

Reading and Writing

About Poetry



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A good poem is like a puzzle—the most fascinating part is studying the individual pieces carefully and then putting them back together to see how beautifully the whole thing fits together. A poem can have a number of different “pieces” that you need to look at closely in order to complete the poetic “puzzle.” This handout outlines one way to read and explicate a poem, by examining each “piece” of the poem separately. (An *explication* is simply an explanation of how all the elements in a poem work together to achieve the total effect.)

First some preliminaries

- What do you already know about this poem? Have you read the editor’s notes, if available?
- What do you know about this poet? What do you know about the age in which s/he wrote this poem? What do you know about other works by this poet and other poems written during this time?
- Consider the title of the poem *carefully*. What does it tell you about the poem’s subject, tone, and genre? What does it “promise”? (After having read the poem a time or two, come back to the title to consider further its relationship to the poem’s meanings and effects.)
- Read the poem *pencil in hand*. Mark it up. Try circling important, striking, or repeated words. Draw lines to connect related ideas. Use marginal marks to bring you back to confusing words, lines, and passages.
- Read the poem several times and on separate occasions. Mull the poem over between readings.
- Read the poem *aloud* to get the rhythm and sound effects.
- Decide first exactly what the poet is saying on a literal level; figure out which verbs go with which nouns, which modifiers with which nouns or verbs, and so on. In other words, analyze it on a grammatical level.

What to focus on

Voice

- *Poetic voice*: Who is the speaker in the poem? Is the poet speaking directly or is the poem told through a fictional *persona*? To whom is s/he speaking? Can you trust this speaker?
- *Tone*: What is the speaker's attitude toward the subject of the poem (e.g., serious, reverent, ironic, satiric, ambivalent, hostile, humorous, detached)? What tone of voice seems to be appropriate for reading the poem out loud? Does the poem seem to appeal most directly to your intellect or emotions? What words, images, or ideas give you a clue to this tone?

Word Choice and Word Order

- *Diction* or *Word Choice*: Is the language colloquial, formal, abstract, concrete? (Do you know what all the words mean? If not, look them up.)
- Do you notice any consistent patterns of words (e.g., multiple references to flowers, water, politics, religion)? What is the significance of these patterns?
- What moods or attitudes are associated with words that stand out for you?

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Imagery

- What images are used in the poem? To what senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch) do they appeal?
- Does the poem express an emotion or describe a mood? (Is it a *lyric* poem?) Does the poem contain any symbols? What are their significance?
- *Allusions*: Are there any allusions (references) to something outside the poem, such as events or people from history, mythology, religion?
- Is there one central image in the poem?

Figures of Speech

- Look at the figurative language of the poem:
 - *Metaphor* – a comparison between two unlike things.
 - *Simile* – a comparison between two unlike things using “like” or “as.”
 - *Analogies* – similarities between things that are not usually associated.
 - *Personification* – a non-human thing is endowed with human characteristics.
- How do these literary devices add to the meaning of the poem or intensify the effect of the poem?

Sound

- *Rhyme scheme*: Does the rhyme occur in a regular pattern, or irregularly? Is the effect formal, satisfying, musical, funny, disconcerting?
- *Rhythm* or *Meter*: How can you describe the variation of *stressed* and *unstressed* syllables and words (e.g., iambic)? Does this variation follow a consistent pattern? What is the tonal effect of this rhythm? Is this rhythm significant to the effect or meaning of the poem?
- Other sound effects: *alliteration*, *assonance*, *consonance*, *repetition*. What tonal effect do they have for the poem? How do they affect the meaning of the poem?

Form

- Look at the number of lines, their length, their arrangement on the page. Is the poem’s form marked by stanzas? Is it a traditional form (e.g., sonnet, limerick) or “free form”? How does the form relate to the content? Why do you think the poet chose that form for this poem?
- Is the poem written in *open form* (with no definite pattern of line length, rhyme, or meter) or in *closed form* (conforming to a pattern)? Why does the poet use this type of form?
- *Movement*: How does the poem develop? Are the images and ideas developed chronologically, by cause and effect, by free association, from simple to complex, from outer to inner? Does the poem circle back to where it started, or is the movement from one attitude to a different attitude (e.g., from despair to hope)?
- *Syntax*: How many sentences are in the poem? Are the sentences simple or complicated? Are the verbs in front of the nouns instead of in the usual “noun then verb” order? Why?
- *Punctuation*: What kinds of punctuation occur in the poem? Does the punctuation always coincide with the end of the poetic line? If so, this is called an end-stopped line. Is there any punctuation in the middle of a line? Why do you think the poet would want you to pause halfway through the line?

Theme

- What is the central theme or themes of the poem? What in the poem supports or develops this theme?
- What issue(s) does this poem deal with (coming of age, love, death, war, peace, coping with change, etc.)? What does the poem reveal and say about these issues?
- Does the poem tell a story? (Is it a *narrative* poem?) If so, what events occur? Who are the characters involved in the action? Where do these events take place?
- What is the occasion of this poem? Why has the speaker of the poem chosen this moment?

A final consideration

Now ask yourself, “*So what?*” What has the poem done for you as a reader? Was your reading a satisfying experience? Do you agree with any prior interpretations of the poem (e.g., an editor’s, your professor’s)? Has the poem created a change in mood for you or a change in attitude about the poem’s subject? How have the technical elements helped the poet create these effects?