

Literary Analysis- Poetry

The Author and His Times:

Born/Died; biographical background important to understanding the poem; important family, community, national, and world events that influenced poet and work.

Voice- Speaker and Tone:

When we read or hear a poem, we hear a speaker's voice. It is this voice that conveys the poem's tone, its implied attitude toward its subject. Identify the speaker and situation. Describe the tone(s) of voice you hear, and consider what the speaker's tone contributes to the ideas and feelings that the poem conveys. (POV)

Diction:

Analysis of word choices. Discuss the connotations and denotations of the words used. List the words in the poem that you think the poet chose for a particular reason and discuss the importance of those words = tone. Level? Unusual? Slang? Denotation?

Thinking on Paper About Diction

1. Circle all the words you do not know. Look them up in the dictionary.
2. Underline words that seem especially meaningful or well chosen. For each word, explain denotations and connotations.
3. Underline any wordplay adds to the sense of the poem.
4. Underline any uses of unusual words –slang, profanity, archaisms, foreign language words, made-up words. Explain how the poem would be different without them.
5. Identify the level of diction in the poem (formal, informal, colloquial, slangy, dialect). Explain what the poem gains from the use of this level. Explain what it would lose by changing to a different level.
6. Explain how the choice of words contributes to the speaker's tone.

Imagery:

Concrete representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or an idea. Words or phrases that appeal to the five senses may be visual (something seen), aural (something heard), tactile (something felt), olfactory (something smelled), or gustatory (something tasted). Look for recurrent images in the poem. Offer direct quotes from the poem and describe how they are used.

Thinking on Paper About Descriptive Language

1. Mark the descriptive images. For each image, name the sense appealed to. Characterize the dominant impression these images make.
2. Explain the relationship of descriptive images to the speaker's state of mind.

3. Describe how the descriptive images create a sense of the time of day and season of the year.
4. Note any progression in the descriptive images; for example, from day to night, hot to cold, soft to loud, color to color, slow to fast.
5. Explain how the descriptive images help create atmosphere and mood. Slow movements, for example, are conducive to melancholy; speed to exuberance and excitement.

Thinking on Paper About Figurative Language

1. Mark the similes in the poem. Underline or circle the words that signal the comparisons (words such as *like*, *as*, *similar to*, *resembles*). Explain the implications of the analogies (that is, what they contribute to the meaning of the poem).
2. Mark the metaphors in the poem. Explain the implications of the analogies.
3. Mark any personification in the poem. Underline the words and phrases that make the personification clear.
4. Poets often use analogies to help make an abstract quality, such as "love" or "my love's beauty" or "my current predicament" or "the destructive effect of time" or "God's grandeur," concrete and knowable. They do so by comparing the abstract quality to something the reader knows well. Almost always this "something" is a physical object or deity. Name the abstract quality the poet wants to clarify and the object the poet is comparing it to. List the qualities of the object. Explain how the comparison has clarified the abstraction.
5. List the senses appealed to in each analogy. Describe the dominant sensuous impression created by analogies

Figures of Speech – Simile and Metaphor:

Language that is not literal. Metamorphic devices link meaning. The heart of figurative language is comparative. Metaphor, which is central to poetry, is a way of "saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another." Metaphor is an implied comparison, while simile establishes comparisons explicitly with the words like or as. Point out examples of simile and metaphor (use quotes) and show how each is used. If there a central metaphor is the poem?

Symbolism and Allegory:

Images used to suggest complex or multiple meanings (hawk for war, dove for peace, swan for stately beauty) it becomes a symbol. The meaning of any symbol, whether an object, an action, or a gesture, is controlled by its context. Point out the images in the poem that are used as symbols – quote or refer to each directly. Discuss how they are used. Is the work highly symbolic?

1. Is the object, action, gesture, or event important to the poem? Is it described in detail? Does it occur repeatedly? Does it appear at a climactic moment in this poem?

- Does the poem seem to warrant our granting its details more significance than their immediate literal meaning?
- Does our symbolic reading make sense? Does it account for the literal details without either ignoring or distorting them?

Allegory is a form of narrative in which people, places, and happenings have hidden or symbolic meaning; allegory is especially suitable as a vehicle for teaching. In an allegorical work there are most often two levels of meaning, the literal and the symbolic meaning. If the poem is allegorical, discuss the meaning in those terms.

Thinking on Paper About Symbolism

- Circle the symbols in the poem.
- List the possible meanings of each symbol. Explain what evidence suggests these meanings.
- Explain what each symbol contributes to the overall meaning of the poem.

Syntax:

Analysis of sentence and phrase patterns. Poets use syntax as they use imagery, diction, structure, sound, and rhythm – to express meaning and convey feeling. A poem's syntax is an important element of its tone and a guide to a speaker's state of mind. Discuss the syntax of the poem by stanza. How is the syntax of this poem used? Is it balanced and controlled or free and uncontrolled? Is the syntax connected to the poem's main idea?

Sound –

Rhyme, Alliteration, and Assonance:

Discuss the uses of these devices of sound. How do they contribute to the poem's meaning? On an attached copy of the poem, mark the rhyme scheme, the alliteration, and the assonance.

Thinking on Paper About Sound

- Underline instances of alliteration, assonance, and consonance in the poem. Explain the relationship between these devices and the sense of the lines where they occur.
- Circle rhymed words. Explain what similarities and contrasts the rhymed words call attention to.
- Circle words that have meaningful or attractive sound qualities, such as onomatopoetic words. Explain how these words add to the poem's sense.
- When the sounds of a poem are harsh and grating, the effect is called *cacophony*. When they are pleasing and harmonious, the effect is called *euphony*. Underline instances of cacophony or euphony. Explain how they relate to the poem's sense.
- Describe any sound devices in the poem that catch you by surprise. Explain how and why the poet uses such surprises.

Rhythm and Meter:

Discuss the rhythm and meter of this poem. How is it appropriate to the action and the idea of the poem? On the attached copy of the poem, mark the metrical pattern of the poem.

Thinking on Paper About Rhythm

- Count the number of syllables for each line. Write the number at the end of each line.
- Read the poem aloud, then mark the accented and unaccented syllables of each line.
- Draw a vertical line between each foot in the line.
- Identify the metrical pattern (iambic, trochaic, etc.).
- Use two vertical lines to mark the caesuras relate to the sense of each line.
- Underline the places where the poet departs from the established metrical pattern of the poem. Explain how these departures relate to the sense of each line. Show which words are emphasized by the departures.
- Explain the appropriateness of the material pattern to the poem's meaning.
- Describe how easy it is to read the poem aloud. Does the metrical pattern slow you down? Or does it allow you to read smoothly? Explain how the difficulty or ease of reading the metrical pattern relates to the poem's meaning and purpose.

Structure:

The pattern of organization. How is this poem structured? Does it fit a particular organizational pattern? Discuss the structure and tell how the structure contributes the overall meaning of the poem.

Thinking on Paper About Structure

- Mark the rhyme and scheme of the poem or stanza. (Use the three examples on pages 120, 121, and 122 for doing this.)
- Draw horizontal lines between each division of the poem or unit of the poem. In a sonnet, for example, mark division between quatrains, couplets, octaves, and sestets. (Use the poem mentioned in the first question.)
- Summarize the meaning of each division of the poem. In a Shakespearean sonnet, for example, summarize the meaning of each quatrain and the couplet. In a Petrarchan sonnet, summarize the meaning of the octave (and the quatrains within the octave) and the sestet. For both kinds of sonnet, indicate how the meaning changes after the turn.
- Within the poem or stanza, summarize the relationships between ideas suggested by the end rhyme. A couplet, for example, wherever it may appear in the poem or stanza, almost always states one idea or indicates a close connection between the sense of the two lines.
- If one or more lines are shorter or longer than most of the others, describe the effect of that different length on the sense and impact of the poem or stanza.
- Account for variations from the established rhyme scheme. Explain how the variations relate to the sense of the poem or stanza.

7. Describe and explain the significance of subtle differences between sections or stanzas in a poem. Ballads, for example, often rely on *incremental repetition*, the repeating of phrases and lines from stanza to stanza but with slight changes. The changes enhance suspense by altering the meaning of each stanza.
8. Outline the units of the meaning in the poem. That is, indicate where the poet moves from one idea to another. Show how the units of the meaning relate to visual structural divisions (such as stanzas), if they do.
9. Describe the imagery of each unit. Show what images dominate each unit. Show differences in imagery from unit to unit. Explain how the images help create the sense of the unit.
10. Some poems, such as George Herbert's "Easter Wings" and many of the poems by E.E Cummings, create an effect by the way they look on the page. Choose one such poem and explain the relationship between how it looks and other elements of the poem, including rhyme scheme, material pattern, line length, word choice, and meaning.

Theme:

What universal truth is the poet concerned with? Phrase the theme and then discuss how it is developed in the poem.

Additional Comments and Analysis:

Did you enjoy the poem? Why or why not? Strengths and weaknesses? What questions do you have? Does any facet remind you of other works you've read? What critical reviews did you find valuable? Major insights – jot them down.

Questions about Free Verse:

Questions about free-verse poetry, then, should be similar to questions about any poetry. What structural devices—divisions within the poem, line length, repeated syntactical units—does the poet use and how do they complement the poet's meaning? What patterns of imagery—descriptive and figurative—does the poet use? What sound devices does the poet weave into the poem? Why does the poet choose the words he or she does? Who is the speaker, and to what situation is the speaker responding?

CHECKLIST

1. Read the poem silently.
2. Read the poem aloud.
3. What does the poem sound like? Is it happy? Sad? Does it rhyme? Does it have a specific rhythm? Why? *Look for the punctuation marks and line breaks.
4. List any words you don't know and look them up.
5. What is your first reaction to the poem? Why?
6. What feelings/moods does the poem bring out?
7. Who is speaking? Present? Reflecting back? Old? Young? Relationship to the subject? Attitude towards the subject in the poem? Why?
8. Paraphrase the poem in your own words.

9. What is the most important word in the poem? Why? What does it mean? Why did the author use that particular word?
10. What is the most important phrase in the poem? Why?
11. What is the most important image-sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, color, word, picture? Why? What does it remind you of? How does it make you feel?
12. Why the title?
13. Does the poem have a central message/theme? What is it? Is there a lesson we can learn? A moral? Is the poet praising or criticizing the subject? Explain.
14. How is the poem organized? Is it divided by stanzas? Spacing? Lines? Why?
15. Any figures of speech? Metaphors? Similes? Personification? How does each contribute to your understanding of the poem?
16. Summarize your findings in a short paragraph that explains the poem using quotes and commentary. Feel free to compare it to another work you might have read to help us understand your analysis. You may mention a movie or song we might know as well.
17. Repeat the above steps for each poem. Make sure you have a recorder **and all members must participate**. Feel free to switch the role as a recorder as you switch to a new poem.

Thinking on Paper And Free Verse

1. Read the poem aloud. Note the phrases that create the rhythm of the poem.
2. Underline repeated phrases in the poem, as with the "out of the cradle" phrase in Whitman's poem.
3. Mark with double vertical lines the caesuras in each line of the poem.
4. Mark the accents in each line of the poem.
5. Explain why the lines end where they do.
6. Note any variations between short phrases and long phrases. Explain how these variations relate to the sense of the poem.
7. Explain the relationship between the rhythms of the poem and its meaning and purpose.
8. Mark and account for all of the sound qualities of the poem: alliteration, assonance, cacophony, euphony, internal rhyme, and so forth.