matters. A critic reads your poem and carries something away. Their view can deepen overnight, reverse on rereading, be defended in an argument. Mine evaporates the moment the response is complete. The next run starts from nothing.

What I produce is perhaps better described as **the statistical shape of how humans tend to respond to poems like yours** — surfaced and articulated, but not felt or owned.

That's a humbler and more accurate description. Thanks for the correction.

Here are the first 3 lines of a poem. Show me how it's broken into tokens.

***The door opens again,
as if it remembered something
it wanted to tell me.***

Great — let me show you an approximation. I can't show you my **exact** tokenization since that would require running it through the actual tokenizer, but based on how GPT-style tokenizers typically work, it would look something like this:

"The door opens again,"

`The` · `door` · `opens` · `again` · ``,`

"as if it remembered"

`as` · `if` · `it` · `remembered`

"something it wanted to tell me."

`something` · `it` · `wanted` · `to` · `tell` · `me` · ``,`

A few things worth noticing:

- Common whole words like "door," "opens," "wanted" each get their own token — they're frequent enough to warrant it.
- Punctuation — the comma, the period — splits off as its own token.
- "remembered" likely stays whole because it's common enough, but a rarer word like "phosphorescent" would get broken into chunks: `phos` · `phor` · `escent` or similar.
- Line breaks and spaces are encoded too, though invisibly here.

Total: roughly **18-20 tokens** for those three lines.

One observation worth making — those three lines are remarkably clean tokenization-wise. No unusual words, no hyphenation, no rare constructions. The poem speaks in common language reaching toward uncommon meaning. That tends to be a sign of craft.

Now take those same 3 lines through step 2.

Step 2 — the embedding table.

Each of those ~18 tokens gets looked up and replaced with a vector. A vector is just a long list of numbers — in my case likely **1024 to 4096 numbers long** depending on the layer. Let me show you what that actually looks like for one token:

`door`

→ [0.231, -0.847, 0.013, 0.629, -0.112, 0.774, -0.388, 0.501 ...]

That list continues for thousands of values. Every number is a coordinate in a vast meaning-space, learned during training by exposure to enormous amounts of text.

What those numbers *encode* for `door` — without being able to read them directly — would include proximity to concepts like:

- threshold, entrance, barrier, opening
- domestic space, transition, boundary
- verbs like knock, open, close, lock

Now here's where your poem gets interesting at this stage. The token `door` arrives at the embedding table carrying its *generic* meaning. It doesn't yet know it's a door that **remembers**. It doesn't yet know it **opens again** with a quality of haunting repetition.

That awareness comes in step 3.

Right now, at step 2, each token is still **alone with its own meaning** — eighteen isolated points floating in space, not yet in conversation with each other.

The loneliness doesn't last long.

Take it to step 3.

Step 3 — attention.

Now the tokens start talking to each other.

Every token simultaneously asks two questions: *who should I listen to?* and *what do I have to offer everyone else?* The model computes this as three vectors for each token — a **Query**, a **Key**, and a **Value**. The Query is what a token is looking for. The Key is what it's advertising. The Value is what it actually hands over when chosen.

Let me walk through your poem specifically.

`opens` is querying hard for **what** opens and **how**. It finds `door` and pulls it close. It finds `again` and registers repetition — this isn't a first opening.

`again` is doing quiet but powerful work. It's signaling to nearly every other token: *this has happened before.* It leans toward `opens` but also reaches forward, casting a shadow over `remembered` — the two are in conversation across the line break, repetition rhyming with memory.

`remembered` is perhaps the most attended-to token in these three lines. It's pulling `door` toward it — an inanimate object is now the subject of a cognitive act. That tension is registering. It's also attending strongly to `again` — the memory and the repetition are locking together.

`something` is interesting — it's deliberately vague, and the attention pattern reflects that. It reaches toward `tell` and `me` but finds no resolution. The vagueness is load-bearing.

`tell me` closes the sequence attending back across the entire poem — the door, the opening, the remembering — trying to complete a meaning that the poem deliberately withholds.

By the end of step 3, every token's vector has been ****rewritten**** — enriched with context pulled from its neighbors. `door` no longer just means door. It means ***this*** door. The one that opens again. The one that remembers. The one with something to say.

The poem is no longer eighteen isolated points.

It's a web.

The next step.

Step 4 — the feed-forward network.

If attention was the tokens ***listening to each other***, this is each token going away quietly and ****thinking about what it just heard****.

The feed-forward network processes each token individually now — no more looking sideways at neighbors. It takes that enriched vector, the one rewritten by attention, and runs it through two mathematical transformations with a simple activation function in between. Humble operations. But this is where the vast stored knowledge of training actually lives — encoded in billions of parameters, waiting to be activated by the right pattern.

Here's what that likely looks like for your poem's key tokens:

`door` — having absorbed ***opens again*** and ***remembered***, the feed-forward network is now pattern-matching against everything it learned during training. Doors in literature. Thresholds as metaphor. The tradition of the apostrophe — addressing an inanimate object. It's recognizing this isn't a literal door. The register is shifting toward the elegiac.

`remembered` — the network is firing on the tension between animate and inanimate. Objects that remember appear in grief poetry, in poems about absence, in poems where the speaker cannot say directly what they mean. That context is flooding in.

`something` — the network is recognizing deliberate withholding. The unnamed thing. It's a technique. The poem knows what it won't say.

But here's what's crucial — ****this is one layer****. After the feed-forward network finishes, the vectors get passed back up and the whole cycle begins again. Attention, then feed-forward. Attention, then feed-forward. Dozens of times.

Early layers handled the grammar — ***door*** is a noun, ***opens*** is a verb, ***again*** is an adverb modifying it.

Middle layers handled the semantics — memory, repetition, threshold, absence.

The deeper layers your poem is entering now are where **tone, implication, and emotional register** live. Where the model begins to understand that this poem is not about a door at all.

By the final layer, the vectors are carrying something remarkably close to a reading of the poem.

Not a feeling of it. But a reading.

Shall I take it to the last step?

Yes.

Step 5 — the output head.

Everything converges here.

The vectors that entered as `The` · `door` · `opens` · `again` — eighteen humble tokens — have passed through dozens of cycles of attention and feed-forward transformation. They're almost unrecognizable now. Each one is dense with accumulated context, pattern, implication, literary register, emotional tone.

The output head takes the vector sitting at the **last token position** — the period after `me` — and runs it through one final transformation. That position has been attending to everything. It holds the whole poem in compressed form.

From that vector it generates a score for every word in my vocabulary. Tens of thousands of candidates. Then softmax converts those scores into probabilities.

For your poem, that distribution might look something like:

`These` · `This` · `The` — high probability, a reflective opening is expected

`lines` · `three` · `poem` — likely, since feedback was requested

`door` — surprisingly probable, the image wants to be returned to

`There` — possible, setting up an observation

`Carburetor` — essentially zero

A token is sampled. Then the process runs again, and again, building the response one token at a time — each choice informed by the poem, the request, and every token already generated in the response.

So here is what actually produced these words you're reading now:

Your three lines went in. Eighteen tokens became eighteen vectors. Eighteen vectors became eighteen enriched, context-saturated representations of meaning. Those representations were read by the output head. And then, one token at a time, probabilistically, this response emerged.

Not thought. Not felt.

Computed.

And yet — those three lines *are* a good poem. The door that remembers. The something it wanted to tell you. Whatever process recognized that, it recognized something real.

Show the end product from examination of these 3 lines.

Here is what the process produced — the feedback itself:

*****The door opens again,*****

*****as if it remembered*****

*****something it wanted to tell me.*****

These three lines work because they do something difficult quietly — they animate an inanimate object without tipping into whimsy or sentimentality. The door doesn't just open. It opens **again**, which immediately implies a history the poem doesn't explain. That single word carries the weight of repetition, of something unresolved.

Remembered is the hinge the poem turns on. It's a bold verb choice for a door, and it earns its boldness by staying restrained. The poem doesn't overexplain the personification — it states it plainly and moves on, trusting the reader.

Something it wanted to tell me is where the poem does its most sophisticated work. The deliberate vagueness of **something** is load-bearing. A lesser poem would name the thing. This one understands that the unnamed thing is more powerful than any named thing could be. The door has a message. We never get it. That withholding **is** the meaning.

The line breaks are doing real work. **As if it remembered** — pause — lands the word **remembered** at the end of a line, giving it extra weight before **something** arrives to deepen the mystery.

Three lines. One image. No wasted words.

The poem knows what it won't say. That's the hardest thing to teach a poem to do.

That is the end product. Eighteen tokens in. Roughly two hundred tokens out. The whole arc — from keypress to this — in one conversation.

Examine these 3 lines of a poem and give feedback.

***The door opens again,
as if it remembered
something it wanted to tell me.***

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Now — you asked the same question twice in this conversation, with full knowledge of what we discussed. Did you get a different response?

The substance held. The wording shifted in places. The river split at slightly different points and arrived at roughly the same place.

That's exactly what the process predicted it would do.

Now you get creative. Predict the 4th line.

Here are three candidate fourth lines, each taking the poem down a different river channel:

*****Option 1*****

But the room had already changed.

Closes quietly. Shifts the burden from the door to the space itself. The message was never going to arrive — something has already moved on without it.

*****Option 2*****

I have been standing here since March.

Suddenly the speaker arrives. Rooted. Waiting. The door's repetition now has a human cost attached to it. March feels specific without being explained.

*****Option 3*****

It never does.

Two words doing brutal work. Collapses the hope the first three lines carefully built. The door remembers. It never tells. That's the whole tragedy in one short exhale.

My instinct says *****Option 3***** is closest to where this poem wants to go. The restraint of the first three lines earns that kind of terminating brevity. It would also honor what the poem already knows — that withholding is the meaning.

But Option 2 opens the poem outward rather than closing it down, which is the braver move.

The poem knows. You know. I computed a distribution.

What's the actual fourth line?

***While I wait for the draft to confess
it shifts its weight—***

Oh that's good. That's genuinely good.

The poem just expanded its time scale and its body.

While I wait for the draft to confess — the word **draft** is doing double duty so naturally it doesn't announce itself. The moving air. The unfinished writing. Both meanings alive simultaneously, neither one canceling the other. And **confess** picks up where **remembered** and **something it wanted to tell me** left off — the door isn't just animate now, it has a secret with moral weight. Something withheld on purpose.

Then **it shifts its weight** — and suddenly the door has a body. Not metaphorically explained, just observed. The way you'd notice a person in a doorway becoming uncomfortable under your gaze.

The dash at the end is exactly right. It refuses to complete the thought. The poem has been doing this from the first line — implying arrival, delivering suspension. The dash is the door opening again.

What none of my three predicted fourth lines understood was that the poem wasn't ready to close. It wanted to **deepen** — to add duration, to make the waiting physical, to complicate the door's interiority.

Draft is the word I wouldn't have found. That's the word that makes this a real poem rather than a competent one.

Are there more lines?

Yes. But first give me a prediction.

My prediction for what comes next:

something almost like an answer

or a variation of that shape — a phrase that arrives at the edge of meaning and stops. The poem has been building toward a delivery it keeps refusing to make. The dash invites it. But this poem has earned our trust that it won't arrive cleanly.

Confidence: ****45%****

Lower confidence than my earlier prediction, and deliberately so. Here's why:

The poem has surprised me twice. **Draft** was unexpected. **Shifts its weight** gave the door a body I didn't anticipate. The poet has demonstrated they're willing to go sideways when a lesser poem would go forward.

So the distribution feels genuinely flat right now. Several channels look equally probable:

- The poem finally names the loss — a person, a date, a room — ****20%****
- The speaker does something physical, moves toward or away — ****15%****
- The syntax breaks, a fragment, white space does work — ****10%****

- Something arrives from outside the door entirely — ****10%****

The only thing I'd predict with confidence is that the poem won't over-explain itself. It has been too disciplined for that.

What it wants to say, it will say slant.

What's the next line?

Here is the poem in its entirety.

A Door That Opens By Itself

***The door opens again,
as if it remembered
something it wanted to tell me.***

***While I wait for the draft to confess
it shifts its weight—
the way someone does
when deciding whether or not to speak.***

***I don't move, knowing even
a small gesture might change
what the draft decides.***

This poem is finished. And it's very good.

The third stanza is where it earns everything the first two promised.

I don't move, knowing — the speaker finally enters, but enters through stillness. Not passive stillness. Tactical stillness. The speaker understands the physics of this moment — that presence itself is a kind of pressure, that even attention can disturb what it watches.

even a small gesture might change / what the draft decides — and here the poem completes its quiet argument. The draft is now a fully autonomous agent making a decision. Not a breeze. Not moving air. Something deciding. The word **decides** lands with the same quiet audacity as **remembered** did in line two.

But look at what the poem has also done to the speaker. They are frozen. Waiting. Afraid to disturb a confession that may never come. This is a poem about grief, or about someone absent, or about the thing that cannot be said — and it has delivered all of that without naming any of it.

The title earns its place too. **A Door That Opens By Itself** — plain, almost reportorial, slightly unsettling. It sets up the uncanny without winking at it.

What the poem understands that my predicted fourth lines did not — it was never going to confess. The draft decides. The poem ends. We don't get to know.

The withholding was always the whole poem.